

Cross the Ages[©]

Data Spell

TUMUL'S LEGACY

It's raining, of course, as befits a funeral. The rain isn't composed of droplets of water, though, but rather of earthy particles, like sand suspended in the air. As for the sky itself, it's not grey, but ochre, and the clouds are smeared with shades of brown in honour of the various rocks that compose the Acongua mountain range.

Because the Primus of the Earth is being buried today.
Tumul is dead.

Loads of officials have come to pay their last respects: not a single Primus or Arkhonte is missing, and every single dynast is lined up behind Créuse of Acongua and her stony face. The potentates of the largest guilds, a handful of high-ranking jods and dozens of quams are there to represent the Arkhante's army and its bourgeoisie, respectively.

And Solis, of course.

The Malkah is standing alone, just a few steps ahead of the assembly of magi and nobles. Immaculate despite the dusty atmosphere, her white gown stands out against the rusty hues of the Banded Lands, the domain of the shale people. Hands clasped over her bosom, she is observing the hoi polloi huddled together on the far side of the ceremony.

Solis can't decide if Tumul would have grinned or taken umbrage at the fact that his funeral had attracted every rung of Arkhantan society, but that his corpse would divide the elite from the plebs. What she is sure of, though, is that he would have been far more moved by the presence of those

thousands of nameless people come to pay their last respects than by that of the officials, many of whom care more about being seen.

The crowd watches in silence as the witches and warlocks, initiates and pillars all together, perform the strange ritual of the Earth Arkhome to prepare their late teacher's body.

At first glance, you could think that Tumul was still alive. His mummified body – fossilized, to be more precise – is dressed in his usual clothes, from which dangle cords woven with stones; his feet have been left bare, as usual. The only tangible proof of his death is the absence of the rocky globe that used to gravitate over his head night and day. Abandoned by its master's magic, the famous rock is now embedded in the shale cliff looming over the ceremony.

The body is passed from one disciple to the next, as though Tumul were hugging each witch and warlock for a final farewell before a long journey. The tradition might look morbid, but Solis finds the sense of brotherhood touching.

Chloris holds Tumul at arm's length for a moment, gazing at him one last time before passing him on to Elbée – her features frozen halfway between anger and sorrow – who confides him to Cildore, who is smaller than the deceased, even though Tumul wasn't very big himself...

Soon everyone but Hannibal and Aurelius will have held the Primus one last time before he is placed in the ground. Cildore finds himself in the unhappy position of having to choose which of the disciples will be the last to salute their teacher. Traditionally, that honour belongs to the next Primus, who has yet to be officially appointed, but who has usually been clearly indicated. Unfortunately, Tumul didn't have enough time to make his intentions clear... or perhaps to make his mind up. While it's obvious that his successor will be either Hannibal or Aurelius, no one knows which of

them will be anointed.

Being the last to embrace Tumul would be a powerful symbol, so neither Primal hopeful seems to be willing to yield that privilege to the other.

A moment of wavering hesitation hangs over the ceremony, which seems to have stopped, as though it had been turned to stone. What had felt fraternal is suddenly threatening to turn fratricidal.

Solis is mortified: it's all her fault. Doubly so.

She had stoked the flames of rivalry between Hannibal and Aurelius.

And she hadn't managed to keep Tumul from wearing himself out in his attempts to reinvigorate the prana cycle.

Solis remembers how devastated Tumul had been when he had come back from Acongua. That was after the ritual of the Pillars of the Earth, when Aurelius and Hannibal had earned their scarifications. Just three cycles of Balor, the little brown moon, ago... yet it already feels like an eternity.

"The rockworms are ill," he had explained. "They're dying!" he'd added feverishly, since she hadn't seemed sufficiently worried. His words had resounded like an earthquake.

Yet Solis had immediately grasped the urgency of the situation. Far more so than the other Primi, who had gathered around Tumul repeatedly to discuss it. But they'd spent more time denying the problem than trying to work out precisely how serious it was.

To be fair, it isn't easy to acknowledge that the source of your power is dwindling, especially if you haven't got a clue about what to do about it.

The Primi had gone back to their territories in search of signs confirming – or disproving – Tumul's conclusions. Solis was already convinced, so she had made everything the

Sculpted Throne could provide, and then some, available to him. The root cause of the degradation of the prana absolutely had to be found. That was the indispensable prerequisite to the Legendaries of the Earth being able to regenerate the natural cycle. Between his rigor and his discretion, let alone his unshakable loyalty, Tumul was perfect for the task of conducting the investigation. If only Solis had realized that it would cost him his life...

Tumul had exerted himself unsparingly, accumulating exhausting spells; forcing himself to do whole, uninterrupted days of reading – longer than Solis had ever inflicted on herself, not even when reading was her refuge from her father's cruel indifference. He had gone through dozens of rockworm fangs in interminable rituals, drawn on his own reserves of prana to the point that they eventually ran dry, and kept going until his own inner song had become no more than a barren whisper. He had criss-crossed Arkhante relentlessly, searching for clues and solutions, until blood ran from his stone-hard bare feet. He willingly gave his own life to try to unravel the situation...

And for what? For naught, or nearly.

The key piece of information, the only certainty that Tumul came up with, was that the depletion of the prana was nothing new. The consequences were only now becoming noticeable, but the process had been ongoing for twenty years. Since the Heroes' War.

Truth be told, it was impossible to date the beginning of the decline precisely, but its temporal proximity to the conflict between Arkhante and Mantris couldn't be a coincidence. Some event – whether it was the destruction of a site or the use of some Mantri technology... or even the creation of the Wall of Bones, as Tumul had considered at one point – had set off the degradation of the prana, which

had been slowly degenerating ever since, to the point that it was now showing the signs of exhaustion.

It was an important clue, but unfortunately, it didn't really provide an explanation, let alone a remedy. Still, encouraged by that early success, Tumul increased his efforts even more, pacing back and forth along Arkhante's border with the Rift in search of clues to the event that started everything.

Thanks to the reports he sent regularly, Solis had stayed informed about his observations, even from a distance. To the south, the mouth of the Thamür, Arkhante's second largest river, used to be fertile with rich, dark silt. Now it was nothing but a barren quagmire. In the primal forest of Orcunion, he observed the same collapsing dolines as those that Syläë had reported, with whole swaths of forest getting swallowed up, from roots to treetops. From the peaks of Acongua, the backbone of the world, he described the glaciers' retreat in harrowing terms. The phenomenon is undetectable when you're living there day to day, but it becomes obvious when you observe the mountain range from a good distance. And the Massada Desert, in the far north, is gaining on the Wall, reducing whole sections of the rampart to nothing more than a pile of bones intertwined with shrivelled brambles that are every bit as dead as the skeletons they're meant to be holding together.

Witnessing the death throes of the world may be what actually did Tumul in, more than his own tireless efforts. In any case, that has become Solis's conviction... and her greatest regret. Because although she could sense that his strength was waning, she didn't even try to convince him to give up his task. His quest was important enough to justify the price he paid. A decision worthy of a queen, but inexcusable for a friend.

At least Tumul hadn't had to face the ordeal alone. Even

though his expedition had forced him to neglect the arkhome of the Earth, he had been wise enough to let himself be seconded by his disciples. Hannibal and Aurelius had taken it in turn to accompany him in his peregrinations. That had the added advantage of allowing him to judge their valour, tenacity, and skill. It was a hands-on test that the Primus wanted to have them do individually, which is why they had never travelled as a trio.

That was where Solis committed her second culpable error. She was the one who had spotted the anomaly. As rituals to regenerate the prana were repeated in every arkhome, under the watchful eye of an ever-more occupied Tumul, she noticed that, systematically, the results were significantly better when Aurelius was present. But why? Another mystery, but it could not be denied: the reports were formal.

Should Solis have kept that realization to herself ? Perhaps. Nevertheless, once again, she chose to put Arkhante before her friends.

Once Solis had shared her observations, Tumul started coming up with all sorts of excuses to justify Aurelius's presence at his side, and Solis came up with reasons to keep Hannibal in Nephtys. Hard to know if the Nay-Dam suspected what they were doing, but the behemoth clearly hadn't been taken in.

And so, because of her, the animosity between Tumul's two disciples kept growing. Solis would have preferred that they get the quarrel out of their systems once and for all, but the Earth is an arkhome that buries and crushes. Explosions are more the Fire arkhome's style.

And now it seems that the rivals have chosen their teacher's funeral to settle their dispute in public. Cildore doesn't have a clue what the Primus's last wish was, and neither Hannibal nor Aurelius is willing to make it easier for him. Instead

they're both just standing there at equal distance from him, looking stubbornly indifferent. Not knowing which of them he should pass the body to, Cildore just keeps hugging the fossilized mummy for an absurdly long time.

Everything about this tragic scene is Solis's fault, the result of her choices. Conscious, deliberate, thoughtful choices... but that doesn't make their consequences any less cruel to have on her head. If she is standing there, marmoreal and alone, at the head of the official delegation, it isn't out of dignity. No. In truth, with her heart in her throat and tears ready to spring to her eyes, it's taking everything she has not to fall down weeping at the sight of the spectacle she created.

A funeral is supposed to pay tribute to the deceased. Nothing about what is taking place before her eyes is in Tumul's image. He had been born to a modest family of slate people and had inherited the qualities of that rock: as erudite as the lush shale that can be sharpened into pencils, as protective as the slate used for roofing tiles, and as generous and unassuming as a stone that is found abundantly, he had accumulated experience like layers of sedimentary rock.

In a silent prayer, Solis begs his pardon.

As the officials present pinch their lips in disapproval at what is gradually turning into an offense to the memory of the deceased, the people of Acongua – all of the clans at once – begin stamping their feet on the ground. What starts out seeming like an instinctive expression of outraged impatience soon reveals itself to be perfectly synchronized. Children, adults and the elderly are all stamping their feet in perfect unison, pounding out a rhythm that keeps a low beat, but is gradually growing stronger and stronger.

Little by little, the ground becomes a drum, as the vibrations shift from a quiver to a throb to a quake, until it reaches the point that you could think the rockworms had

been invited to the ceremony. The dust that had fallen like rain is rising back up to the sky; the cliff looming over the Banded Lands, with its many colourful, brittle layers of rock, is shedding gravel tears. The rocky soil is rippling to the vibrant popular tribute.

Stilled had been its beating heart... But now, despite being deprived of its Primus, the Earth is slowly but surely coming back to life, thanks to the energy and momentum of the shale, granite, clay and other peoples. Their pounding footsteps are bringing back the silent beat that rumbles through the bowels of the earth: the pulse of the world.

The vibration strikes Hannibal full force.

Seismic waves unfurl all around him are, revealing the riches in the soil: the caves where stalactites and stalagmites embrace to create columns worthy of a temple; the veins of silver and gold twining through the tunnels dug by the rockworms, the roiling core of magma and vast expanses of groundwater living side by side in Earth's peace rather than trying to destroy each other... Each and every element is revealing its unity and interdependence.

Suddenly, a deep, profound shame unfurls inside through him. His dishonourable behaviour distils an acidic disdain in his soul that won't be going away any time soon. To think he had dreamt of being Primus when he is so unworthy of all that subterranean beauty! He calls himself a disciple yet he's stalling, trying to avoid a final embrace with his mentor... The stalactites and stalagmites, gold and silver, magma and groundwater don't battle to gain ground! Hearing the sudden echo of his own situation makes him crumble. With the brute force of getting crushed by a boulder, Hannibal realizes that he's not the great man he thought he was.

To Cildore's immense relief, Hannibal grabs Tumul's body, holding it at arm's length to gaze upon it sheepishly, like a

boy who knows he has disappointed his father. Then he hugs it to his chest and whispers a message to beyond the grave. He begs for his mentor's pardon, vows to be better from then on, swears to serve the arkhome and preserve its legacy... chiselling all those promises into the marble of his memory.

Shaken, he can feel the fault lines – poorly metabolized jealousy, fear of losing the place he had carved out for himself, sadness of an adult who suddenly feels orphaned – cracking open his conscience and reshaping his ego. Drawing on his reserves of strength, he buries and compacts those dark thoughts, preserving only his gratitude towards Tumul. And so he transforms the coal of his moods into a glittering diamond of promises.

Then he passes the body differentially to Aurelius.

Who clearly doesn't have a clue what he's supposed to do with it.

After an awkward embrace, the gladiator looks ill at ease, like he's stuck with a burden that he doesn't know how to get rid of. Hannibal can't help being struck by the contrast between the way brilliant, gifted Aurelius was promoted straight from novice to pillar and was chosen as Tumul's companion for his final journey... while he still doesn't know a thing about the Earth's sacred rituals.

Hannibal could take advantage of the situation to humiliate Aurelius in front of everyone. The idea crosses his mind, but it doesn't find a toehold amongst his recent resolutions. It would be unworthy of him. More importantly, it would be unworthy of Tumul.

So he guides the gladiator to the foot of the banded cliff and, with each of them holding one of the deceased's arms, they sit him down, ceremoniously on an outcrop of rock that forms a sort of stool. Tumul is now resting beneath the

globe that used to be in levitation over his head, and which is now embedded in the sacred cliff, like a cannonball that the rock managed to stop mid-flight.

The two disciples step back, while the nobles and magi come forward, with Solis in front and the others forming a half-circle behind them.

Hannibal hesitates for a fraction of a second, before turning to face Aurelius and urging him to follow his lead. With their lips pursed, they begin to make a guttural sound together, a wordless, hummed aria that makes their chests vibrate more than their vocal cords. A deep, muffled, internal chanting.

The drone of the Earth.

Starting out with modesty and deference then gradually increasing to cathartic intensity, hundreds of voices – from the highest-ranking to the lowliest – join the chant. Soon it becomes an infrasound, echoing and resonating powerfully against the cliff. The droning rises, full of subtly moving tonalities, and you would be forgiven for thinking that the very rocks of the mountains of Acongua were vibrating in unison with it. Gypsum, basalt, limestone, jasper, flint, granite, marble and stones gleaming with copper, iron, silver, tin, platinum and other unknown treasures buried beneath the Earth all seem to be joining in.

Inspired by that moving appeal, Tumul's soul comes to anoint his successor, in accordance with the tradition that has been rooted in the Earth arkhme since the magical college was founded.

Although it's firmly set into the cliff, the rocky globe moves and pivots one last time, breaking open and becoming reconstituted in the shape of a parchment made from rock fibres.

Letters appear.

1.2

As soon as Hannibal sees the first letter, an A, he knows. Aurelius accompanied the deceased practically along the whole border with the Rift, and he was the last one to pay tribute to him. Tumul has chosen to bet on Aurelius, the gifted, rather on Hannibal, the doggedly determined, who has never been touched by the grace of genius. A disruptive, unexpected choice for the Earth, but surely what was needed in these troubled times for prana.

Oddly enough, what he feels most is a sense of relief. He has nothing to be ashamed of. He proved himself to be steady, faithful to his arkhhome and his Primus, and devoted to the Earth. He has nothing to blame himself for, no one can deny his whole-hearted dedication. If the heavy burden of responsibility has been placed on someone else's shoulders, it's because Tumul is wise, not because he, Hannibal, was unworthy of the supreme honour.

The next letter to appear is an L.

So he's going to be able to remain at Solis's side after all; to help her consolidate her reign, and to preserve his own role as protector of the Malkah. As Primus, Aurelius will have to leave Nephtys often, and for long stretches. Hannibal will be his relay, the Earth's spokesman at the court of the Sculpted Throne. Aurelius will be able to count on his experience, his insider's knowledge of the power dynamics at court, and his close relationship with Solis. It will strengthen the Earth arkhhome's position.

The fact is, it's a good thing that Tumul chose Aurelius to be the next Primus.

HANNIBAL

That's what the inscription appearing in relief on the rocky globe says in the end.

The hundreds of faces in the crowd turn to stare at him, like so many cairns on a mountainside. Hannibal trembles briefly at the thought of all those eyes counting on him, leaning on his broad shoulders like an edifice on its keystone. The look on his face quickly shifts from the surprise of crumbling soil to the confidence of a boulder.

Tumul has chosen his successor, before the four other Primi, the seven dynasts, dozens of witches and warlocks, and hundreds of mountain people. And above all, before the Malkah.

He, Hannibal, has been indisputably appointed as the uncontested Primus.

If Aurelius had been in his shoes, once again, he wouldn't have known what to do. While he, Hannibal, knows the customs. There he had been deluding himself that the arkhome needed new blood and an innovative approach. He sees what a huge mistake he had been making. The Earth is the foundation that all the other magics rest on, the cornerstone they all lean on. It is where prana originates, so it is the first among all the magics.

Which is why Tumul had preferred him to Aurelius.

Overwhelmed by that revelation, and by the importance of his mission, he walks respectfully over to the globe and lays his hand on it. Mumbling an incantation, his fingers penetrate the rock, kneading it like dough. He pulls out a small ball of it, no larger than a walnut, holding it in his fingertips. He lets it fall into the palm of his hand, staring at it, his back to the silent crowd.

Then he strikes his own face with it, hard, near his left eyebrow.

The round stone pierces his eyeball, bursting it open with a sickeningly damp sound. The vitreous fluid spurts out from beneath the palm he is pressing to his face, making his spread-open fingers sticky as the fluid turns blood-red.

Hannibal doesn't make a peep, doesn't even groan, despite the pain coursing through his optical nerve, tormenting his skull like a stonecutter's drill. His wounded eyelid is fluttering frantically over the foreign body that's so rough and so horrifically dry. It's trying to reject it, preferring to be one-eyed to having one human eye and one mineral one.

With a hand pressed firmly against his brow, he waits for his body to come to terms with his decision, taming the waves of pain. It demands an endless moment of torture that coats his forehead with the sweat of suffering. His scarifications are so warm with fever that he could scratch them until they bled.

Eventually, he gets his senses under control. Then and only then does he carefully remove his hand, squint, and force himself to use his vision.

Suddenly, he sees.

Shapes, depth, colour... everything the human eye usually takes in. But there's more, on another level, like an additional reality: the throbbing of infrasound, the subterranean resonance, and the sedimentary architecture that's as legible and meaningful as sheet music. The slightest movement in the crowd around him, every grain of dust suspended in the air, the vibrational bursts emanating from the hundreds of rockworms gathered beneath the mountain range.

A new world is appearing before him. Or, to be more precise, he is finally discovering the world as he should have been seeing it for a long time by now.

He turns to face the crowd, his face colonized by stony grooves slashing his eyebrow and slipping down towards his cheekbone. He draws himself up tall as he stands proudly before the witnesses to his elevation. Among those hundreds of admiring or stunned gazes, only one matters.

He finally catches Solis's eye.

As she is taking Aurelius's hand.

With his natural eye, Hannibal sees how spontaneous the gesture is. How it radiates kindness, empathy and a desire to console him for his brutal disappointment.

With his stone eye, he can perceive the micro-vibrations, like ripples on the surface of water. Solis's heart is pounding in wild counterpoint to the rage Aurelius can barely contain. A warlock worthy of the name – especially a Primal hopeful – would have managed easily. The difference between them is strikingly stark: Solis is filled with solicitude for Aurelius, who is thinking only of himself.

Why can't she see how selfishly dangerous Aurelius is? Daydreaming of him as an elegant ballroom is all fine and dandy... but it ignores how he disembowelled his opponent at the Appologium. Introducing him as an Arkhantan hero denies the fact that he betrayed the Nay-Dams. How can Solis delude herself to that extent? He may be one-eyed now, but she is completely blind.

Now Hannibal is blind to the tributes being paid to him. The Primi are the first to congratulate him, Sarash more warmly than the rest. Then comes the dynasts and other nobles' turn, followed by the granite people, his clan, and all the other representatives of Acongua.

It isn't until he can commune with the witches and warlocks, the arkhome brethren and sistren he now leads, that he truly grasps that he has succeeded Tumul as Primus. His name will be carved into the Crucible fresco, his feats

may well complete the bronze bas-relief recounting the history of the Earth.

Aurelius is standing off to the side, in the shadow of the cliff, observing evrything from a distance. Unconcerned. Yet he *should* feel concerned. His duty is to congratulate the new Primus. But Hannibal isn't *his* Primus. Tumul chose somebody else even though he, Aurelius, stayed at the late Primus's side for a moon, sharing his daily life throughout the whole long journey along the border with the Rift.

Aurelius did everything Tumul asked of him, and yet, when the time came to choose, the Primus had refused to entrust his power to him. It just doesn't sit right with the gladiator, not after he had allowed his hopes to be raised. During their journey, hadn't he been able to prove several times just how far he had come since the day he had been scarified? Tumul had been impressed, Aurelius is sure of it.

Like that time on the outskirts of Orcunion when he had grown two extra pairs of arms made of brambles to hold up the heavy trunk of an uprooted querk. Aurelius can still see the look on the Primus's face: a cross between admiration and concern. He had cast the spell instinctively, without even thinking about it, but it had clearly seemed like a tremendous feat to Tumul.

So whatever had possessed him to choose that oaf Hannibal over him? Why pick the dogged rather than the gifted?

"Be patient," Syläë hisses in his ear.

Aurelius turns around slowly to stare ostensibly at the hand the Primus of Nature has lain on his shoulder. She jerks it away as though she'd been burned by the vicious intensity of his gaze.

"Things would have been easier if you'd been made Primus," Syläë goes on, "but whatever happens, nothing can

prevent Isalys's rise to power now."

A fault. A huge fault in the Earth is what Aurelius would like to see open up and swallow her comments. There's nothing he hates more than words of consolation, words for the loser. He never comes in second. No speeches for the defeated! Second place doesn't exist; only victory, or death!

It's true at the Appologium, it's true in the Rift, and it's true in ordinary life, every single day. Every Nay-Dam knows that.

There's no such thing as a consolation prize, no second chance. Syläë thinks there is, which only goes to show that Arkhantans are weak. They all deserve to be put to the sword.

Suddenly Syläë is overcome by a convulsive fit of coughing that makes her double over with pain. The wooden horns on her forehead are shaking; the hand she has raised to her mouth is covered with mucus – or blood? – that she wipes hastily off on her high boot, as though no one had noticed a thing. After such a show of weakness, Aurelius drops the idea of putting her in her place. Syläë is on her last legs, that's why she sounds so defeatist.

Veliva, who had also come to plot with the gladiator and the Primus of Nature, conceals the disgust the scene has inspired in her under a thick layer of venomous irony.

"My dear Syläë, it's a good thing that coughing up such foolishness pained you! I never want to hear anything like that out of you again, nor does Aurelius!"

Then, turning to look straight at him, she adds, "As for you, my dear, don't be as naïve as she. Don't you see that you'll never be an Arkhantan? Solis doesn't want it. If she had, she would have chosen you, and you would have been crowned Primus here today."

"She doesn't appoint the Primi," Aurelius objects in a low voice. He doesn't care for Veliva's shrill, biting tone of voice.

“Oh no? And what makes you so sure of that? The solicitous hand holding yours? Couldn’t you see it was pure perfidy? She was holding you back so that you wouldn’t demand your due. Protecting her darling Hannibal. And you, sot that you are, didn’t see through her act.”

Aurelius lowers his chin, as though it were heavy with anger. Could it be true? Had Solis taken his hand just to hold him back? Has he been duped and betrayed? In a flash, he realizes that he should actually be asking himself if there’s a single reason to think that Veliva’s wrong.

He can’t think of one.

His eyes seek Solis out, ready to demand an answer. He spots her a little ways away, kneeling before Tumul’s body, the very embodiment of sorrow. Had she been manipulating him? Was holding his hand a calculated gesture?

More importantly, why should it matter to him? He wants the Malkah overturned, not in love with him!

Somewhat belatedly, he grasps that the Primi are messing with his head. Isalys had warned him: the lords and ladies of the arkhomes are more than just skilled magi. Above all else, they are peerless schemers. Only fools believe that the position of Primus is earned through merit. Hannibal’s appointment is proof positive of that.

Aurelius stares at the Malkah spitefully, feigning to believe the Primi were speaking turthfully. Veliva and Syläë might as well go on thinking he’s a marionette whose strings they can pull, a dumb soldier. That suits him just fine. It will make it all the easier for him to surprise them when the time comes.

That time shouldn’t be very far off, for that matter. Solis had informed the Primi that she intended to go to the Rift in order to continue Tumul’s investigation. The supreme magi were answering her call begrudgingly at best. But with or without them, Solis would be crossing the border soon. Then

she'd be at his mercy.

He almost feels sorry for her.

Almost.

Heedless of the looming threat to her safety, Solis is still kneeling before the body of Tumul, which still looks so strangely alive. Out of respect, everyone else in attendance stands back, allowing the Malkah to pay a final homage to the Primus in peace.

Her head is spinning with doubts, remorse and cruel uncertainty about whether she made the right choice... torments that even her encounter with the astrogant didn't ease entirely. What if Solis's actions had no impact on fickle fate? What if, no matter what decisions she had made, Tumul might have died from them anyway?

Her thoughts intertwine, then meld together into a sincere prayer meant to accompany the deceased to the afterlife. Still, she hadn't actually expected to receive a reply.

Tumul's globe makes a grinding, gnashing noise, like two rocks being rubbed together when a stone-mason is adjusting them. The letters forming the name HANNIBAL dissolve back into the rocky surface, while others appear, discreetly and ephemerally, in an epitaph meant for the Malkah's eyes only.

FOLLOW THE AMBER IN THE RIFT

Before Solis can fully grasp the message Tumul is sending her from the Gates of Death, the globe cracks open like an egg and a dung-scarab extricates itself from it, fluttering its still soft elytra in order to take flight. The golden-bellied insect lands on Solis's finger, then wraps its diaphanous wings around it before freezing in place, as still as a rock, turning itself into an unlikely ring.

A dung-scarab, like the astrogant said.

Her mind is made up now, suddenly as immutable as the

granite of Acongua: the Primi's stalling no longer matters to her. Calyps can try to off-load responsibility to his disciples, Syläë may well be gravely ill, Veliva can rant until she's blue in the face; she, Solis, will go, with or without them. She knows she can count on Sarash and – without even the shadow of a doubt – on the new Primus of the Earth.

She will go to the Rift. She will figure out how to regenerate the prana cycle. And she will save Arkhante.

SALT IN THE WOUNDS

“Do people really live there?”

Jax lifts his chin to indicate the vast, desolate expanse of the Rift, which starts 30 rods straight down from their patrol path. Most Wall of Bones guards don't ask questions like that, but Jax is a rookie.

“Yeah... if you can still call them ‘people.’”

The terse reply ends with a long sigh. Beardless and practically bald, Old Garth has fewer hairs on his whole head than Jax in his bushy eyebrows alone. Bent by the weight of age, Garth forces himself to stand up straight, clinging to his spear like a cane.

“To get there, you have to cross the Great Maw first.”

Garth turns towards the impressive gateway that is the only opening in the Wall of Bones. All the way over at the far end of the patrol path, the passage is held open by the vast ribcage of a giant's skeleton.

From that distance, the huge skull closing the end of the tunnel looks blurry. He squints his eyes in hopes of forcing the spyglass tattoo that gives him fake eyebrows. Alas, even magic is no longer enough to make up for his declining eyesight. To think that thirty years ago, that tattoo had made him the best lookout in the whole pirate town of Alvilid!

“Sometimes whole families head to the Rift together.”

“Who could be messed up enough to do that?”

“People who've lost everything. Outcasts, exiles, paupers, madmen... People who have no other choice.”

Garth's reply casts a chill that is every bit as penetrating as the freezing cold pre-dawn air.

“They must really be down on their luck,” Jax replies, with no real compassion.

“Luck has nothing to do with it...”

Garth isn't surprised by the younger man's lack of empathy. Jax comes from the agricultural plains of Namani, making him a pragmatic, down-to-earth kind of person. Knowing that on top of that, bad harvests have forced him to leave home and accept a position on the foreboding living Wall, there's not much chance he's going to get teary-eyed over the fate of other exiles. Besides, there's no room for sentimentality here; it's a luxury none of them can afford.

“Dang, it's cold. Is it always this bad here?” Jax asks, tugging at his too-short coat. Aren't Massada and the Rift supposed to be deserts?”

“No clouds.”

“What?”

Garth, who can feel his knees getting rusty, holds back yet another sigh. Clearly, Jax doesn't know how to settle for curt answers. Too bad. But Garth is going to have to get used to it, because it's his role to take the new guy under his wing.

“There are never any clouds here. No cloud cover means nothing to block the heat by day, and nothing to hold it in by night. Capiscano, comrade?”

I've never heard anybody say that clouds did that before. Are you messing with me, old man?”

“You know how I've stayed alive on the Wall for all these years? I listen to what people tell me. A magus explained it to me.”

“You're not going to tell me that at your age you still believe the great hooded ones!”

Jax raises his head sceptically. In the rosy-fingered dawn, the puff of his breath is the only cloud on the horizon. Numb with cold, he tugs on the fur-trimmed garment, which

is far too short for his sturdy Namanian build.

“I told the guy who issued it that it was too small...”

“Welcome to the Arkhantan Army,” Garth says, sounding disillusioned.

“Yours fits,” Jax points out insidiously.

“I took it off of the body of the last soldier who was chit-chatting instead of doing his job.”

Garth goes back to patrolling, followed a beat later by a grouchy Jax, muttering in annoyance. For a few minutes, their spears striking the ground is the only sound that can be heard. Deep in the bowels of the rampart, that open-air cemetery, the creaking sounds echo ominously, like a beast growling. When you throw in the morning mist, like an animal’s breath, you could wind up believing that the Wall really was alive.

Suddenly, the brambles begin to stir. They’re strangling the skeletons like knotted muscles, weaving like shifty reptiles through the ribcages and the eye sockets of the skulls, scratching the bones with an unbearable screeching. The edifice cracks, smokes, stretches out painfully... A terrifying monster waking up in a bad mood.

The patrol path starts rippling with an ominous cracking, like a spine with an endless shiver. Garth immediately shoves the handle of his spear deep into the nest of bones and hangs on tight. Taken by surprise, Jax is thrown off balance, landing hard on his butt, his bushy eyebrows making a circumflex accent mark.

“Hagstone, what’s going on? The whole thing’s falling apart!”

“No, the Wall is adapting to a threat.”

“What threat?”

Garth looks around, squinting his worried eyes again to try to locate it. In twenty years on the Wall, he’s seen the rampart

reconfigure itself before, but never so intensely: the danger must be serious and imminent. The idea that Mantris might be launching another attack is enough to liquefy his guts and make the spear almost slip from his sweaty palms.

Scrutinizing the Rift desert meticulously, he still doesn't see a thing but dust and poverty. Curse his declining view that's concealing the enemy and preventing him from reacting effectively! Then the Wall's agitation gradually starts subsiding, the shivering ebbing away. Was it just a false alarm?

"Is it over?" Jax asks, sounding worried.

He barely has the time to stand up straight when the Wall flies apart. Huge tibias, broken claws, shoulder blades as big as shovels and battered-looking skulls are blown sky high. But the bones freeze in mid-air, held back by brambles so taut they're about to give away. The rampart looks like a contortionist dislocating its shoulders.

Jax topples over again, while Garth's spear nearly snaps in two. Luckily, the section of the rampart where they are standing doesn't expand to the point of tossing them to the ground so far below. Closer to the Great Maw, on the other hand, the Wall has tripled in size.

Overcome with fear, Garth is trying desperately to force his eyes to work better, when suddenly, his tattoos regain the strength they used to have in his youth. From a dizzying, high-angle perspective, he sees the huge skull that was made into a gateway rise up to a height of fifteen rods. Beneath him, the bones are coming assembling themselves like pieces of an ivory puppet held together by thick sheaves of brambles, joining into a single giant skeleton.

A legend circulating among the guards says that someday, the dead who have been piled up and woven together dead in the open-air cemetery that is the Wall will rise up and come back to life. The legend doesn't specify if they're coming

back to finish the war or to take revenge on their killers. Garth had always pooh-poohed the notion... but it looks like he was dreadfully mistaken.

It's impossible to say whether he or Jax is screaming louder. Besides, no one could hear them in the hideous, chalky din of the gigantic undead creature's grinding joints. The racket they're making would drown out the sound of a sinking ship.

“AAAAAH!”

Silence has fallen abruptly – and it turns out that Jax's squeal is higher pitched. Way over yonder, on the far side of the patrol path, the Great Maw's patchwork skeleton has risen to a half-standing position, trapped by the bramble latticework. The giant is imprisoned in the Wall, like a lich ensnared in its own shroud. A troop is passing, almost nonchalantly, between its legs that are as thick as a hundred normal tibias, blithely ignoring the huge creature looming over them.

Garth's looking-glass tattoos reveal a regiment of some two dozen foot soldiers, the tips of their spears glinting in the rays of the rising sun that are just grazing the desolate landscape. They're escorting a convoy of light baggage, pulled by placid bovines – with their beds surrounded by barrels, the carts look like rafts crossing a sea of dust. And in the midst of all that, a dozen splendid saddle horses bearing...

He can't believe his eyes.

But it's undeniable. There's Veliva. Let alone Syläë, Calyps, Hannibal and Sarash. Their presence explains the powerful jolt to his tattoos. Primi invigorate the prana around them, even here on these prana-forsaken lands. Only Shado is missing – although on second thought... he could easily be concealed in the half-light, somewhere in the shadows of the shadows.

And just behind them is the Malkah, surrounded by her bodyguards. So the incredible rumours were true: the Malkah really had decided to visit the Rift to make sure that the favour she demanded at the Appologium was being honoured. When some of the Primi took exception to accompanying her, she didn't yield, but had instead insisted that their disciples come too. After that, no one had dared to object. The proof is right there before his eyes: Calyps is accompanied by Keya, the warrior-prophetess; and Veliva by Syphonn, the apprentice wind-blowing-magician.

Seeing the Malkah and the Primi here is as unlikely as the Great Maw having awoken. Although the one explains the other: the Wall is clearly to keep them from being exposed to the dangers of the Rift. Yet it has awoken for naught. You can't restrain a supreme magus against his will... let alone five of them as united as the fingers of a hand.

The rampart makes one last attempt, weaving a bramble fence studded with thorns that's vibrating like a greedy spider eager to catch its prey.

But that was forgetting Syläë, whose horns burst into a crown, reminding everyone that she is the sovereign of the forces of Nature. The bramble fence swings open like a gate, albeit reluctantly, with a few strands still trying to snag the Malkah's gown. But between the Primus's power and Solis's imperturbable poise, they soon give up the struggle.

Conclusively quelled, the skeletal giant is reduced to hanging its bony skull to watch through its empty eye sockets as the convoy passes between its legs. Magnificently heroic, the Primi and their disciples head into the moor, shielded by courage.

Or completely out of their minds, having already fallen prey to the mirages of the Rift...

"Who's the good-looking guy with the long hair? I swear

I've seen him before."

Jax, who's back on his feet and has already forgotten about the fright he got, is fiddling with his beard in annoyance. Then he stops short, with a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes.

"Good Lo! It's... Aurelius!"

The champion of the Appologium is heading into the Rift alongside the Malkah and the Primi? That's odd. And yet Garth has recognized him too, without the shadow of a doubt.

"That guy," Jax gushes enthusiastically, "will show the Nay-Dams who's boss."

Garth watches the surprising caravan fade into the encroaching mists of his near-sightedness as the Primi march away. Before they are gone from sight, one last detail strikes him. Years of keeping vigil on the Wall of Bones have taught him to recognize a Nay-Dam at a glance, just from the way they move. Their predatory lurking gait, an attitude shaped by the devastating anomalies in the Rift; that characteristic tension that allows them to be ready for anything, even – or perhaps especially – the worst. Those clues inevitably betray them. And Aurelius ticks off every box on his list.

A Nay-Dam? The champion of the Appologium – the combatant who earned the decisive point for Arkhante is a *Nay-Dam*?

The old border guard shakes his head, feeling sorry for himself. It's bad enough that his eyesight is failing, but now he's starting to go senile, too.

"C'mon kid, let's go. The magi will be back soon enough. It's best they not find us gawking."

"Just let me at your haggling magi! They'll see what I'm made...!"

The rest of his boasting gets swallowed up by the racket made by the Wall settling back down and the Great Maw

banging like a drawbridge slamming shut. The rampart rumbles and cracks, the brambles grind and screech, as supernatural powers sink back into a deep sleep. Powers that it is wise to respect.

“Garth, wait!” Jax shouts, running after his elder. “Don’t leave me here all by myself, for hag’s sake!”

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The Rift’s landscapes could too easily be summarized as ghost towns with sparse, even ghostlier inhabitants and twisted megaliths marking the borders between clan lands. Its flora includes far too many petrified trees with thorny branches that aren’t welcome to anything but the eyes of the hanged; its fauna, too many carrion-eaters crossing the Wall of Bones in search of carcasses spared by the mutations.

It’s true, this no-man’s land is an invalid with suppurating wounds, a rotting corpse suffering never-ending death throes.

But at night, the Rift retrieves some modesty. It drapes the dark cloak of an icy dusk over its stigmata, and, when the conditions are right, attires itself in an aurora borealis like a luminescent bandage placed over its hideous wounds.

Aurelius briefly stops what he’s doing, hanging bells on the stakes stretching the cloth of the tents. He wants to enjoy the fascinating spectacle falling over their encampment for the night. It’s a sight for sore eyes after a day of being aggressed by the unhealthy strangeness of the Rift. It should have been familiar to him, but instead, he feels like he’s rediscovering it with every step he takes.

He’s horribly ashamed to admit it, even to himself, but just a hundred or so days in the luxury of Arkhante’s palaces have sufficed for him to feel like a foreigner in the land of his birth. To be precise, the Rift strikes him not so much as

foreign, but devastated: a desolate land inhospitable to life. A place that any sensible person would scurry away from as fast as his legs could carry him. It took nightfall to remind him that this is still his home.

All day long, and even now that the caravan has traded its carts for somewhat pretentious cloth pavilions, the Primi have been flaunting their utter indifference to the oppressive atmosphere. They have no choice, they don't want any reminders of how terribly weakened their magic is here. As for the Malkah, she has been feigning total confidence in order to put the many political and personal risks she's taking with this journey out of her mind.

On the other hand, it's clear that the staff accompanying the convoy realizes that danger is lurking. Aurelius can tell from a host of little clues. The servants have lit an astounding number of torches to light up the camp, wanting to chase out the slightest corner of darkness. The cook tosses away a whole piglet that she decides seems off. The meat is instantly whisked away by a fenneg that appears out of nowhere then scampers away amidst the cook's helper's shouting. The cowherd has improvised an ointment to slather onto a suspicious rash, out of fear of its getting infected. Everyone flinches at the slightest noise; no one goes anywhere alone.

The soldiers are all keeping their eyes peeled. The excessively armed patrols' broadswords stay unsheathed. The guards standing around the fires are strangely silent. Several foot soldiers are keeping an eye on the Nay-Dam encampment near their own, their swords pointedly drawn.

Aurelius is keeping an eye on that encampment, too. He's noticed a man staring at him, always the same one. He's easy to recognize: half of his face has been taken over by some kind of blue mould, a mutant organism whose fibrils flutter

in the evening breeze. Aurelius goes back to hanging his little chimes, while keeping an eye on the suspect.

“Why are you hanging wind-chimes?”

Aurelius looks over his shoulder, tying the strings of bells on out of habit, without having to look at what he’s doing. Solis has stepped out of the tent to join him, abandoning the Primi’s council meeting taking place inside.

“You wouldn’t be spying on us, would you?” she jokes guilelessly.

If she only knew! Aurelius focuses on the task at hand so as not to betray his own duplicity. That blasted Solis’s intuition can be extraordinary!

“It’s just a rudimentary alarm system,” he says, finishing his knot.

With a flick of his fingers, he makes sure the chimes can turn freely around the strap. They can indeed, and they tinkle cheerfully.

“Can’t be too cautious. The Rift is dangerous day and night.”

Solis follows him to the next tent pole. Despite the scorching heat, her complexion is as fresh and her gown as immaculate as ever – as though she had just stepped out of a dirigible, when she has actually been in the saddle all day long. Pure magic, unaltered even by the Rift. Isalys has the same ability to remain unaffected by the desert’s aggressions.

“Are you worried about our neighbours?”

Solis shoots a discreet glance towards the nomads who have set up their bivouac just a stone’s throw from their own. Nothing more than mats tossed over hoop frames, their lodgings are far more rudimentary than the Arkhantans’ pavilions. Far better adapted to the changing winds of the Rift, too. And most importantly, far faster to take down in case of emergency.

Aurelius observe the Nay-Dams in turn. The man with the contaminated cheek grins at him snidely, as he does whenever their eyes meet.

“They’re Sigils, profiteers who take advantage of chaos,” the gladiator explains, without looking away.

“Not a very flattering description.”

“Granted, but they are essentially merchants. They like to hang out near the border, where there are always deals to be made.”

“So you’re not afraid they might attack?”

Aurelius smiles at the young queen.

“With all these soldiers around? Not a chance.”

He turns to look at the foot soldiers wiping down the horses under the orders of their captain, Atlas. Tall and ramrod straight, his chest covered with a shirt of glittering mail, he is as perfectly adapted to the Rift as an axe is for pounding a nail.

“We should take advantage of running into them to trade all of our livestock, including the cattle, for tachosaurs.”

“You mean those odd-looking creatures?”

Solis tips her heads towards a herd of animals whose thick skin looks like a knight’s armour. They’re quite impressive, with their large horns and the bony ruff around their necks. Yet they are quietly grazing the sparse algae they turn up by breaking up lumps of sand with their hooves.

“They’re perfectly adapted to survive in the Rift,” Aurelius says, sounding defensive.

“What would become of our steeds?”

“Their meat will make excellent barter. The cleverest ones will go back to the Wall to sell the horses before they wither away.”

Solis pinches her lips, distressed at the thought.

“I’ll mention it to the captain,” she promises,

unconvincingly.

Aurelius settles for a shrug. The Arkhantans don't get it. They're acting as though they were still in their own kingdom. The Rift is going to eat them alive. He won't even have to live a finger; it's almost too easy.

"So then what are those bells for?"

"To warn us if the wind gets stronger," the gladiator lies, having no desire to list all the dangers they're exposed to.

"Does it really blow that hard?"

"I've seen a storm flay the skin from a wanderer's bones."

That wipes the smile from Solis's face, and makes her swallow painfully. What surprises him the most is how instinctively trusting she is towards him... when no one could be less worthy of it than he, who lies to her and even to himself. Proof positive that her perception of vibrations has been powerfully affected by the Rift.

He'd love to be able to convince himself that she's naïve, simple-minded even, overly candid, senseless without her spells. At least that way he could disdain her, look down his nose at her, mock her... but when you get right down to it, he doesn't really know who she is at all. Is she really that gullible?

Deep down, something about that doesn't sit right with him. A sturdy bond, like a square knot, has sprung up between them, he can feel it in his guts. The queen is attached to him – after all, he did his best to make that happen, since he needed to get close to her. But why does she believe in him with such disturbing certainty, such ridiculous blindness?

Like it or not, he's touched by her faith in him, the way she makes him feel trustworthy. He likes it a little too much, even. Confused, he scratches at his scarifications, which have long since healed.

“Solis, I wanted to warn you...”

“About what?”

“Going over the Salt Lake is a mistake.”

“Why?”

“A powerful curse was cast on it during the Heroes’ War.”

“By Udeep, the late Primus of Water, I know. That’s precisely why Calyps is so eager to go. Why didn’t you mention your reluctance earlier, when we might still have taken another route?”

“What are the chances he would have listened to me?”

“Not Calyps, me.”

“I doubt that.”

Solis steps back as though he had slapped her. Aurelius insists on opening her eyes.

“The Primi know I’m a Nay-Dam, they’re never going to trust me. In fact, they’re so suspicious of me that they haven’t even told anyone what I am!”

After the Arkhonts’ thunderous declaration at the Plenition, you would have expected the entire Kingdom to have found out that their champion was from the Rift. Instead, a closed-door meeting of the Arkhantan elite had come to the conclusion that the secret needed to be kept under wraps. Even Captain Atlas is unaware of his true identity.

“Would you rather everyone knew?”

Aurelius is taken aback by Solis’s question.

“As far as I am concerned, you are an Arkhantan, like all of the Nay-Dams. Besides, you’re not defined by your place of birth, far from it. Now, if having it be known is important to you...”

“But... what about the Primi?”

“They will go along with what I say, just as they have gone along with this journey. They underestimated my

determination,” Solis adds with a sly grin. “Are you going to make the same mistake?”

Aurelius is speechless. How does she make everything seem so easy?

“You look pensive all of a sudden,” she says, teasing him gently. “But you have plenty of time to think about it. There’s no point in announcing anything until we get back to Nephtys. Now, shall we go offer a barrel of water to the Sigils, to show that we come in peace?”

Did she suggest that on the spur of the moment, a generous thought inspired by the aridness of the Rift, or is Solis aware of the Nay-Dam custom of exchanging water between clans? If she gives a whole barrel, the princely gift will grant her an reputation that will precede her across the desert.

“Would you be so kind as to accompany me? I would like to take advantage of the opportunity to earn a few words of the native lingo.”

Blind-sided by the queen’s nerve, Aurelius stares as she walks away to speak to Captain Atlas, who has two of his men unstrap a barrel immediately. Is Solis’s concern for the Nay-Dams sincere? Is her intention to reunify the Rift with Arkhante more than just posturing? What a sublime ambition, far more noble and satisfying than the sordid vengeance Isalys and he have been plotting.

You’d have to be mad to believe in it, but cynical not to.

Aurelius is disconcerted. Worse: he’s lost his sense of certainty.

A few rods away, the man with the blue cheek is still staring at him...

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2.2

Ruby disappears in the blink of an eye, swallowed up by the crusty surface of the Salt Lake. -\s a bodyguard, she was marching alongside Solis's chariot when she vanished in one fell swoop, as though she had set foot on an invisible water hole that engulfed her.

She's gone without a trace. There's not even a ripple on the solid surface of what's left of the former lake, now evaporated.

The salt crust had been crackling under the horses' hooves for a while. They had been sinking in to their fetlocks, and the grooves left like a wake by the carts had gradually grown into deeper and deeper ruts. Still, such a dramatic event could not have been foreseen.

Veliva reacts the fastest to Ruby's sudden disappearance. Instinctively, she rises from the ground, followed by her disciple, Siphonn. They take flight laboriously, tacking left and right, as though they were weighed down by Captain -\tlas's heavy armour.

The foot soldiers' laughter ceases abruptly. Just a moment before, Veliva had been entertaining them with bawdy pictures shaped from the salt crystals raised by the caravan's passing. Their snickering turns into shouts as two more soldiers vanish in turn, swallowed up by the salty surface.

Panic spreads through the convoy, leading - counterintuitively - to sluggish, feeble, restrained reactions. -\lthough no one understands why, everyone winds up realising that gravity doesn't obey the usual laws here. The Salt Lake is a lawless area where gravity is free to tug them in any direction it wants. Faced with such an infringement of the world's most reliable rule, no one knows what to do.

No one but -\urelius, that is.

He grabs Solis, who's sitting on the chariot that he's riding alongside and flings her across the saddle. Then he snaps the reins, making his steed rear up to free its hooves from the ground. The horse doesn't gallop, it moves in stuttering leaps and bounds as though it were fording a stream overflowing with snowmelt.

-\ beat later, the cowherd follows suit. Before the steer respond to his whip, he hears two loud cracking noises behind him. Fearing a broken axle, he turns around and sees two sickles driven into the back rim of the cart. The servants jammed inside are gasping in shock.

With difficulty, Ruby is hauling herself out of the ground, hanging onto the chains of her sickles to free her body, which is still buried up to the chest. The effort shows in her tense features and trembling limbs, and in the striking of the tormented links of the chains. The bodyguard is pulling so hard it seems like she's dragging the cart to a halt.

"Go help her!" -\tlas orders his troops.

The captain sets an example, approaching her and stretching his spear out for her to grab like a lifeline. But Ruby can't let go of her chains, since it's taking every bit of strength she's got to stay out of the salty maw of the shrivelled up lake.

"Grab th."

-\tlas is unable to finish his sentence; even the sound of his voice seems to be dragged away by the heavy draw of the gravity. Not just his voice. In a din of rattling, his coat of mail starts vibrating, forming various geometric shapes depending on the frequency shaking the links. Then they abruptly start to contract, squeezing his ribs, which snap like straw. With a sound like a zalnute getting cracked open in a nutcracker, -\tlas

spews a flood of blood as the steel mail digs into his lungs.

Those few foot soldiers who had followed their officer's lead panic and fall hastily back. Ruby begins to howl, crushed in turn by the invisible weight. She lets go, as though all of the strength had been drained from her arms at once. The release is so sudden and violent that her left elbow is twisted the wrong way, and the joint breaks with a sound like a twig.

Sylaë tosses vines in her direction. -\s flimsy-looking as little sprouts and as twisted as old grapevines, they entwine themselves around Ruby's shoulders and chest, then climb up the chains to her sickles, tightening the bond with the cart bed. But even they succumb, snapping one by one, like the roots of a tree laid flat by a flood.

"I'm so sorry." the Primus of Nature half-sobs, overwhelmed to see her magic lessened, dismembered by the Rift.

She wears herself out, trying over and over, doing her utmost to hang on, until her body is overcome, defeated by effort and disease. The vines snap like kindling, breaking the sickles' chains with a jangling like a tocsin.

Ruby sinks back into the ground without the time for so much as a whimper.

Sylaë nearly gets swallowed up too, but Veliva swoops in and lifts her into the air too. The Primus of Nature is launched into choppy flight, just a few feet off the ground.

The whole scene had played out in seconds, barely thirty heartbeats. Their own stupefaction and the intensity of the event meant that most of the witnesses hadn't even had time to react. Even -\urelius had only gotten his steed a few leaps and bounds away.

The desire to get away from the Salt Lake as urgently as possible gleams in every eye. The south-west is the only

direction that is not immaculately, blindingly white. Everyone rushes toward that miraculous oasis in a sea of salt. It isn't until three soldiers are swallowed up - spear and all - that they realise that a straight line isn't the safest path.

Calyps has been plumbing the ground gingerly since they first set foot on the Salt Lake, one ear cocked for magical echoes of the spell cast over it by his predecessor as Primus of Water. This place was once a majestic lake, a holiday spot for the -\rkhantan nobility. Udeep dried it out with a single ritual, turning its waters into a tidal wave to drown the energy plants that had been fuelling Mantri attacks twenty years before.

The current Primus of Water needs to change levels of perception - fast - if he wants to make it out of this predicament.

"Lend me your sight," he murmurs into Nophia, his water serpent's, ear.

The familiar rolls itself around Calyps's wrist, and with a high-pitched hiss, bares its fangs and bites into the soft flesh between the Primus's thumb and forefinger. Nophia's venom sinks in instantly, as Calyps speeds up the circulation of his own blood. The Primus's eyesight blurs, bringing the invisible drafts in the dry, overheated air that is so conducive to mirages into view.

Now he can follow the air currents that transparent fish are swimming in five inches above the ground. Those strange creatures have proven their capacity for anticipating the intangible phenomenon that run riot on the lake's surface. -\s he approaches the school of fish, they flap their fins excitedly, before settling back into their drowsy meandering.

"Keya, the fish!" he snaps at his disciple.

In her twenties, Keya has large black eyes underscored with

tattoos dripping over her cheeks, as though her mascara had run. -\ nasty-looking scar slashes her left cheek. It's clamped together by a stud that's connected to a chain running to one of a host of silver hoops in her ears.

Without a word, she gets the troop to fall in behind Calyps, turning him into a pilot-fish for another kind of school. of humans this time. Soldiers and servants alike scramble out of the carts that aren't nimble enough to follow/avoid the flow of danger. Blind to the looming threat, they take shelter in the Primus's wake, like castaways abandoning their lifeboat to swim towards a distant, but visible shore.

When Calyps seems unsure about which way to go, Ronan shoots a flock of arrows whose trajectory reveals the unnatural fluctuations of gravity around them. Sometimes they zoom straight up to the sky before making a loop-de-loop; others, they shoot off unexpectedly to one side. The pointy-tipped swarm confirms the need to follow the Primus's zig-zagging path.

But Hannibal's not following them.

The Primus of the Earth is entirely focused on the steed carrying Solis and-\urelius far away, in a different direction from the one Calyps has chosen.

His stone eye is in a frenzy from the erratic telluric vibrations, as though it were being assaulted by flashes of stroboscopic light. He lowers his eyelids, but it's impossible to escape the aberrant fluctuations of gravity tormenting his magical perception. Nausea is wringing his guts, draining his strength. He stumbles, goes down on one knee, laying the palm of one hand on the salty crust. It's burning hot, as though the earth itself were spiking a fever.

Thanks to his sense of touch alone, he can follow from a distance the heavy galloping of -\urelius's horse, the salty

surface crackling beneath its hooves, the steed's panic rising as it more and more trouble hauling itself from the ground.

The Earth's vibrations have never felt so uncertain to Hannibal before. The fluctuations aren't like those of a capricious child or a madman, more like those of a disintegrating world abandoned by the forces that have underpinned it since time immemorial.

Manipulating those vibrations means entering a deadly labyrinth whose walls are constantly shifting, one that's riddled with invisible pitfalls leading to an uncertain exist. But if Hannibal wants to give Solis a chance to survive, he has no other choice.

He begins a chant. Having preserved his breath as much as possible since they arrived in the Rift, he's now drawing unsparingly on his magical reserves, like a reformed teetotaller forcing himself to drink to inebriation.

-\voiding the lawless zones, his spell tacks towards the steed. There the Primus of the Earth firms up the soft, loose ground and lightens the two riders' weight. The effort requires extreme concentration: he has to pace himself, without letting the bond between himself and his target break as it gets further away. That means constantly reweaving the bond, turning the spell into a road that adjusts in real time to an inhospitable landscape in the midst of near seismic activity. The effort is such that the Primus's nose starts bleeding, clot by clot.

Unfortunately, Hannibal hadn't anticipated quite how capricious gravity could be around here. It's hard to imagine the most basic power of attraction shifting. -\t best, you can get your head around the idea that it could disappear, or be turned upside down.

Not that it could suddenly shoot off horizontally with a

shearing motion.

The horse and its riders get projected violently to one side, breaking the bond with a disoriented Hannibal in an instant. Devastated, the Primus opens his eyes and discovers something improbable.

With instinctive magic, -\urelius has gathered the suspended salt crystals and assembled them into six arms as thick as trunks that spring from his shoulders, glittering in the lights of Galana. His power has been solicited so swiftly and intensely that his scarifications have started bleeding.

Hannibal had no idea that a warlock could manipulate such a crumbly mineral. He's never seen any other magus pull that off before, let alone so spontaneously. He's not sure that he himself would be able to achieve that.

Two of the limbs pass under the animal's barrel chest, while the other four lift it from the ground. Having already achieved the impossible, -\urelius surpasses it by managing to keep the steed moving along by having the four magical legs imitate a cautious trot.

Just when Hannibal can savour his relief that they've been saved, the steed is suddenly sliced in two horizontally, cut straight through from front to back. The legs are flung to the left while the hindquarters and withers fly off to the right. Even the long, silky tail is cut in two, like a barber chopping off a boy's long locks.

Luckily - unless he had anticipated the sudden inversion of gravity - -\urelius had drawn his legs up to his chest, avoiding a cruel amputation. The artificial limbs, on the other hand, have been chopped cleanly off and reduced to a heap of powder.

Forty rods away, Hannibal has squeezed his eyes shut again, to draw on the dregs of his strength. He creates a pillar of

earth that surges out of the zone cleared of salt by -\urelius. The axis slams into the animal's open chest, shoving through the blood and guts until it catches on the ribs. There it twists around, pushing the carcass forward. -\nother rocky column appears, in synch with the first, bringing the half-animal and its riders another step forward. Clinging to the beast's mane, Solis and -\urelius manage to take the carcass's lurching motions in stride.

Hannibal picks up the pace, creating more and more pylons. The series draws the crest of a sea serpent that has been dozing beneath the evaporated lake's former bottom. -\ crest being bloodied by the disembowelled steed.

Focused on his complex manoeuvre, Hannibal fails to anticipate the next fluctuation blocking his spell. -\ gravity perturbation breaks the magical channel between the spell caster and its target. The kickback is horrific, like a thick metal cable cracking and snapping like a whip.

The blast blows Hannibal's eyelids open. His stone eye cracks like a lens struck with an awl. Blood spurts from the slit, running into his ears.

He passes out.

Unaware of what's playing out behind them, -\urelius and Solis keep hurtling across the artificial ridge. The columns come to a sudden stop, hurling them to the ground just steps from the shore of the lake. Half-buried by the horse's body, their hair and faces tacky with blood, they skid across the salty crust that makes their scraps and bruises burn.

The Malkah and the gladiator stare at each other, speechless, unable to understand what just happened, but still glad to be alive.

"So you're taking your lady-friend for a stroll? I thought she was in Desner?"

The man with a cheek covered in blue moss is crouching just a few feet from them, his boots grazing the edge of the Salt Lake. In saving them, Hannibal has thrown them into the arms of the Sigils, those who profit from chaos.

Pleased with himself, the stranger smiles. His dentition is as queer as his cheek: large rectangular teeth with huge gaps between each one make his smile look like the boards of a patrol path.

He's clearly amused by his luck: the nobles have been separated from their escort. Even better, the other Sigils have all gathered where the rest of the unlucky expedition must be emerging from the lake right around now. So he's alone with his prey.

-\s though to show them who's boss, he uncovers his left shoulder, which bears the sign of the Bloody Wings gang.

-\urelius freezes. This imbecile is going to spoil everything. How can he make the fool understand that he mustn't say anything that could blow his cover?

Struggling to his fee, -\urelius walks over with a grin, as though he were greeting an old friend. -\nd jams his dagger right up through the Sigil's chin, shutting his mouth for good.

The Sigil barely having had time to open his mouth, -\urelius can just make out the blade that speared his tongue and pierced his palate glinting between his teeth. Then the view disappears, flooded by blood gushing between the Sigil's lips and down his neck.

The man crumples without a word, a disarticulated puppet with glassy eyes.

Mesmerised by the scene, Solis gapes at -\urelius, her eyes dulled by horror and questions. Before she can demand an explanation, shrieking howls of pain start coming from the edge of the lake.

Under the onslaught of Sarash's magical attacks, the other Sigils are bursting into flames like so much kindling. Their bones popping in the crushing heat are even making the same crackling noises. Despite the cruelty of the spectacle, Solis is relieved to know that their entourage has been saved.

Like the Primus of Fire, she has forgotten how capricious magic is in the Rift.

On the shore of the lake, the suspended salt crystals ignite, showering soldiers and servants with a deluge of sparks. Before a powerless Sarash's horrified eyes, clothes and horses burst into flame in turn.

UNSCIENCE

The room is spare to the point of minimalism. Not that he needs the space to move around, but because that's Sasaki's philosophy: less is more is the essence of perfection.

Framed by ivory-toned sliding screens, the only furniture in the room is a low table. Placed on it, an omni-directional cam is replaying the battle between the Genetic and the Primus of Darkness that took place almost a hundred days ago now. An eternity in his eyes, as though time were flowing in another reality, or maybe just backwards. The hologram is paused too, frozen at the point where Shado is on his knees, his hands stretched out before him, blocking the nanofilament sabre between his palms. The image looks alive, as perfect as a memory permanently engraved. A discreet meter displays the number of times this replay has been viewed: 7,915.

Perfection requires perseverance: that's Sasaki's other creed.

Hands clasped behind his back, the Genetic is circling the virtual Shado. with a light tread More focussed than ever, he's getting ready to experience it again... and again.

First he had to steep himself completely in the six minutes and three seconds that the battle lasted, until he had absorbed it fully, body and soul. So the Genetic watched the archive holo more than eight hundred times in real time, and over seven thousand times at high speed... including in a dedicated metaverse. Sasaki disdains ReVery, but he couldn't abide with the idea of wasting the time he'd had to spend in a gene-therapy tank, trying to heal the strange tumours that had appeared after the combat, a kind of adumbrated plague caught from contact with Shado.

Yet despite all that effort, he still doesn't have a clue as to how the assassin vanished right before his eyes. He can't help taking

umbrage at the gap in his knowledge that spoils the purity of their confrontation, like a calligraphied text that's ruined by a hair from the brush getting caught in the ink.

The Primus of Darkness clearly must have cast a spell. In response to a phenomenon like that, any normal Mantri would have shrugged and settled for the obvious explanation, "It was magic, that's all." Sassaki, on the other hand, won't stop at anything less than the truth. Whether it can rig physical reality or not, magic still has to be based on rules and laws. There has to be a logic to it, no matter how supernatural that logic might be. The Arkhantans themselves may be unaware of those rules, but they still must exist, because otherwise spells couldn't be taught and relied on, and magi wouldn't be able to cast them.

Magic is just a science whose fundamental equations haven't been formalized yet. The formulae of Arkhantan "science" are contained within his combat with Shado. He needs to uncover their secrets before he confronts his adversary again.

Once the simulation has been launched, Sassaki steps inside the heart of the hologram, his feet bare on the authentic seagrass carpet, his hands tucked into the belt of his kimono. He can speed it up or slow it down, zoom in on a detail while forcing the resolution, position himself closer to or further away from the scene, rise above it, move his head from right to left to change his point of view... All actions that he has repeated with the tireless monotony of a dreary river in hopes that the endless repetition will erode the secrets contained in the recording, but nothing works. Neither his augmented senses nor his over-developed eidetic memory have enabled him to unlock the perplexing secret of the Primus's disappearance.

The hologram has too little information. The robotic factory cams that recorded it weren't equipped with the latest technology, the kind that combines the vast range of human possibilities with quantum processing capabilities. As detailed as it is, the holo just isn't sensitive enough. Compared to the Genetic's requirements,

it's hardly better than a piece of old pixel art.

Did Arhax know that when he gave him the recording? Was he toying with him, forcing his hand when he made him an offer he couldn't refuse?

Sassaki doubts it. He remembers the moment when the Robotic stepped into his room at the Shine-IS clinic down to the slightest detail – the memory is a lot clearer than the hologram of the combat, for that matter. Arhax was defeated, hollowed out by chagrin. Everything about him – his dying creature's half-overcome, half-nasty attitude, the leaden silences between his words, the micro-expressions Sassaki could decipher better than any social AI – absolutely everything expressed real pain and the burden of mourning.

His desire for revenge, too.

For once, Arhax had been stingy with words, and Sassaki had appreciated the austerity. They had come to terms with very few words: Sassaki wanted to unlock the secret of Shado's disappearance; Arhax wanted to catch Julian's assassin. In exchange for unfettered access to the Robotic's factory's holo archives, the Genetic promised to help Arhax in his mortal quest.

According to the code that Sassaki lived by, a thirst for revenge wasn't up for debate – wasn't he seeking an eye for an eye, too? – but the manner in which it was slaked could make it noble or obscene. But as the hundred days that have passed since bear witness, without Julian, Arhax is nothing but a puppet of his own outrage. Sooner or later he's going to succumb to an orgy of violence. Sassaki won't be able to bear it if Arhax insists that he hand Shado over. All the less so in that he and the Primus of Darkness have a combat to finish.

Honour demands that he plumb his own soul to see if he lied when he accepted the deal. Sassaki cuts through his own doubts: he will support Arhax until the instant the older man steps over the threshold of his madness. Only then will the Genetic's bond be undone. Until that moment, his commitment will be

unwavering.

After just a few weeks of their collaboration, an alliance between Robotics and Genetics had been formed. It was an atypical graft, to be sure, but one that had blossomed on the rich soil of the energy issues shaking up the city-continent.

For the first time since the War of Heroes, two different techstyles are officially collaborating to solve a crisis. It's true that a number of Croesuses from this new GenBot coalition have found Arhax's arguments persuasive. The Ordinator had been far too weak in his dealings with Arkhante, and Queen Solis had taken advantage of it, ordering the murder of a shozen in the very heart of Mantris. Even Sassaki had been unnerved by it. The Ordinator hadn't defended Mantris's interests or stood up to the Malkah, and now he's making his people pay for his own spinelessness. An unforgivable failing. When energy is in short supply, it is the weak who suffer the most.

Sassaki had wholeheartedly supported Arhax's request to the Noria to open an investigation into the Ordinator's personal interests in all of this. The Noria's spokesperson is hushing too much up; it's time to pose his secrets to the light of day.

So it hardly matters if the holo provided by the Robotic still hasn't enabled him to find the answers he seeks. Sassaki isn't doing this for himself. He's doing it because it's the right thing to do.

Which does raise the question of his obsession with reliving the combat with Shado. Is that a quest for justice too?

Or is he asking too many questions?

Breath steady and eyes half-closed, Sassaki gradually forces his mind to abandon its goal of directing his body, and to yield to pure movement. The secrets buried inside gestures appear only to those who have repeated them every morning for years.

He's ready.

With a sharp movement — both brisk and precise — he tugs on the sleeves of his silk tunic, pulling it down over his hips to bare his chest. The warrior's body is a granite monolith, a marbled block

of muscle. The tattoo running along his left arm turns on its fiery bright colours.

Then he slips precisely inside his own hologram, conscientiously adjusting his position to the image of light. His arms reproduce the same pose, his shoulders wedge faithfully into place, his abdominals contract identically and his double face becomes one, even his expression is perfectly matched.

The holographic representation merges with its model.

With a finesse that can't be imitated by a machine, Sasaki recovers his sensations from the moment. The adrenaline of the combat, the scent of molten metal, the strange silence of that lumbering factory, the firm grip of the sabre, the subtle taste of a combination of fear and blood on his lips... More present than ever, he is projected virtually into the past, facing an opponent who is at once redoubtable and admirable. He has struck perfect balance between here and there, then and now.

The projection goes on.

The warrior accompanies his hologram as it leaps, strikes, evades, suffers. He accepts the first dematerialized blow from Shado's fist, feels the pain diffusing through his flesh like a poison. He flexes his muscles, movement after movement, striking his actual sabre in perfect synch with the holographic one. He notches the floor of the room, pivots, strikes another blow.

There is a pause in the combat, during which his iridescent double sheds the armour that has been deformed by Shado's blows. Sasaki uses the pause to analyse the first burst of blows. As ever, every single gesture strikes him as being just right; perfect: not because there's nothing to add to it, but rather because there's nothing to take away.

Failure is not a land Sasaki is in the habit of exploring. He wanders in that desert like a thirsty man running after mirages concealing a tangible reality behind the illusion generated by heat. Anger is rumbling at his door, like a vigilant guardian that's suspicious of the unfamiliar. He muzzles it. He's the boss here.

As his holo-self squares off opposite the Primus, Sasaki is struck with sudden inspiration. Laying his sabre down respectfully, he slips inside Shado's shadow, immersing himself inside his opponent's holo rather than his own. A change of perspective, the better to track down his own error, the decisive gap.

Observing their combat thousands of times has engraved the Primus's choreography within him as deeply as his own. Still, he never would have guessed how perfectly he would be able to imitate him, how easily he would espouse the Primus's movements and choices. It is as easy for him to be the other as himself.

Sasaki suddenly realizes the unthinkable: he has deviated from the righteous path for the one of curiosity and accommodation with the enemy.

With a lump of shame in his throat, indecisive wrinkles cracking his mask of serenity, he extricates himself from the combat, watching what comes next until the final standstill, when his sabre, caught between the Primus's hands is stuck as firmly as if it had sliced into a block of carbsteel. He watches himself sheathing his sabre and bowing to a Shado enshrouded — ironically — in light. Then Shado vanishes yet again, as though he had been swallowed up whole by a mystery door. Sasaki still hasn't perceived even the slightest speck of an explanation.

The holo goes out abruptly. His quest remains unresolved, complicated, instead, by new obstacles. All that remains is phantom pain in his wrist and deep respect.

3.2

That will have to be it for today. His biological chrono reminds him that he is expected at the ROMA corpo for Julian's Elevation. Arhax insisted on bringing a certain pomp to the ceremony, inviting both Robotic and Genetic immedia and elites. A tasteless choice in the eyes of Sasaki, for whom mourning is an intimate process, and death a definitive ending that can't be cheated with a future as a Mantrix.

Death reveals people's essence; for having distributed it so often, Sasaki knows that better than anyone. Julian's death has already revealed Arhax more crudely than any interrogation in the metaverse. He's using his lover's assassination to get the Croesuses to accept him as their head, and the shozen to accept him in their hearts. Sasaki would never have acted like that. You should keep vigil over the deceased as you would over a newborn, with the delicacy and restraint owed to the unknown.

Acceding to a position of power should never excuse anyone from their most elementary duties. The city-continent is a melting pot in which all of the techstyles merge, where every shozen can refer to an elite of purists to remember the virtues of each lifestyle. When did that elite begin to disdain its role of exemplarity?

The Robotics have become like their machines. For them, everything – even pain and suffering – can be used, even feelings can be assembled and disassembled. And they're not the only ones who have reached that impasse. The Cybernetics and Meditechs believe in the body's infinite transformability, and the Mantrices promise an immortally digitalized mind. Technology has spoiled too many Mantri children. They need to be guided, led back to the essential plenitude each being carries inside themselves. And on that path, where technology would be a faithful

tool once again, the Mantri's guide could only be a pure Genetic, free of any hybridization.

Sassaki does not wish to be that guide. Just to blaze the trail.

ROMA headquarters has announced Julian's Elevation with pomp and circumstance. Splattering the night sky with its spotlight, the young man's holo is even taller than the symbol of the corpo, an already soaringly tall statue of an exoskeleton-clad warrior. The semi-circular building's windows are screening Julian's achievements on a loop. The deceased pilot keeps flashing his signature victory gesture in front of throngs of over-excited fans. Showy excess is ROMA's trademark, but this posthumous Julian takes that standard to a new level.

Such ostentatiousness goes fundamentally against the grain for Sassaki. Even if it doesn't respect true death, Elevation is meant to reward an exemplary shareholder-citizen who contributed to the city-continent's glory. Becoming a Mantrix means preserving a deserving personality in order to enrich the Noria's collective mind, which advises the living and orchestrates Mantri society. It shouldn't mean idolising some pilot just because he was a Croesus Top 100 member's lover.

Everything has been done to lend the event an artificially enhanced dimension that it doesn't actually have. In the courtyard of the building, exoskeleton-clad guards are checking the crowd's credentials to emphasize the soirée's exclusivity. Entry is for pure Genetics and pure Robotics only – no mixed-techs here tonight. Invitations were sent exclusively to the elite of the two techstyles — a scandalous insularity that has only made the event go viral on the network faster.

Sassaki doesn't need to show either an invitation or a SIT to get in. Even if his face were masked, the tattoo that's exposed by his long, sleeveless jacket suffices for him to be recognized.

The building's largest room has been privatized and redecorated. Rendered transparent, the windows allow the shozen who have been turned away to get a glimpse of the

cutting edge androids serving petits fours and grands crus to the agora of guests in the midst of a holographic frenzy of an imaginary temple's columns and capitals.

For the evening, the organizer had a zone blanketed with scramblers installed temporarily to prevent recording drones from functioning. The press office is keeping the holo-chroniclers at bay while the highest-ranking officers offer their condolences. Sassaki decides to get the task over with right away to be able to leave this place as soon as possible. Respect for traditions is a principle he honours, but only when those traditions are genuine. Here, on the other hand, everything is artificial and shallow.

He waits patiently for his turn amidst the VIPs gathered in the small antechamber. He's in a hurry, but not discourteous. Here along the elite he is every bit the household name that he was for the security guards, but nobody is offering to let him go ahead of them. They are all hoping for a spot in the GenRob coalition that is being created, and no one is going to yield an inch.

While he waits in front of the ostentatious purple canopy offering Arhax some privacy, Sassaki can clearly hear the homages being paid.

"Ah Arhax, how awful... how absolutely tragic! He was so young!"

"You know you can count on us, my dear, *really* count..."

"Arhax, our hearts are broken. The two of you were made for each other... The Noria promises eternity, and your love incarnates it."

"Revenge is best served hot. We're not going to let anything get by, not a crumb. We can't count on you-know-who anymore. You're the only one who can propel the change of situation we need."

"My poor Arhax, we feel for you so. It's such a tragedy."

Sassaki can picture all those schemers bowing before Arhax to kiss his SIT, as ceremonial and hypocritical as their words. At

least they were consistent, he forced himself to acknowledge with a sardonic chuckle.

Sassaki was not truly sold on the GenRob alliance, but he recognized that it was a necessary step towards a Genetic revival. Noria or no, Genetics were born to rule. Literally. They had been conceived and selected to do precisely that since before they were born. If Chaka hadn't perverted their scientific method with her monstrous hybridisation, Mantris would have won the Heroes' War and the city-continent would be ruled by a Pure-Gen. Now the path to achieving that is strewn with pitfalls, and the alliance with the Robotics is clearly one of them.

When his turn finally comes, Sassaki steps behind the curtain – an actual piece of heavy, lined cloth. He is so taken aback by two things that he sees that he stops, freezing briefly in place.

The first is Julian. Garbed in his usual combat exoskeleton – an adaptive armour draped in purple that highlights his perfect physique – he's standing next to Arhax, who is sitting on an antique chair made out of wood. The illusion dissipates rapidly; it's a robot, of course. But for once, even after the surprise has passed, the machine doesn't create a malaise; nothing monstrous in the imitation of the living shows up. Sassaki realizes that the Robotics are on their way to crossing the valley of the strange, the gulf that separates humanity from androids. This Julian might well be the first to set foot on the opposite shore and create a bridge between mankind and machine. In any case, he's offering a tangible materialisation of the alliance being created here.

The other surprising thing is Arhax's tenacious overwhelming chagrin, which is being maintained like a weed being turned into a potted plant. In the midst of the chintzy artificiality of the ceremony's setting and the ridiculous gavelling and kow-towing of the schemers huddling under this canopy, that desperate sorrow is the only genuine thing to be found.

“Sassaki, there you are. Come here.”

Arhax makes a gesture that's almost like an order but quickly segues into sometimes more deferential – out of fear, or respect? Sassaki steps forward, making sure to nod politely at the hopefuls who part to let him pass. The twins, Kunesh and Gamar, from the Al-Din corpo. The two of them look so alike you might think a duplicate was made by accident in a Genetic tank. What a waste of amniotic fluid that was, when you know how insipid they both are. Naya, the famous interfaced vehicle specialist and Julian's main rival. The immedia used to hint they were an item, a notion, that seemed glamorous, but was absurd when you knew what was going on out of the public eye. Chang from Loocon-Dien, whose liquid metal exoskeleton – one of the corpo's specialties – strews itself with growths synched to his moods and words. It's a vanity feature that gives lots of clues away to anyone dealing with him.

“Sassaki,” Arhax finally says, welcoming him, “Julian thanks you for your presence.”

The robot turns to greet the Genetic, raising his hand with charming smoothness, but a fraction-of-a-second delay spoils the spontaneity. When you throw in the overly smooth reflection on the cheek and the geometrically symmetrical smile, you realize that the Robotics still have a ways to go before they can deceive people's intuitive perception of what's human. It's the last hurdle in the valley of the strange, and it is indisputably the hardest one to get over.

Sassaki doesn't have time dwell on the subject, Arhax is grabbing his arm and pulling him close .

“Any news from the Opax detective? The investigation's not progressing fast enough! You told her about the seventeen seconds, right? If you haven't yet, you need to. Right now.”

With every sentence he pronounces, Arhax glances guiltily towards Julian, like an adult who feels uncomfortable discussing serious topics in front of a child. His sorrow — and his madness

— appear whenever the layer of anger and determination he has

shellacked himself with cracks even a little.

Opax is the counter-espionage agency in charge of surveillance over the network. Independent from the Noria and the corpos, beholden exclusively to the shozen, the force imposed the traceability of communications for *all* correspondence. It is the guardian of their confidentiality, and the only entity authorized to raise the veil of secrecy when an investigation is necessary. Composed exclusively of human beings – which explains the not-insignificant proportion of Genetics in its ranks – Opax scares everyone, even the Ordinator.

Those seventeen seconds... Arhax has become obsessed with them and with the intermittent alarm from his distress signal. As far as he's concerned, Julian could have been saved, but a mysterious seventeen-second delay prevented the rescue squad from getting there in time. The Robotic even wanted that to be the main element in the investigation of the Ordinator, which would have been ridiculous.

For the sake of decency and respect, Sassaki allows himself a lie of omission; the need for honesty doesn't require cruelty.

"Salomé is in charge of the investigation, she's the best officer Opax has. She'll leave no data unturned."

Arhax winks in collusion, then frees Sassaki emphatically, signalling that their agreement has been respected. The Genetic makes sure not to let the discomfort Arhax and his automaton provoke in him show. His duty done, he leaves the alcove without further ado.

As soon as he steps out from behind the curtain, he's greeted with, "Sassaki, how wonderful to see you again."

The head of the gene-therapy department from the Shine-IS Clinic, where he was treated after the combat, appears before him as he's striding towards the exit. Her empty glass betrays how long she's been waiting, and her slight body odour expresses a slight anxiety.

"Hello, Il'ango."

Sassaki ignores her stylized physique – hair and eyebrows the exact same shade as her skin, facial features perceptible only thanks to subtle makeup. Rather than gaping at her, he's scanning the crowd to figure out who's recording their conversation. Two seconds suffice for him to spot the optical-camouflage drones, and one more to ferret out Liv, the famous chronicler for the gossip immedia.

Sassaki isn't offended that Il'ango is trying to increase her own name recognition by being seen with her most famous patient. He's perfectly happy to admit it, she probably saved his life. Without her experimental treatment, the tumours might have gotten the better of his regenerative capabilities, exceptional though they may be.

Ever since pirated copies of the factory's surveillance video were leaked, all of Mantris has known that he did battle with the Primus of Darkness. Simulated in the metaverse, edited in holo-clips, shared, parodied and meme-ified, their confrontation has gone viral. The media frenzy around his other battle, and victory, against the mysterious disease – a sort of cancer that was eating away at him from the inside, a terrifying plague that had been eradicated for decades – only added to his already heroic reputation.

That much coverage had to have powerful forces behind it. Politically, it fed the population's resentment of Arkhante at the instigation of Arhax and the Robotics. Financially, the competition hoped that Shine-IS would fail in its attempt to save Sassaki, which would have bankrupted the clinic. The frenzy was also an opportunity for the immedia to glean images of Sassaki's private life, despite his tireless cultivation of discretion, unlike all those who would be influencers of one sort or another.

The hype raised Sassaki's status from simple hero to out-and-out legend. He had become a household name among Genetics who hoped to finally find a successor to Chaka, their techstyle's last Legendary One until now.

While Sassaki believed in paying his debts, he wasn't big on small talk. So he gratified Il'ango's empty words and fake smiles with a few courteous reactions for the cams, then began to politely take his leave.

"Just a moment, please," Il'ango says, retaining him.

Her voice has changed. Her adaptive vocal cords have adopted a tone that scrambles frequential studies of normal recording devices. Her lips are no longer forming the words she pronounces, to prevent the possibility of reading her lips.

"Would you be willing to come back to the clinic? It's not for you. A new patient has been put in our care, and she is presenting the same tumoural schema as you were. Unfortunately, our experimental treatment has been... less effective. If you could grant us a little bit of your time for post-clinical research, we might be able to understand why."

Sassaki stares right into Il'ango's eyes, forcing her to fill in the silence by answering his unspoken questions.

"This patient is the most... altered person I have ever seen in my entire career. Her body is..." the scientist flaunts a strained smile. "It's as though a mad scientist tried to hybrid all five techstyles in order to create a sixth... I don't know her name, but the clinic is being paid handsomely to save her. The only thing that's clear is that her tumours are exactly like yours, even down to their anomalies. If the patient hadn't been wounded by an impulsion gun, I would have sworn that she had gone into battle with the Primus of Darkness, too."

"We're going now," Sassaki declares.

"We're not waiting until the end of the ceremony? Her situation is critical, but not to that extent."

"I insist."

Sometimes fate is an excellent teacher. If there were but one place in the world where Sassaki wouldn't have expected to find out anything useful, it was this pompous memorial ceremony for Julian. But he was wrong, and it was a lesson in humility for him.

If Il'ango's new patient actually has done battle with Shado, and she is as cybernetized as Il'ango says she is, then Sasaki will be able to analyse the recordings of her encounter with the Primus of Darkness. First-person recordings, which will be far more precise than those Arhax had provided him. The solution to his quest is here, in this unexpected encounter.

Minimalism and perseverance, absolutely. Yet Sasaki had neglected the third of his own philosophy's virtues: patience.

MEMENTO SCORIA

Among the memories that the *Memento Mori* hadn't erased was one about Noria headquarters. During a double solar eclipse, Arhax had seen thousands of sleepy eyelids blinking on the grave markers of the Conclave of Mantrices. They looked like moths surprised by the bi-solar occultation, a swarm yearning to experience the ephemeral twilight before it dissolved back into the suns' blinding fires. Having seen such an enchanting sight, Arhax had known with absolute certainty that he would never see the building looking more beautiful again.

But he had been wrong.

Today, as his DALEK speeds over the buildings of Mantris, towards the Conclave – the tallest of them all – he realises that there had been something missing from the perfection he had glimpsed that day: none of the markers had been for Julian.

“You'll like it there, I promise you. You'll love it there, my handsome lad.”

“I'm sure I will, my darling.”

Arhax's mind is far enough away that he doesn't notice the subtle different in tone between the two parts of that sentence. For the moment, JulAI is just a robot with a persona installed that was created from all the data that Arhax could find on the

network or in his own personal database. The best the persona can do is to draw on a finite supply of phrases and reactions. But if Arhax makes the effort not to think about when the words were originally spoken, he can usually manage to go along with the illusion. The persona isn't as sophisticated as a Mantrix, but it allows him to be with his lover without having to wait for his Elevation. His death was so painful that even a JulAI with an amputated psyche is better than no Julian at all.

Thank the door, in less than an hour, Julian's mind is going to be uploaded into a Mantrix; he's going to join the Conclave. Arhax can already picture his pretty boy shaking up that limp pack of AIs. He's going to get them back on the straight and narrow, force the shozen to open their eyes, and remind them of the virtues of hard work. He'll get them asking what they can do for Mantris rather than what Mantris can do for them.

And Arhax will be working with him to bring Mantris's former glory back from within.

Arhax smiles his dissymmetrical smile – with one part of his face made of unmoving ceramic – that reflects his mind, half of which is stuck in the *Memento*.

“Did you see how beloved you are?” Arhax mumbles, eyes unfocussed, mind wandering. He's polishing his memories the way you spruce up a house for your beloved's return. “All those Top 100s who paid me such a spontaneous tribute, insisting that I lead RobGen, were there for you too. I... we aren't the only ones who want revenge for your death.”

“I'm not really dead!”

Arhax remembers the day the real Julian had spoken that sentence. They'd been playing PixelHeat, a vintage 3D-immersion flying-motorcycle simulator. Having taken the same rash risks that he did during the real races he competed in, his fiery young man had spun off the road. Julian had taken umbrage when Arhax scolded him. Some off-colour words and a few 3-D objects had flown, but as usual, a romp in the sheets

had settled everything. Julian is so good in bed...

Arhax can't wait for them to reconnect, and impatience excites his keen metallic jaws. The thought of their reunion is turning him on; he's starting to get hard. He strokes himself lightly, then changes his mind. He doesn't want to climax alone. That feels like cheating on Julian, and the very thought of such a betrayal is unbearable.

The pleasure is becoming urgent, a bioost junkie in withdrawal. His erection is getting painful and so he digs his nails into his inner highs. Suddenly he's tired of pretending, he wants everything to be the way it was. Right there and then!

The concupiscent expression on Arhax's face darkens in an instant, leaving no room for anything but hatred. On that half-roboticized face, it makes for a particularly striking effect.

"I'll chase that son of a whore Shado all the way to Arkhante if need be, and when I've found him, I'll spear him by the balls and make him scream his lungs out. I want him to sob in apology like a child, to implore me to put an end to his suffering; I want to see him writhe in pain while I turn that mother-fucking spear like a roasting spit. Afterwards, you can decide, beauty boy: either we'll cook him up however you please, simmering him on low, so he can stew in his own juice, or serve him up as a carpaccio cut into paper-thin slices. We'll carve him up real slow – taking our time is the most important thing. We definitely wouldn't want to hurry."

Arhax bites his lower lip as he mimes the movement, his tastebuds tingling from the acidity of the lemon juice he pictures drizzling on as a finishing touch to the rare gourmet dish. Holding back his pleasure, he drops his head back, staring at the ceiling. Then he tips it to one side, to catch JulAIIn's eye.

"Choose, sweetheart, whatever makes you happy."

"And what are we going to drink with all that? A nice cold melt?"

Arhax bursts out laughing, what a ridiculous idea, pairing a

vulgar melt with such a refined dish! Julian is as much of a Philistine as he is a good lay.

It's such a wonderful feeling, that moment when he comes to and feels like himself again... He's kneading the capsule of memorial bioost distractedly, without even realizing that he had opened the secret compartment on his exoskeleton where he stores it. No, not now. When Julian is really back. And when they've taken out that son of a whore!

The DALEK lands at a private dock near the top of the Conclave, barely a hundred feet from the force field that protects the city-continent. The alveoli-shaped domes that canopy the thousands of square miles of Mantris's surface area held up by soaring pillars. The tower where the Noria is located is so tall that it is actually one of those pillars.

Arhax and JulAIn go straight from their vehicle to the Elevation Hall, a temporary room separating the grave marker from the rest of the building. Anîs, the Chief Engineer of the Conclave is waiting for them, her eyes blindfolded by a neuronal headset. Arhax had insisted that he wanted the very best person in charge of the transfer, and he's glad to see that they'd done as they were told.

Aside from the three of them, the room is empty. After the very public tribute the RobGen alliance had paid him, he wanted Julian's actual Elevation to be less showy. Nothing fancy, just a plain and simple moment, with no exhausting toadies underfoot. It would be a deeply rooted event, incarnated and profound like his nails digging into his lover's flesh when they had come together under the screen-sheets amidst the symphony of bombs and plasma-gun blasts.

Anîs sets straight to work, adding the final touches to the grave marker's configuration. The task is purely symbolic; she could have done it beforehand. The idea is to include the nearest and dearest in the deceased's Elevation to offer them the opportunity to participate in the ceremony. Some people find the whole idea

of burial outdated: after all, don't the Mantrices open the gates to eternity? But plenty of shozen do grant them tremendous importance.

Anîs hadn't expected Arhax to be one of the sentimental ones though...

She clears the thought from her mind and focuses on the task at hand. The grave marker doesn't look right. Instead of the warm gleam that indicates a successful transfer, the marker is still somewhat dull; the glow is coppery rather than golden. Something isn't right.

"Julian," the Robotic whispers to the marker, "are you there?"

"Yes, my love, I'm here. I'm back."

Arhax closes his eyes, heaving a sigh of relief. His lover's voice has lost the persona's artificial sequencing. Now that Julian is back, he'll never have to settle for JulAIn again. It takes him an endless moment to put a name on the waves of feeling crashing over him: happiness.

"Do you remember everything?"

"Of course, and 'everything' is nothing compared to what's in store for us."

"Tell me what happened just before."

"Before I died?"

"You wh...?" Arhax flinches. "Yeah, before."

Too bad if Anîs becomes an accidental voyeur, he wants to hear it all from the horse's mouth. He has to retrieve that acme of their lost love.

"We made love," the Mantrix reminisces. "There was music, and a screening of the attack, the wind gusting through the curtains on the terrace. And love, so much love; a rough, violent tenderness. It was the best day of my life."

Eyes closed, in nearly a trance state, it takes Arhax a few beats to realize that that's it: Julian has finished his description. A knot forms in the pit of his stomach, an unquenched thirst, a black hole dissolving all his hopes. That superficial narrative was the

diametrical opposite of the flamboyance of his own memories; Their incredibly intense burst of love wasn't *that*. It was so much more than that. It shouldn't – it cannot be summed up like that! Not if Julian's describing it!

"That's *it*?"

"Yup. Do you want me to sequence more of the scene?"

"No! I don't want you to *sequence* it, I want you to *relive* it."

"But that's what I'm doing, darling. The memory is deeply rooted inside me. I can programme a holo that will be true to the last second, if you'd like."

Arhax isn't even listening. His lips are trembling, shaken by anger muffled by disappointment. Hearing the platitudes spoken by that ersatz copy of his love is like having salt rubbed into his open wounds. He turns to glare at Anîs. She hides her stress at being impaled with that look that could kill, from the eyes of this half-human, half-machine whose eyes are staring at her from over a superficially polite smile.

"There's a problem. He doesn't remember," Arhax declares frostily.

His voice is shattered. There are pieces of broken glass between his words as they emerge from the stranglehold on his throat. Anîs replies with visible unease, "Yet it would seem that he does. Watching the holo should prove it."

"No!" the Robotic interrupts her, sweeping her objection away with a disgusted gesture. "He doesn't remember it the way he should. Not like *that*. That wasn't intense enough. That was nowhere *near* intense enough!"

"I'm sorry, but I don't grasp what you're getting at."

"Well, *obviously* you don't grasp it!" Arhax sneers, "Because you've never experienced anything *half* that intense! You've got a bugging blindfold on your eyes! He took *Memento Mori*! He has to be able to remember it better than *that*!"

A flash of panicked surprise crosses Anîs's face. She arranges herself to look composed and cordial before replying in a

perfectly neutral tone of voice, “Oh, I see. That could explain the... incomplete transfer. The bioost must have corrupted the original memory. I’m terribly sorry, if I had been informed about that, I never would have agreed to the Elevation.”

Relieved to have found out that she can’t be blamed for the situation, Anîs realizes a bit belatedly that she could have couched her words a bit more gently.

Opposite her, Arhax expels the anger that’s choking him with a long, shaky sigh. He slips both hands under his cape, squeezing one wrist with the other hand. He’s got to pull himself together, not spin out of control, he promised his Julian he’d take care of everything. The instant his beloved’s name bangs on his consciousness, a voracious black hole yawns inside him. An invisible speck for the moment, he can still hold it in check. But if he allows it to feed, the anomaly will swell up and then... then...

“This is your polite way of asking for more money, is that it?”

“Money has nothing to do with it, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, for door’s sake, another wet-behind-the-ears idealist! EVERYTHING is ALWAYS about money! So stop beating around the bug and tell me exactly what’s going on.”

Arhax knows he’s standing on the edge of an abyss. In his heart of hearts, he has already understood. He can feel the awful, unbearable, eternal loss of the only thing that’s been keeping him standing ramrod straight throughout all of this already starting to sink into every pore of his skin, like the icy liquid of the immersion tanks. It’s physical, not mental. He’s refusing to admit it, because he can still deceive his mind, but his body can’t be deluded.

An unpleasant silence reigns between the Robotic and the Chief Engineer, which she finally breaks.

“As I told you, the bioost must have erased whole sections of his memory, and...”

“I know what *Memento Mori* is, bug it! Granted, he lost a few

memories, but tough chips, he can't be the first Mantrix that's ever happened to, right? Dealing with that sort of problem is your job, not mine. So upload what you can and fix the rest, that's all there is to it. Go on now, get to work!"

Arhax's hand is crushing his own wrist, making his bones squeal. He hasn't really lost Julian, it's impossible. Death is so last year, it's for the exSITed, the Arkhantans, or the poor. Besides, it's so *vulgar*. Whereas he's rich, he's going to be Croesus No. 1 soon. The next Robotic Legendary One, even! Death isn't for people like him, he'd be so disappointed in himself if he died like some jerk. He's above all that. And so is Julian!

"His memory is altered by over 25%," the engineer says, sounding startled, as she consults the data. "That must have been one massive dose of *Memento*."

Anîs pauses apprehensively, worried about Arhax's reaction to what she's about to say next. In a gentle, compassionate voice, she goes on, "Given how extensive the damage is, I would advise you to give up on the Elevation. The risk to Julian's mind is too great. I'm so sorry, but trust me, you don't want to inflict that on yourself."

"Who the door do you think you are?"

"I..."

"Shut up! You don't have the slightest idea what I want. Who do you think you are to speak for me and my guy? Ha ha, as if, you poor thing! Now I've heard everything!"

His laughter is burning his throat like frying oil, threatening to make him chuck his guts up. Arhax is ready to boil all of Artellium until somebody figures out how to bring the love of his life back.

"I don't want to hear about problems, just find solutions!"

Bursting from his exoskeleton, a pair of mechanical arms unfolds with a hostile hissing sound, tearing his cape as they do. Arhax isn't even aware of them, so focussed is he on clenching his jaw and swallowing, or else he really is going to puke. Inside

his skull, nothing is in place, nothing's lined up properly. It's totally chaotic in there, as though the *Memento* were only taking its tithe now.

Pallid-faced, with one eye popping half out of his head, the other icily piercing, he takes a step closer to the engineer. Anîs steps back, convinced he's going to attack her. She's not cringing before a violent man, she's instinctively fleeing a beast growling at the prey caught in its claws.

"I want to speak to your boss."

The words slip out from between his clenched teeth, so laden with emotion that there's nothing left inside him. Arhax grabs the robot JulAIn's hand and holds it tight, unable to bear waiting a moment longer for the misunderstanding to be cleared up.

"Everything's going to be all right, my darling. I promise you, it's all going to be fine. This won't take long."

Anîs nods her assent, and the temporary walls disappear, revealing the long corridor spiralling around the Conclave. The succession of hanging grave markers forms a long row stretching to the end of the curved hall. There, a golden force field blocks access to the top of the building, the zone reserved for the Noria. A sort of human-sized cocoon crosses through it, then unfolds like a chrysalis to reveal its occupant.

The Archivist.

4.2

The face is half-devoured by a cutting-edge VR helmet with two blue LED lights in the guise of eyes. Thousands of cables emerge from the back. Having recently formed the protective cocoon, they now look more like a pair of atrophied wings fallen to the floor.

Consisting of sheaves of cables wound around each other, the silhouette can reconfigure itself at ease, switching from statuesque femininity to body-built virility. In those conditions, it's hard to grasp exactly what the Archivist actually is. Clearly not human... but not a robot either: the mouth — the only part of the face that's visible, movements and voice are all too natural for that. Perhaps it's an individual that's been so intensely cyberneticized it has lost its human appearance. No one knows.

While the Archivist's nature is murky, its role, on the other hand is crystal clear: it is the Guardian of the Conclave, the Noria's unavoidably loyal steward. It's impossible to address the Mantrices without going through it.

Wordlessly, the Archivist sees Arhax seething and Anîs reining in her fear. Deciding that its aspect is too intimidating for the situation, the Archivist adopts a softer silhouette and gentler features. Like a cross between an endearing child and a maternal, reassuring shrink.

“You asked to see us, Arhax?”

“Where is he?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Where is *my* Julian?”

“You're disoriented, it's normal. Let's take the time to listen to Anîs calmly as she explains the situation.”

The Archivist turns towards the engineer to encourage her to

take the floor. Anîs ignores the instructions scrolling across her headset. Still annoyed by Arhax's repeated rudeness, she's in no mood to be diplomatic.

"Rebuilding an incomplete mind is a delicate operation that can only be performed by Mantrices. Doing so requires in-depth knowledge of the original memory."

"You see!" Arhax exults victoriously, flinging his arms out, his metal appendices accentuating the gesture's grandiloquence. "You can rummage through all the holos and communications I have left, I'll grant you access to it all, no problem. All I'm asking is that I get him back whole."

"That data will indeed be helpful. There's still one last thing that would need to be done."

"What? What else? Speak *up*! I can't believe this, it's like pulling teeth! Go on, speak UP!"

"You'd have to commit your own Elevation."

Anîs's eyes are nails ready to crucify Arhax.

"You'd have to renounce your fleshly existence and upload your mind into the Conclave."

"I know what Elevation consists in, thank you very much! Nothing that makes up Mantris is unknown to me! I *am* Mantris! You can't teach me anything, you lousy shred of styrene! Nothing whatsoever!"

He's stalling for time, afraid that her explanation might be irrefutable, inescapable... that it will impose itself on him like fucking gravity. But he has to find out; his need is greater than his fear.

"Why? Exactly *why* should that be necessary?"

"Your in-depth knowledge of the subject would be decisive. And you could be personally in charge of reconstructing Julian's damaged mind. "

Arhax closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose, unable to pretend that he doesn't understand any more. Deep in side his guts, liquified with fear, the insatiable black hole is

relishing the moment.

He turns to gaze at JulAIIn with a look wavering between beseeching and guilty. Realizing he's still holding the robot's hand, he drops it, then regrets it instantly. It was a petty, defensive thing to do. With a tear shining in the corner of his eye, he strokes his beloved's face with a tenderness that surprises even himself.

"As a Mantrix," Anîs specifies, breaking the long silence.

"Yes, I understand, but that's not going to be possible."

"For what reason?" the Archivist interjects. "Have you not reserved a marker?"

"You know perfectly well that I have!"

"That's reassuring. At least you're not one of those idealists that believe in true, final death."

Arhax has stopped listening. He's drawing on every ounce of energy he's got to ask JulAIIn if he has to go, if he has to Elevate himself, if that's what the younger man wants. No, you don't, do you. It's clearly too soon, isn't it? It would be unreasonable... The words are stuck in his throat, so he's playing the conversation out in his head.

His anger had given him certainty, but now he doesn't know what to think. He feels lost. Love is supposed to be like a gorgeous summer afternoon, but now, with this JulAIIn who just isn't Julian, Arhax's feelings are more like a melancholic, foggy autumn day...

"That simply can't be the only solution," the Robotic declares, resolutely. "There has to be another way."

"It is indeed possible to proceed with the reconstruction without your involvement," the engineer acknowledges. "It's even fairly simple. All you have to do is sign the consent form I just tranSITed you. It stipulates that you are aware of and accept the risk of failure, which is evaluated at..." Anîs pauses to consult her neuronal headset, "... 74.8%."

Arhax shakes his head, his face split by a strange rictus at such

an absurd percentage.

“Whereas, with your involvement as a Mantrix, the risk factor drops to just 16.5%.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Arhax bursts out, recoiling at the thought. Apathetic a moment before, he’s foaming at the mouth as he screams and waves his arms. “Julian is 100% worthy of becoming a Mantrix. If there were just one left in this whole miserable Noria, it should be him! *He* can’t be the problem!”

He stops shouting as suddenly as he started, struck by the truth of what he just said: the problem really *isn’t* Julian’s fault, and it’s not because he, Arhax, doesn’t want to Elevate himself, either. It’s because of the faulty batteries, it’s obvious.

“The problem is the energy shortage! We’re low on batteries. If it’s affecting all of Mantris, then it’s inevitably affecting the Noria, too. That’s obviously what’s screwing up Julian’s Elevation. Only you won’t admit it, because you’re all tainted, like those quartzes that discharge all at once sometimes!”

The boiling oil seething through his guts is going to destroy him, he has to do something. Arhax spots another dull grey marker that stands out among the long row of golden, gleaming ones. He pounces on it, pummelling it brutally with his artificial arms. The metal shrieks with pain in response to his blind rage. Bursting open, the carapace disgorges a liquid that could easily be mistaken for blood, if it weren’t for its milky blue hue.

The Archivist adopts an androgynous appearance, watching him thrash away without a word. With a rustling of his cabled wings, he bypasses Arhax’s SIT to block his mechanical appendices: the operation is only possible because they’re inside the Conclave, although it’s also far easier because of his target’s fragile emotional state. Arhax is so beside himself that he doesn’t even notice the offence the Archivist is committing. He just keeps whaling on the marker with his flesh and blood arms, and screaming at the top of his lungs, “Tainted, you’re all TAINTED!”

With another soft rustling sound, the Archivist takes control of

the JulAIIn robot, who walks towards Arhax, taking him in his arms to contain his destructive anger. The Robotic wouldn't have yielded to anyone else, but Julian is different. He already has so much to make up for to him... As Arhax heaves with deep sobs, the Archivist carefully erases all traces of his intervention.

Calmer now, but eyes still shimmering with resentment and tears, Arhax spins around and jabs an accusing finger at the Archivist.

"You know I'm right. You know everything. The batteries are tainted, and that's why the markers are faulty."

"We are categorical: those two events are statistically unconnected."

"But how could the Noria detect a problem if it's already been tainted by it? Answer me that, Mr Know It All Archivist!"

Struck with doubt, Anîs turns to look at the Archivist, too. He doesn't have time to reply. Besides Arhax wasn't really expecting an answer anyway.

"You are no longer in a position to predict the best future for Mantris. If you were, you would know that I *am* Mantris' future!"

With half of his face projecting fierce determination, the other dead and expressionless, Arhax spins on his heels and storms away.

"C'mon, JulAIIn, we're getting out of here!"

In striking contrast to its master, the robot salutes its hosts, throwing in a contrite gesture of apology to Anîs before straddling the DALEK and speeding away in a flash.

5.1

DISORGANIZED

Once the real-time displays and holos of everyone who attended the session virtually have been turned off, the room goes back to its usual bare, oval shape. Now that the meeting is over, even the seats have disappeared, swallowed up by the memory-form floor. Grim and vaguely threatening, the room now looks like what it is: a crisis cell.

-\\ll that's left is an elliptical table and a pair of armchairs for the only two representatives who were physically present for the debate.

Sir Vine and the Ordinator.

"It'll never work."

"Which part, Sir Vine?"

He's not being facetious. The Ordinator is dealing with such a mountain of problems that he truly doesn't know precisely what schaman is referring to.

"Your appeal to -\\rkhante's good will. Won't work."

"Don't toss the solution out too hastily. You haven't met the Malkah. I have. She's not the sworn enemy the immedia portray her as.

"No. That's not."

Sir Vine doesn't finish his sentence. He settles for a sharp movement with his arm - as though he were interrupting himself. With a rustling of his fibre-optic hair, he stands up. Leaving his sandals behind - they're as vintage as his ecru canvas trousers and black pullover - he wanders around the room barefoot to organise his thoughts before sharing them with the Ordinator. -\\lthough he's forty, his coppery skin doesn't have

a single wrinkle, and his body language - running his fingers through his artificial hair, holding his head tipped back to gaze at the high ceiling - completes the youthful impression.

"Even if we could get all of the trisel in the Rift, it wouldn't change a thing. Not a thing! The batteries are still going to run out. Sooner or later. It's a mineral, it doesn't grow back. It. Does. Not. Grrr. Ow. Back. Something else. We have to find something else. Instead of digging deeper and deeper. Find it!"

"But that's exactly what we're trying to do with the V_{\max} batteries."

Sir Vine stops suddenly and lets his arms fall theatrically to his sides. Then he gestures towards the large table where no one is left but them.

"Stop it, Ezio. Don't try to sell me that song and dance. The meeting's over. Just talk straight with me. You're no fool, and you obviously don't believe in that nonsense either."

In a meeting, the Ordinator would have been intransigent about letting anyone call him by his given name. But now, he settles for glaring at the scientist with an ironic look in his eyes.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but aren't you the one who approved R & D on V_{\max} not even two weeks ago? I could have sworn that was you."

Sir Vine rolls his eyes and, sounding exasperated, makes it clear that he takes it for granted that the Ordinator knows the answer.

"-\'s a stop-gap solution. Until we can find something better. Not for the long term! Don't be as naive as the others, for bug's sake!"

The schaman arches his back and jabs his trembling arms skyward, fingers spread. He's the spitting image of how the Mantri imagine a magus would look when he's summoning supernatural powers. The Ordinator enjoys Sir Vine's bracing spontaneity. He projects authentic conviction. In fact, he's known for it, it's practically his trademark.

It's also why he'll never get anywhere in politics. Not in

Mantris, anyway.

"I can't believe I let you drag me into this," Sir Vine moans, his forehead sinking into his palm. You're good. Really, really good. -\t getting people to do your bidding. I don't belong in the F-\ITH any more! It's all so exhausting. People are exhausting, Ezio. Our fearless leaders do everything arse-backwards. -\nd five hundred years too late.

"Drop it, Vine. I know plenty about you, and I didn't ask for your help randomly. The opinion polls are conclusive: your reputation has granted credibility to F-\ITH.

"That just makes it worse! So I've pulled the fibre-optic cables over the eyes of anyone who was really interested in my research." Shaking his head, he goes back to his pacing. "Besides. that name! F-\r-Reaching Intercorpo Task-force Hub. Lousy acronym! Only a PR person could come with anything that bad. Whoever came up with it probably thought he was being so clever, too." Sir Vine's voice changes tone. "It will restore shozen's faith!" He pumps his arms victoriously, before letting them drop back down in disgust. "He doesn't get it, the geezer. He's got it all wrong. -\ll, all wrong." He wags a disapproving forefinger. "Creating the impression that the batteries are religious is totally out of line. Very bad idea. You can't challenge religion. We're heading for a fall, Enzo, I'm telling you. Don't say I didn't warn you!"

The narrow space between the desk and the wall is reining in his ability to pace, so Sir Vine plops back down into his chair. Elbows on the table, he's staring straight at the Ordinator.

"You want me to stay? Then give me one good reason." With knitted brow, he points his forefinger to the ceiling defiantly: "One! -\nd not one word about money. Or glory. Go on."

"You are the last rampart against the dictatorship of the corpos, my dear man."

"If you please!"

"F-\ITH is an ad hoc governing body that replaces our

precious direct democracy. The shozen agreed to it for just one reason: the exceptional energy crisis that Mantris is experiencing: lowered battery output, shortages looming, restrictions and more."

"I know all that for bug's sake!" the shaman says, interrupting him. "Everybody knows it, especially since we've had to start paying for batteries. Without even the courtesy of a citizens poll. You're taking a big gamble there, Ezio. That takes guts, real courage. Political courage, granted, but that's courage nonetheless. The only problem is that it's not enough. It won't solve anything. Far from it."

The scientist's voice is weary; his eyes, steeped in bitterness.

"Your memory is playing tricks on you, Sir Vine. F-\ITH isn't charging anyone for batteries, it has just implemented an eco-zentax//the eco-shozen concept.

"It's the same damn thing. Don't be ridiculous. Pure greenwashing. Enough with the dodgy acronyms and misleading portmanteau words already. Call it a quota, or rationing, and stop lying!"

"Well, that's the idea, of course. Low Croesuses have access to subsistence-level energy, and high Croesuses have an upper limit they can't exceed. But if we say so flat out, people won't accept it."

"You have to explain it to people, not take them for fools. When they realize what's going on, they're not going to be happy. But of course you think it's brilliant. -\fter all, you came up with that stupid name!" the schaman scoffs, remembering.

He can barely control his anger, and when he strikes the table with his fist the sound is so loud he even startles himself.

"My idea, your achievement," the Ordinator says, correcting him, while remaining royally unflappable. "Without you and your detailed scenarios, the corpos never would have gone along with it. You're the one who carried the day, not me."

It was two weeks ago, and the Ordinator hasn't entirely got

over the dizzying panic he'd felt that day - the same as the time he'd lost control of a D-LEK he'd been driving. Sir Vine had been terribly persuasive when he had described the cascading chain of failures. The collapse of Mantris.

"According to our calculations, the question is no longer *if* that's going to happen. That would be too easy, unfortunately," he had acknowledged, his voice breaking with emotion. "No, the only question is *when* is it going to occur."

Unlike the usual tedious technical presentation, the scientist had used plain language and hard-hitting images to help them visualize the economic and social impact of a massive battery shortage. Logically enough, the members of the task force examined the various scenarios presented, and settled on Solution #3, a sudden end to batteries being available for free. In other words, they were postponing the moment of truth, buying themselves some time to look for an alternative solution.

The pragmatic choice of the least of all possible evils.

Less than an hour after the meeting had ended, several of the well-informed Top 100 Croesuses had taken concrete action to prepare for the looming catastrophe - for themselves, personally.

If only the schaman had managed to be clear and convincing enough when he had explained his proposal for getting away from their 100%-battery-powered lifestyle. All of his hopes were riding on scenario 4, but F-ITH hadn't given him enough time to persuade them. Sadly, the gulf between Sir Vine's scenarios and overwhelming sense of urgency, on the one hand, and the technocrats' own concerns, on the other, was too great. He hadn't managed to sway them. When the scientist had lost his temper, everyone else had interpreted it as anti-Mantric fanaticism. But the Ordinator had detected a sincere concern about a looming disaster that parents were choosing to saddle their children with rather than face down themselves.

Sir Vine sighed heavily.

"You see it as a victory; for me it was a defeat. Scenario 4 was

the way to go."

"I'm convinced that that's not so. Your voice mattered in that crisis meeting, because you were bold enough to share your fears, which nobody else has the nerve to do. If you want to bring about change, this is where things get done. So this is where you have the best chance of having an impact. It does require a willingness to compromise, a good dose of pragmatism and a huge amount of patience. all strengths that I'm sure you can draw on when the situation demands it. Which it does, as you keep saying. and rightly so. That's why you should stay. I'm not going to hold you back against your will. But believe me, Vine, I really do need you here."

The two men stare at each other intently, in a battle of wills that the schaman loses far too quickly.

"This is a lousy trick you're pulling on me."

"Think of it as another reason to keep the F-\ITH: you'll temper my bad habits."

The devilish look in the Ordinator's eye - his last card - deals the decisive blow. Defeated and worn out, Sir Vine stands up, looking disillusioned. He walks around the table to lay a hand on the Ordinator's shoulder, as though they were old friends, looks at him sadly and leaves the room without another word. then has to come back for his sandals.

"The Sculpted Throne will turn it down, you'll see," he tosses out before leaving again.

"I'm counting on you to find a Plan B."

"We'll need more than a Plan B. We need Plans X, Y, Z. and Z prime!" The schaman's voice is fading away as he disappears down the corridor. "There aren't even enough letters in the alphabet," he says, thinking out loud. "We have to invent a new category. Maybe square, cube. No, that's too limited. Or perhaps."

Struck with sudden inspiration, the Ordinator leaps up and runs after him.

"Speaking of Plan B.," he shouts, to get Sir Vine's attention.

To free up his mind, he entrusts the rest of the discussion to his -\Assistant, programming a few key-words in case he needs to dive back in. He'll listen to Sir Vine subliminally on fast-forward tonight. The main reason he's walking away with the scientist is actually to get away from the Noria, and his own bodyguards.

-\'s chance would have it, Sir Vine lives in one of the city-continent's somewhat seedier neighbourhoods. -\'mong other virtues, the schaman, who advocates for restraint and simplicity, actually practises what he preaches - which makes him unique among members of the F-\ITH. The Ordinator tags along for a bit, and once they're far enough away from the Conclave of the Mantrices, he turns on his scrambler program so that he can't be found once he parts ways with the scientist.

He can finally hang up his Noria spokesman suit and go back to being an ordinary shozen. He wants to sound Mantris out, to evaluate the impact the task force's decisions are having.

Making people pay for batteries is a drastic measure, a fundamental challenge to the Mantri way of life. The Ordinator had only manage to wrest the eco-shozen concept from the rest of the FAITH, led by Arhax, after an epic struggle. Nonetheless, the change was harsh for ordinary shozen. And the worst is yet to come: the Noria has calculated that in order to follow the First Law of Synthia – “Optimize citizen-shareholders’ life expectancy” – targeted power cuts will be necessary. The Ordinator based his insistence on postponing their implementation on Sir Vine’s research, but his victory will be short-lived: temporary black-outs have already been scheduled for non-essential neighbourhoods.

At which point the Mantri may try to rebel against the whole system.

Wandering around the streets, concealed by his holovisage, he realizes that the consequences of imposing a fee for batteries are for more concrete than he had projected they would be.

He sees a woman crazy with rage holding something broken and kicking a public 3D printer with all her might.

“Why doesn’t this bugging thing work? I’ve soliSITed it three times now!”

“It helps to know how to read,” a passerby cracks, pointing to a holo turning slow over the device.

“Very funny!”

Her sarcastic comment is accompanied by an exasperated gesture: shaking the broken object in her hands, the latest clipsable Net™ glasses. To make amends, the man reads what the holo inscriptions are telling the frustrated client.

“‘Battery flat, please wait for the maintenance robot.’ I wouldn’t wait, if I were you. I’ve heard the maintenance fleet’s batteries have been restricted, too.”

“This is crazy! How am I supposed to get home? All because

of an imbecile on a skateboard, who ran into me because his gizmo stopped short when it ran out of juice! And I just bought these damn glasses this morning!”

Suddenly she’s heaving with tearless sobs; tearless because Net™ requires having cyber eyes implanted.

“Where do you live?” the passerby asks, sounding considerate.

“Skal District.”

“I live near there, too. I’ll walk you home.”

The woman’s smile doesn’t require implants to express the relief and gratitude she feels.

A little further on, a young father sitting on a park bench is starting to panic. The Ordinator figures out soon enough that the baby’s smart bottle is out of order. The hungry infant in the young man’s arms is crying impatiently while the father searches the network for advice. A hologram suggests testing the temperature of the milk by shaking a few drops onto the inside of his own wrist. He follows the advice, repeats the gesture a few times and, looking puzzled, finally seems to accept the fact that the milk hasn’t been warmed.

Flustered, he turns to other parents, who are guiding their kids as they learn to ReVery and walk without bumping into other kids at the same time. Learning that skill is the only reason anyone comes to the park: once they’ve mastered it, they all prefer virtual play. No one can do anything for him, so he resorts to asking for help at a coffee stand run by a young cyb, knowing that the stand uses the same universal heating elements as the baby bottle. With Baby shrieking at the top of its lungs in his arms, looking abashedly at the sympathetic or annoyed looking people going by, the young man waits as the bottle of formula is armed up amidst the vanilla-lychee lattes and the bioosting- algae coffees.

In the very heart of the shopping district, amidst the holographic signs battling for attention, some shops have already gone out of business. A robot-pet shop has a sign announcing

that it was closed “until further notice,” which a holograff had changed to “until further injustice,” and personal-vehicle dealerships are offering the first three batteries free with any new vehicle, and the option of paying in four instalments with zero Croesus fees.

On the other hand, greengrocers are mobbed, despite their prices that had flown sky-high in the blink of a wing. Two customers are fighting over the last pomelmoss: one is using his exoskeleton; the other, her cyber arm, to tug as hard as they could — until the huge fruit gets torn in half while the seller lets out genetically amplified cries of anger. A Meditech is trying to calm the situation down by gently offering relaxing pills to anyone who was in the mood to stuff their neurons.

The Ordinator observes other scenes along the same lines, scenes that betray stress more than actual aggressiveness. Shozen are dazed and confused, but not actually angry, for the most part. That’s looming though — three missed meals are all that separates civilization from barbarity.

Mantris has never had a rebellion. The Laws of Synthia and the system of Citizens’ Polls were designed to make the advent of one highly unlikely, not to say impossible... But you could that that was true of batteries, which were supposed to stay free forever, too. And yet, here they are.

If only the electrified atmosphere in the streets could recharge the batteries, he can’t help thinking, with a small smile playing at the corners of his lips. The ironic thought grants the Ordinator a few moments of relief that do him a world of good.

Suddenly his smile freezes: he has come face to face with... his own gigantic face on one of the dome-bearing pillars scattered around Mantris. The nearly mile-high pylons are made of adaptive nanomer, a thinly spun material that adapts to the force generated by wind or rain on the the dome’s alveolar structure. Pylon maintenance accounts for a huge chunk of the city-continent’s budget, so the shozen voted to add display screens so

that advertising licence-fees would cover maintenance costs.

In the event, the pylon is broadcasting the Ordinator's official allocution — Noria approved, of course — and addressed to all Mantri. It makes for an oddly amusing scene: the incognito little flesh-and-blood Ordi, caught with a grin on his face, freezing as he gazes at the waxy face and calculating gaze of the huge official Ordinator. Towering 300 feet above the ground, the all-powerful spokesperson is doing his utmost to bring people to their senses with his soothingly authoritarian voice.

The Ordinator can't help remembering when he was just Ezio, an ambitious kid daydreaming of giving speeches that huge crowds would listen to attentively, of being influential and admired. He used to picture himself as someone big and important. How his father would laugh at his sister and him giving orders to the ant-sized passersby in the streets, fifty floors below. He was the little boy who did everything he could to succeed, to make a place for himself, to be heard... just to be heard by his father. And here he is now, caught by his own dream for himself, confronting the face of his own mega-success. He worked so hard to achieve it that the reflection of his own image doesn't even surprise him any more. It has become a given, the price to pay. The prize he fought so hard for.

But for the first time ever, a new feeling flickers inside him.

To his own surprise, he feels somewhat detached about the huge, flat personage, who seems hollow to him. Who is that pixelated giant, really? Expressionless, heartless, sisterless... The Ordinator close his eyes and remembers the taste of his own smile. A thrill runs down his back. A child again, he lays an affectionate hand on the shoulder of the grinning little seven-year-old boy. Who has a sister. Who still knows what it means to have a dream and to hold it dear.

In a voice transmitted directly to the SITs to avoid noise pollution, the huge backlit image announces, "We are in the midst of a crisis. We are low on energy in Mantris. There are

radicals who want our city to go to war. We know how that went last time. To resolve this crisis, we need to be able to find new solutions. And to resolve a serious crisis, we need to take a step that no one has ever attempted before. I have transmitted an official request to the Arkhantan authorities for clearance to mine a vein of trisel bordering on their land. The request was just delivered to Nephtys Palace, and I am hopeful that it will strengthen the cordial relations that both the Malkah and myself feel strongly about maintaining. Citizen-shareholders of Mantris, I will, of course, keep you informed about the outcome of our request.”

Objectively, he thought he'd been pretty good. A bit cool, perhaps, but not bad at all. Calm, informative, thoughtful: all the qualities of a good leader, in his opinion. He pictures the path he's been on for all these years... and, in a wave of lassitude – or is it just exhaustion? – wonders how much longer it can last. As someone who has never allowed himself to feel the slightest discouragement, he is surprised to realize he's sighing... then he quickly checks all around him to make sure no one has noticed.

“So what are we waiting for, for bug's sake?” exclaims a young man with pointy ears, like all the trendy young people nowadays. “Didn't we build Kyotech City in the Rift so we could snatch up a ton of trisel? Another project that cost a cyber arm and a leg, and for what? Nadam!”

“Is the Ordo out of his mind-chips, or what?” his mate, a young man with two silver canines sticking out of his top lip, opines, taking things up a notch. “The Malkah's not dumb enough to hand over her trisel for free! We'd be better off asking for forgiveness than permission! Since when have Arkhantans been known to offer humanitarian aid?”

Hmmm, I guess I wasn't as good as I thought the politician admits to himself ruefully. *I should have let Nyopé handle comms, it's her role within the FAITH, after all.*

The Cybernetic's popularity hasn't slipped in the polls, thanks

particularly to her status as the last of Mantris's Legendary Ones since Blue Dream's defection. His own, on the other hand, is taking a worrisome nosedive...

And there's no consolation to be found on the network either.

> *Common Channel* | @SSASUMARU Δ *ExSITed* >

> Now I've seen everything! FAITH is going to make me lose a fuse for real! If I'd been in charge instead of those bugging politicians, I wouldn't have wasted my time looking for a missing comma in the code — I would have rolled up my sleeves and sorted everything out in a ziffy!"

> If he thinks we're gonna' kowtow to Miss Magic Princess, he's got another think coming!

> Did I miss something? Since when do we count on those dumb Arkhant-hicks? Read my lips: ain't nobody gonna' tell me how to burn my batteries. Out now, Ordo! At the rate things are going, he's gonna ask us to keep warm by candlelight and get water with a leaky bucket next!"

> And to wear orthopaedic organic-bamboo-and-hemp sandals and go camping at the Appologium and hold hands and sing "We are Artellium" while we're at it! Never! They'd have to tear my implants out first!

Looking troubled, the Ordinator keeps watching his statement, which is being broadcast on a loop. At every iteration, he notices something he should have said some other way: in a different tone of voice; with a less concerned, more determined look on his face. And without winking ridiculously like he just did!

Whaa-a-a-t?

> *Common Channel* | @SSASUMARU Δ *ExSITed* >

> Did you notice that the Ordo winked at us? And now he's *smiling*!

> Why not give me a pat on the back and pinch my cheek, as long as he's at it?

No, the Ordinator is not hallucinating: his image is making all sorts of silly faces. Suddenly, a ticker-tape message begins to

scroll across the screen above his face, with letters appearing as some pixels go blank.

“V_{max} batteries don't exist. The Noria is lying to you / Eco-shozen = ecocide intervention! – ÅPØLØW.”

The broadcast goes back to normal almost immediately, so quickly that you might almost think it was a subliminal image. Either way, it can't be denied that activists have hacked the broadcast.

The Ordinator closes his eyes and his comm channels. He has no desire whatsoever to subject himself to the shozen's reactions. He's had enough already.

Sathyne. He has a vital need to see her, which is suddenly as plain to him as that silly look on his face he just saw.

Caution would advise walking to Nyvenn's shop, but he can't bear the thought of waiting a whole hour to see his sister. So he decides to take a public DALEK, counting on that free mode of transportation's sudden surge in popularity to conceal his presence. In fact, the surge is such that he has to wait a few minutes for a disk to be available.

Yielding slightly to caution, he gets out a quarter of a mile from his destination, then turns around and walks the wrong way, changes direction, speeds up, slows down, and even strolls around the neighbourhood a bit to make sure he's not being followed. Briefly he thinks that he is, before he acknowledges that he too is being overcome by panic and paranoia.

He finally allows himself to enter the shop, where, luckily, there are no other clients. Feeling practically like he's in withdrawal, he doesn't pay much attention to Nyvenn's updates on the situation. His gaze in the distance, he nods in agreement with whatever it is she just said. Nyvenn notices. Her ego rises above, but her empathy flares with concern at seeing him looking so troubled. Then the Ordinator can finally step inside the secret room.

His arms at his sides, rolling his shoulders in an attempt to loosen his stiff neck, he stands in front of the tank, the only

source of light in the dark, plant-filled rooms. He's always found the room's mysterious atmosphere conducive to talking things over with his ghosts.

He closes his eyes. Breathes in deep, filling his lungs with the room's damp air. Releases the overflow of moist oxygen with a long, trembling, liberating exhale. He loves being here, near his sister, and being able to let go. Then he inhales, sniffing at the air. The mushroomy scent reassures him like a pyornis-feather comforter, like a placenta. The fluorescent-green aquatic plants in the tank perk up his dark mood. This place is like no other... not in Mantris, anyway. This lair is an enclave, a gateway, a chamber full of love, a door opening onto better. An addiction. A shot of well-being.

He feels his jaw loosening up by a few twists, his stomach unknotting, his heart rate slowing down. His soul is expanding. So he can pour everything out to her. With one hand lying on the glass front, his long fingers stretched into a caress that is only virtual because of the thick glass, he shares the burden of his responsibilities with his brilliant sister, who should have been Ordinator instead of him. A thin veil of impersonation soothes his guilty feelings like a tranquilizing armour that's as heavy as an exoskeleton without batteries.

Sathyne. His Sathyne. Who blew her neurons out in her flight towards the highest spheres.

"I'm sorry I whine and blubber so much, I know how annoying it must be," he manages to stutter after a bit. "What about you? How are you doing? Your complexion has improved, you're looking good, Sis."

He means it, he really does think she looks perkier than the last time he saw her. She's magnificent, with her hair floating around her like a mane, and her features in a cheerful, twinkly expression. Is it thanks to the algae flourishing in the regenerative liquid? Or to those strange, funny-looking creatures clustered around the tank's pipes?

He asks his Assistant to replay the conversation with Nyvenn on fast-forward. He hears her explaining that for the moment, she's making do with black-market batteries, a solution that won't last forever. A loss of power would obviously be catastrophic, tragically wiping away the continuous progress Sathyne has been making.

"I get the impression she smiles sometimes," Nyvenn added, with a radiant expression that softened the harsh grooves of her bark skin.

She smiles...

A memory suddenly leaps into the Ordinator's mind, striking it as hard as a hydraulic press. It was thirty years ago, when he was a teenager. Sathyne had fallen seriously ill, a human error having sullied her optimized genome. While his parents wore themselves out suing the Genetic corpos that had given birth to her, he had tended to his big sister while she was stuck in a cryochamber. He had sworn then that she wouldn't miss a thing, that she would sow her wild implants like any other shozen her age.

So he tried anything that came within reach: storm bioosts, orgies with all three sexes and every imaginable gender, extreme pre-mortem reVeRies and excesses of all sorts — both real and virtual... Total commitment for an endless shot of endorphin-enhancing adrenalin, a hot and spicy seasoning that shields the palate before biting off more of life than he could chew. He butted heads with life, brushed up against death with fits of rage but without doubts, hesitations or fear, and always flat out, never, ever doing anything by halves.

Nobody understood, of course, especially not his parents, absorbed as they were by a ton of very serious things that mattered more to them; they had had more important things to do than to worry about their spoiled rotten son's teenage angst. Later he would find out that the situation was more complicated than that, but that was how he had understood things at the time. They had even threatened to send him to an isolated institution

on the Savage Isles, totally cut off from the world.

He couldn't have given a flying DALEK. No border could or would ever stop him. Because he had a goal, an objective. A vocation.

After each experience, he would inject himself with a cocktail derived from *Memento Mori*. Rather than enshrining the experience in his own memory, it allowed him to share it with Sathyne. Thus she could experience his hijinks vicariously. The sensations were always somewhat subdued, less intense... which is why he had to aim high, ever higher. But it was still better than not experiencing anything at all.

The Ordinator remembers that strange period, a constant back and forth between imperative pleasure-seeking and an acute sense of responsibility, between relief at being alive and a one-track anxiety that Sathyne would stop clinging to his, between wild debauchery and hungover mornings after.

As teenagers, they never had long conversations that went on until dawn. Instead, they shared sensations in the deafening silence of absence. That unabashed sharing of tripping out and flipping out had consolidated their complicity, straddling the despicable barrier of her coma to preserve the bond between brother and sister.

Once Sathyne had emerged from the coma, he had assumed he would never have to go through an ordeal like that again. Except that everything had started over. Again. Ineluctably. Like a curse in perpetual movement, a holo on a loop until asthenia ensued, a sticky jinx.

And what has he been doing this time? He shows up to visit his submerged sister to drown her in his rinky-dink problems. He bores her to death instead of entertaining her. He weighs her down, burdening her, dragging her into the darkest depths of power rather than lifting her to the intoxicating heights of life.

He falls to his knees, head hanging, a huddled shape inundated with the dim light from the tank where she's floating in delightful

insouciance, as though she were coated in a marvellous inner peace.

“I’m sorry, Sath... Sorry, sorry, sorry. I’m so ashamed... I don’t think I’m that guy any more... Remember that solo total on Pillar 91? I nearly met my maker that time, losing my grip a thousand feet above the ground, slammed back against the wall by a gust of wind and saved by the skin of my teeth... or my fingertips, really...” He rubs his wrist absentmindedly, as he relives the scene. “Do you remember the transfer we did right afterwards? The shock that surreptitiously jolted you awake? The near-death experience that brought you briefly back to life, the thunderbolt that blasted you out of the coma you were in, if only for an instant? The idea of seeing you smile like that again is the only thing that’s been keeping me going lately, Sis... I miss you so much...” Chin sinking to chest, he looks miserable and defeated. “That’s all I do any more: daydream, instead of accomplishing anything...”

Uncertainty has planted its seed deep in the fertile soil of his private doubts. He can’t get the idea that he might not be the right person for the job any more out of his head. Not the right brother to save Sathyne. And not the very incarnation of the spokesperson the shozen need connecting them to the Noria. Does he truly want to save Mantris, or is he stalling for time, avoiding power cuts because they would necessarily affect the neighbourhood where Sathyne is tucked away? He’s not really sure he can untangle his motivations any more. He’s got a bit lost in the labyrinth of power.

Will he save the shozen... or his big sister?

The question bumps up against his arguments, rebounding every which way like a roulette ball running into the deflectors on the spinning wheel in the great casino of fate that his life has turned into lately.

THE SACK

Creation of a private metaverse, reference LP1-08XA22/1454.

Accessible to authorized members only: Fabro, Atale, KatK and Onyx Lag'Chuo.

Access approved, settings complete.

“The criarunes can make Dad’s sculptures move, I swear they can!”

Sitting on the floor in the main room of their flat, Onyx points to her father’s destructured robots, convinced that it will be enough to convince her big sister.

“One, enough with that nonsense already, you’ve been harping on it for weeks now. Dad’s sculptures haven’t moved a nanometer, it’s just the beginning of the energy crunch shit! No two ways about it!”

“Wait, I’ll show you,” Onyx says, doubling down.

She knows that big people can be stubborn sometimes and that they don’t always listen, but this is really, truly true, Kat HAS TO believe her! So she shows her big sister the holo images taken by Sphax that day, when he was flying around their flat. You can see the little creatures moving slowly, but in unison, with their fur standing up with static electricity and vibrating like marbles during an earthquake. They light up, cluster together and then suddenly the picture teeters, lurches and tips over – because Sphax broke down and crash landed – before fading definitively to black.

“There! Did you see it that time?”

“Nope.”

“Hold on, I’ll show you again.”

Onyx scrolls through the holo in slow motion to freeze on a frame taken just as Sphax tumbles to one side. In the

background, Fabro's sculptures are little more than blurred spots on the wall.

"There! *Now* do you see it?"

"Ummm..."

"Kat, you're not even looking!"

"Yes I am!"

Onyx pinches her lips together so tightly that her mouth turns into a mini volcano, and she knits her brows until her eyes disappear beneath them. But she stops pouting soon enough. It makes her chin hurt because of the growths. Besides, there's no point, Kat simply doesn't believe her.

Usually Kat's always on her side, but lately, she seems to be with her new friends all the time. It's really annoying.

I hope she doesn't start turning into an adult! the little girl finds herself thinking.

"So are you going to give the meta a new name, or what?" KatK asks, changing the subject.

"Isn't it your turn?"

"Yeah, but I'm a few points down in our 'my sister is the best,' accounts, so..."

Ooh, that's good, Onyx thinks, reassured. *Kat's growing up, but not too fast.*

"So-o-o-o-o-o..." the little girl starts, imitating her father's drawl, as she fiddles with the metaverse I.D., twisting it every which way. "I know: The Pioxies!"

"OK, P1-08X... pixy, poxy... Pioxies. Not bad."

"Mom hasn't called us her little pixies in a long time..."

"Knock-knock, here I am!"

Atale's persona gets embedded in the flat through the metaverse. Staggeringly realistic, Atale really seems to be there, when she's actually still on the other side of town.

Her first reflex is to give Onyx a kiss, making the little girl beam. Atale settles for a nod and a wave towards KatK, who has made it clear that they have outgrown their mother's kisses.

“Is everything okay at home, kids?”

“Yup!” the sisters reply in unison.

“Great! Is Dad back from shopping yet?”

“Nope, not yet,” Onyx replies.

“Ah. And it’s going to take me a while. I don’t know what’s going on tonight, but things are nuts.”

“Don’t worry, Mommy,” Onyx reassures her. “We’re fine. Do you want to play a game with me?”

“Sure, my little pixie. What would you like to play?”

Luckily, the girl suggests something easy, a kind of brick-breaking game with blocks in the shape of crierunes. The robotics engineer can’t understand where Onyx’s obsession with the creatures has come from, but she’s pleased that the girl has found a hobby. It makes her feel less guilty about abandoning her so often.

Less guilty? Because my daughter has to get attention from little critters instead of from me? You should be ashamed to even think that!

There in the street, sitting on a bench in the middle of the crowd, Atale can’t deny it: she’s a bad mother.

Despair bowls her over as though she’d been hit by a speeding DALEK. She’s as stunned as if she’d just miraculously escaped from an accident.

All around her, shozen are waiting in front of the self-service station for a vehicle to become available to take them home, but everyone has suddenly started flocking to public transportation. Absolutely unused to waiting for anything – ever – in Mantris, everything is organised for instant gratification – prospective passengers improvise a queue... and discover impatience’s injurious effect on mood. The network is soon bursting with vids shot live. Abundantly commented on, they reach peaks of viral popularity when queue-jumpers get taken to task. The vid of a fisticuffs between two passengers from the financial district, which is usually exceptionally well regulated, gets the week’s best start in terms of number of views.

Atale doesn't even care. Not really. She's not a bad shoen, just a bad mother.

She's got to face facts: her life is explosively chaotic, every bit as much as Mantris's current situation. She's been working overtime to avoid home, where she's caught between a marriage that's slowly but inexorably losing its spark, her guilt about having lost touch with her eldest child, and that awful, gnawing sense of responsibility for having passed on a genetic disease to Little One.

At least Fabro had chosen her, and she had never pretended to be anything other than what she was. But the girls? They hadn't asked for anything. She brought them into this world, she's supposed to take responsibility for her choice. Fabro does. She doesn't.

And for what? For a corpo that just unceremoniously sacked her! Today, via SIT, no less! "Since the autonomous robot program does not comply with the new energy optimization rules decreed by the FAITH, it has been indefinitely suspended. Management is placing all concerned personnel on indefinite leave until further notice. Their access to the corpo's metaverse has also been suspended. We will be in touch with our staff daily, in order to keep them informed of evolutions in the marketplace. We are and remain a large, united family. Domix watches over you, watch over Domix!"

The bugtards.

How is she ever going to break it to Fabro? Is he going to blame her? Blow up? Leave her?

She realizes the absurdity of her fears in a flash. Fabro is the kindest man she's ever known, always upbeat and cheerful. He'll laugh the whole thing off, tell her she's the best robot specialist in Mantris and that she's bound to find a new job in no time flat. "And when that's taken care of," she can hear him promising her, "I'll SITE Domix: "Guys, you should get rid of your HR director, because he or she sure screwed up big time when they let

Atale go!” And he’ll be so sincere that she’ll wind up believing it too.

How could she have doubted him?

Tears spring to her eyes. Granted, she’s a bad mother, but is she a bad wife, too? What’s *wrong* with her?

“Hello-o-o-o, Pioxies! What a great name, I love it!”

Once Fabro’s persona shows up, the whole family is united in the metaverse. Even without the image, his high-spirited voice is unmistakable.

“Is *every*-body happy?”

“Hi Dad, yeah, everything’s fine.”

“Hi, sweetie,” Atale hesitates, before resigning herself to settling for a trite, “I’m stuck at work, I might be home late. Is everything okay with you?”

“It’s a mad scene here! Remember we said we would all go to the zoo together? Next time I’ll take you grocery shopping instead. It’s practically the same atmosphere, but a lot cheaper!” He chortles, and his persona imitates his clownish character to perfection. “I’ve got to tell you what...”

“You didn’t got a vid, instead?” KatK asks, cutting him off.

“I didn’t have time.”

“Dad! You need to spruce yourself up a bit, like... yesterday! Last night on Borzone I saw a fab-fab retinal implant. It’s got a retro design, so it’s perfect for an old fuddy-duddy like you.”

“Thank you, my darling. I promise to think about it. In the meantime, I’m going to tell you what happened. So-o-o-o, like I was saying, there was this elderly couple stocking up on industrial quantities of toilet paper. They were loading so many packs onto their frail arms that every time they added a package, two others fell off. It was nuts! And I was thinking, okay, so they’re ready to starve to death, but they’re damned if they’re going to have dirty bottoms.”

He chuckles, and Atale and Onyx politely laugh with him. KatK seems to be elsewhere.

“I swear, it was something to see!” he feels obliged to add, before admitting to himself that it wasn’t really all that funny when you think about it.

The thing is, despite appearances, his heart’s just not in it this evening. While he’s strolling physically up and down the supermarket aisles, his persona at home is rummaging through the cupboards and fridge to get a sense of their supply of staples. He had checked before he left the flat, but without taking his memory patch. Those damned bioosts, he’s useless without them by now.

“Darling,” Atale whispers discreetly, “I wanted you to know...”

Ah, Fabro sighs with relief. She’s finally going to spit it out.

“What?”

“I... I...”

Why are you hesitating, sweetheart? Just say it, I already know for Domi anyway.

He happened to have found out for himself, totally by chance. As soon as they’d had to start paying for batteries, Fabro had sent a new application to get Onyx into a medical trial. He was worried that free medical care was going to be the next thing to go. He had received the reply by SIT this morning.

“Despite the quality of your daughter’s application, blah-blah-blah, and although we appreciate your trust in blah-blah-blah, we regret to inform you that we are unable to enrol your daughter in a medical trial, following Atale Lag’Chuo’s being placed on indefinite leave from Domix. Nevertheless, we will keep your application on file blah-blah-blah. »

It had been quite the double whammy: his daughter had lost her free access to medical care, and his wife had lost her job! And Atale hadn’t said a word about it to him! Okay, so he hadn’t told her for Onyx yet, either, but that’s not the same.

Granted, the way things were going lately, it wasn’t the best time to lose your job. Fabro was convinced they could get by. Together. But Atale has to be straight with him, that’s all. That’s

not too much to ask for, is it?

“I’m listening, sweetheart,” he says, encouragingly.

“Um, why did you bother to go to the supermarket, anyway?”

“Why?” Fabro snaps back, spitefully. “I’m going to tell you why. I was going to have the groceries delivered, as usual, but you know what? That service has been suspended. Damned robots are never there when you need them, are they.

“It’s not such a bad thing,” KatK cuts in. “Do you even realize the blitzload of energy those zombies use?”

“Well, well, well,” Fabro says, sounding amused. “Look who’s spouting the FAITH’s energy-saving creed now! I never thought I’d hear you quoting them.”

“You lost your mind or what? The FAITH is farewell democracy, leave everything up to our so-called experts and shut your shozen mouths. Seriously, have you heard their propaganda? ‘To keep our technology, let’s use less energy.’ Yurk! ‘Solidarity with the next generation.’ Yeah, well, I *am* the next generation, and I can tell you that I don’t believe what they’re saying for a nano-second. ‘Anyone caught stealing a battery will be liable to a fine of up to two Croesus.’ And what kind of fine should hogging all the wealth make you liable to? Nooo way, Daddyo, I’m just a-sayin’ that robots aren’t the answer, low-tech is. As in how lo-o-ow can you go?”

“It sounds like you’re talking to your friends from ÅPØLØW, not us,” Fabro mutters.

The metaverse they’re all in is so realistic that he sees KatK flinch, though only fleetingly. It means his perception was right though, she is indeed talking to her friends, the ‘Sunday revolutionaries,’ as he thinks of them. It’s actually pretty easy to tell, when you know what to look for: an unfocussed gaze with stable pupils. ÅPØLØW uses audio rather than video, a clever way to stay under the radar in luminous Mantris... except that the eyes wander when the ears are focused intently. Fabro’s never going to let on to his daughter that he’s figured out how to know

when she's lying to him. There's no way he wants to lose his last line of communication with her, the way Atale already has. It's not going to stop him from keeping his eyes and ears open, ready to step in if she goes too far.

After the surprise has passed, KatK looks embarrassed. Good. Maybe there's still hope that she'll break off from those clowns.

"Rather than low-tech, I'm all about autonomy," Atale declares, with her persona sitting on the couch in their flat in exactly the same position that she's sitting on the bench, which she hasn't budged from since she arrived in the meta. "I raised your sister and you to be autonomous, and I have no regrets about that."

"*You* raised them? All by yourself? Thanks a lot."

"No, Fabro, that's not what..."

"Okay, gotta' fly, things are heading styrene here. Kat, I'm counting on you to keep an eye on your sister, right?"

Fabro ends the connection quickly. Granted, it didn't make sense to take offence over nothing like that — he knows perfectly well that that's not what she meant — but offences add up, and eventually it becomes impossible to pardon someone anymore. Besides, he doesn't want to hear Atale's excuses, she's only going to make things worse. And two guys really are fighting over the last pomelmoss in the store, in front of a grocer who looks like he's about to roll up his sleeves and jump into the fray. The world really is going to hell in a handbasket... whatever that is. Fabro tries to get everybody to calm down, offering a bioost from his own stash to anyone who wants one.

Yet he himself is as tightly wound as a droid gear, it might do him good to yell at someone for a change. Stop being such a pushover and start sticking up for himself a bit more.

Fabro is keeping the thought to himself, but still, there's no way around the fact that none of this would be happening if the Ordinator had stood up to Arkhante a bit more. Their land is chock full of trisel they don't even use. Those guys in their robes are selfish technophobes that want to bring Mantris to its knees.

We looked weak, and now we're paying the price.

The fact is, he's terrified! What's going to happen to his family? Especially Onyx... He'd do anything and everything to save his family, if somebody would just tell him exactly what he needs to do...

KatK holds in a sigh of relief when their father leaves the meta. He nearly caught them out! And they were right in the middle of a direct action, too: gReek, ÅPØLØW's techie, is hacking the Ordinator's propaganda in the shopping district right now! Their best action yet, KatK is so proud of them! Her arms and thighs are light up with chibi Ordis, cross-eyed, with sweat dropping from his brow.

Kat's own specialty is organising minidos, for "mini-demos". They're the one who got the group using the name. They've already planned a dozen of them in less than two weeks, including a power outage in a rich neighbourhood: let them get a taste of their own medicine for once! KatK has a weakness for audio messages denouncing the Noria's lies about V_{\max} batteries. – the Noria controls all the vid and holo displays but nobody can keep them from shouting into a bullhorn. Plus, KatK loves the crackling noise that camouflages their voice and makes them impossible to trace! It requires a decent amount of coordination, but it's not too much to ask for the sake of such a righteous cause. After all, if changing their world and prying open the eyes of shozen who are blinded by the meditechs' leisure bioosts isn't worth it, what is? Their friends from ÅPØLØW can count on them.

"I'm nearly there, Kat!"

The teenager needs a beat to realize that Onyx isn't talking to her through the meta. Her voice is coming through their own direct-com channel. But the meta shows One playing at home, and Kat can't see the channel anywhere. The audio and the video don't match.

Theoretically, KatK should be able to confirm if their little

sister is in the flat or not easily enough, just by looking up. They had promised their dad to keep an eye on One, after all. Except that they have actually gone to Nyvenn's shop to do the action. *Neither Frivolous nor Pointless* is off-grid, which makes it a lot easier for KatK to scramble their trail. Onyx is the only one who knows; she agreed to cover for her big sib by pretending they were together in front of their parents' personae.

The teen knows full well they shouldn't have done it, but hell's bells, they're not Onyx's mother, either!

KatK activates her com, dreading what she's going to find out.

"What do you mean, you're nearly there?"

"At Nyvenn's, duh! I'm meeting you there."

"WHAT? Where are you now?"

"Why are you yelling at me?"

"One, what are you..."

"Besides, it's your fault. I was all by myself, nobody's ever home any more. You didn't even notice when I left the Pioxies!"

At the other end of the channel, the little girl suddenly starts to bawl. KatK starts to panic. They'd be willing to vote for the FAITH's rationing if they could just have their sister right next to them, right this second.

6.2

“Okay, Little O, Okay. Just tell me where you are... pretty please with a pomelmoss on top!”

“In the street, and my feet hurt.”

“Talk louder, Little O, I can’t hear you very well.”

“I can’t, Kat,” she whispers. “Two big, weird-looking boys are following me. Kat, I’m scared, come and get me quick, Kat, please!”

The teen is paralyzed in front of the com, immobilized by fear as thick as gelatine. This can’t be happening. Onyx... Oh, Onyx!

“Dad! Mom! Onyx is lost!”

“What, you’re playing hide-and-seek in the flat?” Fabro jokes. He’s come back to their meta, now that he broke up the fight at the supermarket.

“No, she went out, she’s out in the street somewhere!”

“You let her go out by herself?!?”

“Da-ad!”

“Does she have Kubu with her?” Atale cuts in, still sitting on the bench.

“I don’t know, Mom. I don’t know *anything*!”

Fabro connects to Onyx’s sound-cancelling headphones to listen to what’s going on around his little girl. Her panting and sobbing is making his heart pound in his chest hard enough to break his heart. He can hear the rustling of Sphax’s wings, and the crunching of Kubu’s caterpillar tread.

“Tadpole? Papa’s here, everything’s gonna’ be okay.” *Liar!* Then, to Atale. “Yes, she’s got her bo-bots with her.”

“She’s in Naylyan District, I/M-1956.”

“What is she doing *there*? What the bug is going on?!?”

“We’ll figure that out later, I’m on my way!”

Atale leaps up. Listless a moment before, now she strides to the front of the line, ignoring the remarks flying her way. She steps

right in front of the Meditech whose turn it finally was and leaps into the DALEK that had just got back to the charging station.

“Hey, who the bug do you think you are?” the passenger who got shafted snaps in outrage.

She stops short when she sees the look in Atale’s eyes. The look of a woman who will do anything for her children.

Even so, Atale still gets there too late...

Onyx can barely hear her father’s reassuring words in her headphones; she’s running as fast as she can. Between the sound of her own gasping for breath and the ringing in her ears, she’s practically deaf. She’s running so hard her lungs might burst. Her throat feels like she swallowed hot soup.

Every third step or so, she glances back over her shoulder in fright. The boys are following her, and they don’t even have to run to catch her. She had thought it would be a good idea to take the gloomy side alley — in half-darkness because some street lights have been turned down to save energy — and now she’s all alone in the street with the bad guys breathing down her neck.

One of the guys has a crest of cyber hair that’s smiling at her like a scary monster. And with his transparent tattoos, you can see the other one’s innards. Both of them look like bad guys from a holo-cartoon. Terrorized, she keeps looking behind her instead of where she’s putting her feet, as Mommy is always telling her she should.

Inevitably, she trips and falls flat on her face. The blow breaks the growth on her chin, which starts pissing blood. The pain jolts through her jaw making her bite her tongue, hard. Onyx is shrieking from pain and fear.

“Ha-ha-ha,” Cyber Crest laughs at her, “little baby has lost one of her implants.”

“They’re weird, kind of revolting even,” Transparent Tattoos pronounces, kneeling in front of the kid, who’s crying her little heart out. “And shut up! You’re breaking my ears!”

“How do your bugging robots open?” the other one says,

sounding annoyed, while he's doing his best to hold Kubu still. "Give us the batteries or I swear, I'm gonna' smash them to bits!"

Still kneeling, the tattooed hoodlum looks Onyx up and down: her chin's bleeding, there are tears streaming down her cheeks, she's got her back against the wall. Like a nose-diving bug, Sphax's attacks were so harmless they didn't even distract him.

"Unless you'd rather we smashed *you* to bits?"

"You ain't going to do a thing to that child."

The muggers turn to look at the woman who has suddenly appeared at the other end of the alleyway. Slight, with the fine features that imply genetic treatment, her hair neatly plaited in one long braid down her back, she's wearing a retro raincoat with cyber-halo implants peeking out at shoulder level. There's something timeless about her look, which is complete contrast with the attackers'. Seriousness, severity even, seems to pour from her, and her eyes blaze at the despicable injustice of the scene before her.

Nothing to worry about, the weird woman doesn't look any more dangerous than the kid. And if the shozen has super-heroine fantasies, they're going to show her whose turf she's on. Still, there's something slightly spooky about the way she's walking towards them so calmly. A light, noiseless tread; a complete absence of fear, and her right hand jammed into the pocket, out of sight.

When she pulls it out, the thugs flinch.

It's just a funflower seed. She cracks the hull open with her nail before tossing the seed into her mouth, her hand staying at pocket level the whole time.

"I'm giving you exactly one chance to scram on your own two legs, gentlemen. It's more than anyone gave me," the mysterious woman mutters to herself.

"You're one funny lady."

As Cyber Crest walks towards her, his fingers stretch out

inordinately, then fuse into a spiked metal bat. As calm as ever, the woman flicks the empty hull away, hitting him in the eye with it.

“Code-twat!”

He doesn't have time to say anything else. With stunning swiftness, she materializes – there's no other word for it — right before him. She snaps one leg out, cracking his nuts and literally lifting him off the ground. The hoodlum lets out a strangled groan as he takes flight, arms and legs lagging behind his pelvis, which is propelled backwards.

The stranger raises her leg very high, hooking Cyber Crest under the chin. Performing a sort of vertical split, she holds him off the ground, like a giant picking an opponent up by the scruff of his neck. Crest's baggy trousers slip down his legs, revealing a camouflage-coated cyber member.

The other thug backs up awkwardly before turning around and running hell for leather. With a powerful snap of her pelvis, the woman tosses her catch, who lands on his partner-in-crime's back. They fall to the ground in a ball of twisted limbs. Transparent Tattoos eventually manages to heave himself and his accomplice up, and they stumble out of the alley.

The stranger has already forgotten about them. She turns her attention to the kid, who is trying to stop the bleeding by pressing her hand against her chin. There's something in her eyes, a maturity that plenty of adults still don't have hovering behind the façade of her youth. Her deformities could inspire pity, but her gaze makes you admire her instead.

She still deserves a spanking for the dumb thing she did.

“You should be more careful with those robots. Now that people have to pay for batteries, thefts are skyrocketing.”

Onyx settles for nodding her head, with one hand holding her chin. She's a little bit intimidated by the super-strong woman's tough tone.

“So tell me. They're obviously not securi-bots. So how is it that

they still work in a zone where the electricity's been cut off?"

"My mommy makes them."

"Interesting. And where does your mom live?"

"Riota District, flat..." Onyx starts to recite, just as her parents have taught her to.

"Onyx! Oh, Onyx, there you are!"

KatK bursts around the corner into the alley and pounces on their little sister, hugging her tight and covering her with worried kisses. A warm, feeling of relief — with a few cold dashes of leftover guilt about her own stupidity — washes over them. Their worry melts away at top speed... when a few details suddenly make them realize that the lady looks a lot like a cop. Are they being followed?

On the other hand, right this minute, who cares?

"Are you okay? Your chin!"

"It only hurts because you're hugging me too tight!"

"Sorry! Where are those code-whackers? Did they hurt you?"

"Nah, the lady helped me."

"Salomé," she says, introducing herself.

To think she lost track of the Ordinator to save the kid, and now she's being called "the lady." Does she really look that old? Kids...

"So where do you two live?"

"Thank you, but we'll be fine. We can get home by ourselves."

"You're cute, but I didn't go through all that trouble so that you can run into more crested knuckleheads."

On her shoulders, halos blink until a moto arrives on automatic pilot.

"I'm taking you home. End of discussion. So, the address?"

"Can we go to Nyvenn's?" Onyx asks her sister.

"No, we really have to go home, *now*," KatK says, turning to look at Salomé. "Riota District, E/P."

"Flat number?"

"Why, is your motorbike gonna' drop us in front of the door?"

Salomé grins. She likes the teen. Moments later, she's watching the sisters huddling in the passenger compartment of her motorbike as it zips away. The vehicle will take less than five minutes to get there and back, but she's got no time to lose: getting back on the Ordinator's trail can't wait.

She shoves the flaps of her raincoat aside to free up her movements, and with a series of leaps and bounds, she has landed on the roof of one of the neighbourhood's lower buildings. She needs a good vantage point to spot her target.

A BAG OF BATTERIES

“You’ll be able to repair it, won’t you?”

“Yes, of course, Mr. RaHavani. After all, I’m your factotum here. Your answering machine is in good hands. In *two* good hands, at the very least.”

His eye glued to a loupe, Viggo is leaning over the minuscule device. With a pair of micro-tweezers in each hand, he’s rummaging through its innards as though he were dissecting a frog. Concentrating on the ancient wire connections, he pushes them aside with the intense, cautious concentration of a omb-disposal expert. The battery compartment is buried beneath a tangled skein of wires, and he can’t seem to get at it. “The thing is... it’s the last recording I have of my wife’s voice.” The old man scratches his balding head and sighs. He’s so old you half expect his breath to smell like moth balls. “They’ve stopped producing it, I checked with the manufacturer. The reception persona was quite short with me, too. I didn’t really appreciate her tone of voice when she mentioned how surprised she that anybody still uses an answering machine nowadays.”

Thick is his moustache that’s quivering with righteous, pent-up indignation. He’d clearly like to stick up for himself here, in Viggo’s dusty old shop, with everything he didn’t think to say on the spot, in the corpo’s showroom.

Viggo is as happy as a clam that this answering-machine from another era has wound up in his repair shop, like a karmic encounter tickling his funny bone. The machine is a drop of water crossing through the beams of his luminous happiness,

turning the repair into an unexpected rainbow.

Viggo's grinning. Despite the nearly exhausted battery, the device that's going to reformat itself if he can't fix it pronto and the risk that Mrs RaHavani's voice could be erased for good, sent back to beyond the grave... he's still grinning. After all, moments like these are what Viggo lives for. As one of the last recyclers in Mantris, his vocation is to bring objects back to life, not to bury them.

"You come highly recommended," the client, who can't figure out how to interpret Viggo's joy, says, belabouring the point. "You will be able to repair it, won't you?" he asks again. "I have only the vaguest remembrance of this kind of thing, but no empirical knowledge. Still, however battle-weary I may be, I won't surrender," Viggo says soothingly, without looking up.

Struggling to grasp what sounds like a mad scientist's comments, the old man glances around the shop, looking for proof of its owner's skill. Winding around the base of one of the dome's pillars, it looks like a covered market with dozens of stalls, like a bazaar you could circle though over and over and still find something new at every turn.

There are no on-demand 3D printers here, only actual physical objects, in stock and available immediately. Whole families have been known to wander through it, some scanning the top shelves with their eyes, others kneeling on the carpets on the floor. Kids rummage through a mountain of old toys piled up as randomly as in a child's bedroom... while parents look for pocket watches among the jewellery dangling from the beams.

Actual bars of body soap and laundry soap get sniffed at, hard copies of books and magazines flipped through for the old-fashioned scent of ink on paper, wooden furniture stroked

and its doors opened just for the pleasure of touching real wood with the nostalgic scent of beeswax. The tick-tock of grandfather clocks is enjoyed, as is the clack-clack of voice-controlled typewriters...

Viggo's shop is like a foot jammed in the door of progress, making sure it can't close for good on the world from before dematerialisation. The result is that a rarefied air blows through it: sometimes a fresh breath of nostalgia, others a cold draft coming through the chinks and making you shiver... For most Mantri, it's clearly a flaw in the insulation that needs sealing.

As far as Mr RaHavani's is concerned, it's the last place in Artellium where he can hope to hear his late wife's voice.

He leans a little further over the counter behind which Viggo is presiding over a workbench. Chewing on his moustache, anxiously watching the battery's warning light blinking, the old man mutters, "I hope it's not too late. I haven't used it in years, but the batteries shouldn't have drained like that."

"Did that happen to you too?" a young mum who has come to pay for the touch-screen tablet she just chose, asks. "I had the exact same thing happen two days ago." She turns to look lovingly at the baby floating behind her in an autonomous buggy. "I bought a new sound-cancelling lolly — brand new — and it stopped working after just two days! Which meant nobody got any sleep, since my little nipper here cried all night!" She pinches his cheek affectionately and the little lad gurgles and grabs his feet with joy. "You cried all night, didn't you, my little monster?" Then she looks at Viggo and Mr. RaHavani, all the warmth in her manner draining away. "I thought the Ordinator and all those specialists in the FAITH were going to take care of the battery problem. So what are they waiting for, a black-out?"

“I don’t think the FAITH can move mountains,” Mr RaHavani sighs. “But you can, Mr Viggo, can’t you? For my answering machine?”

Curious to see how things are going to work out, the woman leans over the counter in turn to stare at the workbench. She keeps the baby happy by giving him the tablet. Licking the screen, he accidentally turns it on. His face splashed with the 2-D display, he rubs his nose against the image of an adorable little ravix, gurgling with pleasure.

Viggo likes a job well done, which means taking his sweet time and concentrating. Instead, here he is, rushed and surrounded by curious customers. And now the doorbell — a real one, not a recorded signal activated by a movement detector — is jangling. Another customer coming to rush him. It’s... unseemly, a real cordax!

Of course, everything would be easier if he had had a few cybers implants installed, like tactile assistance or multi-directional eyes. But it’s impossible, the shopkeeper in his elegant tweed vest is, by conviction, every bit as vintage as his shop.

“Jarnicotton!” he swears.

Refusing to admit defeat, Viggo gives it his all. Leaping up from his antique chair with wheels, he rummages through his shelves muttering in a language that he alone understands, marvels for a few seconds at a miraculously unearthed zoopraxiscope, blinks a few times to force himself to concentrate, and finally puts his hands on the prototype of his battery recycler.

‘Eureka!’

If he plugs it into the answering machine, the prototype should let him recharge the quartz, as long as he can match its resonant frequency. It’s all still somewhat experimental, and in

truth, it's a bit early for a test, but it's not like he has any other options...

Concealed behind Viggo's eclectic, electric eccentricity and elegant dignity is a sense of urgency that is worrying the old gentleman.

"I'm pleading with you, Mr Viggo. I just want to hear her one last time, it would mean so much to me... I haven't recognized my wife's voice since her Elevation. She swears that nothing's changed and that I need a new pair of ears, but I would bet my bottom croesus that the Mantrix doesn't have the same timbre.

"RaHavani... RaHavani..." The young mum seems to be trying to remember why that rings a bell... when suddenly a memory rushes at her like magnetic shavings to a magnet. "You must be the husband of..."

"Hello, you have reached the home of Datti RaHavani, digital architect of the first DALEK hub. I can't ta-a-a-ke..." The voice turns to a croak, the answering machine is dying, Mr RaHavani is overwhelmed with emotion, the young mum is startled, the baby chuckles, and the new client – who had been keeping to herself – is starting to hope that Viggo can finally take care of her. Only Viggo is still almost in control of his emotions. To keep the trembling of his eyelids behind his monocle from giving him away, he fiddles with the recycler in hopes of catching another echo of that voice headed for oblivion.

"... your call right now, but you can leave a message. Unless it's for my husband, because I've got better things to do with my time than taking his messages. It's not like I haven't been telling him to get his own machine for long enough!"

"Now that's my Datti," Mr RaHavani says with a chastened smile. "Everybody says that Elevation preserves people's

temperament, Datti first of all. Well, now I've got proof that that's not so!"

"Alas...", Viggo starts to say, his voice dripping with regret, and a genuine tear slipping down from behind his monocle.

He's interrupted by the whirring of the answering machine. Having been cleared out, it's now reformatting.

"Not to worry," the old man reassures him, drumming a finger on his SIT. "I had time to record it." Chomping at the bit to show his Mantrix of a wife f up or once, he shuffles quickly to the door, where he turns around and tosses out, "I'll leave the answering machine with you. It should be right at home here in your shop.

Viggo and the young mum watch him leave before turning their attention back to the machine, the vocal tomb of Ms. RaHavani. With a shrug, the young mum leaves the shop next, the autonomous buggy in her wake. Which leaves Viggo alone with...

"Lady Nyvenn? What an enchantment to see you again!"

"Hello, Viggo."

"Deuces, you're all out of breath! Would you care for a drink? I have some fresh-squeezed nanabe juice that's absolutely ambrosial. It comes from... you know where."

He removes his monocle in order to roll his eyes melodramatically towards the bootleg gardens on the roof of Mantris. Nyvenn knows the place well; she grows her medicinal herbs there. She can't help smiling at the barmy expression on Viggo's face. She has great affection for the mad scientist who recycles everything out-dated, even words. His eccentricity gives her hope in humanity, a better balm to her heart than any of the ones she blends.

"That's very kind of you to offer, but I'm fine, thank you."

“As you wish, my dear. I don’t want to be indiscreet, but please, reassure me: everything is in order with the items you picked up earlier?”

“Yes, yes, as usual,” she says, rushing her words impatiently. “That’s not why I’m here.”

Relived, Viggo pulls a handkerchief out of the pocket of his elegant vest and begins to clean his monocle. Although he’s pushing fifty, he still wears the accessory strictly for style.

“I’m delighted to hear it. In that case, in what manner may I assist you?”

With an affable smile, his head tipped slightly to one side, Viggo is the very embodiment of attentiveness. The sparkle in his eyes implies that he is expecting nothing less than a cosmic revelation. Nyvenn would love to take the time to chat, Viggo has such a charmingly hoarse yet warm voice. But she really doesn’t have the time today.

She’s got just fifty-seven minutes left before Sathyne’s tank goes off, for want of energy.

“Batteries. I need as many as you’ve got.”

While Viggo’s smile is as affable as before, his thumb and forefinger have suddenly frozen on either side of the monocle, betraying his surprise.

“I beg your pardon, Lady Nyvenn, I wouldn’t wish to discommode you, but I’m not sure I have grasped the meaning of your request. Battery distribution falls under the exclusive purview of the Conclave.”

“But you told me that you replace the ones in the objects people bring in, didn’t you?”

“Yes, indeed. Often, that’s the entire extent of the ‘repair’ needed: changing the battery. My clients’ surprise when I explain that to them never gets old. They look at me as though I were some sort of magician. They’re so encomiastic it’s

heartwarming!”

“So do you have a lot of them? Where are they?”

“Well...” Viggo puts his monocle back in before turning to look at his storeroom, tucked into the centre, but at a rough guess, “At a rough guess, I’d say nearly three score.”

“I’ll take them. All. How much do you want for them?”

“But... I haven’t the slightest... They’re not for sale, and besides, I doubt very much that I’m licensed to... What’s more, they’re practically empty.”

“Viggo, I’d love to discuss the commercial permits you do or don’t have but unfortunately, I’m in a terrible hurry. Name your price.”

“My word, you’ve taken me by surprise. I don’t know what to say!”

“Viggo, I’m begging you...”

Nyvenn holds out her open leather shoulder bag in hopes of speeding things up. But Viggo is still looking her in the eye.

“I’d feel like a mountebank if I sold you any that were dead.”

“I’ll cope.”

“However, that reminds me...” he says, in a circus barker’s tone of voice, while pointing to the recycler that’s still sitting on the workbench, “It just so happens that I have designed a device that is able to recharge batteries.”

Nyvenn stares at the machine, which is about the size of a thick spell book, and then back at Viggo. She hasn’t a clue how the device works, and even less where her friend is going with this.

“If I’m not mistaken, your genuine-wood furniture is quite in demand among some high Croesues, n’est-ce pas? Do you think that one of them might want to be a backer for my invention?”

Nyvenn’s arms drop to her sides and she freezes, like a truly

petrified tree. Now Viggo has spoiled everything with his blackmail disguised as a quid pro quo. She's a refugee, an illegal alien, a Nay-Dam who blends in with the exSITed to avoid the Opax. He knows that perfectly well, and here he is, asking her to take the risk of getting arrested, expelled from Mantris and sent back to the Rift...

Of course, she could agree to do it and not keep her word. She would never lie to a friend, but at this point, it's no longer clear if Viggo still is one.

In the meantime, the voracious present is devouring the seconds with its metronomic appetite.

"You can count on me, Viggo." She says, stuffing the device into her shoulder bag. "But be quick, please!"

"By all means!"

He disappears, leaving Nyvenn alone with her fear of time flying by. Nervously scratching at her arm, she's making flakes of her bark skin fall off.

It isn't as though she hadn't warned the Ordinator that she was going to run out of batteries. With the threat of shortages and blackouts, shozen are using them up rather than tossing them out for no good reason. Her usual supply channels have dried up, forcing her to come to a friend to plead urgently.

She owes everything she's got to the Ordinator: her shop, her safety, her very subsistence. The only thing he asks for in return is that she take care of his sister. What will happen to her if anything ever happens to Sathyne? A friend would understand that she can't be blamed for a power outage, but is the Ordinator really a friend? She would have sworn that Viggo was...

Now that the seed of doubt has sprouted, its tiny rootlets are spreading through her heart, which is pounding in fear at the threat to the very foundations of the new life she has made

for herself here in Mantris.

A chunk of bark is yanked from her arm. She slaps her palm onto the exposed skin, which feels like it's been scalded, pressing hard to contain the pain.

"*Here* we go," Viggo says cheerfully, his eyes drawn to the shoulder bag, which is surrounded with a soft halo of light. "I've only got two-score and eight, and not three score."

That's precisely how many minutes she's got left, Nyvenn can't help noticing.

"Thank you, Viggo. I've got to go."

"Just one moment."

Nyvenn stops, without knowing why she has agreed to waste a precious moment.

"About that recycler... Don't get yourself in any trouble over it, you hear me? It's just a concept for sale, but your friendship is priceless to me."

Nyvenn spins around and rises up on her toes to plant a light kiss on his cheek... carefully, so that her scratchy bark lips don't create an unpleasant sensation.

Then she dashes away, the strap of her bag tight against her chest.

7.2

A few moments later, Nyvenn is standing in front of the old maglev station. Since Daleks caught on, no one uses the maglev any more, except for long trips, like to the beach resorts on the coast. The metal plaque that's supposed to block the entrance has been cut open by homeless people, like one of those small pedestrian entrances cut into a large carriage door.

A door that opens onto the hellish landscape of her worst memories. These tunnels are how she infiltrated Mantris, fifteen years ago by now. She was escaping the Rift, Great Mother, the gang, magic. Everything. It was an even more terrifying exile than the one that had forced her out of Arkhante years before.

These tunnels are the lair of her night terrors.

As luck would have it, they're also the shortest way back to Sathyne; it took too long at Viggo's for her to go any other way.

Her legs go so stiff at the top of the stairway plunging to the heart of the old station that she nearly tumbles down head first. She's retching with deep, dry heaves. She hesitates, whimpers, casts desperate glances every which way, trying to work out how long it would take if she went back to the maze of crowded streets.

And all that time, time keeps marching on...

Time, time, always time!

If there's one thing that Nyvenn really hates about Mantris, it's shozen's obsession with time. Mantri chop their days up into hours, minutes, *seconds*... They even use smaller units than that, as though they could possibly do anybody any good! A second is less than the time it takes to breathe in, what practical use could there possibly be for such a short unit of time except for driving people crazy?

In Arkhante, they do just fine with Galana, which counts the days, along with the three moons – Karas, Balor and Regel – to

announce the seasons, and Rainar to mark the half-years.

And in the Rift, the whole concept is meaningless. There, people get chopped up, not time.

Nyvenn has lived in all three lands, and as far as she is concerned, Mantris is by far the best of a bad lot. But still, she'd give anything to escape Mantri's neurotic relationship with time!

Just thirty-three minutes left.

She hurtles down the horrifically high steps of the non-functioning escalator, and dashes through the station to get to the old tracks. Bioluminescent holo-grafs cover the walls in a continuous scroll of street art, a blend of cryptic messages and gang symbols. The light is faint, she has to watch her steps.

She's holding her breath, afraid of being submerged by the flow of time in this underground space. If she lets herself drift into the past, she'll wind up colliding with a memory iceberg, the kind that slashes the hull open below the water line, flooding the hold of the subconscious with its icy, murky waters.

If only she had trained as an Air magus, she'd know a few techniques for holding her breath. Even so, the tunnels would be too long, the exit too distant... She's struggling to keep her anxiety suppressed, compartmentalizing the hold of her very being with watertight partitions.

She's trying to focus on what she can see, but nothing catches her eye. The place is nothing but a long, perfectly tubular tunnel, where magnetic-levitation trains used to zip by so fast that passengers didn't have time to see anything out the windows. Everything is so monotonous that Nyvenn's hardly sure she's going anywhere.

Unfortunately, time is definitely moving forward. Just twenty-seven minutes left. She starts running flat out.

And slams straight into the very memory iceberg she dreaded.

The tip is her clandestine arrival in Mantris. But the main part, nine-tenths of the floating ice behemoth's mass, can be found underwater.

First tenth: Age 16, a rebel in love with a luthier, she runs away from Nature College to live her life with love as its only official source of magic.

To the Inquisitors on her trail, the codices she stole to sell —love won't feed an empty stomach — justified killing her handsome luthier. Whether it happened accidentally or in deliberate retaliation, she's not really sure any more. The scope of the tragedy made her memories go as milky as oxygenated ice.

Third: Before the arkhome's judges, she demands exile to the Rift. She wants to make a grand gesture, do something striking that will impress and inspire her peers. The sages on the court agree to her demand, feigning magnanimity, when they are actually acting more like gardeners weeding their plot.

For a young woman from Arkhante, the reality of the Rift, the never-ending throes of a once-fertile land dying in the slow shrivelling of a dried flower is a brutal shock. She pleads before the Wall of Bones, begs them to let her come back. All that achieves is the loss of the tiny bit of moisture still nourishing her roots.

Five. The breath of fresh air — oh, just a few tiny bubbles frozen in the ice, but they do a world of good when oxygen is in such short supply. Great Mother, the matriarch of the Bloody Wings, welcomes her like she was her own long-lost daughter. To be fully adopted as a member of the gang, she has to spill a little blood, and share a lot of her knowledge of the art of magic with Great Mother. A price she pays with furious enthusiasm, a kind of revenge on her lover's killers.

Six. If only two short years hadn't sufficed for everything to wither away. What she had learned at college: wrung dry; Great Mother's love: shrivelled; her anger at Arkhante, evaporated; her youth, absorbed by the desert of the Rift. By age 20, she already looks as old as she does now, at 40.

Seven. An amah will change everything. She shows up in the Rift one day with a baby in a basket and a cloth embroidered with ivy,

the coat-of-arms of Nephtys. In the blink of an eye, Great Mother had a new favourite daughter: a baby who seemed like a more useful heir than a former Nature magus. Before the child even has a name, she has already wiped Nyven's from the matriarch's mind.

8. A rebel once more... but without the innocence of youth this time, Nyven defies Great Mother according to the laws of the gang. Her magic comes rushing back, as powerful as love... as thwarted, bitter love that reeks like sour milk, that is. Nyven loses control, the Rift's perturbations corrupt her spell, bouncing it partly back on her, turning her skin to bark. Great Mother loses an arm; Nyven, the desire to ever call on prana again.

9. Taking advantage of the fact that Great Mother has only one arm to escape from her clutches and get away from the gang before they crucify her. Exile, for the second time. The last, too, Nyven hopes. As she is running towards Mantris, the last territory left for her to be chased out of, she thinks back to Bielova, the fortress of white trunks where she grew up. There, newlyweds plant a seed. The tree shoots up to welcome the new family, branching out when children arrive, bursting into leaf to protect them all from inclement weather. Will her tree ever grow in the artificial soil of the city-continent? Or will she have to abandon her dream of starting a family someday?

Numbed by the icy winds of memory, Nyven huddles against the cold, smooth wall. She rubs her rough cheek, making wood powder fall like dusty tears. She should never have taken these tunnels; she has fought too hard to bury her past. Like any plant, she hates darkness and needs light.

Twenty-seven minutes, that's all she's got left to save Sathyne. Sathyne...

When Nyven first arrived in Mantris's underground world, she wandered through the tunnels for days on end. Life there was as hard and strange as in the Rift. Harder, really, because on top of everything else, she was completely deprived of sunshine. Having lost the sky, she lost all hope.

Then one day she chanced upon the regeneration tank that the Ordinator was having transported to a hiding place he had had prepared for his insentient sister. Mistaking the tank for a watering trough, Nyvenn, who was dying of thirst, ran towards the windfall, where she was taken aback to discover the sleeping young woman radiating all the grace and melancholy of a driss deep in the forests of Orcunion.

Moved by the unlikely appearance that yanked her back into herself, dazed from deprivations to the point of being almost in a trance state, weaned of the magic of both love and prana, Nyvenn still managed to accomplish an act of faith.

The day she'd left the college, the codices weren't the only thing she'd stolen. A seed, that was the other thing she'd taken with her. The seed she had hoped to plant the day she decided to grow a family like you grow a garden. That grain had survived everything, even the Rift.

She slipped that seed into the ventilation system so that it could germinate inside the drowning houd's trough.

And now, fifteen years later, the plants drifting in the regenerative liquid come from that seed that was produced in Arkhante, mutated by its time in the Rift and finally steeped in Mantri technology. The triple fermentation process — once in each of the cultures of Artellium — had created these luminous psycho-algae. The process keeps Sathyne alive in her tank and hope in her little brother's heart. And it offers Nyvenn a chance to redeem herself, a chance to believe in something once again, to reconnect with her sense of wonder.

Nyvenn gets going again, first dragging her feet, then running every fourth step. Sathyne is a bridge between Arkhante and Mantris, a bridge whose load-bearing pillars stand in the Rift. Nyvenn won't let that disappear, she has nowhere else to run.

Suddenly she starts running full out once again, her fear of icebergs melting away as her restored energy warms the waters of her own existence.

There's just four minutes and fifteen seconds to go by the time she steps foot inside *Neither Frivolous nor Pointless*, so haunted by the urgency of the matter at hand that even she is counting the seconds.

"Kat, it's Nyvenn!" Onyx shouts the moment she arrives.
"HURRY!!!"

Onyx and Nyvenn dash into the secret chamber where KatK has been busy plugging the tank into a back-up generator as she waits impatiently for Nyvenn to get there. Onyx closes the door behind them while Nyvenn tips the contents of her shoulder bag out. The batteries clutter to the floor, chiming like so many seconds ticking by.

All three of them stuff the precious quartzes into the cells of the generator, which looks like the chrome frames of a beehive on wheels.

"Did you manage to plug it in?" Nyvenn asks as she keeps shoving batteries in.

"The plugs didn't match," KatK groans. "The damn corpos won't agree to universal standards. It was touch-and-go, but I cobbled something together."

"All done!" Onyx declares triumphantly, holding up her hands as irrefutable proof.

When KatK switches the generator on, the energy bar on the edge of one of the hive's frames lights up. It barely budes from the 0.

"Not sure this is going to do the trick..."

The tank goes abruptly dark; the filters let out a long slow rattle that ends in the silence of death.

There's no more juice in the batteries.

No, it can't be!

In desperation, Nyvenn grabs Viggo's invention, closing her eyes for a moment to picture in her mind's eye how he had plugged it in. Then she connects the device to the back-up generator. Nyvenn is following her instincts, assisted by KatK, who has mobilised her

friends from ÅPØLØW and is scrolling through every imaginable tuto on her skin. Onyx is prowling around them, as on edge as the criarunes who have been drawn to the green halo cast by the tank's back-up lighting. The atmosphere is electric, but even that's not charging the quartz batteries.

Although...

Inside the compartment, the languorous dance of the psycho-algae has started up again; they're swaying to the hum of the filters that are purring like well-fed cats. With her long hair forming a diaphanous crown around her sleeping face, Sathyne looks like even more like a mermaid than she ever has before.

"We did it! We're the best! We're the queens of the machine!"

Onyx is leaping every which way, so hard that she even loses the brand new sound-canceling headset that was a gift from Nyvenn's mysterious friend. Instead of worrying about it, she takes advantage of it to spin like a top as fast as she can, then improvises a dance of joy to the sound of Nyvenn and KatK's peals of relief laughter.

The teen is nearly in tears to see their little sister so happy. Despite the bandage on her chin and the horrid horns sprouting on her face and hands, One embodies overflowing hope and a lust for life that you can't help admiring. It's so radiant it's a beacon guiding her loved ones towards happiness. KatK finds it inspiring.

Annoying too sometimes. But not today.

While Nyvenn joins Onyx in leaping around the room with joy, KatK slides down the wall 'til they're sitting on the floor, arms crossed on raised knees. Their skin turns into a disco ball splashing the dance floor with flashy stroboscopic lights. A clever way to conceal themselves behind a curtain of light.

KatK never thought she'd be back here, and certainly not so soon. When she climbed out of Salome's motorbike, with a still stunned Onyx clinging to her leg, she was expecting to get the tongue-lashing of her life from her parents. And she did, later. But their first reaction had been to hug them both tight, crying tears

of relief, then to cover them in kisses to the point that it got embarrassing.

Obviously, once Onyx was asleep, KatK had a lo-o-o-ng argument with their parents. Thinking back on it, they know they said some truly horrible things, partly because they really thought them, and partly because the backlash from the day's emotions had caught up with them.

"I may have screwed up, but at least I found something to soothe One! She's doing better thanks to Nyven's unguents. And what have you two done, huh? You make a big show of doing all this shit, Dad, but it's just a bunch of hot air. And Mom, you haven't got a clue about what's happening here any more!"

The argument put a stop to the sermon by making everybody cry, KatK included. It might not have been very elegant, but boy, was it efficient!

The next morning, they all had breakfast together for the first time in... KatK can't even remember how long. Atale didn't rush off to work, and Fabro didn't take a bioost: they had both decided to take their time. It was actually a little awkward at first, as unpredictable as a lone dark cloud on the cusp between bursting into a downpour and fading away on sunny summer day. As was often the case, Onyx was the catalyst, and blue skies settled over the table. With a few scattered showers, too, because in between the healing medicine words, two or three painful truths needed to be spoken.

In the end, the girls had been allowed to go back to Nyven's while their parents kept up their search for another treatment — "Only until we find something better, because we're going to!" Fabro said, sounding confident. The only condition was that they inform their parents ahead of time and they rent a safety-bot — "We'll pay for it," Atale said firmly. But most of all: no more lying.

KatK thought that was fair, and Onyx was thrilled.

What made the biggest impression on the teen was what their parents said when they came to see her — separately — while

Onyx was occupied elsewhere.

Mum: “I know we haven’t been getting along very well. It’s partially your fault, but mostly mine. And I promise that’s going to change, or I’m going to try my best, anyway. But I’ve got things to work out with your father, and I’m going to start there. It’s not that you matter less to me, it’s just that, whatever happens, I’ll always be your mother, but nothing says I’m always going to be your father’s wife. You understand? I love you.”

Dad: “It wasn’t actually fair of you to say I don’t do anything for your sister. But you were absolutely right to remind us of everything you do for her. You cope like an adult, better than I do sometimes, with no crutches and no pretence. You have no idea how proud I am of you... and how afraid I am that you’ll think I care more about her than you do, because I spend so much time taking care of her and not enough of you. You need to know that we may be running out of time, but my love for you and your sister is infinite. In fact, it’s the only infinite thing there is in the whole damn universe. Come here, Kat.”

Their parents could have punished them, the crisis could have shattered their family for good, but instead, they suddenly feel more attached than ever to their parents, like a free gas in a cold fizzy drink.

Kat has a sudden, overwhelming urge to send her parents a vid. They flag Onyx’s jubilant cries, Nyven’s tears of joy and the criarunes’ frenzied leaps and bounds, then they edit it all to some trendy music and add a personal introduction: “Dad, Mom? You’re gonna’ be so proud of us. O and I did something totally wild at Nyven’s!”

7.3

Salomé never would have thought that a public figure like the Ordinator could be so hard to trail. He's the most holographed shozen in Mantris; his every move is scrutinized by the Noria itself; he is under permanent surveillance by the famous guards from each of the four techstyles, and yet... as unbelievable as it seems, the Opax agent is barely managing to keep track of him.

Unbelievable, so terribly motivating. Otherwise, she wouldn't have taken as many risks as she just did.

Salomé is clinging to the vertical face of a skyscraper, a hundred meters above the ground, holding on by nothing but the friction power of her cyber legs. Risk # 1.

The building in question, which is easily recognizable thanks to its twisted X shape, is none other than the headquarters of Aleph, the corpo specialized in cryptosecurity. Although technically speaking, she hasn't actually set foot *inside* the building, Salomé is not entirely convinced that she has outmaneuvered the last of the surveillance systems. Risk #2.

She isn't perched up here because she's interested in what Aleph's up to, but because of the fish tunnel that runs through the building and that she's crouching beneath, hidden in the shadow of the impressive tubular structure. A wired sensor – a veritable antique, which, counter-intuitively, actually makes it almost impossible for modern counter-espionage technology to detect – tacks across the pipe network for three hundred meters, all the way to the Zoone, the Genetics' centre for "special" tests, a place that's so secretive it's almost an urban legend. Even Opax members can't get inside without a good reason — that's how touchy the Zoone's scientists are about medical ethics. Risk #3.

Except that the Zoone is precisely where the Ordinator is just now. But arresting such a well-known political and public figure, who, on top of it all, is protected in the highest spheres of power, is going to require irrefutable proof.

Thanks to her sensor drifting with the fish and mollusks, Salomé can hear his conversation with one of the directors, whose name she doesn't know. The transmission is choppy and crackling, in fact, surprisingly similar to the idea you'd have of a discussion taking place underwater.

∩ *AIssistant, priority routine.* ∩

∩ Activation of sound-treatment filters. Extrapolation of noisy passages through static treatment, indication [between square brackets] in the transcription.

“How many years have I been funding [your research]?” Despite the static, the Ordinator's annoyance is perfectly perceptible.

“I am [aware of that].”

“Do you or do you not have a way to regenerate a human brain?”

“We're [nearly there. We need] more funding.

“And I need results!”

“And we've had some, for the little girl with epidermodysplasia verruciformis.”

∩ *AIssistant, secondary routine.* ∩

∩ Explanation of “epidermodysplasia verruciformis.”

The images layered over her vision are so shocking that she recoils., making her slip a few centimeters down the vertical façade, stretching and finally breaking the sensor cable.

It doesn't matter, she doesn't need to learn more. Salomé has already seen the horrible growths that skin disease causes. She even knows the address of the “little girl” the Ordinator asked them to treat. The place where she ran into Onyx Lag'Chuo just so happens to be where she lost the Ordinator's trail two days ago.

∩ *AIssistant, priority routine.* ∩

∩ Virtual exploration of the Sowet District, A/S. Searching for statistical anomalies on each premises.

∩ A/S 197: Top 1,000 oldest warehouses in Mantris. Delete.

∩ A/S 622: Detecting chemical vapors compatible with a clandestine meditech production line. Transmitting to Anti-Fraud Agency.

∩ A/S 290: Detecting natural heat, probable fossil fuel heat. Delete.

∩ A/S 321: Abnormally high quartz-battery consumption relative to usage records.

She scratches her kneecap, a nonsensical reflex ever since the accident that cost her her legs. She had had the same reflex just before her vehicle suddenly wound up dangling over the void, clinging to a magnetic track by a single motor, about to be dropped into the fish-farming canals fifty meters below.

The accident was ten years ago now, but the memory is still painfully alive. Her little brother was locked in by the safety systems in the vehicle's back seat; the securi-bot that came to help them as the damaged vehicle twisted and swayed, threatening to drop at any moment; the robot's decision to save her rather than him; her own screams of pain and grief when the vehicle fell into the water, taking her little brother and most of both of her legs with it.

The investigation established the statistically unlikely series of breakdowns that led to the tragic event and determined the share of responsibility of each implicated corpo, but they completely cleared the securi-bot. The statistics were formal: Salomé had had a far better chance of survival than her late brother. When the decision was announced, she hadn't complained, hadn't said a word, in fact. Once she'd emerged from the legal metaverse, she walked — on her cutting-edge new legs paid for by GeStark — to the Opax recruitment office. In just a few years, her hostile distrust of robots and their damned inhuman, dispassionate reasoning had propelled her to the top spot among Opax investigators, the agency in charge of monitoring the Noria.

Over time, the knee-scratching reflex had turned into a signal from her instinct, letting her know that she was getting warmer.

She had no idea exactly how, or, more importantly, why, but the Ordinator was mixed up in that over-consumption of batteries. She would be willing swear to it on her life.

Her conviction isn't enough though, she needs to gather irrefutable proof. She has to act fast and take advantage of the fact that the Ordinator's not there to organize a raid and find some incriminating evidence against him.

Her encounter with the Archivist suddenly pops into her mind. It was five days ago, when her investigation was just beginning. Her request for access to records of the Ordinator's movements had just been refused. Hardly a surprise. Undeterred, Salomé had demanded an explanation, and barely an hour later, had found herself alone with the Archivist. Now that *had* been a surprise!

"The data you've requested are archived," the Archivist, who had adopted a masculine profile that day, informed her. "Archived," as she knew perfectly well, was the diplomatic way to say "confidential".

"Archived?" Salomé had replied, feigning incomprehension. "Luckily, I've been sworn in to a position authorized for access to archives."

"Your Opax accreditation doesn't give you access to the Noria's archives, Agent Salomé. You have to be a Mantrix for that."

"Duly noted. If I die in the line of duty, I might be considered worthy for Elevation. In that case, can I count on you to give my file priority so I can pursue my investigation?"

The Archivist had smiled faintly. Now she was about to wipe that grin off his face!

> [®] *Priority Channel* | *SALOMÉ* Σ *Intervention Service* \ *Opax* >

> Agent Salomé, Personal ID Colex-23. Requesting immediate intervention in the Sowet District, A/S 321. Resistance possible, neutralize for interrogation.

She has to hurry up, she wants to be there to run the operation. Let alone that she's better off getting out of here, just in case the fallen sensor gives her presence away.

Her legs change skin, making it look like they're shuddering, then, with a powerful leap, Salomé pushes off from the façade, heading for *Neither Frivolous nor Pointless*, which is located inside the suspicious building. She hopes that little Onyx isn't there; she'd hate to have to arrest the girl.

She'd hate to, but not so much that she'd fail to do her duty as an investigator.

MIRROR | RORRIM

“Aurelius, I need every possible detail about what she’s wearing today. It really matters, the success of the ritual depends on it.”

Isalys’s resolute voice makes Lantana’s prism quiver. Floating above the wide open palms of the green-robed Arkhont, the crystal is diffusing an indistinct light. Aurelius’s image is floating inside it too: the *mise en abyme* subtly emphasises the fact that the gladiator is standing leagues away.

Without the clairvoyance spell, it would be impossible for Isalys to communicate directly with her spy infiltrated into Solis’s entourage. The conversation is taking place in real time, with no lag time between speakers, even though Aurelius is far beyond the horizon, which prevents direct transmission. Instead, the signal has to be shot into space and bounced off of one of the three moons to be beamed back down to them — in an almost instantaneous celestial odyssey. A feat even Mantris is surely incapable of.

Still, Isalys hardly seems impressed. For her, the means don’t matter, only the results count. Presently, the only thing she cares about is the success of the ritual she’s about to initiate, the one that will spring the trap she has been patiently weaving around Solis. The tiniest mistake could mean a potential escape route for the usurper; she mustn’t neglect the slightest detail. Knowing

exactly how Solis is dressed will be a decisive asset.

“I gave you that information already,” Lantana reminds her. “Why demand a clairvoyance spell just to confir...?”

Isalys interrupts her with a look.

“Go ahead, Aurelius.”

He launches into his description, as precisely as a surgeon-barber’s scalpel, detailing Solis’s garments, jewellery and shoes with military rigour. From the tone of his voice, it’s obvious the gladiator is impervious to the complex embroidery along the bust, the buckles shimmering like mother-of-pearl on the slippers: frills he’d never seen anyone around him wearing before. He lingers over Solis’s face: her powdered complexion, not unlike the dust of the Rift, as he puts it, but slighter lighter and cleaner. Isalys is surprised that he finds that detail worth mentioning... and that his mentioning it galls her so much.

So be it, what matters is that Aurelius has performed his task perfectly. His sense of observation — finely honed by a life lived constantly on the alert — has compensated for the shortcomings in his knowledge of aristocratic attire.

Isalys is only listening to him, her eyes are focussed on Lantana, whose face is concealed by the veil that symbolises her task. The lighter-than-silk material — sloughed from Lify the Legendary — quivers with repressed trembling, in which Isalys divines frustration at her own seeming lack of confidence in the Arkhont.

When Aurelius has finished his report, Isalys makes her satisfaction clear.

“You must understand, Lantana, I have nothing against you, it’s just that everything needs to be perfect.”

“Haven’t I already proven the extent to which I am committed to your cause?”

“The issue here isn't commitment, but precision. You are a seer, observing all through a filter of magic; whereas I perceive them as a leader of human beings. A necessity, here in the

Rift...”

The tremors in the veil cease, and Lantana’s breathing slows. Isalys can tell that she is now reassured, and attentive to the needs of the future Malkah once again. Good. Some Arkhonts have been helping her prepare this coup d’état for years now, but one simple truth remains: in the end of the day, the power will reside in her hands alone. Hers, not the Light’s.

Isalys stands up nimbly. With a few resolute words, sweetened with praise to spur them to keep serving her faithfully, she dismisses Lantana and Aurelius. So much remains to be accomplished, she’s already focusing on the next step, the one that will depose Solis. That will bring the usurper down and finally render unto Isalys what has always been her due.

A few moments later, she has reached the entrance to the Hive, the network of underground galleries that acts as the Bloody Wings’ hideout. Jolau is the guard on duty. With its one missing lens, his gas mask makes him look like a cyclops. As she draws nearer, his fingers start snapping furiously. The young man, who had been half-dozing in the sun, instantly starts lashing the tachosaurs harnessed to the huge door scrounged from a former Mantri armoury. No one’s ever been able to fix the opening mechanism though.

“Matrician Isalys,” he says, bowing his head with respect.

“Jolau, I need two hours of light in the amber room.”

She announces her request from a distance, as she’s still walking towards him. The ostler spurs his animals on even more, fearing that the door won’t stand up to such an unstoppable force.

Jolau raises his eyes towards the enormous solar panel dominating the bunker’s decrepit cement dome – it’s the only thing that gleams for miles around. As he does some quick calculations, he’s absent-mindedly scratching the back of his head. The movement, seems to cause the atrocious creaking of the door opening. You could think his skull was a blackboard and

his fingers were chalk.

“It’s just that Galana is already so low in the sky...” His eyes twitch back to Isalys, still striding his way. He can see in the determined set of the Matrician’s gaze how crucial the need is. Imperative, even. “ ... but no problem. We’re on for two hours, you can count on my crew.”

Isalys nods her thanks and slips inside the opening without slowing down. Once she’s inside, the Hive, which is as dark as a cave, suddenly bursts into golden light, a celestial dew with honeyed hues. Reoriented by Jolau, the solar panel is beaming Galana’s rays onto the sheets of copper lining the walls inside the hangar.

A horde of young people with makeshift goggles protecting their eyes is scrambling across the scaffolding moulded to the bunker’s curved walls. They’re vigorously polishing the metal, keeping the slightest trace of green corrosion at bay. With all those beams of light bouncing back and forth, the room has become a miniature sun, radiating blinding heat.

Like a vigilant foreman, Jolau calls his troops to order: they are gaping at Isalys’s outlandish attire as she strides across the hangar with a queenly gait. Not a misstep, but a misrepresentation, a rough simulacrum of the current Malkah. Granted, the golden hoop piercing her lower lip doesn’t gleam like Solis’s, nor is her long braid as lavishly bejewelled. Her gown isn’t cut from the same precious cloth. Be that as it may, Isalys is regal through her naturally aloof carriage, her nerve and fibre, her almost feral gait, and her obvious legitimacy and furious determination.

Not an imitation of a queen, but the incarnation of one. Embodied rather than attired.

That is the true measure of royalty. The rest is nothing but smoke and mirrors, poetry and face powder.

Isalys walks deep into the heart of the Hive, turning at austere corners, taking exposed-cement staircases, crossing airlocks with

bullet-proof doors. Every step of the way, an unbroken line of young people are knocking themselves out aiming looking-glasses, rear-view mirrors, reflectors and holo-screen lenses — as well as sheets of tin foil and trinkets of all sorts — to reflect the powerful beam from the solar panel and bounce the light deep into the bowels of the underground complex.

Too busy anointing her arms, face, throat and any other parts of her body left exposed by her gown with unguent, Isalys can't respond to the sincere admiration visible on the faces of the young women and men alike. They are drawing immeasurable motivation from Isalys's determined stride. She and the Council will lead the Bloody Wings to a better life, dragging the whole Rift behind them like the tail of a comet; they know in their hearts it will be so. Hope gleams in their eyes like the glitter in the unguent that's sparkling in the reflected golden light, turning Isalys into the bearer of light whose duty it is to dissipate the obscurity of falsehood.

A truth that will blind Solis, consuming everything, even her soul.

Isalys finally gets to the very heart of the Hive, protected by a large, reinforced glass door. She shuts it behind her, cutting herself off from the mirror-bearers without depriving herself of the golden thread of light woven all the way from aboveground. She is alone in a rotunda whose walls are thickly coated with a slow accumulation of wax, the remains of countless candles that have long gone out.

Thousands of pieces of amber have been jammed into the paraffin, covering the floor, walls and ceiling. The gems represent two decades of gathering from the rim of the shadowy crevices zig-zagging across the Rift. It's dangerous work, because the risk of getting sucked into the crack in the world is great. The treasure alone — purchased, extorted, stolen and patiently accumulated — justifies the existence of the Hive, a former Mantri bunker remade into an oversized safe.

For Isalys, who has been initiated into the arcana of Light, it's far more than that. The ersatz heavenly canopy beneath which she stands — tall, proud and inspired — is the vessel of her memory-insemination rituals. From here, she will gift her latest vision to little Solis, an oneiric shock that will strike her like a bolt from the blue, with Aurelius in the role of a lightning rod.

The rotunda is none other than the flambeau of revelation, and her oiled, glittering body, the spark. She will need a blazing inferno of emotion to succeed.

Isalys closes her eyes to force the darkness to come, hums a lullaby to coax herself to sleep, chants a spell to plunge deeper into her waking dream.

Stimulated by the magic, the wave of light refracts, like a swarm of overexcited fireflies, into a multitude of rays in the thousands of pieces of amber, stretching its vibrations into eddies and swirls, drawing on the magical ebb and flow, decomposing its own waves like a rainbow fanning out its hues, revealing its corpuscular composition like fabric stretched to the weft. With her body as a focal point, the apprentice seer sculpts the bright light like a diamond cutter, manipulating dream images, creating illusions, modelling visions that she does her utmost to project into the mind of Solis, as familiar as she is foreign. They are sisters, so close and yet so far.

Despite the distance separating the Hive from the oasis where Solis has found shelter; despite her sister's waking state, which complicates things considerably, Isalys can perceive her target's signature. The bond is fragile, as evanescent as the misleading gleam of dusk that fades so quickly into twilight. Anyone else would accept defeat and give up, wouldn't dare cast such an iffy spell: a magical bluff, practically a roll of the dice.

Not her. Not Isalys. Not today, when she's got one foot on the dais of the Sculpted Throne. She can't wait any longer, can't queue patiently like a customer at a hydroponic greenhouse. She has to climb a step. At least one.

Giving up is not an option, but nor is forging blindly, stubbornly ahead. Craftily, she uses the oldest trick in the sandman's book: urging her prey to stay awake... the better to coax her to sleep.

"Don't fall asleep, Solis. Don't come join me. Stay in the safety of your entourage, don't put yourself in danger. You're not ready to know who you really are yet."

Her remote, subliminal appeal is less audible than a whisper in a crowded marketplace, as tenuous as the scent of tobacco in the smoke of a house fire, barely more tangible than the caress of a morning fog.

Yet her message hits home. Solis syncs herself to that voice. Now Isalys can lead her into that artificial, ersatz world of dreams, on a long road they stroll down side by side, as heedless of each other's presence as one is of one's own shadow.

To strengthen her hold on Solis, Isalys gives her time to leave the waking world and anchor herself more firmly in the kingdom of dreams. Patiently, with tiny, impressionistic dabs on the canvas of their shared fate, she depicts the mournful path already conquered across the Rift, the fields ploughed by war and sown with famine, the deadly favela swept by sandstorms and bathed in a damp, heavy aura so specific to the Rift's most vibrated zones. Caved-in buildings repeat like the pattern on a chaotic timeline, with, standing in for a wind rose, the strange windmill with seven sails, one of which, snapped in half, is dangling pitifully amongst the wind's sighs.

All those familiar details are snagging Solis's mind firmly in Isalys's web of dreams.

There, she has reeled her to where she wants her: before a bunker half-covered with sand, a place that looks as ordinary as could be. Yet once past that old, faded-red door, an enigmatic current can be felt, a dangerous attraction, filaments of slowed-down time blow a chill from deep inside the gut, an eternal dread.

The building is the bait, the trap, the hook that the golden girl has to gulp past her rebellious palate. It is here, where fates collide, that a duel of wills will be fought between the two sisters, with the throne of Arkhante as the prize. Isalys has no choice, in order to snare her prey, Solis has to step inside the trap of her own free will.

8.2

But Solis is hesitating like a little girl huddled under the covers, convinced there's a monster making scratching noises under her bed, but too terrified to get up and run out of the room or even to call for help.

Solis finally takes a step back, then another one. She swivels her hips to wrest her magnetised gaze away from the bunker. Squinting to strengthen her determination, her nostrils dilate like an animal alerted by its untamed instinct.

In her amber chamber, Isalys trembles. Not with fear, but with pure bitterness. Solis has been so perfectly foolish from start to finish, unable to make the slightest decision worthy of a true Malkah, and now she's suddenly displaying miraculous discernment on the verge of her fall? It's unacceptable!

Mistress of the nightmare she created, Isalys makes the letters "O N I" composed of three separate neon lights on the font of the building glow. The Rift slang word for time-eating demons begins to blink. Anything so odd will arouse the interest of Solis-the-guileless, piquing her curiosity and sense of wonder. If she steps inside, Isalys wins.

Solis turns around, starts walking back towards the bunker, then stops and hesitates with her hand on the doorknob. It may well be that behind that door, time flows like the dust of centuries, with an indolence that makes oblivion tremble. Ten breaths inside those walls, and outside, all of your nearest and dearest may have been dead and buried for decades. Her hand on the door is trembling without being able to pull away, as though the metal were attracting her like a magnet. Solis wants to go inside, but something deep inside her is holding her back.

Appalled, Isalys can only observe the scene. Solis is turning away, wisely giving up, preferring a waking state to an enlightened one. At the speed that Solis is stepping away from the trap,

success is slipping from Isalys's grasp.

Behind her closed eyelids, Isalys's eyes are rolling around inside the honeyed light saturating the heart of the Hive. Her body has understood, but her mind is still refusing to... The ritual hasn't failed yet, she just needs one last ingredient to achieve perfection. The sweet drop of blood necessary to embody her spell, to make it more fully alive than reality.

One drop... deep scarlet... a fecund tear of youthful terror. Isalys plunges into her childhood memories, drawing on the raw power of fear, the bewitching strength that will hurtle Solis head forward into her trap.

The building, inhabited by the shadows of days, is not unknown to her, that's why she picked it, actually. Temporal anomalies fluctuate in the bunker: sometimes speeded up, sometimes slowed down, time is a weathervane there, an unhinged windmill. Some people have stepped back out older than their own mothers, others have never returned. What she knows for sure is that the time-eating demons sough terrifying futures into the ears of all those who enter, leaving trauma engraved like open wounds in their flesh. Anyone who hopes to join the Bloody Wings must gain admittance there: enter ONI, confront the demons, relive your worst memories and bring back proof of your victory: that is their initiation rite.

Isalys passed that test successfully at age five; not twenty, like Solis is now.

To mobilize her memory, she plunges back into her sensations from that time. Damp air. Dissonant, inhuman noises. Bile held back, breath choppy, courage pounding in her chest.

But courage nonetheless.

When Solis stops, the schemer draws even deeper on the terror she overcame that day. Without realizing it, the Malkah draws on the child's bravery from fifteen years ago. Isalys has sealed the ritual. They enter the dreamlike ONI in unison.

Inside, the pestilent smells have the crimson taste of

coagulated blood; the gloom is as cold as iron shackles. The corridors stretch out to infinity, over and over, in a dizzying succession of interlocking geometrical shapes. Neither round, nor square, nor triangular. A blend of all three, with everything else thrown in for good measure. Thorny words from childhood, long forgotten, fling themselves at her ears; images of her constantly fleeing father, far ahead of her in the corridor. All of Artellium exploding in a drop beneath her damp eyes; the wheezing of an old magus, dagger in his back, blood gushing onto his white robe on a festival day in Nephtys; dull cries she has heard before, brooded over ad nauseam; her father, again, laughing uproariously at her failed attempt to read an essay about the Crucible accords when she was five years old.

Solis walks forward as though she were gliding over the ground, her steps silent amongst the echoes of the corridor that turns into an endless tunnel, a passageway as long as death, as short as the last second of life when memories assail you like thousands of cold hands. Between partitions in the wall, doors open onto alcoves blocked with fenced glass. Behind each door is a terrifying future. Some, ajar, allow her a glimpse of her buried body and her soul rising. Others, filled with simple, happy memories to come, slam shut as the Malkah approaches.

Stabbed with fear, she keeps going forward into this place where time is dislocated, dismembered, dismissed, on the verge of snapping. Her gut is heavy with latent, indigestible violence; her skin shivers and is drenched with shiver-toned sweat; fear snaps furiously at her heels without being scared away by her brave kicking at its snout.

Solis keeps moving forward, convinced that the next step will be the last. She hopes it will, she dreads that it might. And then, from inside another one of the many spine-chillingly empty rooms, a pillar of light draws her eyes. A pinkish, skin-toned glow compels her to make a detour. A tree with bloody-hued fleur-de-lys blossoms is planted in one of the place's many tanks. The tank's

glass walls have been shattered by the trunk with rough, knotted bark; cables are caught in its branches; its roots have warped the metal floor.

Solis draws nearer to this absurd oasis of beauty in an austere setting, the hybrid tree that doesn't exist seems more real to her than this nightmare architecture, this maze of time that will drive you crazy or senile. She picks a fleur-de-lys with petals the colour of an ichor-splattered shroud, twirling it between her fingers breathing in the odourless but colourful scent.

A spotty old mirror. The walls of the tank are a spotty mirror. Liberating, it reflects an image of herself that isn't blurry — at last! She sees herself in flesh and blood, fresh, clear and in sharp focus after that endless period of doubt when she no longer knew who she really was. She loves this image of a wandering queen who can finally glimpse her destination. She appreciates the wrinkles the adventure has begun to chisel here and there into her face, sweet stigmata of a chrysalid that has finally emerged from its cocoon.

When she looks at herself in that mirror, she sees a confident queen with established authority, the leaven of a perpetuated future. A bit cold, perhaps, but so much sturdier. Self-assurance galore, a presence you can't help but admire, unquestionable legitimacy, a painful past that has forged an unshakable determination. Less tender, but so much stronger.

It's as though her own psyche were sending her an ideal version of herself. More embodied than an ordinary reflection, a twinned image at once so similar and so different. In that two-way mirror, she finally sees herself unburdened with doubt or hesitation, invested with new powers. She's laughing and crying at the same time, enthralled with the power she could have incarnated, saddened to discover the chains that kept her from fulfilling herself. She will never be that other queen, and she is stabbed by the absolute certainty of that fact. But it makes her proud, too, inspiring her and filling her with a desire to break her shackles.

This mirror isn't really one, and yet it's the first that has ever shown her an image of herself that is finally complete and recomposed. Like a rebirth, a trick of fate. A fuller, more accomplished new childhood magically replacing her own fragile one.

She smiles knowingly, trustingly at this other. She watches herself twirling the flower, symbol of her tamed fear. She smiles at herself, tipping her head to one side, tickling her chin with the spinning petals. She glides into a dance step, raising her arms then twirling them around her head to crown herself with the fleur-de-lys.

She doesn't feel the hair tickling her wrist when her plait catches on her bracelet, doesn't notice the slight lag between herself and her reflection. On the contrary, she finds that the Light is finally beautiful in this dream that had been leaning more towards the Darkness until now.

She pouts at her own reflection, blinking at her sulky, mischievous-looking self. Thrilled to be able to revel in herself without modesty or witness, Solis blows her other self a kiss, closing her eyes the better to enjoy the one she receives in the mirror.

When she opens them, her image keeps its eyelids down. Closed, like tombstones sealing her soul. The blossom turns into a paper butterfly, fluttering around the Malkah then falling at her feet, deliquescing like dark-amber-hued blood.

With a chill suddenly running up her spine, she steps back, her dreadful, obese fear having returned instantly. The other, her reflection, is opening its eyes. Purple ones, the very eyes that have always made Solis unique, and yet that are unrecognisable to her in this moment. She must not have looked right, that has to be it. She steps closer, swaggeringly, laughing at the dirty trick her mind is playing on her. Chastened, she smiles at herself.

The reflection glares at her.

And thrusts its hand out to grab her face!

8.3

Solis awakens up with a start. For the briefest of moments — floating in the disorientation between sleep and waking, her ears still filled with her own cry of fear — she doesn't have a clue where she is. Sitting up in bed with one hand covering her mouth and the other held up like a shield against a looming, imaginary danger, her gaze as panicked as her heart, her surroundings are completely unfamiliar. Then her senses gradually return: the beating of the tent flaps, the damp air of the oasis, the salty tang of the wind... It's the place where the caravan took shelter after the debacle of the Salt Lake, two days ago...

She's in some magic-forsaken part of the Rift, out of range of Arkhante, protected by the most meagre of escorts. Not much less terrifying than the house of shadows she was dreaming about, when you get right down to it. And yet, the Malkah feels infinitely safer here.

Safe, really?

What about Calyps, who went back to Arkhante? He was accompanied by Veliva, who, faithful to the vaporous inconstancy of her arkhhome, immediately fell into step alongside him. Officially, as the journey was taking longer than originally intended, they returned to Arkhante at the Malkah's command to keep an eye on the regency confided to the dynastic lords and ladies. Off the record, after the events at the Salt Lake, Calyps felt a vital need to revive himself in a damper environment than this damned desert.

Their disciples are standing in for them now: Keya is representing Water, and Siphonn, Air. There's something suspicious about the primi's impromptu flight, a confused web of events whose dull vibrations the Malkah can perceive, without being able to detect the cause.

Solis gets up, still catching her breath, but determined to chase

away her demons, both nocturnal and diurnal. A certain unease at having nodded off is growing inside her, proof that she's getting her wits about her once again.

Attentive to appearances, she stares at herself in the mirror of her vanity. She looks haggard, her face drawn from the poor sleep, but even that reflection is less upsetting than the one in her dream. Less unfamiliar. After deftly re-plaiting her hair and pinching her cheeks a few times to bring out some colour, she steps outside.

Galana is crashing into the horizon, the orange glow of its fire turning the desert sand into molten gold. Two magicians are unfolding the mess tent with whirling arms, a handful of servants are setting the table for dinner. An ostler is filling a trough with streams of water drawn from the oasis; it's pouring through the air as though it were gushing from invisible gutters. On the fringes of all that, Hannibal is carving a rock into a rudimentary altar that Sarash is turning into a cooking stone just by laying on her hands. Soon thin slices of meat have been tossed onto it, and the whole camp can smell them grilling.

Peaceful, bathed in the mild evening air, pulsing with the beat of a barrel that has soldier is using as an improvised drum... the scene should be charming to her. She never appreciates magic more than when it forgets about being spectacular in favour of being useful. And yet, she stays by her tent, hands clasped over her bosom. She's there, but her mind is elsewhere.

What's wrong with her?

Oh stop it, you know perfectly well what's wrong.

In her dream, she was a triumphant Malkah, but she has awakened to her usual doubt-ridden self, stabbed by trauma and fettered by indecisiveness. Why is she here, in the Rift? She'd like to convince herself that she's seeking a way to regenerate the pranah cycle, but she can't help noticing that the journey looks a lot like trying to run away from her problems. Even if you throw in the hope of finding her sister, the journey is still dangerous

and unreasonable. Her sister may be no more than a mirage, a fantasy as insubstantial as that bunker with its distorting mirror. A meagre trail for a risky hunt, entrusted to the most unpredictable of trackers: Aurelius, whom everyone keeps trying to warn her away from.

Leaving Nephtys had been a huge mistake, a trap she had thrown herself into headlong, blinded by false certitudes and starry-eyed sentiments. She had put too much faith in her own intuition, which had turned out to be as unreliable as the laws of nature here in the Rift.

Unless she's being manipulated? Is she being played for a fool? Why not, after all? It would be easy enough. Her experience of power is still quite limited, she's only been ruling Arkhante for a year. Solis is easy prey for palace schemers, she knows that only too well. But who would betray her? The Air? Yes, Siphonn could be a traitor, he has such a conspiratorial air about him. But why would he do that? And is he alone or are they in league against her? How many of them? All of them? Can't they see how hard she's trying? What could be more important than stopping the pranah's decline?

That's not the problem. Your quest is righteous and necessary; the real question is whether you are the right heroine to lead it...

She chases those thoughts away angrily. She hasn't got the right to lose her footing, not as long as she is Malkah. The Sculpted Throne demands its due, she may not sit upon it while refusing to settle her account. Still, every ruler has advisors. But who can she talk to? Who can help her sort through her doubts and premonitions? Who can she confide in?

Hannibal? No. Although he's got plenty of talents, an intuitive imagination isn't one of them. Besides, confiding her problems in him would reinforce his sense of being her protective big brother, an attitude that Solis is finding harder and harder to take.

Sylaë? Already ill in Arkhante, she has been wilting, withering, and wasting away the further into the Rift they go. Yet despite

Solis's repeated exhortations, she refused to go back to Orcunion to revive her spirits, as Calyps chose to do. Solis simply can not burden her any further with her own worries.

Aurelius? Ah, comely Aurelius with his unbearable charm and predictable fickleness. Why must she suddenly have discovered a taste for the exoticism of that sweet-and-sour cuisine? She feels oddly... at peace in his presence. But no, not him, it's simply out of the question. Ridiculous, really.

So who then ?

Musing about the questions that haunt her, Solis suddenly realizes that there's no one she can really talk to or confide in. Terror begins to build inside her again, an emotional flood tide of icy water and slimy seaweed.

Why is she putting herself through all this? She's so tired, worn out from her constant efforts, fed up with the compromises constructed so patiently over time being torn down so quickly by duplicitous plotting that cloaks itself in the garments of duty and honour.

The Primi fight for her favour or take umbrage at each of her statements, the dynasts defend their own territories even to the detriment of broader Arkhantan interests, the mad whirlwind of Mantri immedia is constantly fanning the flames of conflict with the strength of a tornado, preventing the slightest possibility of peace.

In the midst of all that, what can she achieve? She feels so totally alone. She, Solis, who isn't able to take a single step without a guard or a servant following her like her shadow; she who attracts all eyes in court, who stokes hope and resentment in equal measure, has no one that she's close to. She is so alone, and her task, so arduous. A reason, just one! Give her one good reason not to quit, not to abdicate! Not to refuse to pay the dues demanded by the Throne!

She sweeps her eyes over their encampment, desperately seeking the hoped-for – or dreaded, she hardly knows any more

— reason. But she doesn't see anything. Not a thing. All she sees is a mosaic of ordinarily boisterous scenes from daily life.

Over here the guards are gathered around campfires. She can sense the bonds welding them together, their metallic personalities turning into alloys from the heat of camaraderie. Laughter and grunts crackle like flames around their games of dice. Anger makes fleeting clouds of sparks, friendship lively flames, and secret love, glowing embers. With an inquisitive brow, the sergeant is keeping an eye on his troops, ready to toss a bucket of water to cool the ardors that lower vigilance.

Further on, two servants are arguing – Joste, an older man with a pinched face, and Yriel, a tempestuous young woman whose cheeks are redder even than her flaming hair. Solis can't hear them from this distance — good domestics cultivate the art of discretion. But she can still perceive the duet they're singing mutely. It's the song of a father who was unable to pass anything on to his children and is now trying awkwardly to do better with this novice. And the flute-like voice of the novice, who wasn't looking for a father figure, even though she does like the old man: he's the only one who never rebuffs her.

Solis's gaze falls next on Hannibal and Sarash, thick as thieves and cheerful – just like she and Hannibal used to be... before. Solis knows the strength of the bond between them, whose roots go back about a decade, to a legendary tavern brawl. This journey through the Rift has allowed them to reconnect, after their responsibilities kept them apart for so long. They intend to take full advantage of the opportunity. Solis can clearly sense their affinities. More than just shared interests, it's a fusion that reminds her of lava, an intimate mix of earth and fire. Free of any romantic temptation, slag that might thicken the flow, their relationship is one of pure friendship, with a lovely orange glow as intense as Galana's.

An unnoticed lurker, she snatches glimpses of all those scenes. But finds in them no reason to go on.

Unless...

The obvious answer suddenly hits her.

She had believed that she was cut off from the harmony around her, deprived of the intuition that had so often guided her. When in fact, she is the only one capable of detecting the minor dissonances beneath the encampment's apparent serenity, the bits of missing paint that keep the chiaroscuro tableau from flaunting brighter, more cheerful colours.

She might not know how to restore the pranah cycle yet, she doesn't even know if she should believe in the existence of her currently imaginary sister, but one thing she does know is how to wield the brush of emotions. And her title of Malkah offers her a particularly lush palette.

Stepping away from her tent, she wanders through the camp, seemingly aimlessly, but actually knowing exactly where she's going.

Passing Yriel, she tells the novice to prepare her tent for the night, adding that Joste had praised her as hard-working – an exaggeration rather than an out-and-out lie. The old man and the young woman exchange a surprised look and a discreet grin. Solis makes a mental note to inform her chamber maid, who will be pleased to have the night off.

Passing near the campfire, Solis tightens her fur stole ostensibly before slipping between the soldiers to hold her hands over the flames. With a few benevolent words, she has the soldiers, who have snapped to attention, sit back down. She banters with them lightly, congratulating the evening's winner at dice, making sure the mail has been distributed before asking those who received some for news from home, complimenting the troops in front of their sergeant, and thanking him for keeping such a careful eye on their caravan. She leaves the group with a cheerful "good night" that puffs out the chests of the men and makes the sub-officer's moustaches quiver with pride.

Solis is no fool, she knows she's just scattering seeds in the

wind. Harmony isn't a state but a struggle, a garden that must be tended constantly with a blend of dogged determination and patience, keeping pace with the often harsh seasons. But its cycle is still essential. Fertilizing, watering and admiring what grows... Nourishing the others with the fruits of her work, now those are dues she's more than happy to pay.

But to be able to do that, she needs to restore the pranah cycle. Her mission is less to reign than to reestablish the natural order of life. And she feels ready and able to take that mission on.

A blissful serenity overwhelms her, as refreshing as a soft spring rain. She hasn't felt that peaceful since... since the last time she ran into Aurelius. Really?

Fine. It's high time to figure out what's up with that stalled attraction. She tries to catch the gladiator's eye.

Hannibal suddenly stops worrying about the meat and turns to look at Solis. The pounding of her heart, which he keeps track of absent-mindedly, like listening to music while you're doing something else, have just changed tone. From excited cymbals, it's just switched to a steadily beating drum. Pleased to know that she has finally relaxed, after emerging from sleep with such difficulty, he watches her walk over to...

Aurelius? Aurelius!

When the behemoth makes a move to join them, Sarash lays a firm hand on his arm, pulling off the well-nigh impossible mission of stopping him in his tracks. When Hannibal tips his head toward the young pair, Sarash replies with an intimidating left-right shake of her own. They settle for observing the Malkah and the gladiator from a distance.

"Your little stroll is over, time to go back indoors," Aurelius states coolly, walking towards her, too.

His peremptory tone of voice sends the conversation down a radically different path than the one Solis had been daydreaming of.

"What imbecile put you in charge of my protection?" she

snaps back.

“The imbecile would be you, Queenie.”

She stiffens in surprise at his rude manner.

“It was reckless of you to allow ValRed to leave. You should never let go of anybody who’s willing to die to defend you.”

Solis stares at the ground briefly, then, out of pride, she jerks her head back up. She doesn’t actually regret her decision, she’s just saddened by the circumstances that led her to taking it.

Ruby and Hanzo had been swallowed up by the Salt Lake during that appalling crossing that the caravan is having a hard time putting behind them. When the salt plain spit their remains back out, ValRed requested permission to bring them back to Sassaki’s school, their alma mater. As unexpected as his request was, it was the first time the captain of her guard had ever requested anything, and she hadn’t had the heart to say no. Only Ronan has stayed behind.

In the space of just two days, her personal guard had gone from four people to one.

“The archer is reliable,” Aurelius opines, as though he could read her thoughts. “But even guys like him and me have to sleep at some point.”

Had Aurelius stepped in to take over while Ronan dozed, or was his presence here fortuitous?

“He’s not the only one protecting me, I’m in no danger.”

“Says the woman who nearly got killed on the shore of the lake.”

Solis chases the image of the Nay-Dam with his jaw impaled on Aurelius’s dagger from her mind. She’s had enough disturbing visions for one day.”

“The Rift is a waking nightmare, Solis, I know what I’m talking about.”

Solis can hardly contradict him.

“Having grown up here, does a windmill with seven sails mean anything to you?”

“Seven sails, like your seven arkhomes?”

“It stands near a strange building, a former Mantri prison, if I’m not mistaken.”

“With the letters ONI on the front?” Aurelius can’t help asking, eyes wide with surprise.

“Do you know it?”

“I’m sending that one back to you, queenie! How do *you* know about it?”

“Well, I’ve never been there, but I... It’s complicated.”

“Well, if you know about it, then you know it’s no place to visit.”

“Is it far from here?”

“Forget about it, the place is cursed, it is out of the question to set foot there.”

“Take me there, I have to go. I can’t get there on my own. Please, Aurelius. I need you.”

Here she is pleading with him, when she’d meant to rebuff him. The man is a whirlwind, and so are the emotions he stirs up!

“Not happening! No way.”

“Do not mistake my good manners for weakness. That was an order, you have no choice.”

“An *order*?! Why not stamp your pretty little foot as long as you’re at it? Take a good look at me, young Malkah. Do I look like an underling? Do you really think I’m going to obey a queen who’s not my ruler? I’m no subject of yours, not even a subject of conversation. If you ever think you’ve noticed so much as an ounce of servitude or submissiveness in me, it means you’re delusional. Full stop.”

Unbowed, Solis leans her face in towards the gladiator’s. Aurelius doesn’t know what he’s supposed to do at this point: abide by what she says, rebel, help her? He was told to grin and bear it, but in the sense of bearing her up or just bearing with her?”

Can the answer be found in those amazing purple eyes?

“Who are you trying to convince, Aurelius ? Not me, I hope, you’d be wasting your breath. You chose to be my bodyguard, thereby placing yourself under my authority.”

“Oh, that’s a good one! I love the idea of *me* being under *your* authority. As if! Now you listen to me, and listen good: you may have learned to order people around in your gilded palace, but we’re not in Nephtys any more. I’m ready to help you out, if only for the sake of your eyes, Solis, but if you try to order me around, I’m out of here. You got that?”

Solis stares at him haughtily, bursting with the self-confidence that was nowhere to be found mere moments ago. It’s no coincidence that only Aurelius can guide her; it can’t be.

Aurelius bares his teeth. It’s a waste of time, so he storms away, kicking a stone that flies up, then changes direction and crumbles against a rock. He rails against fate, scratches furiously at his scarifications, then turns to look back at the Malkah.

Hardened by rage and guilt, he lets out a string of curses.

Then he turns around and goes back to stand before Solis, whose twinkling eyes had never left him.

“Fine,” he says, with a shrug. “But it’s a huge, pointless detour: whatever it is you’re looking for, it’s going to take a lot of nerve to go inside.”

Solis doesn’t waste her breath arguing about it; she knows in her gut that Aurelius is wrong. The question isn’t whether or not she’ll be brave enough to face that strange reflection, that other self, again.

No, the real question is: does that other version of herself hold the answers to the questions that haunt her?

FAULTS

“The Council has decided, soulmate. You can rid us of their presence. Both of theirs.”

Aurelius nods his assent, a small smile playing on his lips. So the Council went along with Isalys’s position – with a sense of euphemism that only the Elders possess. Despite the prism’s slightly blurry image, he can see how satisfied Isalys is to have made her case. He likes that. He likes imagining that somewhere far away, his nest, his clan, his community, matrix and flesh are still there.

His orders are clear: he has to kill both Sarash and Hannibal...

He knows perfectly well what that means: another frenzy of violence. More blood, more blows, more pain: sacrifices willingly made for the sake of the clan. There’s the solace. Preserving the Hive is sweeter than honey for him.

He concludes that the trap must have been set. Last night, Solis asked to visit ONI, and now this morning, Isalys confirmed that her ritual worked perfectly – not that she would ever have admitted it if it hadn’t, but... The conspiracy is entering the final phase: eliminating potential obstacles.

“And come back alive...” she can’t help adding.

Before he can reply with an intimate gaze, Isalys’s face disappears, replaced by Lantana’s. The Arkhont’s lips barely have time to form a satisfied grin before the prism goes out.

The blackout snaps him harshly back to practical considerations. Whatever, nothing to do but to get down to work. He hasn't a clue how to go about it, for the plain and simple reason that it's an impossible feat. Until he pulls it off. As usual. Like at the Appologium.

To get down from the palm tree where he'd been huddling, he skips lightly down the trunk that the winds have inclined steeply, and with a leap enhanced with a caper, comes back in contact with the ground. He's got into the habit of perching in a tree when he communicates with Isalys; it's the most efficient way to reduce the vibrations that are perceptible to Hannibal, who has him under constant surveillance. He heads back to the camp, instinctively slipping the amber pendant back inside his shirt.

"I've been looking for you, pretty boy," Sarash greets him, when they meet at the top of a dune overlooking the oasis. "Where've you been?"

"Taking a piss. Why, did you want to hold it?"

"I hate to break it to you, sweetheart, but I prefer firm tits to soft balls... Why'd you change the itinerary?"

One-upped at his own game, Aurelius keeps the grin on his face, like a good loser.

"Haven't you heard?" he asks, feigning surprise. "The boss lady wants to play tourist. A mistake, if you ask me, but you'd have to take it up with her."

From the way she's fuming, Aurelius can tell that the Primus of Fire won't try to dissuade Solis, no matter how unappealing she finds the idea of a detour. It's the paradox of her arkhhome: despite her strong character, she'll follow orders. Isalys is right: Sarash will defend the Malkah to the death. By drowning, if need be. Nothing will ever get her to switch sides and join the conspiracy. So she has to be eliminated.

"That still doesn't explain why you're having us go around the valley," Sarash says with a tsk-tsk usually reserved for children. "I find that suspect, big boy."

She turns partway around to point to Voblast Pass, a gorge cutting six or seven miles across a rocky plateau that the blast blew open twenty years ago. Twenty windy years had turned it into a steep-sided valley, which shows how strong the gusts blowing through the Voblast are.

“The road is wide and clear there. To my ears, that sounds a lot more like ‘safety’ than your winding little canyons. So why are we going around it?”

To Aurelius’s eyes, the question just shows yet again how little the Arkhantes know about the Rift. Nary a Nay-Dam is unaware that a localized anomaly prevents sound waves from traveling through the valley, compressing them to the point that not the slightest sound can be heard, even stealing the words of reckless travellers... before releasing the pressure in a detonation that can kill anyone not wearing the right protection: a shell-shaped helmet and several layers of clothing.

As strange as it would seem anywhere else in Artellium, the phenomenon seems obvious here, among the thousand and one disruptions of the Rift.

Aurelius is in no mood to explain all that; it would take too long and be too complicated. And he's got better things to do than to tutor someone who's doing a slow burn. Besides, keeping his own counsel might offer him an opportunity to accomplish his mission. It would mean running the charming risk of getting blown to pieces by the first storm, but Hannibal and Sarash wouldn't know what hit them. He'd be vigilant, he'd pull through. He always does.

But he decides not to. It's not really a good idea. The whole caravan would get caught up in the anomaly. If he manages to get Solis killed before he delivers her to Isalys, she's the one who'll flay him alive.

Aurelius stops trying to project. He doesn't need a plan, he'll just grab his chance when it comes his way. He'll improvise, follow his instinct wherever it leads him. Gutsy and ballsy: that's

always been his way, and it has kept him alive so far. Thinking things all the way through is just a waste of time anyway. And in the Rift, time can play tricks on you, disappearing, getting blown to smithereens, just like weighmessness. Here, time is just another luxury he can't afford. So why change methods now?

"You gonna' answer her?" Hannibal growls, having joined them.

"No, actually, I'm not. I've got nothing to say to you, haven't you got that through your head yet? The rules of the Rift still escape you, young Primus. Just because you see a few grains of sand, you think you're in your element."

Aurelius positions himself right in front of the behemoth, challenging him with his gaze, unconcerned about being half a head shorter.

"Here, the Earth sometimes takes itself for the Heavens. Don't make the same mistake, Hannibal-less."

He drops that bomb with aplomb, you can't mistake it for something that slipped out in anger that he didn't really mean. An attempt to get his mission over with on the spot. He feels ready for anything, even taking them both on at once. Why not kill two Primi in one fight, a firebird and a stone dying together? A spark struck against rock could start a huge, devastating fire, couldn't it?

Hannibal looks like a bulldog about to bite. He can't believe his ears. His hands are squeezing his war hammer so hard that the leather handle is screeching.

"There's something fishy about you, shrimp. I don't trust you one bit," Sarash cuts in, sticking a finger into her ear.

She twists it around vigorously, scooping up earwax in her nail. Removing her finger, she admires the lump briefly, then flicks it away, adding, "The fact is, I don't like you."

"Whereas I've never liked smokescreens. That's why I like you, because anyone can read you like an open book."

Sarash ignores the barb, as insignificant to her as a spark

landing on her face, and turns to look at the caravan gathering at the base of the dune, ready to go. Solis is watching them from a distance, with an entourage composed of her last guards and the main magi: Syläë, Syphonn and Keya, as well as two of the five Arkhonts.

“So here’s what we’re going to do. The convoy’s going to take the canyon path, like Aurelius said, but you and I are going to go ahead, as scouts.”

“No, I’m keeping an eye on him.”

“Hanni, remember what we said: I’m the sword, you’re the shield. You stay with her.”

Aurelius doesn’t say a word, he settles for an ambiguous half smile, a Saint Elmo’s fire hovering near the future corpses. Here’s the chance he was wanting for: he’s going to be alone with Sarash.

By high noon, the Primus of Fire will be dead.

9.2

On her guard since the beginning of their exploration, Sarash detects the brusque surge in Aurelius's body temperatures as he is about to make his move.

Nothing else betrays the gladiator's intentions. He's getting over a rock that's blocking the deep and narrow canyon they've been following for a while now, climbing with the chimney technique, pressing his hands and feet against the orangey-red sandstone walls of the canyon, when he suddenly slips.

Sarash doesn't fall for it; she resists the urge to go help. Still, she hadn't expected him to make his move so fast.

Scraping some sand from the friable rock wall, Aurelius tosses a handful of it in her face as he drops down from his higher position. She closes her eyes, but pretends to have been blinded, and waits for it to be too late for him to change his trajectory. Only then does she cast her spell. She evaporates a bit of her own blood, which wafts from her wrist band in whistling plumes of steam. Thanks to that stratagem, her arm strikes with the brutal power of a piston.

Aurelius realizes instantly that she is on to him. Too late. The Primus's fist catches him on the jaw, breaking two molars off at the gum line, the pain numbing him one side from his cheek to his collarbone. Without his amazing reflexes, he would have taken the blow on his forehead, and his skull would have been split in two.

Then his head is slammed into the sandstone wall, his cheek ground into the soft surface by an arm as fast as an arrow, as massive as a war hammer.

Endure. Don't faint. Ignore the stinging burn of skin scraped to the bone, the shock still reverberating in his skull. Condense all that pain into a single fat ball, then shrink the ball down to a marble.

No a bullet. For the next blow. When the glove reaches his chin.

Sarash can't figure out what's going on. With a blow that hard, she has already killed a vorabar from the forest-covered foothills of Acongua. In one fell swoop. With Aurelius, it's as though she were pounding on a block of iron, not flesh and blood. How can that be?

Her fist skids off the edge of his jaw and winds up smashing into the wall, which bursts into sandy shards.

The instant he's freed, Aurelius leaps to the side, lifting his knees to his chest for more air... and to grab his dagger from his boot at the same time. He soars across the whole width of the canyon, landing softly and rebounding off the sandstone wall, charges Sarash, weapon drawn. The whole thing in a single bound, straight from a standing position: three rods back and forth without touching the ground. Impossible.

She sees the dagger swooping towards her face. Caught unawares, she raises a hand to protect herself. The blade pierces the flesh, sliding between the bones until the hilt is blocked by her palm. She screams with rage more than pain, clamping her fist tight around Aurelius's. Beneath her fingers, which she heats to burning, the gladiator's hand starts to roast, and the smell of grilled meat saturates the narrow gorge.

Aurelius can't free himself, even by dropping the dagger. The surprise, the Primus's iron handshake, the back of his hand that's getting burnt to a crisp... between them, he's powerless. And Sarash is staring at him like an ifrit, one of those fire demons from Massada that ravage the Rift with their bloodthirsty raids.

He's got to do something.

When he twists the blade to enlarge the wound, Sarash moves with him to limit the damage. Then he kicks one leg into the air, twisting his hips at the same time, spinning all the way around as though the dagger were the hub of the wheel of his body.

Sarash's arm gets twisted out of its socket, with her hand still stabbed.

After an instant upside down, Aurelius lands back on his feet, knees bent. He slams his free hand up into the pommel as he springs back up to a standing position. The dagger is stabbed fiercely between her mandibles, like for the Nay-Dam by the Salt Lake.

A blow that's going to become his new signature — a hallmark of victory.

Weakened by her twisted arm, Sarash can't parry the blow. She lets go of Aurelius and pushes him away, but it's too late. The steel has impaled her throat, pinning her tongue. Don't dwell on the pain, don't think about the devastating damage. Luckily, that zone has been less sensitive ever since she was burned in a magical accident, so she stays lucid just long enough to cast an instinctive spell.

Inside her mouth, the blade melts before it can pierce her palate and reach her brain. The heat cauterises her pierced tongue, coating it with molten steel.

That she spits in her adversary's face.

Once again, Aurelius only survives thanks to his incredible reflexes. His head moves so fast to avoid the fiery-orange squirt that he can feel his vertebrae cracking. His long hair, waving a breath later, bursts into flame with an avid, crackling sound. He throws himself to the sandy ground, rolling in it to put out the fire.

In the time it takes him to get back on his feet out of her reach, the Primus has removed what's left of the dagger from her flesh. The cauterised wound has stopped bleeding already.

He's never fought a warrior like her. He grins, thrilled by the scope of the challenge looming before him. Electrified by the fact that he hadn't got a clue about how to win. The truth is, he doubts very much that he'll make it out of this fight alive.

"Now we're talking!" Sarash hisses enthusiastically. He tosses

the rest of the melted dagger a good distance away, and chortles when she sees the gladiator draw one from his other boot. “You’re a dead man walking, haven’t you got that through your head yet? Although... I have to admit, it took me a little while to get my head around you, too. Usually I can sniff traitors out from as far away as a burning evergreen tree.”

“Yeah well, I spruced myself up for your sake.”

Aurelius rushes towards her, feints to the right, switches to the other side, and lunges as if to attack her from below. Then he leaps as agilely as a feline and winds up running along the steep, sinuous left side of the canyon. He’s literally walking on the wall.

Moving too fast for her to grab him as he goes by, the Primus has to settle for keeping an eye on him. He’s all over the place: next to her one moment, he passes her and winds up behind her a moment later.

Then he runs away as fast as he can, her jeers echoing in his ears.

Sarash isn’t too displeased to see him scampering away, she could use a break too. Fighting Aurelius is like trying to catch a will o’ the wisp: the damn thing pops up all over the place, impossibly elusive, but it’ll burn you every chance it gets. It’s exhausting, and painful. Potentially deadly, too.

She rolls her muscular shoulders a bit, loosening them up, then reaches one hand behind her back to grab Rousse, her lucky bat. It’s impossible to use it in such a cramped space, but just clenching it in her fist is reassuring. It’s her favourite weapon because she can adapt it at will, make it as cold and hard as forged steel or as incandescent as a torch.

After a few twirls whistle past her ears, she places it behind her neck and drapes both arms over it. Then with a light step that still echoes between the high, close walls of the canyon, she whistles a cheerful tune as she heads after Aurelius.

9.3

If Aurelius thought he was going to lose her in the maze of gorges, he's got another think coming. No matter how fast he runs, he'll never get far enough to escape her perception. Thanks to years of experience, Sarash can pick out any hot-blooded creature within a half-league radius. Most of the time she can sense what kind of animal it is, too. It's systematic when she has a clear idea of what she's hunting.

Which means that Aurelius doesn't have a chance to slip through her fingers.

She could go back to the camp to warn Solis – even if she's in no hurry to hear Hannibal bragging that he'd been right since the beginning. No, it's too dangerous to leave someone as unpredictable as Aurelius on the loose. Besides, by now, it's got personal between the two of them.

How did he trick everyone for so long? There's got to be something. A trick, or a card up his sleeve. She can't wait to rip the secret out of him. Then she can go back satisfied.

She picks up the pace when she realizes that her prey is approaching a group of nearly a dozen people, four hundred rods away. Accomplices of his for sure.

Shit, she hadn't thought of that.

When Aurelius happens to run into the amber gatherers, he isn't even going to take a breather. There are quite a few shard prospectors willing to face the danger in order to gather amber, the most precious material produced by the anomalies in the Rift. The Bloody Wings, in particular, are willing to pay through the nose for it. Isalys has been stockpiling quintals of it.

The gatherers won't help him: they've got more important things to do... and he doesn't have anything to grease their palms. And he can't even imagine what it would take to intimidate someone who frequents the ambrage fault on a daily basis...

The fault.

Aurelius pulls up short. He is in a spot where the gorge, with its steep sides polished by the wind, widens out, forming a sort of cove where sand takes the place of the sea. Deep inside that miniature bay, the amber gatherers are heading with infinite care towards a rocky plateau that's jutting slightly out of the ground. About the size of a banquet table, it's spitting out shards of amber like a wound dripping clots of blood.

It's obvious that the group is a family that's used to working together. Roped to one another, the lightest ones are all converging on the same spot, belly crawling across the bottom of the cove. Each of them is stretching out one arm that's extended by a sort of butterfly net to catch bits of falling amber. The burliest ones are the carriers, keeping the ropes so taut they are constantly thrumming with tension. The youngest children, barely five or six years old, are bagging the nuggets in burlap bags that they sew tightly shut before passing them to an old woman who weighs and marks them. The oldest person there is supervising the whole crew, sitting on a broken armchair in front of three hand-drawn carts. And the whole thing is taking place in perfect silence, without a word or a sound exchanged between them, making the tableau even stranger.

Beneath the rocky plateau lies the anomaly, the vortex, the nexus, the voracious maw that devours everything within reach. Its force of attraction is so powerful that it even softens the stone around it, turning it into a kind of quicksand.

No one knows where those faults lead, nor who created them. But no one is foolish enough to try to find out either, and not one poor soul who fell in has ever come back out.

Even Aurelius is afraid of them.

When Sarash reaches the cove in turn, she's more on guard than ever. She has lost the gladiator's trail; his aura has mysteriously vanished. One minute she could clearly perceive his presence, as well as those of nearly a dozen accomplices, and then suddenly it

all fused together into a single signature, like droplets of blood running together into a single larger stain.

The Rift really is unpredictable.

Gripping Rousse in her fist, she follows the swollen wall carefully, bowing her head to pass under wind-polished outcroppings of rock or twisting her hips to keep from banging into ones jutting out waist- or knee-high. She's cool, calm and collected, as unobtrusive as a salamander.

She thinks about climbing the wall that's about a dozen rods tall. With her cleated boots, it couldn't be easier. And it would give her a better vantage point. But she'd be vulnerable during the climb... and considering how brittle the rock is, there's no way she could be discreet. So she drops the idea. No point in making Aurelius's job easier. She observes the heights with heightened attention: if she thought of that, he might have too...

Reaching the place where the gorge opens out, she casts a quick glance into the cove. No sign of the traitor. So she focuses on his accomplices... and can make neither heads nor tails of the scene unfolding in front of her.

It looks like some kind of sporting event with an audience of very old and very young people. One team's trying to reach a rocky slab at the bottom of a dip — by belly crawling? — while the other is trying to prevent them from reaching it, holding their opponents back with ropes wrapped around stakes jammed into the ground. How come those muscle-bound guys can't haul in the puny- looking wimps from the other team?

Something's not right. The Nay-Dams really are as disturbing as the place where they grew up...

On her guard, she tries to work out where Aurelius has got himself to. And if those people are going to get between the two of them.

In the end of the day, they don't interpose themselves... but a rock does.

She hears a trickle of sand just before a huge chunk of rock falls

from the rim. It hurtles down the stone wall, mutilating its sculpted profile, rebounding off of one of those jutting bits of stone and only coming to a stop when it crashes into one of the carts.

Sarash knows she's been sheltered from the beginning, and the rockslide happened fairly far from her position. So it wasn't aimed at her.

The poor Nay-Dams have been hard hit, though. Startled by the falling rock, the burly guys let the rope go slack, and now they're doing everything they can to wrestle the situation back under control. The ones who were crawling are heading back from where they came, abandoning their material behind them. The kids dive for shelter, and the ancestor in the armchair has come to his feet to give instructions, fingers flickering over the shaft of his spear. Their reactions exude a sense of urgency rather than panic. You can tell their response is well-practised.

Was that rockfall really just an accident?

As if to answer to her question, Aurelius hurtles down the rock wall in turn. As agile as a mountain goat, he inflects the trajectory of his fall by pushing off here and there, zigzagging down in a way that makes it hard to predict where he'll land. He's zooming towards the Primus at breakneck speed.

Sarash kicks an imaginary ball, raising her leg high. With her burning-hot breath, she turns the sand she just kicked in the air into droplets of molten glass: a hot razor-sharp fog that Aurelius can't help passing through. The damage is superficial, but the diversion makes Aurelius lose the initiative.

Which turns him into easy prey.

Rousse whistles hungrily when Sarash puts her whole body into the blow. The bat slams Aurelius's side so hard that it knocks him ninety degrees off course. Suddenly he is being propelled parallel to the ground, which he never reached. He lands in a heap at the foot of the wall, as inert as a sack of flour.

Sarash is whirling Rousse around as she walks towards him, on the lookout for the slightest reaction, the tiniest hint of trap.

Nothing, the gladiator seems to be unconscious.

By the time she reaches him, she's pretty sure where things stand: he's done for.

Bat on her shoulder, she looks him up and down with a satisfied grin.

And smashes Rousse onto Aurelius's knee with all her might. His body twitches from the blow, but there's no other reaction, not even a groan.

Now she's *really* sure.

"Your sweet little face should be glad I want to interrogate you, or else I would have aimed for your thick skull instead...."

Cries of panic make her turn around. All of the crawlers have made it back to safety except one. The stake that his rope was sliding across was broken by the falling rock. The curly-haired teen's eyes are wide with terror as he is inexplicably drawn towards the bottom of the cove. His nails are furrowing the ground as he tries to haul himself up towards the group, but the sand offers no grip.

Sarash shouldn't get involved, she should go inform Solis forthwith. The Throne is in danger, perhaps even all of Arkhante. She really needs to leave, now. But... would Solis want her to abandon these people to their sorry fate, no matter how urgent her report was?

She sighs, a miniature plume of smoke wafting from her nostrils like a volcano that's about to erupt.

She reaches the group, which has nothing to do with Aurelius after all. She grabs one of the many ropes lying around, ties one end around her own waist and hands the other to the two burliest members of the crew. Then, before the Nay-Dams' dumbfounded eyes, she walks straight towards the teenager. With each incandescent step, the sand vitrifies into a lumpy slab that cracks and splits as she moves forward, but provides a solid enough surface to walk on.

After a few steps, she feels a growing force of attraction

affecting her. The terrain is flat, yet she feels like she's going down a slope that keeps getting steeper and steeper. What has she got herself into it?

Tough luck, it's too late to give up. Not now that she has stirred hope in those people – a family, she finally realized. If she can't save that kid, she's not worthy of being Primus, that's all there is to it.

Aurelius is at the gates of unconsciousness. What little he can perceive of the real world is reaching him through the keyhole of his incredibly high pain threshold. But his bet has paid off. Throwing the rock to damage the anchor points for the ropes, hurtling towards the Primus of Fire knowing full well that she'd hit back, absorbing the full strength of her attack as best he can and play dead, or nearly, afterwards, no matter what. After that, all he had to do was let her heroic instinct take over. He knew full well that she would try to rescue the gatherers, unaware of the danger. It's nobody's fault but her own.

To keep himself from passing out entirely, Aurelius focuses on Sarash's steps, forcing himself to observe each and every subtlety of her pace. The way the sole of her foot spreads out to distribute the weight of her body, the tension at the core of the glassy surface when she places her boot on it, the fault's power of attraction... he takes it all in.

The information doesn't transit via his five senses, it's more like an intuition. No, the message reaches him more deeply, as though he had a heretofore unknown sixth sense. He doesn't understand how, but he *knows*.

Is the information reaching him through vibrations in the ground that he's able to decipher thanks to the magic of the Earth? Is that ability that he's suddenly becoming aware of what Tumul had spotted within him? He always wondered what had made the old magus think that a punk from the Rift like him, a kid raised in a gang, had what it takes to become a thaumaturge...

Had this new sense been awakened by the blow from Sarash's

bat? How ironic, being as he's going to kill her.

Sarash has reached the young man. When she grabs him to draw him to her chest, he doesn't wriggle or thrash about like a drowning person. On the contrary, he tames his fears in order to take advantage of this incredible chance to be saved. Sarash can read an ineffable terror in his eyes, something greater even than the fear of death. What are they going to be confronted with?

She grasps it the very instant she tries to turn around. It's impossible to head back the way she came. She is being drawn towards the bottom of the cove, towards that strange, undulating slab of rock. Even though she's pulling with all her might on the rope and her legs, mobilizing all of her iron will, nothing's happening: the attraction is too much for a mere mortal to resist.

But Sarash is no mere mortal.

As when she struck Aurelius, she sacrifices a bit of her blood to make vapour to propel herself and the teen beyond the reach of that supernatural power.

She manages one step.

So she pushes her body to its utmost limits, drawing on her reserves to the cusp of the point of no return. It's a matter of life or death.

She manages another step.

Rather than dragging her down, the kid is chipping in: pulling on the rope with more strength than his frail arms would lead you to suspect. He might not have Sarash's vigour or her cleated boots, his worn smooth soles might slip on the glassy surface, but he too is fighting with all his might.

Together, they manage a third step, which turns out to be just a shade easier than the first two.

Aurelius doesn't allow them to take a fourth.

Mobilizing his new ability, he... pushes. He manifests his determination not to allow the Primus to escape from getting sucked into the flaw; he makes reality bend to his wishes. The thought occupies all the space there is inside the narrow range of

his semi-consciousness.

Sarash has to die. For Isalys's sake.

Deep inside the cove, Sarash suddenly and clearly feels a chain running through her chest, with a weight as heavy as a galleon's anchor at the other end. She can't think of anything else that could tug her back that hard.

Instantly, she grabs the kid by the scrub of his neck, and with a long discobolus's groan, she catapults him as far from her as she can. It may not be much, barely a few cubits, but it's far enough for his relatives to be able to toss him a landline and hail him to safety.

Or at least that's what Sarash hopes, because the effort has delivered her over to the unbelievable attraction. She's rolling backwards head over heels, shattering her glass carpet, which accompanies her horizontal fall. She winds up with her feet stuck in the rocky plateau, sinking into as though it were quicksand.

The sensation she's feeling is impossible to grasp. She can't even tell if her legs are crushed or intact. Soon she's in up to her thighs.

Nothing makes any sense, everything is bathed in the supernatural. So to survive, she clings onto what she knows best: magic.

Mobilizing every bit of pranah the Rift has left her, she chants a spell to cool the stone, solidifying it so she'll stop sinking in. Her pelvis is caught, already there's no time to waste. If it isn't too late already...

As if the Rift were thumbing her nose at her one last time, natural laws are reversed, and, rather than hardening, the stone gets softer still.

Aurelius admires the Primus's courage, her determination to face Death, staring it in the eye until the Grim Reaper lowers his gaze first.

His admiration is such that he struggles to stand, despite his knee that has swollen to twice its normal size. His jaw is still aching, his tongue can't help exploring the new hole in his teeth, his cracked

ribs are tearing at his lungs, but the worst sensation is the guilt gnawing at his gut. No one deserves what fate has in store for Sarash.

He limps his way down to the family of gatherers that is watching the ineluctable death with horror. The old man, who knows even better than the others that there's nothing anyone can do to save her now, doesn't even try to resist when Aurelius takes her spear.

"This was your plan all along!" Sarash is bellowing. "Son of a troll, filthy shit-face traitor, you're gonna' pay for what you've done to me!"

The bonfire of anger in the Primus's gut turns the ironic nicknames she's giving Aurelius into true affronts to his honour. Her anger is melting into metallic fear, she's inexorably losing control, bit by ashen-tasting bit. That NEVER happens to her. You can't lose control of fire, otherwise it'll kill you. The scars on her face are stigmata from the one and only time she ever got in over her head. After that, she swore that she would never lose her footing again. Yet here she is, screaming at the top of her lungs to forget her failure, forget her body that's buried up to her chest. She's struggling so as not to think about what's going to happen. Afterwards.

"Sarash," the gladiator says, "don't fight it."

"Hagtard! I'm going to hang you up by your hair and dip you into the volcanos of Cendraise, excruciatingly slowly, one toe at a time!"

Aurelius isn't paying any attention, he knows that people will say anything when they're terrified. He tests the spear's balance, adjusts his movement to take account of his battered state, and draws his arm back.

"Don't try anything, I'm begging you; just let me kill you, I swear it's the most merciful option."

"You hear me, you gallows-bait traitor? You're gonna' feel every fibre in your filthy body roast! You're going to beg me to put you

out of your misery, but I'll never do you that favour!"

"I'm telling you, you really don't want to go through the fault. Let me kill you. Not for my sake, for your own. Please, I'm begging you..."

He's not really talking to Sarash any more, it's more like he's mumbling to himself. He is a cold-blooded killer, he doesn't even know how many victims he has notched up, but he has hardly ever wanted to be as merciful as he does now.

The spear shoots straight towards Sarash, whose face and shoulders are all that's still sticking out of the quickstone plateau. The weapon's aim is perfect, right at her left eye.

Sarash burns it up with a burst of flame spat from her furious lips. The weapon is reduced to ashes before it reaches her.

"The embers always catch, Aurelius, I'll find you! Do you hear me? I'll get my REVENGE!"

Only once the rock has closed over her eyes does Sarash allow herself to truly feel the fear that's crushing her, more powerfully than the supernatural force of attraction ever could.

It's true, she's terrified.

But she disappears into her tomb without begging anyone for anything.

To Betray or Not to Be ?

Sarash is dead! Sarash is dead... Sarash is dead.

In keeping with her status, Solis has to remain as impassive as a statue, with all the dignity that is expected from her. Strength, discipline, exemplariness, constance. Yet... although she is supposed to remain imperturbable, her face has been deformed by chagrin like hot wax. The composure she should be displaying has turned into tears made bitterly cold by the loneliness that the Primus of Fire is no longer there to warm up.

Shattered by the news like a boat hitting a rock, Solis is keeping one hand over her trembling lips. She is broken, torn up inside, filled to the point of illness by the devastating echo reminding her over and over that Sarash is dead. Her friend, her champion, her shoulder to cry on, the person she shared so much with, from laughter to tears, from late-night talks to eloquent silences.

Right that instant, with the fire inside her that has gone out and her heart reduced to ashes, Solis feels royally indifferent to Arkhantan protocol or to what people will think. Her inner flame has been extinguished in a devastating snap, blown out like a cheap candle by the storm. She simply refuses to see the infinite affection she had for Sarash disappear, revealing the dense depth of a night that will never end. She feels her legs wobbling, threatening to give out. She's this close to sinking to her knees.

At her side, Hannibal is a rock. His own heart has been crushed, reduced to gravel pouring through him, jamming up his joints and his feelings... Solis has not the slightest doubt about

that. But at least he was able to dilate the powerful detonation of his sorrow to reduce the effects. At least he was able to maintain his dignity, despite his sorrow and chagrin. The man is staying in his place, a step behind the Primus.

She tries to imitate him, to pull herself together, get a grip, channel the sadness and guilty feelings submerging her. It's a hopeless, elusive and futile task, like a prayer addressed to an empty coffin, an epitaph that is erased no sooner than it has been engraved on the quick-stone of the slab deep in the cove.

It's a good thing Hannibal is breathing some of the small store of inner strength he's got left into her. Otherwise she would have collapsed by now.

"Sarash is... dead... Hannibal, Sarash is... Please, I'm begging you, tell me it isn't so."

"She was murdered, Solis! There's no way it was an accident! I hope you realize that! And that you know who is responsible... some directly, others indirectly."

Solis barely whispered, while Hannibal is thundering. His powerful, gravelly voice makes everyone's head turn: the soldiers posted at the highest points above and the entrance to the narrow gorge, the Arkhantan caravan cowering in a corner of the vast bay of sand, Primus and disciples observing from a distance the anomaly that's disturbing their magical senses, the amber gatherers being interrogated by Cantor and Bayan, the two Arkhonts accompanying the delegation. All eyes are on them, standing at a slight distance with Ronan, moved to safety like a head of state who has just survived an assassination attempt.

Aurelius is the only one who looks unconcerned about the behemoth's growling anger. Leaning against one of the hand-drawn carts, he's being tended to by Syläë, serene despite his wounds — or pretending to be — you'd think he'd been run over by a traders' caravan, so battered and bruised is he.

"The Light will ascertain the facts," Solis reminds him, in a voice heavy with tears.

“Solis, are you blind, or what?” Hannibal cuts her off, fuming. “Who needs Light to know that Aurelius did the deed! I know it, I can feel it, I’m vibrating so hard that everything’s trembling inside me. His attitude reeks of lies and deceit. I don’t know how he did it, but she’s gone because of him. We can’t deny it any longer, Solis. And you’re the one who brought him here. You’re protecting him while he betrays you with a smirk on his face and kills our loved ones with impunity. I haven’t got the magic to open your eyes, but hear me, Solis. Rise to your mission! Be the Malkah your people needs! Save yourself and us from this conspiracy, Solis.”

Hannibal is perfectly still, standing by Solis’s side, from which he refuses to budge any more. But beneath his feet, the ground is trembling in waves that are rippling the fine sand, like aftershocks from his inner earthquake.

She thought Hannibal was on her side, a pillar she could lean on; And now she sees he’s furious her, practically blaming her as an accomplice to Sarash’s disappearance – her *death*, not her disappearance... Has she lost him too? Has she been deprived of yet another dear friend? She refuses to even consider that possibility, not now. She knows she wouldn’t have the strength to face another bereavement, not yet. To ward off that awful possibility, she slips her hand inside the behemoth’s paw, relieved that he squeezes hers back.

Sarash won’t come back, they both know it. All of her embers have gone out, the world has been cut off from the Primus of Fire’s vibrations. That coal-black thought alone scorches the Malkah. It’s as though she has been abruptly deprived of all the minerals that give water its taste, that intimate water that is the source of life, and suddenly all of existence has become bland and flavourless.

A furtive, blinding bolt bursts inside her, reviving the spell of suffering. She sees herself as a trembling, stuttering child, so diminutive before the imposing stature of the Malek. He has

been hammering home the rules incumbent to their rank with his usual distance and chilliness. Her mood veiled by fear and loneliness, the child fantasizes about being anyone but herself, since the Malek apparently wishes to be a father to all Arkhantans... except her.

Sensing Solis's chagrin, Sarash appeared as if by magic. She preformed a series of tricks, each one funnier than the last: crossing her eyes while making wimpy little will-o'-the-wisps come out of her ears; aping a ridiculous-looking Malek with his grouchy face furiously red; snorting puffs of stinky smoke from her broken brawler's nose; vomiting burning embers from her huge mouth, eyes popping, and oversized tongue smoking and blistered with painless burns.

When she emerges from the memory, the souvenir, the smell of burning wood persists, but Sarash isn't there. Because Sarash is dead. Dead. The seat of the Primus of Fire is empty all of a sudden, and Solis has a chunk of ice where her heart should be. s "It's all his fault," Hannibal says stubbornly, lifting his chin in the guilty party's direction, voice still smouldering with rage. "Solis, you have to listen to me: Aurelius killed Sarash!" He gnaws on his anger, having failed to contain it. "I've been warning you about him for moons now."

Solis avoids catching Hannibal's eye. She wants to maintain the illusion of their complicity despite everything. Despite everyone. She tries to chase away her sorrow, but that's like pulling out the sword you're impaled on without so much as making a face. She keeps trying, forcing herself despite the cursed pain prodding at her. She has to pull herself together quickly, to react, to act and to make a real decision soon. The right decision.

Could Aurelius really be the killer? Turning to look at the accused, Solis suddenly doesn't know what to think about the man who overwhelms her senses, making her thrum and torturing her all at the same time. Though she's mobilizing all of her senses, practically torturing her own intuition on the subject

of the warrior, it's to no avail. She can't conjure up an assassin, the shifty, sneaky creature Hannibal is decrying. No. clearly, definitely not.

She barely manages to restrain herself from reminding Hannibal that Aurelius is also his disciple. If it turns out to be true, the crime will besmirch both the Primus's and the whole Earth arkhome's reputation. But a gibe like that would be unfair, and stupid besides: after all, it was her decision, and hers alone, to explore the Rift with Aurelius as her guide.

Emotionally, she's in a weightless state that resembles the Rift's own. If Aurelius is guilty, she'll have to publicly acknowledge that she was wrong about everything. She will have no other choice but to return to Nephtys, and her reign won't survive the blow.

She's rubbing her temples, pressing hard out of rancour, rage, and a desire to ache in order to forget her pain. As though that could do the trick... Why? Why is she following that imbecile? Why doesn't she sense the tainted vibrations everyone else seems to see?

No one understands the huge scope of her task, nobody else feels the weight of all of Arkhante on their knotted shoulders, the burden of duty, the fear of failure. And hovering above all that, soaring high in the sky of her beliefs: the strength of her absolute conviction: without Aurelius, she's never going to find her sister. She'll never be able to regenerate the pranah, the mission that is precisely the purpose of her reign: her task, her vocation, the one and only reason for which she was seated on the Sculpted Throne.

But if he is cleared, she'll lose Hannibal — right after losing Sarash, because the Primus of the Earth will never resign himself to accepting the verdict.

The most awful part is that whether Aurelius is guilty or not, Solis still winds up devastated. She had dreamt of saving the world, and now all that's left of her hopes is a sovereign who led a faithful friend to a certain death. That chagrin, that terrible

sense of powerlessness, is much more serious...

10.2

...than Cantor had imagined. Plus, the Nay-Dams' hostility is palpable, and Bayan's not doing anything to smooth things over. It's a mistake, professional misconduct, even, so important are the results of their investigations. Cantor takes a read on Bayan and all he can grasp is a vague, muddled colour buried in gloomy fog: her aura is veiled, and far too blurry to read. Cantor realizes that the Arkhonts haven't really been talking to each other much lately... They've been postponing their emotional enlightenment sessions for months. What if the situation has been upsetting Bayan? Cantor will grab the next chance to bring it up with her. But in the meantime, they have an investigation to conduct, and an Arkhont of her rank shouldn't tolerate conditions like those for an investigation. Cantor wouldn't have allowed that to happen. They do have a code of ethics after all.

It's strange, because everything had gone well at first: the series of events had seemed clear; the eyewitness accounts were unanimous, both in their admiration of the Primus of Fire's heroism, and in their confirmation that Aurelius had been unconscious when she was swallowed up by the "ambrage fault," as the gatherers referred to the phenomenon. Then his fellow Arkhont in her blue chasuble had gone and got a bee in her bonnet about probing the young man who Sarash had saved before she disappeared. Her insistence had only led to the Nay-Dam closing himself up inside a stubborn silence, punctuated only with surreptitious glances at his elders.

Cantor doesn't understand his colleague's attitude. The Nay-Dams' emotional aura was perfectly clear and luminous, making it easy to interpret. Bayan should understand the stakes and adapt her behaviour accordingly. Unless he's the

one that doesn't grasp the emotional schema that's being woven here...

Doubting his own analysis, the Arkhont focuses, mobilizing a bit of his pranah: he inhales, creases his eyes, exhales, and, between the lashes forming a starburst around his eyes, the halos surrounding each of the gatherers is revealed once again. Their shimmering is amplified by the heat and the perturbations of the Rift, but their colours are still clear and interpretable.

For the young man who was saved by Sarash, the yellowish hue of his aura confirms his obstinacy, while the black highlights strewn across are it a reminder of the traumatic nature of his recent experience. Cantor concludes that the "fault" really is every bit as dangerous as it seems. In fact, even he can't ignore its presence, prowling around the edges of the sand cove. The last time he had been so aware of a threat hovering over him was when a Dimmer of Darkness had been mandated by a dynastic tribunal to treat the psychotic problems of a reformed child-soldier.

The three strongest adults' auras are the most pronounced: a deep crimson, sign of a tendency towards violence that their calloused hands make all the rougher and more concrete. That doesn't scare Cantor, he knows how to take care of himself, but he also knows he won't have to. Those colourful contrails are being sucked in by the silhouette of the older man with his bright green halo. He's someone who has had enough experience to trust his instincts, a man who is at peace with his own choices, the clan's actual protector. The three big bruisers won't make a move without his consent, Cantor is utterly convinced of that.

Still, the old guy's not the real leader. You have to pay close attention to notice, but the old lady sitting on the burlap bags filled with amber is radiating a lovely brown hue – the colour

of old leather that has acquired the patina of age, a leather that has been oiled regularly to make it last longer. She's hiding her halo behind the children's garish pink ones – the reflection of both their careless youth and the excitement stimulated by the game they're playing: assembling mechanical pieces found in a dump to endlessly create new shapes. A teenaged girl is keeping a distracted eye on them, she's enshrouded in an orangey hue that illustrates her vitality and taste for adventure – her quick mood swings, too... Cantor knows what to expect from her.

The Arkhont is focusing on the old woman. He can see that she's got true grit, the strength of a person who's been around the Rift too many times to be taken in easily. She's someone who's looking for peace and stability, who's willing to compromise in order to get what she's looking for. She's the group's cornerstone. What's more, the Arkhont divines that she's fully aware of that, more so than the other members of her family.

Cantor heads towards her. The woman scowls, her drawing their curtain to mask her mood. Reading those details, he knows he got it right. He stops at a respectful distance: hands open, palms visible, in a universal gesture of good will. To emphasize that, he raises his veil, slapping an affable smile on his face.

They exchange a silent, meaningful look. Cantor would love to explore the woman's memories, discover an existence that he divines has been richly complex in the mysterious, out-of-kilter Rift, but he doesn't dare read her mind. He doesn't want to push anything, preferring to let her judge him with her own eyes, by the cloudy light of their milk-white corneas. He'd be ready to swear that, one way or another, she can read his aura too. He yields to her examination willingly: he's got nothing to hide. As far as he's

concerned, transparency is a prerequisite of the role of Arkhont. The thought makes him glance – untimely though it may be to turn his gaze away from the old woman just then – at Bayan.

As the silence grows longer, he allows himself to dart his eyes towards the children, who are ignoring him with royal indifference. Cantor observes and takes note of the complexity of their constructions, and of the technique the assemblages, with their spring-driven mechanisms, requires. The skill it must take to turn them into automatons impresses him greatly. The jury-rigged creations come alive both briefly and animatedly, like a metaphor of life in the Rift. The children's big sister, on the other hand, hasn't taken her eyes off of him for an instant. She's running an annoyed tongue over her teeth, looking like a serpent readying her fangs in response to an inopportune presence.

As inconspicuously as possible, he slips the memory reader out of one of the inside pockets of his red chasuble. He handles the crystal hoop, which looks vaguely like a headband, distractedly, trying to catch the sun's rays with it. Although the teen is pretending not to be interested, the kids are immediately captivated by the iridescent reflections tickling their retinas.

Cantor focuses on the old woman once more. He points at burlap bags with his free hand.

"I'm no expert, but considering the risks your family takes to gather all that amber, I suppose it's worth a fortune in these parts."

An extra crease in the matriarch's eyelids deepens the line of her wrinkles.

"If you'd like, I could certify the weight of your stock, right down to the last carat. That would reduce the risk of theft, and you could even contact buyers without having to

bring the merchandise with you.”

“What kind of a fool do you take me for? Your magic doesn’t work here.”

Cantor pulls a verification prism out of another one of his pockets. He raises his arm to the sky, orienting the prism in his extended hand to catch Galana’s light. A shape materializes, then becomes immobilized, like a fountain whose spray freezes at the first gush.

“It will work,” the Arkhont says, reassuringly.

“Keep your magic tricks for the kids. I’ve outgrown them.”

“But he’s right, Mama,” the teen says, cutting in. “Those things really work. I’ve seen lots of them. Some of them even play music, with guys who dance and everything.”

The old lady clears her throat in a way that makes her opinion of a gadget like that perfectly explicit – as well, most likely, of the strange tastes of youth.

Cantor nods at the teen, then smiles his most charming smile at the mother. He lays the reader and the prism on one of the burlap bags, then jams his fingers into his broad leather belt, indicating that the next move is hers.

“What’s in it for you?” the woman asks in a voice that’s surprisingly clear for her age.

Cantor glances back over his shoulder towards Solis, who’s standing off to herself, awaiting his and Bayan’s report. He had thought that by keeping her distance, she was demonstrating her neutrality, but he suddenly realizes how isolated it makes her. The Malkah has never seemed so fragile to him as she does right then, or as sad.

“That woman...” he replies, turning back towards the older one.

“I know who she is, thank you very much. You really do take me for a fool, don’t you?”

“Oh, do you know who she is? I had no idea she was so

popular in the Rift... Anyway, I'm helping you in her name. She has reminded us all that the Nay-Dams are Arkhantans." If he had still had any lingering doubts about the wisdom of Solis's words, the sudden veil over the old woman's gaze convinces him for good. In a flash of light, he catches one of her memories.

It's as blindingly violent as the explosion that ravaged one-eighth of Arkhante's territory twenty years ago, leaving this desolate moor.

Cantor is now deep inside the memory of Lagide – for that is her name – at the precise moment when the horizon is swallowed up by a monstrous detonation of light and darkness. The semi-sphere grows immoderately, creating a dome over a huge swath of the world. It keeps swelling and swelling until it finally seems to be blocked by two invisible walls. Only then does it start to flatten out on two sides, then shoot up even faster towards the sky, growing in a multitude of buboes, like a cancerous tumour. Then it bursts

The mother of all explosions, the one that will finally put an end to the Heroes' War by giving birth to the Rift.

While her neighbours are still dazed by the apocalyptic spectacle, Lagide dashes towards her children, just in time to pull them both to her chest and curl herself around their little bodies.

Then comes the awful blast of the shockwaves.

She thought she could save her children, but she gets blown about like an autumn leaf, unable to hold onto them despite the unfathomable strength of despair. Her ears are saturated by the explosion to the point that she can't hear her sons' death rattles, her back is burnt by a heat more intense than a drak's breath, her gaze is whitened by the flash, one of her hips gives way and will never heal completely, leaving her with a permanent limp. But the most atrocious thing

takes place inside her left arm and on part of her right side: in those spots, the skin that gets ripped from her little boys' bodies fuses onto her own by the vibrated blend of magic and technology. The flesh **of** her flesh has become flesh **in** her flesh.

Since that day, Lagide has never failed at her duties again. She built a new family that she feeds every day, watches over every night, and increases at every generation. She repaired what could be repaired in the Rift; recycled what couldn't be; urged everyone to help each other out the first few years; fled the gangs that have been running rampant in the past decade and learned to make a living selling amber by taming the danger of the faults.

Cantor is blinking furiously; he's having trouble focussing, now that he's back in the here and now. That memory transfer took him by surprise, he didn't do it on purpose. Another anomaly due to the Rift, most likely. Cantor is shaken up by the intensity of the memory, whose echoes are so enduring... even though in his role as an Arkhont, he has seen some things that were hard to stomach.

"What do you want in exchange?" Lagide asks again, suspiciously.

"I'd like to help you."

"Help us? Who do you think you are? Your red-headed friend helped us. But are you ready to make the same sacrifice?"

"I don't..."

"The Rift helps those who help themselves, Arkhant."

Cantor suddenly realizes how condescending he's being. He hadn't meant to, granted, but it was still a mistake, an insult to this woman who has transmuted a tragedy into a strength. It's an achievement that only she knows the secret to, a treasure concealed behind her craggy face and surly

character. When he sees her absent-mindedly scratching her left arm, he decides not to offend her with the pretence of a selfless gift, he can't do that to a woman who has earned every minute.

"All I want is to know for sure what happened here."

"You don't believe us?"

"I do. But there are others who, unfortunately, are more distrustful than I."

"So what do those 'others' need?"

She clears her throat again, even more noisily than last time.

"If you could run this reader over your eyes..."

"There's nothing to read inside me."

"I'll do it."

The teen grabs the reader without waiting for her mother's approval. Seeing how effortlessly she sets it on the bridge of her nose with the crystal arch in front of her eyes, she obviously knows how it's used. More proof that the Nay-Dams know more about Arkhante than he does about the Rift...

Soon, residual images appear in the crystal, reproducing the scene as the teen saw it.

"It's stealing your memories!" one of the kids, who has stopped playing to watch, says, sounding alarmed. "You're going to forget all about it, I know it!"

"No I won't, don't be silly" the older girl says with a blend of annoyance and affection.

"Okay. Will it make you nicer then?" one of the little girls asks. In reply, she gets a slap on the back of her head, one that's good and noisy but does no harm.

"Ouch!!! You're right, Mama, that mage's stuff is worthless!"

It takes Cantor mere moments to confirm the Nay-Dams'

accounts. He's tempted to leave the reader with the girl, but drops the idea when faced with Lagide's irate gaze. It's best to stick to the deal and hand her the prism certifying the weight of her stock of amber. The gleaming, sharp-edged prism strikes a violent contrast with the old woman's creased, leathery palm and fingers twisted by arthritis.

Cantor is pleased, it's a cut-and-dried investigation. A job well done, quickly and efficiently. He heads over to the Malkah to give a report.

"You may speak freely in front of Hannibal and Ronan," Solis says encouragingly, when he is obviously hesitant.

So he explains the series of events, with the rock that fell down from above, Aurelius's unconsciousness and Sarash's rescue of the teen, an act of heroism that unfortunately cost her her life.

"I can say this with certainty," Cantor is summing up just as Bayan reaches them, the Nay-Dams are sincere."

"Well then, question them again!" Hannibal growls, "because you're making a mistake!"

"I can assure you that..."

"Aurelius tried to kill her with the old guy's spear!" Hannibal snarls, cutting him off.

Cantor stays calm; he's used to hostility from claimants who don't get the answer they were hoping for – although they rarely have the size or reputation of the Primus of the Earth.

"Indeed. In fact, that act consolidates Aurelius's innocence. The faults'..."

Cantor unconsciously darts his eyes sideways, towards the bottom of the cove where the tear in the fabric of the world is throbbing. All of the mages around him, and even Solis, follow suit.

"...reputation is so sinister that the Nay-Dams would

rather die quickly than be sucked in alive. That's why groups of gatherers always carry spears: to be able to put anyone about to be swallowed up out of their misery."

"Stuff and nonsense!"

"If we were in Arkhante, I would agree with you wholeheartedly, Primus. But here in the Rift, it's considered an act of mercy. The anomalies have not only changed the laws of physics, they've changed those of mankind."

"Nonsense..." Hannibal repeats stubbornly.

"Cantor, you have assured us that the gatherers are sincere," Solis points out. "But in your opinion, are they speaking the truth?"

"I..."

"I beg your pardon, Malkah," Bayan says, cutting him off. "But seers are not allowed to give personal opinions, and Arkhonts even less so. The facts have been established, that is all there is to know."

"You are speaking to your queen!" Hannibal reminds her.

"I am expressing myself thus out of respect for her," Bayan replies with a slight bow. "The border between magical and dynastic powers was clearly defined in the Crucible Agreement, a decree that it is your duty to uphold and defend, Your Grace."

Cantor is becoming less and less able to decipher his fellow Arkhont's behaviour. First a clumsy interrogation, and now an even clumsier reminder of the Agreement? How could the Malkah possibly not know that nobles are not allowed to practise magic, be they plain old jods, lordly dynasts... or seated on the Sculpted Throne? The only time that double role was ever allowed was to enable Aladrelle, the Primus-Malkah, to apprehend the astrogant long enough to build a prison around the then-thousand-year-old creature in order to lock it up forever. Artellium barely survived. Five

centuries have flown by since then, and no one has dared to take that risk again. Several Maleks were executed at the first suspicion of magic – Stryge the Mad was the most recent one.

Does the Malkah master magic? The Light Arkhome has been searching for a Primus for twenty years now, and among the possible candidates, Solis's name is near the top of the list. It's such an outlandishly far-fetched notion that Cantor never took it seriously, thinking of it as a kind of self-deprecating humour, a way for the seers to poke fun at their own despair to make it less upsetting. Less than a rumour, it's pure speculation, a woolly theory. It can't be true. But what about the strange behaviour of some Arkhonts lately...

That would be awful. Every bit as awful as the other whisper that's been rustling through the halls of Light: a plot to eliminate Solis. Are the two things related? If Solis had the gift of magic, then preparing a coup d'état could be seen as a kind of preventive execution, dictated by the Agreement and history.

Could Bayan possibly be involved in all that?

Confused – an atrocious feeling for anyone who has devoted his life to revealing the truth, Cantor can't make up his mind. Should he mention the detail that's bothering him, an inner turmoil that the Malkah seems to have noticed?

The gatherers are convinced that Aurelius was hit by the rockslide, which is the most logical explanation by far. The gladiator's many bruises strengthen that hypothesis. But they didn't actually see him get hit by the boulder, so the shadow of a doubt remains – an uncertainty that's no more tangible than the suspicions pointing to a breach in the Agreement.

Writhing with indecision, Cantor still can't make up his mind...

10.3

... to act. Siphonn is pondering his options. He could suffocate the Malkah – no, maybe not, it would take too long. What about blowing her into the air, tossing and banging her around a bit and then dropping her from high enough to be sure the fall would kill her? That would be so theatrical, and he does love a spectacular death. But in this particular case, alas, his actions need to be discreet. He could compact the air, making it as solid as an arrowhead, and pierce Solis's eye with it – an exploding eye is so poetic! Or coat her lungs with a layer of emptiness, blocking her breath at the source – complex, but doable: a challenge worthy of his skill.

So many possibilities. And so little certainty here in the Rift. A frustrating combination for an Air assassin.

Veliva left instructions before she went back to Arkhante with Calyps: Isalys or Solis, it's all the same to her. What matters is playing a decisive, visible and timely role enabling one of them to take power... or the other to fall. Whichever sister winds up on the Throne, Air has to be nestled up close, with one cheek perched on the armrest.

That's Veliva for you: instructions as clear as a pea-souper. Siphonn doesn't have his Primus's loquacity, he doesn't wield the Verb like she does, and never will. That was obvious from his very first day at Air School – which his parents forced him to attend, when all he ever wanted to do was to be a pirate in Alvilid. He had always admired the profession's bloodthirstiness. The day he saw one of their boats sailing into port splattered from deck to moonraker with the guts of a sea monster impaled by harpoons half as long as the foremast, he knew that piracy was his destiny. But his parents made him go to that school for mewling magicians with their

immaculate gowns and their filthy, duplicitous smiles. Mocked by his classmates during a singing exam, devastated that he was missing his calling, he sliced off his own tongue in the classroom. At age twelve. In front of the other kids and the teacher. Guffawing like a madman with a blood-red grin. Even then he had that innate, extraordinary sense of the dramatic...

The singing teacher was Veliva. She persuaded the dean of the school to let him stay on despite his mutilation – air magic is more a question of breath than of diction. He has stuck by her ever since.

Years later, Veliva became Primus. And he, her evil minion.

Being mute is often an advantage – it forces you to listen.

Siphonn can decipher the conversation between Solis and the Arkhonts without much effort: he can interpret the wisps of breath emerging from their lovely, plump lips... which he'd love to see turning blue from asphyxiation. More importantly, he can hear the unspoken, like when Cantor betrays himself with the articulation points he's mobilizing to speak, the deformation of his phonation organs – pharynx, larynx, glottis. Siphonn knows how to interpret those signs, too.

The Arkhont is harbouring some doubts, he suspects that Aurelius is somehow involved in Sarash's death. It's no surprise that he's suspicious: he wears the red chasuble, so he considers himself linked to Fire. Siphonn has never grasped the complex relations between the Arkhonts and the five elementary arkhomes. He's never tried to either, the whole nonsense bores him. Too many rules destroy the dramatic tension, any fool knows that. Besides, it hardly matters: Cantor's suspicions are well-founded, Aurelius is in fact part of the plot. Veliva told him so, because she's in on it too... or at least, she's giving Isalys the impression that she is, until

the gets a chance to see which sister will be the victor.

If Cantor has the slightest doubt about it, then he's not part of the cabal. Even though Bayan – in a chasuble with Air's white tones – is aware of it, and Lantana – green chasuble, like Nature, is too. In fact, she's been in on the conspiracy since the beginning.

Siphonn finds the Arkhonts entertaining: champions of divulging the truth... who delude themselves to boot. They claim to be able to reveal the great secrets of the world, and they can't even spot the little falsehoods within their own arkhome. Ridiculous.

The assassin is standing by, saturating his blood with oxygen, so he can be as explosive as possible, if need be. He observes each of his potential targets in turn: the Malkah, to be overthrown in favour of her sister; Cantor, to be done away with before he can expose their plot; Aurelius, to be eliminated if he complicates the equation. He breathes in their humours, absorbs their scents, analysing their cocktails of hormones to work out what condition they're in, in order to refine his plan of attack. He establishes several options, seeking the best strategy to follow. Even in a weakened state, Aurelius would be the hardest to handle: elusive and unpredictable, the man is like wind made flesh. If they two have to fight, it's going to whip up a storm. He'll have to mess up that pretty face of his. What a shame.

He's forcing himself to run that sort of drill in his mind. Imagining scenarios like that allows him to ignore the chaotic drafts of air coming from the neighbouring Voblast Valley, a throbbing as dynamic as life, as extinguished as death. A zombie breath that spooks him like nothing he's ever known. Listening to it is like a...

10.4

... terrible, devastating torment. Syläë feels every blow as though her own body had received it: bruises as big as saucers, dislocated knee, broken ribs, punctured left lung... Aurelius is seriously injured. But the Primus of Nature is determined to restore the gladiator's strength; it's her role, her mission. Her *raison d'être*. And her promise to Isalys.

Having rubbed her palms together briskly, Syläë lays them on Aurelius's chest and begins the healing ritual. Little by little, with a light touch, she absorbs Aurelius's injuries, making them hers instead. She doesn't feel anything at first, but it will come, and that certainty makes the wait nerve-racking. Her knee begins to tingle, then is soon throbbing furiously. Her breath gets hoarse, as though she were inhaling hot, smoky air in the middle of a forest fire. Even attenuated by the spell, the pain is horrific, a blade sawing at her nerves. The sensation is so powerful it takes her breath away, which complicates her incantation.

How can Aurelius endure it? Seeing him lounging so peacefully against the cart, he looks like a hiker who decided to stop for a quick nap. She hates to admit it, but she wouldn't be able to withstand wounds that bad, even tamped... or not without succumbing to them, anyway. Not in the condition she's in.

Syläë has invested too much in this, has compromised herself too deeply; she can't give up now. With her back against the wall, she takes the life-tree seed that she keeps with her at all times out of her saddlebag. She clenches it in her fist, crushing it in rage and despair, sacrificing any chance she had of planting it in Orcunion's Family Glade someday. She's acting on instinct, without stopping to think, without listening to her own inner song – she has to, or else

she never could have done it. From the fragments of the lineage she will never see grow, she's draws the vigour she needs to continue her ritual.

Aurelius will be healed; she's going to get him back on his feet.

The euphoria of success soon evaporates like morning dew before the flames of sudden revelation: she has just sacrificed more life than she has saved. Can she still even call herself the Primus of Nature?...

"Thank you," Aurelius mumbles, bending one leg, finding it still stiff, but working.

Sylaë flutters her hand in front of her face, as though she were waving the unnecessary words away, when she's actually disseminating the pheromones she's using to converse discreetly with the gladiator.

Pheromone communication is a total connection. For anyone who knows how to grasp the scents, their fragrance enables absolute understanding, even communication between species in the universal language of the living. Sounds shaped into sensations and emotions, a message that goes far beyond words.

Aurelius is less skilled than Isalys at interpreting the wafts of scent – he learned their secrets second-hand – but he masters their language well enough to grasp the main points. In just a few emanations, Sylaë can see the situation as clearly as a hunter stationed in a blind.

A dash of musk transcribes Aurelius's excitement when he received the order to eliminate Hannibal – the scent of sandalwood, and Sarash – a whiff of frankincense. The composite bouquet of potpourri informs her that the order came from the Council of Elders, but a dominant scent of Isalys – dried fleur-de-lys – betrays her stranglehold over the decision.

Isalys... Syläë doesn't regret choosing to help her overthrow her sister. After all, her right to the Throne is absolutely legitimate – Syläë's in a better position than anyone to know that. Still, once again, the Primus catches herself fearing her protégé's manifest thirst for power, which is out of step with the horizontal organization that prevails within the Bloody Wings gang. Truth be told, what she fears the most – still – is her own sense of guilt. Finding out if she had been right to defy the Malek's order that night... The idea of getting an answer terrifies her with a terror that's firmly rooted deep inside her.

It's too late to change her mind now, the conspiracy has gone too far not to play out to the bitter end. Her own fidelity to Isalys is practically like a blood tie; she can't back out... Still, Syläë would have liked to have been consulted before a decision as radical as eliminating two Primi had been approved.

Amazing her once again, Aurelius senses the Primus's frustration. Through awkward whiffs, he shares his amused surprise: how can anyone who knows Isalys not know how determined and convincing she can be?

Syläë conjures up an image of Isalys in her swaddling clothes the day she brought the baby basket to Great Mother, who welcomed them both on behalf of the Council. Though still a new-born, Isalys knitted her brow with its eyebrows so blonde as to be practically invisible, and waved a tiny fist to let them know she was there against her will. Thinking it would mollify her, Great Mother tried to nurse her. The nurseling bit her nipple so hard she drew blood, though she hadn't even started teething yet.

Aurelius is right: how could things have gone any other way, with Isalys in charge?

Syläë sighs, suddenly weary to the bone, struck by an

overwhelming desire to end it all – effluence of myrrh. Her sigh is so deep and profound it sets off a long and painful fit of coughing that makes her spit a little blood. The price of betrayal? No. Love that like can never be betrayal.

Still kneeling at the gladiator's side, she turns towards the rest of the caravan to weigh the strength present on each side.

Among the Arkhonts, she knows she can count on Bayan, and even more so on Lantana, who initiated Isalys into the arcana of Light. Veliva is one of theirs too, but Syläë doesn't trust Siphonn one bit. How can a taciturn Air magus be trustworthy? Calyps changes like the tides; he won't make up his mind until the die is cast... if then. With Shado gone and Sarash eliminated, the only ones left...

Suddenly her train of thought is broken, as the chill of her own indifference makes Syläë shiver. The Primus of Fire has barely had time to turn cold, and Syläë's only reaction is to think of her as one less problem to solve? That's dishonourable of her. Sarash deserves better. She was the only one out of all of them who actually showed any concern for her declining health! Guilt squeezes Syläë's throat in a tight, dry wave. Sarash... They used to be friends, before... Before all this.

A shadow engulfs her, preventing her from taking that train of thought any further. Looking up, she sees Hannibal, who has come to join them. His belligerent expression informs her that he's here to get answers, and they'd better be clear and precise.

While she may wonder about some people's involvement, concerning the Primus of the Earth, Syläë has no doubt whatsoever: Hannibal will eliminate anyone who threatens Solis's life, on the spot.

Which means that if she betrays herself, Syläë is doomed.

... DRIVEN

Hannibal is standing there, motionless. He's towering over Aurelius, who is stretched out on the ground, with Syläë crouched at his feet. Legs firmly planted in the sand, arms crossed over his chest making his biceps ever more prominent, Hannibal is glaring down at them defiantly, his bald head eclipsing the sun that's crushing the desert with its heat. With his dark skin coated with a sheen of sweat glistening as though it were strewn with ephemeral diamonds, his silhouette looks like the celestial shadow of an angel of Death. His war hammer and two-handed battle-axe are jutting out past his shoulders like wing-stumps, reinforcing the impression of an emissary from the great beyond.

The behemoth isn't trying to look intimidating on purpose, all he cares about is getting some answers from Aurelius.

Proving he's right.

The gladiator waves Syläë away, then stands up calmly, with his usual feline grace. Every subtlety of the movement is transmitted to Hannibal through the soil's song: the firm strength with which he lays one hand to the ground, the stiffness in his knee that he eases with the other hand cupping the kneecap, the impulsion of the hips and more. Like the bow of a stringed instrument, the sand catches the slightest vibrations with such fine granularity that the Primus

could close his eyes and still know every movement Aurelius is making. More than knowing it, he would experience it, *be* it.

Aurelius is doing his best to hide it, but his wounds haven't completely healed yet. Wounds inflicted by Sarash, Hannibal's sure of it!

The Primus is seething, on the verge of exploding. His arms aren't crossed to make himself look even more threatening, it's to keep himself from battering Aurelius immediately. A chthonic drama is playing out inside of him, a tectonic of emotions that's going to change the landscape of his personality.

Sarash is dead; he has lost a dear friend. He knows it, he can sense that she has left this world for good. Solis is still clinging to the hope that she has only disappeared from view, but Hannibal felt the contact between them snap. They'd only just got back in touch, started to tighten the bonds between them that had been stretched by distance and duty... It was just like old times, when they used to work hard and play hard, hopping from tavern to tavern, boozing and brawling.

He had forgot the taste of those carefree pleasures. The intoxicating savour of melt-filled nights of debauchery had evaporated, palely replaced with the sickly-sweet aroma of kharo sipped at by nobles with pinkies extended. The mouth-watering labels of hard liquor had peeled off, displaying only the carefully measured etiquette of court life. Bawdy jokes had morphed into priggish witticisms.

Why did Sarash have to be taken from him so brutally just when they were starting to relive the wild-oat-sowing behaviour he remembers so fondly? Fate couldn't possibly be so randomly cruel; it has to be a plot. A scheme hatched by Aurelius!

Unless...

Re-forging his friendship with the Primus of Fire has made him rethink his relationship to Solis. He gave everything up for her. On Tumul's orders, he became her vigilant guardian, her protective big brother. He had agreed to leave Earth College far behind in order to accomplish his mission. He hadn't seen it as a sacrifice, not even as a duty required by honour. No. Becoming a powerful thaumaturge had seemed less important than watching over Solis. He had never regretted his decision. Not ever.

Or at least, not until Solis ascended the Throne.

Things have changed a lot since then. For a long time, he had believed it was a natural evolution: Solis disappearing behind the Malkah; he behind first the disciple, then the Primus. Their relatively insouciant, youthful years were drawing quietly to a close. Adulthood was stamping its seal on them. Responsibilities, constraints and obligations were trampling their past candour and naivety, along with some feelings and emotions.

And then *that guy* had shown up, whistling like he didn't have a care in the world, too self-assured for words, as though he'd already been everywhere, done everything. Pretty boy Aurelius from the Rift, acting like he was God's gift. Unbearable. Shamelessly, he struck poses, pat his hair uselessly back into place when the wind tousled his half-shaven, wholly ugly mane, thrust his chest out absurdly and showed off his string-bean biceps. Pathetic. A fake, a braggart – a complete waste of space! And Solis fell for it all – hook, line and sinker – without batting an eyelash. She believes every word of his poppycock, a soppy smile playing at the corners of her eyes. Exasperating. Sickening. The traitor. The worm in the apple. The mole digging through the earth. His Earth!

From the moment they'd met, in the dressing room at the

Appologium, Hannibal sensed the attraction Solis and Aurelius felt for each other. The earth-shattering quake. Unexpected, uncalled for, overly sudden. Between them a little flame has been lit that soon turned into a bonfire. At first, he'd figured it would just be a flash in the pan. A damp squib. But no. It got worse. Despite everything everyone told her about him, Solis followed him everywhere, like a puppy, with neither fear nor pride, throwing caution to the winds.

What happened to the house of brotherly love he'd spent years building for her, stone by patient stone? Of that castle that could be seen from the mountaintops, so vast was it, nothing is left but a terribly drab, lacklustre fortress.

Hannibal's face twists with a surge of anger rising in his throat like a once-in-a-lifetime flood. The phlegm he can't spit out has a name: the name of that damned Nay-Dam that he barely dares to say out loud, or else all the anger, injustice, danger and thirst for revenge might tumble out after it.

All of that is churning beneath Hannibal's marmoreal carapace as Aurelius slowly comes to his feet, indifferent to the other man's icy wrath.

The two warriors stand face to face, jaws clenched in defiant virility, eyes brooding with menace. They understand each other without a word. With no offence meant to Hannibal, Aurelius and he speak the same language. They might not use the same vocabulary, but at the very least, the grammar is similar.

The behemoth clearly perceives that the gladiator won't betray himself, no more than he himself would have yielded. Theirs will be a clash of braggarts, of swaggering swashbucklers who neither bend nor break. If either one of them had the fluidity and patience of the tide, they could have worn away the rock facing him. But they're both far too ornery, too monolithic for their confrontation to turn into

anything other than the shock of continental plates ramming into each other and destroying everything around them in a violent earthquake... just so they can finally find out which of them can outdo the other.

So Hannibal is willing to stake everything on this: making it clear that HE is the Primus, and Aurelius, his disciple.

Slowly, he reaches for the war hammer on his back and, arm outstretched, brings it forward to lay its massive weight on Aurelius's shoulder, as though he were knighting him.

At first, the gladiator seems like he's going to let him do it, then he grabs the weapon at the last moment, just above his collarbone. The hammerhead slaps resoundingly against his palm, his fingers close around the iron. Hannibal tenses his arm, pressing down, Aurelius pushes back harder. So begins a strange, trembling arm-wrestling match with no clear winner, when suddenly...

The hammer head bursts into a million tiny shards, like a block of ice.

Hannibal is stunned, dumbfounded. Never having believed that Aurelius had the gift of magic, this is the first time he's seen him call on pranah. What's even more disconcerting is that he can't figure out exactly what spell the gladiator cast. Hannibal's never seen a thaumaturge use anything like it.

Had Tumul seen something? Is Aurelius truly a gifted magus whose potential is so vast that he would be able to explore unknown magical territories? Is he the legitimate heir to the Earth?

"No! *I* am the Primus!"

Hannibal calls on every ounce of his art's power. The ground is ripped open, pierced by myriad needles of stone as long and thick as javelins. Amplified by the unpredictable Rift, the brutal attack raises...

11.2

... a sandstorm, followed by a tsunami of stone. Keya feels the tearing deep inside herself when the groundwater table they're standing above snaps. With its bed cracked open, the basin's water rushes into interstices in the rock, like blood gushing from a wound.

It was madness to cast a spell like that here in the Rift, where magic is so unpredictable and uncontrollable. This battle is going to cause all sorts of horrific collateral damage, the disciple of Water is sure of that.

A quick glance around allows her to evaluate the likely victims. Ronan is protecting the Malkah, so she'll be fine. The other magi will be able to fend for themselves. Syläë, who was closest to the adversaries, has already scurried for shelter. That leaves the soldiers and the servants, who need to be kept safe.

Without a moment's hesitation, Keya starts incanting in her most powerful and beautiful voice. She is drawing the contents of the underground basin towards herself. Charmed by the lyricism of her timbre, the waters rise to the surface in a slow, unnatural rippling. The disciple can hear the boundless joy this return to the surface is procuring them, a sort of sparkling fizzing sound, like bubbles of laughter bursting into a spray of spit. The water has been filtered; its memory washed clean of the long, forced sleep. Once upon a time, when it was part of the largest lake in Solon, it lived on the surface, enjoying the fresh air.

Tuned to its wavelength, Keya is vicariously reliving the ritual launched twenty years earlier from the banks of what is now the Salt Lake. In the midst of the Heroes' War, Aria, then the Primus of Water, led the greatest recital in the history of the arkhome, a chorus of the most eloquent

diviners tasked with performing a work composed specifically for the occasion. It was the most complex choral score ever written. The most foul, too, to the point that afterwards, every single copy was destroyed and its memory flushed from the aquatheques.

But you can't erase water droplet's own memories.

Every drop remembers the choir of sopranos and baritones, tenors and altos. Their song was an ode, a declaration that blinded with love, that urged on every passion, every folly. Every horror, too.

Bewitched to the point of defying natural laws, the drops flew up in a reverse rainstorm, gathered into a thick fog that headed precipitately towards the Mantri soldiers, slid into the depths of their lungs and drowned them on solid ground. Suffocating with damp, their cries were reduced to moist gasps, their last words drowned out, their throats crying more tears than their eyes... a slow, awful drowning, an endless agony.

Keya has seen the bas-reliefs in the Crucible portraying the scene. They show Aria and the choir singing the final notes of the unrighteous ritual with their own fluids, offering their own lives to atone for the crime committed. Their liquid souls, emerging from their mouths singing at the end of the recital, joined in the mortal deluge. The disciple had seen the sculptures and was moved by the self-sacrifice of the arkhomes' most legendary heroes. Now that she has felt it through the memory of the murderous waters however, the recital is no longer heroic in the least, in her eyes.

Thousands of shozen died that day, and the lake was reduced to a mournful, salt-crusted plain. The accursed waters that took part in the massacre burrowed deep into the clayey sub-soil to hide their shame beneath the sand, seeking refuge in the cove that used to shelter an oasis. They had

gone underground until this exalted day, the magical moment when a diviner was summoning them once again, not to end lives, but to save them.

On the surface, the sand is starting to glisten and is soon covered with a thin film of damp. The playfully fluid stagnant water slips under boots and sandals, raising their owners barely more than an inch of the ground and moving them away on a strong and steady current. Soldiers and servants find themselves unexpectedly performing an opera: their shouts of surprise are a concert, their flailing attempts to keep their balance, an improvised ballet. The cove has been turned into a vast, improvised stage.

In mere moments, everyone is out of range of the battle of the thaumaturges. The liberated waters dive back down to the depths, except for a few hectolitres that prefer to evaporate into the dusty air of the Rift. But all unanimously sing the praises of she who freed them from their decades-long underground slumber.

Taken aback, determined, inspired, worried, relieved and touched... Keya has gone through all those emotions in a turbulent but non-stop journey, like a sea swell on a blustery day. Now, observing the two combatants' fury, she is stupefied. Hannibal has turned into a monstrous stone golem, even more imposing than the behemoth he already was. Aurelius dodges his blows with ethereal leaps, withstanding blows that would smash through granite, laughing in the face of ferocity.

She wonders if she should try to break it up, but abandons the idea almost immediately. Not only would it be risky, but who could legitimately intervene in a clash between a Primus and his disciple? If Hannibal believes that strength is the yardstick by which Aurelius's worth should be measured, then so be it.

In the meantime, she knows Calyps would never do such a thing. Had he been present, he would have looked down his nose at the brutality of Hannibal's methods. He prefers psychological pressure to physical violence. Calyps would never confront a disciple, he would choose two of them and watch them swirl in and out of each other's traps. Calyps is a cape, a headland jutting into the fluctuating borders of two seas, observing them as they try to overpower each other with heinous waves.

Keya knows Honora well enough to know that she would have jumped straight into the fray. She wouldn't have been able to resist the temptation of putting in her two cents' worth. That certainty alone is enough to keep Keya on the sidelines.

Besides, if anyone should intervene, it's the Malkah. But Solis is just standing there inertly. It's impossible to know if she's distressed or just can't make up her mind. If Keya hadn't already drawn on her meagre stores of pranah, she could have divined the queen's superficial thoughts. She still probably wouldn't have dared to attempt to, though. As surely as it would be dangerous to come between Hannibal and Aurelius, it would be a potentially deadly sin to force one's way into Solis's private thoughts.

Seeing the Malkah behaving so weakly makes her lose whatever credibility she had left in Keya's eyes. The disciple doesn't even bother to waste her time wondering what Calyps would think, or what he would have her do: as long as Keya is representing Water, Solis will not get the arkhomes support or allegiance.

As though she'd been freed of...

11.3

... a huge weight, Aurelius feels like a new man. He can use magic! He can keep pace with the Primus of the Earth!

And that's no easy task. Hannibal has proliferated himself into a small army of golems. Made of damp sand, the copies are perfectly identical to the original, even down to the coppery glint of the behemoth's skin – making it impossible to know which one's the real Hannibal. So an armada of fists is using him as their punching bag, dealing him a wall of blows that would reduce the toughest rock to dust.

Except that not a single one of their blows is touching him.

Almost air-borne, Aurelius is dodging, ducking, eluding, taking pleasure in waiting until the last moment, until he can almost feel the blow's updraft, then leaping and spinning, darting like a bird. He stays suspended in the air for so long he seems to be flying, or dancing like a tightrope walker.

There he had always thought he was totally free, and suddenly he realizes that his entire life he's been fettered by iron shackles, prisoner of the tragedy of his childhood that locked him out of his relationship to pranah. His previous battle, against Sarash, had forced him to break that yoke, and now that his magic has been unleashed, he feels light and agile as can be. He's not just dancing with Death now; he's twirling the Grim Reaper around so fast that it's making the cloaked one dizzy.

Boosted by magic, his senses are revealing a whole new world. To his touch, the ground feels like a sheet stretched over the void. Even a light shift in weight deforms the cloth, alerting him, so he can anticipate the slightest movement anywhere near him with the acuity of a spider on its web. To his eyes, all matter – both inert and alive – appears in all its

fragility, all flaws and weaknesses exposed. Hannibal doesn't realize it, but his con isn't fooling Aurelius, he can spot the golems as easily as you can distinguish an individual from their reflection in the mirror of a lake with a rippled surface.

He had had no idea that the Earth allowed such exploits. He's not even trying to understand, he's just acting on instinct, his mind lagging behind as his body goes to work as unpredictably as a wild animal. Only more dangerous.

Having leapt away just in time to avoid a spray of gravel as sharp as knives, Aurelius pushes off with his arms from the wall at the edge of the cove, propelling himself towards one of the golems, his leg outstretched horizontally before him, his pointed foot as stiff as an arrowhead. Mid-flight, he bends his trajectory to aim for the real Hannibal, without having pushed off of anything, unless it was the void, which can't be done, theoretically.

Suddenly he gets it: the Earth isn't obeying his orders, gravity is. Having grown up in the Rift and its weightlessness, he can toy with the Earth's attraction, forcing it to obey his will rather than natural laws. That's why he was able to climb the Pie-Scraper so easily, becoming the first person to reach that legendary summit. The one and only. The inimitable. Instantly legendary. He had been so proud of himself, when if he'd been aware of his real potential back then, he could have flown to the top instead!

His stiff toes stab Hannibal's left pectoral, piercing the muscle. He's going to crush the behemoth's internal organs, reducing him to a pulp as though he were squeezing a juicy fruit in one hand. He's won!

Then the recoil from the impact climbs up Aurelius's leg, making his barely healed knee sizzle with pain. Reality catches up with him in a flash, sobering him up like a knife fight after a pub crawl, demanding he pay the bill for every ounce of

audacity spent. In an awful instant of lucidity, the gladiator remembers that he's just a novice experimenting with his abilities up against a Primus who's been honing them his whole life long. On top of that, this duel is between a wounded soldier and the other side's champion. Aurelius overcame Sarash by catching her by surprise and manipulating her into behaving like a heroine. Hannibal, on the other hand, knows exactly why he's there. He's 100% focussed, and he'll show no mercy, not for him, anyway.

Hannibal's skin instantly turns to stone as hard as marble, and Aurelius's ankle is trapped as though he'd stepped into a bucket of mortar that sets on contact. A pair of clawed arms unfurls from the behemoth's flanks, talons piercing their chrysalis, gripping Aurelius's still-horizontal calf, digging their hooks into his flesh. A moment ago, the gladiator could fly, now he's trapped as though by birdlime.

Never one for analyzing anything, surfing on the wave of events rather than trying to swim against the current, thinking only of today and never of tomorrow, Aurelius can't help wondering about the strange feeling flooding over him. The nausea crawling up the back of his throat, with a powerful scent of bile that's turning his stomach... could that be *fear*?

"You fly, you hover, you sting..." Hannibal grumbles scoldingly. "You're a regular hornet, you are."

Two extra pairs of arms surge from his ribs to catch Aurelius by the wrists and the throat.

"You're just forgetting that I can crush you like a bug with a flick of my fingers."

With a gesture like an impaled warrior removing the spear that has stabbed him in the gut, Hannibal rips Aurelius's foot out of his chest.

"You think you're of the Earth, but you're just dust."

Subject to gravity once more, the gladiator is vertical again: Hannibal is dangling him with his feet barely an inch above the ground. He still looks like a bird... in the hand of a hunter who has no intention of letting it fly away.

Aurelius *cannot* lose this battle, no matter what. It's not about pride, or even a matter of life or death. It's that the Council is counting on him –Isalys even more so – and he can't let them down. The conjuration has to be completed. Solis must die. It's imperative.

To find a second wind, he wrenches his neck imprisoned in Hannibal's claws, cocking his eyes as far as they can go towards the corners of his eyelids. With that tremendous, arduous and painful effort, he finally manages to catch a glimpse of the Malkah.

Solis...

His determination washes away as though it had been wrung out of him. His allegiance is to Isalys, irrevocably, that's a given. Yet Solis is still so... He doesn't know, can't remember what to do. Who should he protect, who serve? In whose name should he die? Is any of this effort even worth it, or is it all just much of a muchness?

He's worn out, completely exhausted. Palace life has clogged his reflexes, his wounds have diminished him, his new mastery of magic has drained him. He's coming down as fast as if he'd sniffed ravix powder, a crashing that's steeper than the sheerest cliff, the worst he's ever experienced. In the euphoria of the adrenalin, he found an ounce of pranah whose very existence he had ignored until then. Now that the hormone is ebbing away, he's rediscovering an outpouring of love for Solis. Yes, "rediscovering," because he'd known he was in love since the Appologium. He'd been doing his best to ignore it ever since, but it's always been there, somewhere deep inside that skein of barbed wire that stands in for his

heart.

He wishes he could burst out laughing, but Hannibal's talons are crushing his glottis, blocking his hilarity in the depths of his being. He could cry, but it's really not his style. He could lower himself and shriek in anger, but no, that's not for him. So he grins wickedly at the Arkhant who thinks he's got the better of him. Go on, deceive yourself. You won't be the first!

His swaggering can barely conceal the fact that he doesn't know who to love any more, nor...

11.4

... how to react. Solis's lower lip is quivering, convulsing, her teeth are practically chattering. On her neck, droplets are beading. Her skin is shivering and creasing from pangs twisting and tugging at her body. She's paralyzed, unable to move.

Darting her eyes at Hannibal – brow knitted with hatred, face splattered with anger and aggression – she feels her guts grinding with disappointment as cold as metal. Couldn't he just... stop that? All that impulsive violence is embarrassing. It's not Aurelius that Hannibal's talons are trying to claw to a pulp, it's their friendship, their sibling-like complicity in a life that, as a child, she believed was devoid of family or love.

Then Solis's gaze falls on the gladiator, a real brute, too, she'd almost forgot. Something in her head-over-heart with Aurelius is getting spoiled, turning sweet-and-sour, like a poorly filtered liqueur growing murky. Her guts are shrieking something at her in a language she doesn't speak.

When her fingers begin to shake, she wraps her plait around them so they won't turn into a madwoman's claws. She can tell that she's going to lose both men, and maybe herself, too. Her body is imploding on the inside; she's in a cold sweat and can feel herself buckling. But on the outside, she's still standing ramrod straight.

Beneath the pressure of her accumulated doubts, the realization that the battle royale playing out before her is actually just a front for a far greater struggle – one that's more about the Malkah than it is about Solis personally – is gradually congealing into an utter certainty that is sapping her fortifications. Her defences suddenly collapse.

Everything about her is uncertain. Her vision that's blurred by the desert heat, the sweat on her brow, the reasons that

pushed her to make this journey, the very foundations of her personality, and even her own self-image... She feels like she's turning into someone else, a vulgar reflection, a shadow on a wall... Everything is trembling.

For no apparent reason – if there even is one – Aurelius suddenly emerges from his apathy. His presence becomes imposing once again, more and more attractive, literally, as though all of the energy around him were being sucked up by... the piece of amber he wears around his neck?

Hannibal groans from the effort: it feels like Aurelius is getting heavier and heavier. Stretched by the load, Hannibal's artificial arms of earth and rock shudder then crack. With a sound like a tree trunk being cracked apart by a storm, the limbs burst and turn to piles of dust before the Primus's bewildered eyes. His stupefaction doesn't last long, the renewed combat is monopolizing his attention.

Still feeling powerless and unable to make up her mind, Solis looks away; she doesn't want to see what's coming. A knot of anxiety is calcifying under her sternum, keeping her from inhaling properly, stealing her breath, her options, her power. So she turns her head, stares at the distant horizon, focusing on a point as far from the scene playing out before her as possible. A scene that is beyond her understanding, and whose din is paralyzing her with fear.

And that's when she sees it. The first plume of Rainar, Artellium's other sun. It's subtle, almost imperceptible, yet Solis knows with absolute certainty: Rainar will be rising soon.

While Galana's enormous, orangey-red sphere sets the pace of all of their days, Rainar is only visible for half the year. A fixed star in the sky, it experiences a single night that's a half a year long as the planet traces the first half of its orbit. That's followed by a single, equally long day. Rainar, no

bigger than a fist seen at the end of your arm, is comparable in size to Balor, the smallest of the three moons. Its luminosity is barely more intense than the Forest Moon Karas's, and its off-white hue barely shimmers with barely more strength than Regel's blue... far less captivatingly.

Still, there's one thing that makes Rainar absolutely sui generis among the stars. The little sun is shaped like a spinning top, with a huge, flattened central disk that has two long plumes trailing it like a comet's tail on either side. A splendid oddity, a remarkable anomaly that makes it hard not to believe in a divine power.

Solis is staring at one of those plumes right this instant. Rainar itself is still hidden beneath the horizon... if it were even true that it was about to rise.

Which is utterly impossible.

Rainar's ephemeris has been worked out for centuries. Its appearance in the sky is watched for expectantly by all astrologists, and is welcomed throughout Arkhant with celebrations organized by the arkhome of Light. How could she possibly perceive Rainar's plume before anyone else?

Solis turns to look at Cantor and Bayan, who should be more attuned to celestial phenomena than she. At a glance, she can see that that's not so: the Arkhonts are concerned about the battle and the possible toppling of alliances, but not in the least about Rainar's plume. Yet Solis has rarely been so sure of her own judgement. Logic, celestial mechanics, her long schooling at the College of Light and her own experience all assure her she must be mistaken.

But she is following her own instinct.

Her trembling abruptly ceases. What had been vibrating frantically within her the moment before is instantly soothed, as a wave of calm washes over her.

What are court intrigues, her entourage's doubts or the

Arkchants' expectations to her? None of that obliges her, she is not dependent on the wishes of others. She is not here in the Rift by chance or on a whim. She is following two goals: restore the pranah's cycle and find her sister. She had thought they were separate missions, but now she realizes they have something in common: Aurelius. Not only is he guiding her to her sister, but he is also wearing that mysterious lump of amber which, inexplicably but manifestly nonetheless, can channel pranah.

Everything is suddenly clear; she knows exactly what to do.

Solis steps towards the two combatants, without haste, but with great resolve. Concerned for her safety, Ronan tries to hold her back but soon abandons the idea. He can't stand in the way of his Malkah's determination. The archer didn't cry over Ruby and Hanzo's deaths – it would have been sacrilegious; no tears should accompany the deceased's return to the kamis. But he had felt doubt about his mission, for no more than the length of an intake of breath, but he had found that brief moment as long as the creation of the world. Seeing Solis striding forward as she is doing right now, his doubts no longer exist. He's not even sure he can remember ever having felt them....

In Cantor's eyes, Solis's silhouette seems to be haloed in light, as though he were watching Rainar rise early – but that's impossible, it's not expected for seven more days. His prerogatives as an Arkhont have led him to consort with many of the high and mighty – dynastic lords and ladies, potentates, guild chiefs and more. But never has he seen anyone display such charisma, such obvious authority before. Or at least, not since the time when, as a child, he saluted Calista, the Primus of Light who was extinguished during the Heroes' War and has yet to be replaced...

Siphonn is so surprised by the Malkah's transformation that

for a moment, deafened by the serene harmony radiating from Solis, he can no longer hear the throbbing of the choir at the heart of the Voblast Valley. He makes his mind up as suddenly as a gust of air: he won't make a move for the moment; the outcome of the plot can no longer depend on nothing more than a queen's gambit...

After healing Aurelius, Syläë had collapsed, slouched against a wall far away from the combat, the conjuration, everything. She's no more than driftwood on the vagaries of the tides, fated to wash ashore on the banks of her hopes, washed by the salt of regret. When Solis is suddenly garbed in an invisible yet dazzling aura, the Primus of Nature spontaneously turns her face towards that source of light, like a funflower aiming its corolla at Galana. Sweet is the sensation on her withered skin, which gets a bit of its colour and glow back. She savours each and every beneficial ray, her eyes shut, her lids turning rosy in the light of this new star. Suddenly a tiny doubt sprouts through the bark of her decision. Had she been right to choose Isalys over Solis? Did she even have the right to set them up to oppose each other, rather than leaving them united? Syläë's tears water that seed in silence...

When Keya sees Solis heading straight towards the two mortal enemies battling it out, a memory suddenly pops into her mind. One day five or six years ago, she and Honora had challenged each other to stupid stunt: reversing the course of a cascade pouring into an ox-bow lake off the Namani. When he caught them at their childish competition, Calyps had settled for joining them. Standing in water reaching mid-thigh, he had laid his palm on the water's choppy surface. A concentric spread from beneath his hand, a single ripple that left a growing circle of still water inside it. And the current hadn't come on the surface only. Keya could feel that it

immobilized all the way down to the soles of her feet, like a stagnant pond on a windless day. She and Honora had tried to tame the cascade, Calyps had soothed it. What Solis was doing right before her eyes, in the midst of a political maelstrom, was similarly miraculous...

Out of the whole caravan – from Primi to disciples, soldiers to serfants – Hannibal and Aurelius are the last to become aware of Solis's metamorphosis. Focused on their own clash, which even they no longer know if it should be a barroom brawl or a battle to the death, they keep hacking away like bulls butting heads.

Then Solis slips into the fray.

Seen from outside, she manages to tip her head to one side precisely when Hannibal hurls a huge stone that turns into a javelin. Then she spins halfway around to avoid the projectile, which shoots off sideways when Aurelius twists gravity from vertical to horizontal.

Her earrings are jingling like carillons – so close do the blows pass in front of her face. Once Aurelius caught his raised boot in her plait; another time her dress was abruptly folded back by a projection of sand impelled by Hannibal... and all that without knowing if she is deliberately avoiding injury or just incredibly lucky. In the end of the day, it's a bit of both, a perfect rhythm twinned with a conjunction of strokes of luck.

After a long while, Hannibal and Aurelius's throbbing finally fall into synch. They're not listening to each other yet, but at least they can hear each other. Solis is bringing the hostilities to a halt without speaking a word, with little more than a few waves of the hand borrowed from the royal playbook.

Then the impossible occurs: the two adversaries release

each other, even though their battle has not chosen a victor. Panting hard, chins raised, eyes still fiery, but guard lowered. They no longer have fists, but hands... which can be shaken. Standing between them, Solis looks radiant, peace oozing from her voice. Only a gash on her left cheekbone – a thin, elegant line ending with a drop of blood – bears witness to the risks she took.

“I have come to a decision, messieurs. I will forsake my visit to ONI, so this detour need not be pursued any longer.”

While Hannibal is nodding with satisfaction, Aurelius can’t take his eyes off of Solis. He’s never felt this way before, like a reptile spellbound by a snake charmer. In a moment of weightlessness that tickles his tummy pleasantly, he no longer knows if that supernatural charisma belongs to Solis or Isalys...

“I am changing my destination. Aurelius, lead me to the place where you found that piece of amber, I pray thee. At the summit of the ruins of a Mantri skyscraper, if I recall our conversation aboard *H.M.S. Unsteerable* correctly.

“What?” the behemoth chokes out, his voice strangled. “But that’s even *more* perilous!”

“Yet that is where I wish to go.”

“Solis! You’re blinding yourself; you can’t trust him!”

“Hannibal, my dear friend... I wish you could understand the extent to which you are mistaken. You think you’re protecting me, and I know that you sincerely believe that’s the right and honourable thing to do. But what you’re actually proving is this: you don’t trust my choices. You don’t trust *me*.”

She has suddenly switched back– without even seeming to realize it – to speaking in the friendly, easy manner that used to be normal between them. A tone that had been lost since the day the young woman climbed to the throne as Malkah.

Hannibal is dumbstruck by the tone of her voice, his jaw pinned with regret like Gaumry the drak on the rockworm's fang. Why does it have to be precisely now, when her life is literally at stake, that Solis gets her authority over him back? In his entire life, he's never been so proud of her, nor felt as torn by his duty...

“My question for you is simple, Hannibal: Will you accompany us to the building, or would you rather go back to Nephtys?”

The Primus of the Earth chews over his answer with more difficulty than if it had been a mouthful of gravel.

INTRIGUING

“Professor Il’ango?”

“...”

“...”

“Yes, Dell, what is it?”

The head of the department has to restrain herself from sighing. Her assistant’s lack of initiative is driving her nuts! Sometimes she half-expects him to raise his hand to go to the little boy’s room! For the umpteenth time, Il’ango considers the possibility of getting an Assistant, before reasoning with herself for another umpteenth time: when you work at the Shine-IS clinic, the leader in gene therapy, you have a human assistant. Full stop. Besides, Dell is a Geneflop – a nickname given to descendants of the seven leading families whose potential turned out to be inferior to expectations. Accepting him in her team is what got her into the Zoone research department.

At least Dell’s cute little buh is a plus...

“Consul Arhax begs you to remember that he urgently needs to get in touch with Master Sasaki and that he’s counting on you to pass the message on.”

“I suppose he said something more like, ‘Tell that code-whacking boss of yours that she better pass on my bugging message,’ right?”

“Let’s just say that Consul Arhax employs rhetoric that I would describe as... quite frank. And yes, that was indeed more or less how he expressed himself.”

Il’ango would have laughed at that... if Arhax didn’t make her so nervous – totally freaked her out is more like it. The

RoboAc has been in all the immedia lately, on all the popular shows, hammering at public opinioin with a stunningly simple message, “If Mantris needs baHeries, then Arkhante gets the baHering ram.” It’s a style that appeals to some and worries others, but doesn’t leave anyone indiffer^{ff}ent. They’ve even organized a debate between him and the Ordinator – bookmakers are already taking bets, which will probably go sky high.

Il’ango had been invited to join the GenRob coaliaon, but she turned the offer down. She couldn’t give a flying dalek about all that, baHery issues aren’t her problem. Her only priority right now is hanging onto her job. And to do that, she has got to save Kora, the... the what? Med-Cy- Geno-Tic? Mecanoic? In any case, she represents a bigger alliance than just Gen-Rob...

The department head goes back to focusing on the holos superimposed over Kora’s body, which has been laid out on a ceramic operaAng table. Il’ango devotes every second she can to her paAent. That’s why she had all the equipment installed right in her office, on one of the top floors of the corpo.

The displays are almost pointless: it’s almost as though the mecanoic – she’ll go with that – had been put together from a kit. Her body has been modified to the extent that much of it can be taken apart. Il’ango absolutely has to understand why her treatment isn’t working on Kora like it did on Sassaki. Why there’s been a cascade of organ rejecAons, despite the immunosuppressant drugs. And the rejecAons are brutal to, not unlike a tech-tonic overdose. For yet another umpteenth Ame, she scolds herself for having given in to the Ordinator’s threats. Her job as director of research in the Zoone is both an honour for her and an opportunity for Mantri to live beHer and longer, and maybe even get a glimpse of eternity someday. But the Noria’s spokesperson has turned that responsibility into a means of pressuring her. Maybe she should be rooAng for Arhax, acer all. She might be able to just go back to doing

her job...

The scientist can feel her assistant's gaze weighing on the back of her neck, as heavy as a broken-down dalek. How is she supposed to concentrate in these conditions?

"Is there anything else, Dell?" she asks, between clenched teeth.

"Master Sasaki is on his way up, Professor."

"Already?" She glances at the Ame and realizes that it has steamed by without her noticing. That's a side effect of the modified metabolism that means she only has to eat and sleep once every three or four days. "Oh, bug!"

Sasaki had kept his side of the deal, he'd let her run every test and take every sample she could think of. And now the bill has come due. He's here for the recordings of Kora's behavior. The only problem is that uploading them might harm the mecha. It's too soon, she's not ready.

"Delay him. I don't care, just figure out a way to keep him out of here."

"The problem is that I don't know where he is." "I thought you said he was on his way up."

"Master Sasaki did indeed pass the security gate, but no one knows where he is currently."

"I'm right here."

Sasaki's instantly recognizable voice is coming from... her office's private balcony?"

Il'ango freezes, like the other morning when she found a hairy little bug in her food printer. Her stomach is knocking with fear, like an animal facing down a predator. It's an atavistic reaction that even the most advanced genetic manipulations have been unable to suppress. Dell flees. Literally.

"Go on with what you were doing, Il'ango. I have arrived a tad early, you needn't interrupt your work on my account."

Sasaki doesn't bother to turn around to look at the person he's speaking to. He remains immobile, hands clasped behind his back, eyes gazing out over the unobstructed view offered by the panoramic balcony.

Mantris is spread out in all its immensity before him, in the splendour of its public lighting, which is so anesthetic as to eclipse the natural beauty of the setting sun. The almost chaotically varied skyline illustrates the city's unbelievable architectural and cultural diversity. Suspended from the kilometre-high pylons holding up Mantris's retractable roof with its hexagonal checkerboard pattern, the ionized screens are closing to protect the city-concomitant from the evening cool. The opera-house stands up strong winds that gust with joyous abandon between the skyscrapers. Attenuated by the balcony's force field, the breezes hardly dare stand up Sasaki's long hair.

No one messes with the master, especially not when he's in a bad mood.

Like a vulgar carnival mask, the glowing panorama struggles to conceal the problems rattling Mantris. The energy crisis is a feverish symptom displayed by an unhealthy city-concomitant going through an irrational episode of delirium. Just yesterday, shonen were still all in it together. Now, queues snake around supply centres, patterned replicas pouncing on the slightest half-charged battery.

If he were a doctor, Sasaki would diagnose a rejected grace: the lovely unity once flaunted by the five techstyles has dissolved in the acid of restrictions... and even they are far less corrosive than the total penury looming on the horizon.

If he were a moralist, he would disdain the shonen's hasty reaction. They're panicking at the first disturbance to their ordinary lives, completely unable to put things in perspective, to show any esprit de corps... in that transplanted body. By dint of hybridization, soothing body armour and artificial organs, they are no longer reacting to sensations but to retransmissions – from the media, their assistants, their SITs and more. He had been ready to believe in the melting pot, open to the idea that it might offer certain advantages, but events have only bolstered his innermost belief: genetic purity is the only path, eugenics the only solution, sobriety the supreme virtue, and his school, the last oasis of serenity in

Mantris the frazzled.

If he were a cynic, he would draw a parallel between Kora's fate – defeated by Shado, deeply unwell – and Mantris's – diminished by penuries, unable to win the day against Arkhante. The mecanoic and the city-conAnent are micro- and macroscopic proof that blending techstyles is neither healthy nor desirable.

If he were...

If he were anyone other than Sassaki, he would express his disgust, display his disappointment. But he's a Zen master, so he keeps his thoughts locked up inside his mind's safe of steel, as placid as a supercooling mountain lake that stays perfectly immobile, avoiding disturbances so as not to freeze.

Suddenly, right in front of him, just a few feet away, he sees a pyornis struggling against the wind that's rising. Because of its power, the pyornis can only hover. The seeming sAllness is betrayed by the long quills fluHering at creature's wingAps so hard they might get ripped out. Beak open, wingspan fully deployed, perfectly silent amidst the wind's mocking howls, you might think it were simply immobile, when it was actually fighAng hard. The beast is the very incarnaAon of courage, and above all, of contradicAon: the state of not-acAng against the raging elements.

The pyornis is the grain of sand that crystallizes Sasaki's disdain, transforming it into sorrow. He loves Mantris deeply and truly, he is affected by the tumult its going through, observing it with chagrin rather than disgust. He's displaying the kind of tolerance you reserve for loved ones who have lost their way. He even feels a share of responsibility, like parents who cannot feel entirely blameless for their children's misdeeds.

The most surprising thing is that he feels the same way about Kora.

"Professor," he says, stepping from the balcony into the office. "Aside from more Ame, what do you need to treat your patient?" Sensing that Il'ango is afraid it's a trick question, he adds, "I'm not accusing you of charlatanism, so I would be grateful if you didn't mistake me for a politician."

"If only I knew what was the matter with her," the scientist sighs, sincerely. "The only logical explanation is that the patient is deliberately resisting treatment."

"Then perhaps that is the case."

Having joined Il'ango, Sasaki gestures towards Kora's body, which has been reduced to the state of a suspended corpse.

"No," Il'ango says firmly, "I can assure you that the mind is not able to overpower the body to that extent. It's metabolically impossible."

"Personally, I'm not convinced that humans have grasped all of the mind's subtleties. Didn't you yourself once tell me that science is written on the ruins of certainties? Why not explore that hypothesis a bit further?"

"The thing is... in my entire career, I've never seen alter a patient to this extent. I'm not even 100% certain of the patient's sex!"

"Really?"

"Her – if she is a her – reproductive organs have been entirely removed, look."

Il'ango gestures towards the groin that's hollowed out to the

point that you can see the hips, and even the cerametic-reinforced ribcage.

“Tell me, Il’ango,” the warrior says, breaking the silence. “Why menAon the sexual criterion in parAcular?”

“I have to start somewhere! And the medical file clearly states that Kora is female. I’m talking about *facts*, Sassaki.” The professor’s voice shrivels, as though it were being strangled by the chill of her office-cum-morgue. Sassaki chooses to ignore the familiarity of her manner and responds professorially, “Forgoing that facts are not the same as truth is a mistake I shall make, despite my hours of daily meditation.”

“Point taken. It’s true that nothing about the clinical examination allows me to state that. Even the blood tests gave ambiguous results.”

“Did the assumption about the sex guide your treatment?”

“No.”

“It might have influenced your approach...”

“Of course it did, I’m a geneticist, not a faith healer!” “You’re right, I’m not a doctor. I’ll let you come to the requisite conclusions and I’ll come back tomorrow.”

Sassaki leaves without looking back. Behind him, Il’ango fidgets for a moment, taps nervously on her tablet, sighs... and then erases all of her data and runs a new simulation. She forgot to give her visitor Arhax’s message, which suits Sassaki just fine: it offers him an excuse to keep ignoring the RoboAc’s calls...

12.2

To ascertain if a star is getting closer to Artellium's solar system or moving away from it, the light it emits is measured: if it leans towards red, then the star is moving away; if it's blue, then it's rushing towards Galana. If ValRed were a star and Mantris were the solar system, his name would definitely seem appropriate...

Since he has been back in the city-continent, the captain of the Malkah's guard has felt out of sync. He hardly recognizes his hometown; a distance has opened up between him and the shozen. In the less than a year since he was last in Mantris, the atmosphere has changed radically.

The holos visible between the adverts screening in the ageing maglev that's ferrying him across the city from the border with the Rift to the Genetic neighbourhood are painting a surprising portrait of current events. ValRed finds out about the release of a new kind of pay-to-use battery, called V_{\max} , and learns that popular consultations have been replaced by FAITH, a policy-making body made up of top experts. Yet no clear reason seems to have been offered to justify that major change in Mantri politics. Surprised, ValRed observes the other passengers' reactions. They don't seem nonplussed in the least about what is clearly not new information for them. That's when he suddenly realizes how exceptionally many shozen there are in the maglev. Not that it's more crowded than usual. But the thing is, only one of four individuals are personae. Everybody else is being transported in person, and not via their virtual envelope. Usually, the proportion of actual people to virtual ones is the other way around, since most shozen would rather stay home.

Having reached his stop, ValRed gets out and heads into the streets, rectilinear canyons of greenery lined with energy-self-sufficient buildings. Engaging in a more in-depth observation, now that his curiosity has been piqued, he

notices that the pedestrians' appearance is far less extravagant than what he remembers. Fewer far-fetched, multi-coloured skins, hardly any exoskeletons just for show, and only a handful of bio-luminescent tattoos and imprints, which were all the rage last year... The overall impression is that the current trend is for restraint rather than eccentricity. With his armour and the long sabre hanging across his back, ValRed might possibly be the most whimsically garbed person in the crowd. Now that's a first for Sassaki's discreet disciple.

In addition to the surprising austerity, ValRed sees that several people at a time are sharing Daleks, that every other public 3-D printer is closed and that the fleet of service robots seems to have been seriously reined in. Even the intensity of the photosynthesis projectors aimed at the greenery-covered walls has been lowered. The contrast with the opulence he remembers is stark. Mantris had always been a glowing place, a feast for the eyes that should be all the more striking to him in that Arkhante is a visually drab land: polyphonous but monochromatic.

Then he is struck by another, even more upsetting realization. As he's walking under the large red arches made of real wood that mark the entrance to the corpos' zone, drones scan him and, alerted by his sabre, guide security agents to him. After a brief conversation with the sentinels, whose faces look as taut with worry as the creases on their uniforms, he is allowed to pass with no other formalities. The scene would have been unexceptional in Nephtys – aside from that ValRed would have been far more meticulous, even with a dynast – but it is mind-boggling here in Mantris, where security has always reigned supreme. In fact, that's another major difference between it and Arkhante, which is as perilous as an unexplored and untamed land.

From that moment on, the captain of the guard has just one desire: to get back to his master's school, which he believes to be as unchanging as the constants that rule the universe.

So it is with sincere – albeit concealed – relief that he

reaches the garden where the training centre is located. The spot is extraordinary: an oasis of greenery in an ocean of cement. Perched on one of the seven summits of the Kyotech Tower, it soars over the city-continent in a lush setting overflowing with moss and fresh water. A red-painted wooden bridge spans the stream that weaves peacefully between the trees and the gravel-covered paths. Trout and cranes enliven the garden, adding a touch of life and movement to the scene's natural beauty.

ValRed strides through the park along a gravel alley that five- and six-year-old apprentices are polishing with rags, stone by stone. Out of habit, ValRed moves almost soundlessly, hardly more than a slight chafing of gravel. Yet most of the children hear him coming. The ones that are repainting the tall wooden fence around the garden don't have time to notice him before he enters the main building.

Once inside, he entertains himself by striding through the halls with his eyes closed. The exercise is simplified by the trail of incense left by the bonzes heading for the temple, and the silky rustling of the servants stepping out of his way. More than just a little game, the stroll is a chance for him to dive deeper into the place's serene atmosphere. Like a rejuvenating dip in a fountain of youth, it's carrying him back to his childhood, which was spent here, filled with asceticism and endlessly repeated exercises.

The training courtyard is located just behind the rice- paper panels. He can hear the slapping noise made by the unstable boards floating on the river, where pupils learn the subtleties of balance; the hard blows on wooden figures that have been so thoroughly whacked they are slowly splintering apart; the feline whistling of sabres that's sometime followed by the moist tearing of flesh and dripping of beads of blood, and always the instructors' brief, guttural shouts and grunts. So many echoes of his own dogged relentlessness at overcoming his human condition in order to experience perfection by dint of force of will and endurance, rather than

by renouncing living flesh for cold, dead implants or exoskeletons. Succumbing to the appeal of artificial transhumanism would have prevented him from fulfilling his destiny: protecting the Sculpted Throne. Some saw it as consorting with the enemy and betraying Mantris; ValRed saw it as an honour, an opportunity to understand Arkhante better, and – although he'd never admit it – a chance to stand alongside a queen as admirable as Solis.

The school is still the haven of peace that he'd hoped for. So why doesn't he feel soothed or revigorated? Is he worried that the two funerary urns he's bringing back might cause his master take umbrage that two of his pupils failed in their mission? Hanzo and Ruby fell on the field of honour, doing their duty. The Malkah even organized a touching memorial ceremony in their honour, so how could their death provoke Sassaki's ire?

ValRed's eyes fly open as he pulls himself up short in the middle of the corridor, nostrils irritated by the scent of cold incense, ears filled with stifled sounds but empty of music, ice lining the pit of his stomach. Did he just compare the master to the Malkah? Although he guards the Sculpted Throne, and despite the magical tattoo of submission covering his left pectoral, poised to burn his heart at the slightest betrayal of Arkhante, his allegiance has never wavered: he's a proud Mantri, a graduate of Sassaki's school, a valorous genetic warrior, heir to a long tradition... How can he cast aspersions on all that? Or on Sassaki?

But the truth is, he knows the answer to his own question: beneath the mask he wore constantly, even when eating or sleeping, Hanzo had concealed a face ValRed knew well. Sassaki's face, as it looked in ValRed's childhood.

His master had cloned himself, defying the Genetics' supreme taboo.

ValRed didn't request authorization to come here, to his school, in order to bury the two guards in the land of their birth; he came to hold Sassaki accountable. The captain of the

guard cannot come up with a scenario that doesn't involve his master: there's no Croesus or corpo foolhardy enough to clone Sassaki without his explicit approval. Sassaki must have had a goal in mind when he sent Hanzo to the court of Arkhant, but what was it? There's just one thing he knows for sure: the master sent his clone exactly where he wanted him to be.

Rather than obtaining an explanation for his abject transgression, the captain hopes that his master will categorically deny everything. ValRed would rather knowingly swallow a lie – because he is adamant: Hanzo *was* a clone of Sassaki – than to have to believe that his master was guilty of such a sin of pride. Intrigued by his immobility, the servants dart their eyes towards him, heads straight but pupils prying. Then ValRed readjusts his sabre, which rings chimes when it strikes the urns strapped onto his back and gets moving again. Eyes wide open this time, ready to ferret out the slightest shred of deceitfulness in Sassaki.

When he enters his master's office – knees and forehead to the ground, ValRed is ready to confront his elder. When he sees the older man staring off into space, lost in thought, ignoring an uncompleted calligraphy, fingers fiddling with a holocube – a vulgar gadget in this monastically pared-down place? – he realizes that the problem is not whether Sassaki had had himself cloned, but rather, if he is still the same man.

The manner in which ValRed straightens up and places his hands on his knees is enough to shake Sassaki out of his reverie. An infinitesimal stiffness, no more than the friction of a rice-paper panel slipping through a poorly oiled runner, and the recordings salvaged from Kora momentarily escapes the Genetic's mind.

His pupil – he who had been left unshaken by the Heroes' War – is upset. That is worthy of at least a speck of his attention.

“Ruby and Ronan?” he inquires in a neutral tone, when ValRed places the two urns in front of him with all due respect.

“Ronan has stayed with the Malkah to ensure her protection, master.”

Although ValRed has cleverly managed to avoid correcting him, Sassaki still noticed a detail that speaks volumes: when his pupil pronounced the title “master,” the capital M was conspicuously inaudible.

“How did they die?”

“Together, protecting each other.”

“Rather than fulfilling their duty to protect the Throne.”

“They were in precisely the right place.”

The turn of phrase catches his attention, a light scratch at the door of visitor that doesn’t want to bother anyone. What did ValRed mean by that? Strange way of putting things...

“With your permission, master, I would like to deliver the urns to the families of the deceased. I happen to know Ruby’s personally, but that’s not the case for Hanzo. Can you point me in the right direction?”

ValRed’s question is accompanied by his eyebrows being raised imperceptibly. Interrogatively; accusingly, even. Sassaki mobilizes his patience not to call his disciple to order. Master and pupil eyeball each other interminably – the eternity of a moment of truth.

“Unfortunately, no. I don’t have any information whatsoever about his background,” Sassaki finally replies.

ValRed’s face remains imperturbable, but his gaze goes as hard and trenchant as steel. Sassaki is surprised to find himself adjusting his stance. It’s absurd: his disciple would never attack him; no more than he would ever attack his own master, Chaka.

Chaka...

12.3

The information obtained from Kora's recordings – which Il'ango had finally handed over to him, after a breakthrough in treating her patient – included a strange, disturbing revelation: Chaka had known about a parallel universe, a secret place where invokers of Darkness, like Shado and Faust, the previous Primus, could seek refuge if need be.

Sassaki hadn't learned it all at once, it had been a two-step process. Thanks to the mind-boggling number of sensors the mecanoic's body was equipped with, he had worked out that in order to disappear into the darkness, Shado had manipulated an unknown energy, a kind of dark matter as inconsistent as a gas.

Not being particularly familiar with state-of-the-art physics, he had got in touch with Sir Vine, the FAITH's famous schaman. Vine had shown an immediate interest in the data Sassaki brought, looking at it as an unhopd-for diversion from the stupefyingly dull political negotiating that was sapping the committee's energy.

"What you've got there is nothing like dark matter whatsoever," the scientist had declared, with a rustling of his metallic dreadlocks. "In fact, dark matter's not matter, you know, not really. More like... non-matter. Or better yet, like a *hamper*. You never heard of one of them? It's an old-fashioned word for a picnic basket, that often turned out to be empty... like the stomach of whoever had been looking for food, therefore!"

The price you had to pay to benefit from Sir Vine's knowledge was attempting to decode his speech, which was riddled with antiquated references that were as impenetrable as ValRed's body language. Sassaki eventually grasped the idea that *dark matter* was just a not particularly accurate term used to identify the missing mass required to explain why galaxies don't disintegrate as they spin. Since the only mass from distant galaxies that is observable is light from stars, the rest,

whose nature is currently unknown to scientists, was labelled as “dark”, to distinguish it from the light.

“Fine,” Sassaki replied. “So now how about telling me what the energy measured by the sensors actually *is*, rather than what it isn’t.”

“If you want my best hypothesis, I’d say quantum entanglement. A sort of parallel world, the... the *Quantang!* There, I’ve coined a word! I like that, it’s got a nice tang to it. Not bad, don’t you agree?

“Whatever you say. And how... ?”

Before the Genetic could finish his question, the schaman had sprung up like some kind of wind-up toy to activate the opening of a hidden compartment. When a bed and bath had materialized in the memory-form wall, and Sir Vine had started rummaging through his toiletries, Sassaki realized that the scientist slept at the office.

Sir Vine had come back to his visitor holding a compact mirror and looking as happy as a kid who’d chanced upon a sweet. Then he took an anti-stress ball out of his pocket and placed it on the low table next to the mirror, which he had opened to a 45°-angle in front of Sassaki in such a way that the Genetic could see both the ball and his own reflection.

“Ignore the mirror. Imagine you’re a scientist. You see two particles, you know that they’re bound together. *Entangled*, to use the precise term. You want to know which one of them is real. How do you do it?”

“I observe them attentively,” Sassaki suggested, hazarding a guess.

“Go on, be my guest, observe to your heart’s content!”

With a nod and a mischievous smile, Sir Vine urged him to come closer. No sooner had Sassaki glanced toward the reflection than the schaman whisked the mirror away.

“Ha ha, I got you, right? Admit it! You see what just happened? That’s quantum entanglement. When two particles share a quantum state, they depend on each other, no matter how far apart they are. Isn’t that wild? What’s even crazier is

that trying to know a particle's exact quantum state... makes its doppelganger disappear! That's called wave function collapse. A nice fancy term, a concept used by fatheads who want to impress people with their knowledge. Not my style. Because you see, when you get right down to it, the concept is quite simple, really."

"Simple... I'm not sure about that. In any case, I'm having trouble grasping the connection to the data I showed you."

"Oh, really? But I just... Ah, well, let me see if I can put it another way. Hmm... Okay, let's try this: the sensors detected a parallel universe, the one that I call the Quantang. It's a world that's different from our own, a sort of reflection of it, but with its own physical laws. But the two worlds are interconnected, and even interdependent, just like entangled particles." Sir Vine had laced his fingers together, then spread his hands, which were now intertwined. "As though they'd been woven together by a tailor-moth, you see?"

"Yes, now I see. So what do you have to do to go from one world to the other?"

"A powerful photon source would help."

"Could a plasma weapon serve the purpose?"

"Spot on! Ehm... except, well... there must be a less dangerous method. I would certainly hope so, anyway," Sir Vine opined, disentangling his hands to shrug his shoulders.

So Kora's plasma beam had actually made Shado's escape easier. In retrospect, Sassaki was all the more pleased that he'd confronted the Primus with weapons for hand-to-hand combat only.

"So with a sufficiently powerful energy source," the Genetic muses, summing things up, "you could establish a connection between Artellium and the Quantang, a sort of portal to pass through. That's it, right?"

"That's *exactly* it! On condition of being a photon, of course. No offense meant, but you don't really look much like a photon. This is all theoretical physics that we've been discussing. Only applicable to particles, not humans. Nor

cats,” he added with a chuckle: schaman humour, clearly.

“But that’s precisely what Shado, the Primus of Darkness, did.”

“Ah, well! I’m just a scientist, not a magus. My tools are differential equations, not arcane rituals.”

“But couldn’t those equations be the first step towards decoding their magic? Towards understanding how it works and, thereby, reproducing it?”

“Possibly. Somebody once said that when technology is advanced enough, it’s essentially magic... But still, it’s peculiar.”

“Why?”

“If the Arkhantans knew how to deliberately manipulate the fundamental laws of the universe... Oh no, I don’t want to think about it... Oh no, no, no.”

Sir Vine looked troubled all of a sudden, as though worry were crushing his features in a hydraulic press.

“Nobody has ever looked into this before?” Sassaki pressed on, determined to get at least one useful piece of information out of the conversation.

“Pursue theory for its own sake, with no commercial value? Why would anyone do that?”

Nevertheless, Sir Vine checked the archives via his retinal implant, which made him blink.

“How odd,” he exclaimed. “There actually was one other person with enough stars in their mind’s sky to do something that outlandish: Chaka! She did masses of research on the topic.”

“Chaka, the Genetic Legendary One?”

“Herself. She even had a polarizer device designed to detect the opening of the Quantang... What?!! I can’t believe it! She enlisted Gaupelle’s services, not mine!?!? Maximum vexation.”

“A passage-to-the-world-of-darkness detector, really? Would you know how to build one?”

“Obviously!”

That conversation had taken place two days before, so he

should be getting his hands on the detector without much further delay. Nothing else really mattered to Sassaki now, except wondering what else Chaka had kept secret from him. He doesn't conceal anything from ValRed, except perhaps his lack of interest in the fates of Hanzo and Ruby. Is that what's disturbing his pupil so?

"The road from Nephtys must have been long," Sassaki grants. "I will take care of having their ashes placed in the school's vault. Go rest."

"Infinite thanks, master. However, I only had to travel half the distance. I have come directly from the Rift." ValRed seems to want to segue directly onto another topic – what? Sassaki has no desire to find out – but in response to his master's furrowed brow, Valred goes on: "Malkah Solis has undertaken a journey there in hopes of understanding what is causing the degeneration of magic in Arkhante."

So Mantris isn't alone in facing a penury, Sassaki muses with surprise. Strange coincidence... unless it's not, and the two shortages are actually related? Just like the Quantang and the real world, Artellium's two civilisations might be a lot more alike than either one of them cares to admit.

Even if that were so, Sassaki remains convinced that neither the Mantri nor the Arkhantans would be facing these difficulties if they were only able, as he is, to show some restraint. In the end of the day, magic isn't really all that different from technology: they both alienate their users. The magi are hardly better than Mantris's fans of drugs and implants: they're all artificial trans-humans in some way, rather than actual accomplished humans.

All the more reason to defeat Shado, the magical transhumanist.

"Did you run into the Primus of Darkness?" Sassaki asks with feigned casualness.

"No, master. He has disappeared; no one knows where he is, not even the other Primi."

The thrill that runs up Sassaki's spine is harder to mask than

the tension in his voice. Is Shado still in the Quantang? If he could pinpoint the entrance with the polarizer, could he take up a position in front of the passageway and surprise the Primus when he attempts to return to the real world?

He stands up, copied immediately by ValRed, who bows to him. The captain is ready to strike the match, to set the rice paper on fire. He's got things to get off his chest, an emotion as thick and dark as coal tar churning in his stomach. He's going to spit it out, to start a bonfire of bitterness. He's ready, here he goes...

"Master, I..."

"Since such is your wish," Sassaki says, cutting him off, "I'll let you deal with Ruby and Hanzo's ashes yourself."

The warrior has more urgent things to worry about: getting the polarizer from Sir Vine before he can go back to the robotics factory where Shado had disappeared so mysteriously... The Genetic leaves his office with a lively, ample step, leaving the door open and his disciple's stomach feeling heavier than a shut-down fission reactor.

12.4

The one undeniable advantage to being equipped with a SIT is the feature that disconnects users automatically from any metaverse where they are being exposed to actual physical harm. Engineers have never managed to completely disassociate the mind from the body, so being subjected to pain and suffering in a virtual environment increases your chances of a stroke, heart attack or TIA. When, by popular consultation, automatic disconnection became compulsory, the number of shozen having cerebrovascular accidents, especially among extreme-sim-sports enthusiasts, was reduced to zero.

But Sasaki doesn't wear a SIT: never has, never will. When he's in a reVeRy, the only safety feature available to him is a profound knowledge of his own limits. It's not a problem for him, insofar as he never goes to any metaverses... with the notable exception of the virtual universe where Chaka hid her last will and testament.

Which just happens to be the most dangerous metaverse in the whole network.

Sasaki's persona – a reproduction that is faithful in all respects to the original – jams his sabre between the decorative flagstones, then sits on the ground in lotus position. The warrior needs to catch his breath, his body is close to breaking point. There's no way for him to check, yet

he is quite certain that in the real world, his ears and nose are bleeding, and his eyes probably are too. If his brain hadn't been optimally encephalized, the damage would already be irreversible. That's the price to pay to overcome the trials that will allow him to access the inheritance left by Chaka, whose successor as the Genetics' Legendary One has yet to be found.

An honour like that has to be earned. For twenty years now, Sassaki has been trying to reach the inner sanctum and discover the treasure of wisdom that Chaka left there for whoever could unearth. The test is open to people from all techstyles. Legend has it that even a magus gave it a try. Woe betide the unworthy, since the trials can be lethal... so lethal, in fact, that Chaka's metaverse weighed heavily in the debate about automatic disconnection. After two fruitless decades, Sassaki is one of the few who are still trying. He's also the one who has come the closest to the revelation... although even he still hasn't achieved it yet.

But now he will, for sure: the warrior has decided that he won't give up. Not this time.

Sir Vine's polarizer works, he checked it out by going back to the robotics factory. That changes everything. The vibrational signature of the World of Darkness – the famous “reduction of the wave package” that Sir Vine had referred to – is now available to him. So he is able to detect a passage to the Quantang – or whatever the Kingdom of Darkness's real name is. This is the closest he's ever been to catching up with Shado. And that's all he cares about any more: not Mantris's energy crisis or Arhax's coalition, not even his

school's future, or ValRed's... nothing but his revenge match with Shado.

He should question that obsession, explore it, determine what it reveals about him. Worry about it too, perhaps. But this is no time for distraction. He has a goal, an objective to reach. And that means getting his hands on Chaka's testament: his master knew about the existence of the World of Darkness, she may also have discovered Faust's flaws and weaknesses. He can't wait to find out what she was deliberately hiding from him.

And that is the reason for his presence in the metaverse. He won't leave it until he has reached his goal. He will not tolerate failure any more.

Wrists lying lightly on his lap, he's extending his little breather. He has overcome the seven trials of Jahan, the code of conduct of Chaka's school. Now Sassaki is facing the last test, the one that will pit him against the keeper of the secret, the final rampart protecting the Legendary One's legacy. A combat in which he has never yet prevailed.

Like the preliminary tests, thanks to the infinite possibilities of the metaverse, this last combat presents itself in a different appearance every time. In the event, Chaka in person is acting as his ultimate adversary today. Superb irony that only strengthens Sassaki's resolve. He will win... or he'll die trying.

The Chaka standing before him is true to his best memories of her, i.e. from before her hybridization with the genome of a crocodile. She still has that slightly arched silhouette, those incredibly sturdy muscles, and that ever-so

distinctive face: pug nose, subtly asymmetrical eyes, smile that reveals both flawless teeth and slightly misaligned incisors. A cascade of flaws that, paradoxically, give her a charmingly appealing singularity. In a techstyle that favours flawless beauty, the choice was daring. Rumour even has it that Chaka broke her own nose and teeth to overcome her progenitors' choice of features.

She's lying beneath a chimera tree. Its entanglement of vines and flowers is releasing a shower of stunning white petals. In a snub to her disciple, she's lolling amidst crocodiles, stroking their scales and occasionally slipping a hand between their jaws with their morbid-clown smiles.

The opponents are facing each other. The final combat can begin.

Sassaki considers leaping onto a crocodile and smashing its teeth to distract Chaka before striking her with a circular kick. The Legendary One rolls over another reptile, picking it up and throwing it at the warrior as easily as if it were a cushion.

So the warrior falls back on the idea of a frontal attack ending with a jump halfway up the tree, breaking off its trunk in one blow. The chimera tree falls down, surprising Chaka and enveloping her in a mist of petals. She still turns out to be less handicapped than Sassaki, to whom she had taught everything she knew about fighting blind.

Then the Genetic thinks about a frontal challenge, exhorting his master to strike first, promising not to dodge the blow. A barbaric, villainous, desperate manoeuvre, but one unexpected enough to open a new path to victory.

Stoically, he endures the bite from Croc, one of Chaka's two serrated-edged swords, inspired by a crocodile's jaw. Double whammy: not only does the attack take his breath away as it slams him in the chest, but the blow was struck with the flat and not the cutting edge, as though she were afraid to hurt him. With his morale shaken more than his body, Sasaki gives up.

All that thrusting and parrying is taking place while Chaka and Sasaki remain perfectly immobile. Their combat is mental, they're confronting each other in an onslaught of determination and will, like chess players plotting ten or twelve moves ahead without touching a single piece on the board.

At every attempt, Sasaki is implacably checkmated.

Knowing that only physical wounds in the metaverse cause traumatic brain injury in the real world, their mental jousting should be risk-free for the person reVeRying. In fact, their battle of wills is so intense that the harmful effects are every bit as great, and Sasaki is on the verge of slipping into a coma. If he were equipped with a SIT, he would already have been ejected from the virtual world and transported to a clinic.

In the metaverse, his persona remains impassive and focussed. But not relaxed, no, the exercise mobilizes too much energy for that. They're like two warriors with their sabres still sheathed who, poised in unstable equilibrium, are searching for the crack – and the crack in that crack – in their opponent's vigilance, ready to swoop like birds of prey at the first opportunity.

Shoulders tense, Sassaki suddenly has a flash of insight, a vision as fleeting as a blink of the eye that he manages to grasp nonetheless. He freezes it. Monopolizes it. Occupies it even, like a discreet tenant. He closes his eyes, the better to experience the waking dream, the petrified image that is so pure.

A hallucinatory revelation?

He pictures himself flying, gliding like a pyornis struggling not to be swept away by the wind, wings spread to their full span, pressing against... just nothing, like the one he watched from Il'ango's balcony. Bird of courage. Wild. Free like no other living being in Mantris.

That photo in his mind's eye is like an engraving: welcome, natural, healthy, unretouched, unique and unreproducible, not born of any techno.

But when you get right down to it, is he really struggling?

He thinks about Kora, who thought she could defeat Shado with a plasma gun, when she was actually providing the Primus with exactly what he needed most. Out of the question for him to make the same sad mistake.

Has he taken the right stance? But what stance? That awful "countering," the "endure, no matter what, to conquer or perish?" Do something even if it kills you. Win. Fight against those who are stronger and never give up, with the excuse that you have no choice, it's your mission, it's a test. Revel in unmeasurable pain to the point that it becomes pleasurable.

ValRed's strange expression comes back to mind: "Hanzo was in precisely the right place"... and yet it killed him.

Is Chaka dead, too? Did Faust slay her? Did his master fail? But then... what does failure mean? Isn't it time for him to admit that the most obvious answer might be the right one? Is this ersatz Legendary One produced by the metaverse just a digital phantom, a pixelated corpse, or is it... just nothing? How can he, who loathes everything virtual, be ready to die confronting a digital version of the person he admires most in the world?

Does he even still admire her, now that he knows she hid crucial information from him? Was she trying to protect him from danger by not requiring him to accompany her on the fateful day that put a stop to the Heroes' War? Or did she think he wasn't worthy?

How is it that he, who prides himself on being such a noble warrior, is only now calling himself into question, after twenty years of wondering about Chaka? Because his star pupil stopped calling him "Master?" For that matter, how long ago was it that he himself dropped the capital M when he thought about Chaka?

Master Sasaki, the valiant warrior who never surrenders, the indestructible, self-sacrificing plodder brimming over with abnegation, suddenly feels exhausted. In this sterile, virtual universe, he realizes that dying for your beliefs doesn't actually prove that they were right. And unexpectedly, as though the ground had suddenly caved in beneath his feet, he gives up his pointless struggle. He lets himself get sucked in by the surprisingly pleasant sensation of renunciation. Like a bioost running through his veins, an exoskeleton massaging him, or an implant updating his thought-ware. He

lets himself be penetrated. Engulfed. Cajoled. He espouses non-action, a marriage of convenience that turns instantly into love.

He won't pursue this combat, nor will he ever come back to it. He's letting go, accepting not-doing. Delighting in not-struggling. He liberates himself. Allows himself not to want to hear his master's last wishes. His whole life long he has advocated sparseness and minimalism, now he's taking that all the way to renunciation.

Like the pyornis, he turns around, goes down wind, embraces his natural place. The right place. He lets go. Lets himself slide into the powerful element that's giving itself to him and that doesn't use a gram of trisel.

Such is Sasaki's feat, the most resounding of all his success. Conquering, conquering himself – not because he's the strongest, but because he's the wisest. He has won the most demanding of duels: the one against himself. Not straining any more, but letting himself be carried along instead.

For an instant as silky as the shower of white petals enveloping Chaka, as fleeting as a glitch in a faulty program, his persona is as at peace with itself as a human being can be. The emotion crystallizes into a tear glistening at the corner of his eyelids, which have closed with relief, the relief of a patient who has been suffering for a terribly long time and who has just been miraculously freed from pain.

“At last, Sasaki. At last.”

Sasaki opens his eyes. He can finally see. There she is.

Chaka.

Chaka, standing, before him, stretches out her hand with a smile.

“Finally. Come.”

Behind the chimera tree, a portal opens...

SWIVELUME

.die to want don't I

.scared I'm

.revenge my get will I .him kill to going I'm

.traitor a is Aurelius

Dead? I don't want to die, I'm not ready, my time hasn't come yet, I'm scared.

I'm so scared.

No! I'm not dead!

Yet death is in the air. There, and there, the way the air moves, the air from the peaks, the heavy, ashy suffocating, blooming, congested and...

Hold on a second... that sky... Is she back in Cendraise?

Flashback. The fiery teen arriving at Hernum School of Fire in the middle of a volcanic eruption, the sky laden with opaque ashes and ephemeral embers like so many diabolically blinking eyes.

The terrible curse burns her throat like hard liquor, her eyes with rage tears, her stomach with guilt. Asha! She's dead, and she killed her! Vengeance! Any unfair death must be avenged! Even against yourself.

Vapours of memory. Memory of vapours, from the volcanos of Cendraise, frozen puffs of breath during winter training in the

mountains of Acongua so extreme it devours your skin.

Vapours of vapours. Vapours of grains of sorrow, anger, pity. Vapours of grain alcohol, alcohol by the bottomless barrellful. Plonk drunk to the bitter dregs, melt that hadn't even been fermented, adulterated liqueurs and hectolitres of hatred that made her throw her guts and her fists up ... Until she came up against a warlock, a behemoth who didn't let anyone get in his way. His face, the granite gaze of his eyes... That day, the two of them destroyed an inn and built a friendship. Hannibal and... and...

Sarash! My name is Sarash, and I'm here because... No! I'm so scared... Mama said I mustn't die... because I... I am the fire incarnate!

Fire incarnate? Then why is everything extinguished inside her? The quaking makes her tears tremble, her cheeks cold and ashen.

Her mission, her determination, her purpose... all buried as deep as magma beneath the earth's crust, instantly expelled from her mind by an eruption, reduced to cinders by the inferno of lava, blown through the crater pulverized by the explosion, spewed out in a bulbous plume of thick, greasy smoke, propelled into the atmosphere having become clouds devoured by the clouds. Clouds, clouds everywhere the clouds.

Like noxious fumes in her throat. Chasing the air from her lungs. Suffocating her. 'Til she doesn't know what she's feeling. Burning cold?

It's death. I'm in the land of death.

Memory death. Death without eternal silence, she senses she's surrounded by sounds hissing at all her sense. Laughter, tears, fluttering phantom "fff's" fanning her fears.

What ifff the dead remember?

She has to. Wants to. Remember. Something important to do. Someone to warn... maybe... she knows... doesn't know... not any more... Maybe not. It's there, fragile and flickering like a flame in

a hurricane lamp, sheltered from the storm by no more than a thin pane of glass. That certainty keeps her warm, she huddles around it, making sure not to snuff it out, despite her irresistible need for warmth in this cold, hostile place.

Good grief, where IS she?

Around her, everything is a cottony substance of heavy black clouds, a storm brewing and becoming swollen with flashes... she can't even say which way is up and which is down, a sense of vertigo, weightlessness, wretched weightlessness that spins your stomach and rolls your eyeballs like marbles where's the fixed point that will help her not fall not fly not exhale her fear into cloud haze more clouds there's enough clouds around her everything's cottony substance of heavy black clouds

Move. Death is cold, absolute zero, the moment when all moving matter freezes still. As long as you're moving, you're not dead, so move!

A first hesitant, trembling, dizzying step. But a first step nevertheless, sole placed on a vaporous unsubstantial haze, not the void, but hardly more.

Shake your booty, Sarash, if you're not dead, pull yourself up by your bootstraps!

It feels like she's walking on a sheet of glass that isn't one, a mirrored wall where her reflection sees the real her beneath her feet. Who cares, she's moving forward without falling.

Indecisive, afraid of falling from walking too far on the nebulous swollen bellies, she – *my name is Sarash!* – is searching for a way through the shadows. The cumuli seem to be dispersing from the keenness of her gaze... but that only reveals more shadows behind those shadows, dotted here and there with white fires blinking like eyelids.

Slagheap world. Darkness is surrounding and enveloping her. But this darkness has a texture to it, lush shades that verge on colour. The sky that's neither up nor down is a slate roof with

moist highlights, a roof beneath which the cumulo-fumaroles, like diluted ink stains, are still swelling. So that's what it's like. That's the exact texture of death. Diluted ink mouldering belowground, belownothing, sticking to your fingers and shivering.

If I'm alive, spark's word, it's not for long.

Feeling her way along, she's following the glittering granules of a flow of bitumen, ignoring the shapeless shoulders and chaotic itinerary to turn it into a road out. Every step, she skids. Every step, she slips, nearly falls into a hole the size of a point... of no return, trembles. Every step is the last; every pause, the first.

You're alive, your fear is telling you so.

She's searching like a mastiff that has lost its owner, scratching at every surface, running towards all the nearly elevated parts. No way out does she find, but it looks like she's following the right path: it's even got a milestone!

She's closing in on the mark, she leaps over the cottony void to spare herself a long meander in the path, runs without really knowing why... stops in front of a tumulus that comes no higher than her hips.

A landmark! A signpost showing the way out!

In the uniformity with a thousand eyes-closed-coloured variations, the marker glows like a pale sun with knife-sharp edges cut into the winter sky. The marker is a three-dimensional crystallin efflorescence, a sort of monochromatic coral to cling to in this murky misty sea of brown. Everything is hazy here, but the marker is hovering: peaceful, precise, present. A punctuation in the senseless chaos.

A punctuation... Like Asha who breathes in, her dimples, breathes out, her hand on my chest to calm my panic, breathes in, her fingers laid flat on my skin, breathe out, her palms are my outline, breathe in.

She tames her breath, – *I'm a magus, I'm an expert at*

controlling my breathing! – focuses. Unmoving is the marker, but all around it, everything is spinning, in her stomach, too, and in her head, her eyes, it's spinning, the vertigo of an ever-changing landscape woven from thousands of organic rhizomes surging forward or beating a hasty retreat, sometimes both at once... an incoherent path along the surface of this crystal-coral-marker that summons the road she's following in vain, the road that wanders with neither rhyme nor reason through the endless, flawless, weightless mist.

Si-fon-fi-her-flee-for-dre

Eye-fall

O-ree-shun

*O-ree-sun*¹

The sound, a sort of nursery rhyme being chanted by a child's voice, is coming from the marker. It's a warm, rousing tune – which draws her in instantly, like huddling under a blanket on a lazy morning. Muffled by the fog, deformed by the absence of echoes and parasitic sounds saturating her ears, it comes across as background music rather than as a message. A song to fall asleep by, weaving through her phases of sleep and wakefulness?

I'm dreaming!

Si-fon-fi-her-flee-for-dre

Eye-fall

¹ Translator's note: We have done our best to render this mysterious, magical poem into English. Nevertheless, for those who would like to read the original French-inspired text of the poem, here it is:

Si-fon-feu-fon-fou-fo-fuir

po-pièr-tomb

o-ré-son

o-ré-son

O-ree-shun

O-ree-sun

I'm dreaming!

But Shado knows he's not. Even at death's door, deprived of pranah for a moon, he can tell the difference between death and the Invermonde. He hasn't died, but someone has drawn him into the Kingdom of Darkness, where invokers are lords and the Primus, an emperor.

He's not dreaming, he's surveying the Invermonde, that other reality that isn't Arkhante.

His mind is near a lightrack, one of those stela that former Primi erect upon their death, while his physical body is resting somewhere, struggling to heal the wounds received during the confrontation with Sassaki.

He's not worried about the place where his battered body is resting, he couldn't give a dam, there is nothing but pain and suffering there. Long-term companions he has come to know well, but, despite the years, has never learned to love. He stays far away from them, deliberately, like an ascetic who deprives himself of everything in order to stay focused on himself. But despite his withdrawing inwards, he can't help hearing them babbling about his fate, their voices slipping through the cracks in his comatose consciousness.

"How is he doing?"

"Samson?! What are you doing here? I thought you'd gone to the greenhouse?"

"Yeah, right. That was like two and some-odd hours ago! All sorts of crazy stuff has happened since then, believe you me!"

"Two *hours*? I've been with him the whole time, I didn't see the time going by..."

"Yeurk! My, my, Carya, you have taken a tumble for the seeping warrior! You're making googly love-love eyes at a stinky

suppurating wound! Yeurk-yeurk and yeurk!”

It’s just a kid humming more ironically than musically. Nothing to do with the chant in the Invermonde.

“Hush! You’re going to wake him up.”

“As if that’s not exactly what you want – for him to wake up, so you can take *such* good care of him!”

They’re talking about him, Shado the convalescent. There’s an attentive, worried, tired woman.

This is nothing like a conversation between pain and suffering though. So who’s talking? He needs to know if he’s in danger, in which case he needs to force himself awake. Take action, endure more suffering in order not to die.

He keeps his eyes closed to force his memory, because he knows that bright light always offers bad advice. He listens to the sounds, breathes in the scents... two powerful memory activators.

His caretakers! Samson – a kid with an affable appearance, a bonfire of sassiness in his eyes, and a scent of topsoil – and Carya – a radiant smile, generosity so spontaneous it seems supernatural, almost off-putting, scent of nard. They’ve been tending to him ever since... since... his defeat against Sassaki!

“Shut UP I told you, you eejit, come help me with him instead of talking nonsense.”

“Yeurk, that wound is really gross! Nothing has turned my stomach in weightmessness mode like that since I can’t remember when. It’s like he fell into the Top Croesus of filth, even though there’s no shortage of that in daRift!

“Yes, I know, thank you very much. But don’t overdo it. Why don’t you help me turn him over instead?”

“Aargh, that wound is gonna make me lose my lunch!— did you SEE the scab???? Oh, GROSS, don’t touch it! Why don’t you leave it alone?”

“He’ll suffocate if we leave it purulating like that. His lung is

affected. I've tried everything, I don't understand why the wound won't heal."

"Your dark 'handsome' stranger stinks. He smells mouldy, I swear I'm going to throw up!"

"I'm warning you, you better not."

"It wouldn't be any worse than this stinkbomb. It's foul, I swear!"

"Samson, that's enough!"

"I bet you ten big ones I can pass his scabs off as amber."

"Remind me how many times I've told you to give up on that idea?"

"Remind me since when I listen to what you tell me to do?"

"Samson... You want to be the Little Prince of Thieves, but think! The gangs will be furious if they realize you scammed them. And who do you think they'll take their anger out on?"

"Those guys have mush for brains, Carya. Nothing's gonna' happen at all, they're wimps. They smoke styrene and see winged pink peacocks everywhere! So before they notice fake amber..."

"Well, but if they believe you, it'll be even worse! Shado'll wind up hanging by his feet with kids no bigger than you harvesting the sap oozing from his wound every day. His death will be on your conscience. And mine, too, because I won't let them do it!"

"Ah ah, I knew it! You've got a crush on him, right? You go all mushy inside when you look at him, don't you? Eww, she's blushing! I got your number!"

Samson starts humming again. He loves that, he's always humming. It gives him a somewhat cheeky self-confidence. And since Carya protested so lamely, it means he wasn't completely off target.

Too bad for Carya if she's becoming attached to him, that's her problem, not his. Shado hasn't got time for that sort of nonsense, someone's calling for him in the Invermonde. His fate was sealed years ago: he's not a man, he's the Primus of

Darkness.

13.2

Si-fon-fi-her-flee-for-dre

Eye-fall

O-ree-shun

O-ree-sun

Fire... Hearing it again, she definitely recognizes one word this time: *fire*. She clings to it, sinks her claws into it, keeps it from slipping from her grasp too soon, like a cat playing with a mousekin, knowing she'll devour it as soon as she tires of the game. *Fire*, why does that word call out to her so powerfully?

My name is Sarash, and I am the Primus of Fire!

Like a log tossed into her mind, that certainty makes her thoughts flare up.

And I must... I must...

A vulgar straw fire that leaves her frustrated, and totally ignorant of the mission that's burning her up as invisibly and stubbornly as a peat fire.

There are still so many sounds missing, keeping her from understanding what the chanted words mean. Blanks in the poem, blanks in her memory, insolent blanks breaking up the density of all those shades of black.

Frustration is simmering inside her, steaming and seething and making her head shake like the cover of a pot that's boiling over. She clings to that inner fire, that fire inside her, the fire in her belly, the fighting-spirit fire, the fire that defines her, that is her essence, her steam engine that keeps rolling through the days.

Focus, follow your fire, your flag.

She uses the most infinitesimal movements of the matter to guide her, confident in her hypersensitivity to the warmth

born of the particles rubbing together. The question of where it's guiding her hasn't been answered yet, but that doesn't matter as much as the idea that she's got to keep moving.

Unable to know if she's walking on the ceiling or hanging from a wall, she follows the graphite grooves, lines of grey dust drawn before her, calligraphy of her confusion. One step, and then another one, on those pencil lines, memories flooding in, pounding on her temples. One step, and then another one, her mind a blurry carousel, walking kaleidoscope feeling her way, without falling, without chundering. The sweat on her palms is liquid fear.

And still the chant is resonating in the distance, coming from every direction at once, as haunting and elusive as a dream upon awakening.

Suddenly the vertical horizon is barred by a vein of a colour that doesn't exist in real life, a crude vein. A breeze without air and the clouds part. She finds herself in front of a river of glimmering anthracite, frozen on the surface, a strip of obsession-inducing sharpness, keen, in a not-black black that could make you go blind. Pupils glued to the hypnotic line, a different kind of dizziness assails her.

She had convinced herself she wasn't dead, but...

Beneath the frosty crust swirl the shadows of silhouettes with faces deformed by despair, rage, shame, anxiety, disgust... a vile stew of every dark emotion the soul can feel. A father cradles his dead daughter on his lap, a terrorized woman is hiding beneath a porch, a man abandons the pedestrian he just crushed beneath the wheels of his chariot, a little girl hides her hands to try to forget her mother's blows and curses, a couple destroys their voices with shouting and their love with cheating, a teenager wipes his clogs on the face of another young man lying on the

ground, a thief throws his bloody knife into a lake while tucking a meagre purse into his coat, a princess casts a last, mournful glance at the stable-boy she's not allowed to see ever again, an old man whose fingers and nose are turning black from the Plague is tearing at his skin as his devastated wife looks on, a magus accidentally kills another one because she loses control of a spell she's casting...

Sarash's hand leaps to the burned skin on her throat, trying to hold back the scream she can't help letting out. She crumbles, lands on her knees, cradling her head in despair and panic. Possessed by the idea that she's dead, or that she's in between the two worlds, stuck eternally at the gates of hell, she sobs uncontrollably. Her face contorted with pain, she lacerates it to hide the suffering. Fear and snot gush from her nostrils, snot without sparks or embers, snot devoid of any fire, snot from a snot-nosed punk who's completely useless. She wishes she could heave all that into a river, let it float away on the tide of abandoned memories.

"No, no, NO! I CAN'T die! I have a mission! I must... I must... SHITFIRE AND DAMNATION! I... I must...!"

In the river of the dead, the indifferent ghosts keep floating on by. Uninterrupted hordes of phantoms... and in the midst of all that anguish, an angel.

"Sarash? Sarash, is that you?"

The angel is speaking to her from the beyond, haloed in an aura of light that's blinding in the perma-dark with its thousand shades of black.

A demon looms at her side, a tenebrous presence of pitch blackness.

"What do you mean, 'Sarash'? She's dead! Who are you talking to?"

"Aurelius, listen. Don't you hear Sarash?"

Aurelius? SOLIS?

“Solis!” Sarash screams with all her might, “I’m here, Solis! Run! Hide! Aurelius is a whorson of a traitor! He...”

“I can’t hear you, Sarash. Where are you?”

“He.... killed me... I... I’m dead.”

“Use my voice to guide you, Sarash!”

Then the angel and the demon get carried away by the whirlwind, leaving her alone in the chill of oblivion. The solitary chill of the grave.

Alone with the ghosts in the river once again... The tears dry on her cheeks, tugging at her skin, and the hole in her throat won’t close up. She stretches out on the strange ground, that matter with no texture or feel to it, stroking her hands over it without understanding, surprised by the nostalgia for ashes on her fingertips: tangible, rough, cold ashes. Here, she can’t feel a thing. Nothing alive. She shivers. No one to collect her body, no one to put her ashes in the urn, no one to touch the urn as they leave home every day, no one to stoke her fire-memory. In the Fire arkhme, they say that you’re really dead the day that no one rekindles you every morning. She is being extinguished, and the theatre is empty. Already her gut is but an ember, not even the slightest spark tickling her throat. She closes her eyes, relaxes her muscles that had been tense with anxiety until then. Perhaps her fire has already gone out.

Si-fon-fi-her-flee-for-dre

Eye-fall

O-ree-shun

O-ree-sun

No!

She might be dead, but her name is Sarash! She is the Primus of Fire! And the flames of vengeance are blazing

inside her!

Fire...

All at once, the meaning of the words of the chant finally make sense:

Sigh upon fire, flee for trees

Everything is suddenly crystal clear: she has to use her last breath to fan the flames, to re-energize herself so she can flee, back to the real world where trees offer fuel for strong fires. She might not understand the rest of the chant, but who cares? The first line confirms her initial, intuitive thought: trust in fire, in heat, follow the sources of light.

Past a meander in the river, a whitely glowing light is throbbing like a heartbeat. She has seen fleeting flashes of light here and there, but this one is far stronger than all the others. It's like a cumulus expanding and contracting in an endless loop, with a spinning lantern at the centre. She – *my name is Sarash, I am the Primus of Fire and I have to warn Solis!* – heads that way, guided by that quivering light like a ship wanting to reach safe harbour.

The impossible darkness surrounds her. The chimera colour unfurls itself, an ocean without a shore. Dry. The colour of kohl at the bottom of a marble jar. Or not quite. More like a fold in a dark, moiré fabric, the colour of a dragonfly's wings on a moonless night. No, but that's almost it. More like the black of lava a fraction of a second before it has cooled completely. The distant beacon is throbbing, calling her. Unable at times to see her own feet in the textureless swamp, she's walking. Obsessed by the contrast between this nameless blackness and the warm light in the distance. A pseudo-fire to warm the cockles of her heart.

Right away, she knows she has made the right choice. Right

away, for the first time since she's been wandering in this other world, she runs across rustling life.

She only becomes aware of it in contrast, even now, no sounds live in that spot: her soles don't squeak on anything, her own breath is muffled to the point of inaudibility, everything is reacting as though the ambient air didn't have the consistency needed for an echo. A supernatural silence reigns, pierced only by that overpowering, half-understood chant coming from everywhere and nowhere at once.

Her hearing isn't the only sense affected. She can't feel anything more solid than mist, has no idea what she's walking on – she refrains from trying to find out, out of fear of learning that she really ought to be tumbling through an endless void. Only the slightest scents tickle her nostrils, bland, faded fragrances, washed out by an atmosphere saturated with damp. Mould and rot, old fermenting alcohol too, sinister evocations of embalming and the tomb.

Since her panic attack earlier, her feelings have fallen into a doze, rocked into drowsiness by the muffled, tamped-down environment, drained of colour and life. The truest sign of that is that all those clues that she's beyond the grave aren't frightening her, well, not any more, anyway. Another change.

Suddenly, around the cloud glowing from the inside, whose edges quiver like the skin of a drum being banged on, she glimpses a small flock of fowl flapping and prowling like starving scavengers. She can hear them yelping – an ambiguous omen that could mean death or life, which she chooses to interpret as a good sign. They swarm around the white heart, the vibration-and-vapour skin, smashing into its nebulosity like a distracted songbird blundering into a pane of glass, rising with a rustling of velvet towards the sky in a swirl that flares wider and wider, like an inverted siphon coiling hastily towards the plug at the bottom of a vat.

She creeps warily closer, her head slightly inclined, like a prudent explorer. Pressed up against the undulating surface of the siphon, insects with harpy wings are drawing glyphs on the cloud, that cloud that's throbbing so bright: an ephemeral cuneiform language that's beyond her means to decipher. The creatures elude her gaze, the instant you try to look at one, they disappear from sight. She learns to observe them sideways, from the corners of her eyes, in those furtive spaces on the periphery of attention, the edges of awareness. It enrages her not to be able to read the messages, not to understand them the way she managed to understand the secret of the chant. Where she had been feeling next to nothing, she's suddenly afraid of going mad if she has to stay here much longer.

In her line of vision, the fowl have dispersed, chased away by her curiosity. They reveal a whole section of the white, flameless fire, revealing images...

Images she knows practically by heart. The ones that open the combats at the Appologium every year.

The duel between Chaka and Faust.

The two legends are there, within arm's reach, prisoners of the nebulosity, like an Arkhont prism projecting their famous final clash: The two adversaries are facing each other, their faces twisted with pain, as blood spurts from between their clenched teeth. Chaka, blinded, while Faust's chest is impaled on her two serrated blades. An embrace that's both cruel and magnificent, self-sacrifice that transcends and inspires.

She has no way of knowing if it's really them, or just an image. She'd like to touch them to be sure, talk to them, ask them what they're doing there, if they're dead too... but it's hard to get past the barrier of voracious beasts massed around the heroes.

She's about to give up, when she sees Chaka tug abruptly

on the swords to remove them from Faust's chest. The previous Primus of Darkness grabs his adversary's right arm, since the blade's barbs could rip his heart out. But the other sword comes out in a silence that only amplifies the atrocious pain he must be enduring. Chaka tosses the bloody sword far away, so far that it disappears from sight. Faust falls to his knees while the genetic Legendary One, lost, tries to pierce with her blind eyes the mysteries of this world in black-and-black.

Stunned spectator, Sarash discover images that none other has ever seen. The rest of the combat, the one that was supposed to answer the question, "Which one is more powerful: technology or magic?"

Chaka and Faust aren't dead. Sarash is still having a hard time believing that they are right there in front of her eyes... Chaka and Faust are alive. And she's alive too! A match strikes behind her navel...

With a resolute step, she strides towards the whirlpool of light that's imprisoning them, ready to tear through the wall of vultures with her teeth if need be. She has to talk to them. A fever has taken hold of her, a feverish hope blazing.

Si-fon-fi-her-flee-for-dre

Eye-fall

O-ree-shun

O-ree-sun

A fever has taken hold of him, devouring his flesh like a funeral pyre.

"He's burning hot, and he keeps twisting and turning... I can't just let him keep on suffering like this."

"You can't or you won't?"

At the threshold of his consciousness, Shado can sense

Samson and Carya's presence at his bedside. He's struggling not to join them, but to stay with Sarash, who's a prisoner of the Invermonde. Only the most hardened invocers can survive the chimera of the Kingdom of Darkness, especially ever since the War of Heroes wreaked such profound changes on its geography, which, due to its ever-evolving rhizomic was already unstable by its very nature.

If he doesn't stay with her, Sarash is bound to commit a fatal error.

"He's delirious with fever, he's calling for our help," Carya insists. The quavering in her voice is enough to express her concern.

"Nah, he's not delirious, he's singing some kind of song. A chant, or a nursery rhyme, something like that."

"Are you sure?"

"How should I know? But it sounds like... like.."

"Enough! I refuse to let him die. Help me."

Shado is trying desperately to anchor the shadow of his shadow to the swivelume, that vortex that's drawing Sarash in like a flame attracting a moths. But Carya's efforts are too gentle, too sincere, too soothing... a lot more so than his determination to help Sarash.

He has never cared for pain and suffering, but at least they're familiar. Unlike the topsy-turvy Invermonde, which has turned into the great unknown. Uncertain. Alarming. Ever-changing – to the point that even the lightrocks left by previous Primi of Darkness are no longer reliable landmarks – the Invermonde has turned into a mutant kingdom, a ferocious beast made even more terrifying by its degenerative disease.

Let alone that pain and suffering have changed, too. They're called Carya and Samson now. And he might very well be able to learn to appreciate those two.

“Look, he’s waking up!”

“Watch out for his wound.”

“Yes, m-o-o-m.”

A soft, warm hand is dabbing at his side with a moist cloth. He is engulfed by agony, a return in living colour to his faded sensations and dark thoughts. Feeling things procures him a bracingly electrifying sense of well-being. The reunion with reality was long overdue.

And, as always, the Invermonde keeps his memories to itself, preserving in saline the dreams that are the salt of humanity.

“Pleased to finally meet you, Shado.”

“I’m Samson, and, uh... she’s Carya.” The kid is too scared to let the slightest silence settle, so he rattles on without giving the patient a chance to reply, “You are Shado, aren’t you?” Barely pausing for breath. “See, Carya? I was right! You’re a legend, man!”

“Samson, please!”

Without seeming to have heard her, Samson goes on excitedly, “I saw hacked copies of your fight with Sassaki. Dam, you’re a real heavyweight, my man!” Samson starts miming the combat, leaping around inside the tent that’s littered with material, knocking over a battery-powered camp stove that Carya rights, objecting half-heartedly. “It was wild, you’re in a league of your own. Nobody else could do what you did, not nobody, not no how! Not even a gang guy.” He goes down on one knee, and freezes with his hands over his head, palms pressed together as though in prayer – or to stop an imaginary nanofilament sword. “Even a whole gang couldn’t stop you! Not even two! Nobody can stop you in fact, right Shado? Right? What could stop you besides yourself, huh? And even that, I’m not so sure...”

“Samson, that's enough now. Leave him some air. He needs

to rest.”

“You think so? I don’t, I think he needs to get jazzed up. He’s had enough rest, he’s been sleeping for days. Am I right or am I right, man?”

“How long?”

Shado’s deep, solemn voice casts a chill that manages to cool even the kid’s enthusiastic ardour.

Not being the type to repeat himself, Shado does a quick analysis of his whereabouts. Ramshackle tent, salvaged Mantri material, a few odd magical objects and potions, musky, dusty smell, and the bustle of a caravanserai outside the tent flaps... He’s obviously in the Rift, in a favela of a certain size. He’s not a gambling man, but if he had to bet, he’d say Desner.

Alongside the cot he’s lying on, there’s a stack as big as his fist of crusty amber. Seeing it rekindles the pain in his flank, where it was slashed by Sassaki’s sabre. He feels drained, without a drop of pranah, more fragile than a foal struggling to stand for the first time. He strokes his chin, where his beard has grown so long and thick that it isn’t even scratchy any more. How is it possible that he feels so weak after such a long stay in the Invermonde? He should be feeling completely refreshed!

His recollections of his time in the Kingdom of Darkness are already evaporating, fading like the light during a solar eclipse.

Where did that image come from? Why it rather than some other? It’s not random, more like an echo from his memory. Sun... light... warmth... Someone’s there, someone female. She’s a prisoner, there’s a fire in the Invermonde that shouldn’t be there... Fire! For Darkness’s sake! Sarash is a captive of the Invermonde!

“Did I say anything?”

“Yeah, you were chanting some kind of rhyme,” Samson answers hastily.

He yelps when Shado grabs his arm, like a serpent biting its prey.

“Which one? Sing it!”

“I... I don’t know, I couldn’t understand the words. It sounded like ‘Si-fi-fon-fon-fi-fi-fortree...’”

Shado relaxes, nearly sighing with relief. What Samson imitated approximately, disturbed by the rhyme’s seemingly nonsense syllables, is instantly recognizable to him.

Siphon fire, flee: forgery.

He transmitted the right message to Sarash. She mustn’t trust her instinct as Primus of Fire. She must absolutely flee the swivelume: the siphon of fire will kill her if she penetrates it.

Flee, Sarash, flee the siphon-fire forgery.

Thank Magic, he warned her in time...

VERTICAL RIVALRIES

Hannibal never crawls in front of anyone. It's not about being overly proud, no. It's that sturdy, inflexible Hannibal is the unshakable foundation, the ground that allows others to crawl. After all, he's the Primus of the Earth, isn't he?

Then what in Earth's name is he doing up here, flattened against the wall of the Gravlev? He never should have attempted to climb this wretched building, as treacherous and dilapidated as the rest of the Rift.

His chin rubbing the wall, he tips his head back to check up on his fellow climbers, three floors above him. Guided by a foolhardy Aurelius, Solis is barrelling to the top, leaving him far behind. She and Aurelius are both moving at a strange angle, scuttling like crabs, victims of the gravity that has a mind of its own here.

A mind of 'its' own... like Solis lately.

He simply can't leave her alone with him. He's not trustworthy. The guy reeks of betrayal from ten rods away. So it's out of the question!

Hannibal mutters to himself, releases his anger in a long sigh, to reduce the pressure, like the furnaces in Cendraise that were so dear to Sarash.

His frustration over getting outpaced so easily is boiling and swirling inside the huge cauldron where the hard-to-digest soup of the sentiments he's feeling is simmering. Let alone that the blend has been spoiled by his growing fear of falling, a taste that's stronger than all the rest. His fear is like a pinch of salt that turned into a heaping spoonful when the lid of the salt shaker came off.

The building is tall, taller than the drakiary in Nephtys. He's already reached the sixth floor, there's at least ten rods of air beneath his feet. At this point, turning around is as dangerous as going on... Despite the fact that aside from the broken windows, with their treacherous shards of glass, the wall is supernaturally smooth, without the slightest joint. He can cling to the fissures running haphazardly across it, occasionally get a grip on a corbel with mouldings polished by erosion, but most of the time he can't count on anything more than a slight roughness to help him make progress. How on Earth – or in the Rift is more like it – does that hagtard Aurelius do it?

Eyes glued to his disciple, who's progressing with the ease of a mountain goat, Hannibal still can't unlock Aurelius's secret. Even his stone eye can't decipher the Rifter's vibratory signature. What magic is he using? Not the Earth's that's for sure. No way! Tumul was wrong; Aurelius hasn't got a warlock's bone in his body. A disciple? Even less so. The whole thing reeks of rotting compost, and Hannibal's going to prove it.

In the meantime, he's being taunted by the gibes and jeers of a mob of kids scrambling over the Gravlev as effortlessly as ants climbing a tree. Girls and boys are swarming around him – at a safe distance – like scavengers keeping an eye on prey that's larger than they are. Hannibal's trying to ignore them, but their foolhardy ease only emphasizes his own

ungainly climbing technique. He knows bloody well that scaling the Gravlev is a sort of rite of passage here, a way for young Riftians to prove their courage, so the first third of the Gravlev is familiar territory for the most of them, but he still can't help admiring their crazy derring-do. He wishes he were a local who was familiar with the territory, too, someone who could be speeding along instead of hauling himself around like a burden.

In the meantime, Solis is getting further and further away.

Suddenly, that observation overwhelms all the rest. She is growing away... from him.

That reality catches him off-guard, knocking him off his feet as indifferently as a landslide. Right there, clinging to a crumbling wall for dear life, being blown around by a gritty wind that usually caresses him but here is abrading and polishing him down to his very soul, that simple truth hits him full force: for moons now, Solis has been keeping her distance. She's leaving the nest and flying with her own wings, leaving him standing heavily on his rock, deprived of heat, cooling slowly until he petrifies. It turns out he was just a phase for her – an important one, he hopes; foundational, he'd like to believe, but over now, in any case. If a distance has grown between them, it's because she's dashing ahead, while he's just crawling along.

Time has taken its toll, and the rock has turned to sand running through an hourglass. And he's stubbornly trying to slow the grains of sand down instead of turning the glass over.

He can't take any more, he has to stop watching Aurelius and Solis leaving him behind. So he straightens his neck into a more natural position. Struggling not to look down, he rubs his cheek hard against the wall to keep himself from peeking between his feet. The scratching of a three-day beard

awakens echoes inside the building, revealing the nature of the structure: a network of steel bars running through the whole building. The Gravlev was built by the Mantri decades ago. Those sons of silicon had so little faith in their cement that they poured it over a metal framework. Hannibal can grasp its vibratory nuance at the core of the earthen building material. So their famous Gravlev is nothing but a spindly giant whose flesh is a mix of gravel, sand and lime. A colossus with limbs of clay.

And that's what he's supposed to be afraid of? What a sad joke!

Hannibal bursts into gales of liberating laughter. Granted, he's been dawdling. He got off to a slow start, but it's not too late. He may be slow, but it's because he's implacable. And now that he realizes what a pathetic opponent the Gravlev is, nothing is going to keep him from catching up with the pack.

Five rods above him, Aurelius hears Hannibal shrieking like a madman. Instinctively, he shifts his weight onto the edge of a moulding, aligning his pelvis with the local weightmessness, and winds up facing half downwards, as at ease as a lizard basking on a wall. He sees the Primus clinging nervously to the wall as though he were trying to fuse with it, his limbs trembling. Is it cramps? A panic attack? A fit of anger? Unless it's just that Hannibal has finally understand which of them is the master, and which the pupil.

Because here, halfway up the Gravlev, Aurelius is all-powerful. Gravity is his servant, and now he knows the words to command it.

The gladiator doesn't know how to read, no one ever took the trouble to teach him, and he's never seen the point. He suddenly realizes the scope of his mistake, now that he knows how to decipher the subtle variations in forces of attraction, now that he can interpret Gravity's infinitesimal

vibrations. He has thrown the spell book of the laws of nature wide open, and he can re-write the rules however he pleases. It's still instinctive, a hesitant copy, an imitation that's still a limitation, but he swears he's going to learn so he can move as quickly as possible up from the lowly rank of scribe to the more appealing one brilliant illuminator.

Will the Council approve of his developing his powers? Isalys was initiated into the Magic of Light, will he be granted the same opportunity? Solis would allow it – bizarrely, he has his doubts about the Council, but not about her. Yes, but he's the one who wouldn't allow himself to do that. No matter what he does, he feels weighed down by his loyalty to Isalys.

He tips his head momentarily towards Solis, slightly lower down. Her cheeks are red with the effort, but her breath is steady. She's managing pretty honourably, her instinct about which holds to use is undeniable... she's even being sassy enough not to just slavishly follow the path he's tracing for her. She's feeling her way – a little too cautiously for his tastes – but she's making progress and clearly has no intention of backing down. There's something unstoppable about her, like she's made a bet that she refuses to lose. He wonders if she'll keep moving forward like that when the jaws of the trap they're setting have closed in on her neck and are starting to choke her.

Wanting to distract himself, Aurelius closes his eyes, the better to enter into communion with the fickle Gravity swirling around him. He feels like he's in a gigantic room with distant walls, climbing an endless staircase, like the ones on those drawings where the stairs spiral back onto themselves through a trick of perspective. The echoes are strange, unnatural, and it's hard to tell if he's walking up the stairs or down.

For anyone who hasn't acquired the knack, it's unsettling, even harrowing. But once you've unlocked the mystery, it's a fascinating experience. The thing you have to understand is that the staircase doesn't exist, that you could just as easily be walking up the vertical posts of the bannister. Understanding that there's not really any such thing as up or down, no horizon, and an infinite number of ways to fall, and that the only way to overcome the chaos of the place is to espouse it, to bind with it spontaneously, without thinking. A rational individual could never understand; for instinctive Aurelius, it's second nature.

Nonetheless, Gravity is still as shape-shifting and unpredictable as a gust of wind. At any moment, he could hit an air pocket, which would be synonymous with tumbling down and asphyxia. So be it, he's still sure of himself, as nimble and quick as a weathervane that automatically lines up with the wind to take advantage of its power. That's probably where his greatest advantage lies: Hannibal is stiff, unbending, rooted in an immutable reality, while he is constantly adapting and evolving. His childhood in the Rift taught him that, and today he's benefitting from his vagabond existence, to the point that he's starting to believe in fate.

Would he give all of that up, if Isalys asked him to?

"Aurelius?"

The tone of Solis's voice may seem detached, but a slight tremble betrays the fact that she's asking for his help without saying so. Turning around, he sees that she's stuck a few cubits below him. Intuition doesn't replace experience: she's gone down a dead end, a slab of wall that's still unblemished, despite the passage of time and the effects of the weather.

Intuiting an inflexion in horizontality, he shifts to the side to find new holds and scampers back down to her. He passes by a girl who looks to be about fifteen. She's lolling

comfortably in an armchair attached to the wall, her legs dangling over the armrest. There are a few of them scattered around, perched on a chair or a park bench held in place by unravelling cables, leaning in the direction of the local gravity. It's a privilege – the reward they've earned for reaching the legendary summit of the Gravlev, following the trail that Aurelius blazed.

“What's a princess like her doing in a place like this?” the Riftian asks, jabbing her thumb at Solis.

“Same as you: trying to find herself,” Aurelius snaps as he leaps from one hold to the next.

“Thank you, but the princess isn't trying to find herself,” Solis says, sounding trenchant and firm. “I know exactly where I am and where I'm going. I was told that mutual aid was the norm in the Rift. Have I been misled?”

Aurelius exchanges a quick smirk with the teen, who's fuming.

“Oh yeah? Well nobody told you the Gravlev was a travel agency, did they?”

The girl hawks up phlegm, expelling a gob of spit that's dripping with scorn. The armchair scrapes the wall as it sways from the inflexion of Gravity. She takes advantage of it to lean over and scream at some kids five rods below them, “Hey, you slowpokes down there, what are you waiting for? A rising gust? The Prime is right here among us, and you lumpheads are hovering around an earthworm? A haggling Arkhantan, guys! Uggh... what losers!”

Aurelius puffs up with pride when he learns the sobriquet his achievement has earned him. “Prime” sounds a lot like “Primus” – he likes that. By the time he's caught down with Solis, the galvanized aspiring climbers are heading for the summit.

Hannibal sees the kids fluttering like a flock of pigeons

spooked by someone strolling by – the hasty rustling of soles on the cement sounds like wings flapping to take off, excited shouts and cries that could be squawking. Then he's alone, abandoned like a pile of seeds reduced to their shells...

The kids' brazen ease, the wall that he can feel vibrating beneath his fingertips from their swift departure, the awareness of the void beneath his feet... it's all dizzying. Nothing has ever knotted his guts like this before. No danger, not a single combat, not even the Appologium. He can't bear feeling so weak, pathetic... and full of resentment so bitter it's eating a hole in his stomach.

Jaws clenched, nostrils flaring, he breathes in deeply, in two stages, to control his breath. It's an exercise for beginners, the first one he learned at Earth School. Getting back to basics to help him get his self-control back.

Aurelius can't decide for him, and neither can the Gravlev or even the Rift. As Primus, he is the sole master of his own fate.

Modifying the texture of his epidermis, he fuses the flesh of his fingers to the wall and starts climbing again. With each new handhold, a bit of skin is torn off, and his blood is soon soaking into the friable cement. Ideally, he could sink his hands in through the cement to the steel framework to use it as a ladder. But a spell like that would require a lot more pranah, and he can't take the risk of using up what little he has left. Not for now, anyway. And especially not in the Rift, where magic is so unpredictable. Besides, the pain turns out to be like fuel hurrying him along. To motivate himself even more, he raises his head, looking past the kids a few rods above him, and locks his eyes onto Solis, whom he has to catch up with, no matter what.

The shock almost makes him let go.

Showing off in front of the kids, Aurelius is taking all sorts

of risks. Leaping from a slim overhang, he catches himself by slipping his fingers into a crack. Then he turns his hand into a fist for a sturdier hold, twists his hips to make his whole body sway like a pendulum, and uses the momentum to get his foot onto a window ledge. There, with his body at an angle and his knees higher than his shoulders, he turns around to reach his free hand out to Solis.

Before Hannibal's horrified eyes, Solis frees her right hand to try to latch on to Aurelius's. Their fingers are seeking each other like maggots on a fishhook – maggots the colossus feels like he's swallowed and can feel writhing in fear in his gut.

Her foot slips, she loses her balance and falls.

Aurelius shifts position slightly and grabs her wrist. His reaction is quick, his balance steady, he could have done that a long time ago, instead of toying with the Malkah. The scene enrages Hannibal, a fury that lasts far longer than Solis's cry of fear, not understanding that she's not going to fall fifteen rods to the ground. Hannibal can't even breathe until his protégée is back on solid footing. The bile setting his throat ablaze takes longer to dissipate.

He starts climbing again, cruelly aware of the contrast between his laborious efforts and Aurelius's natural grace. Hannibal can't snuff out a twinge of fascination for his disciple's dance-like body language, the tepid beauty of his movements, the precision of his swaying. He's dancing with Death...

That much recklessness is a kind of pure stupidity!

The guy is a public menace. How come he's the only way to see that? Dazzled by their elder's panache, the kids are attempting acrobatic tricks now too, verging on catastrophe with each trick, stirring up cheers and shouts from the rest of the gang. Indifferent to the excitement he has fuelled,

Aurelius guides Solis through a window, and together, they disappear from his view.

Hannibal stops looking up, he doesn't want to watch that gang of young daredevils showing off for each other. It was despicable of Aurelius to strut his stuff like that, knowing that the kids would do everything they could to be like him. He might have some strange kind of magic, but he hasn't got what it takes to be Primus. Because Aurelius has finally exposed himself for what he is: in the image of his native Rift, the guy's unstable. He could never guide a magical arkhome. He's got as much discernment and empathy as a Mantri weapon of mass destruction. He's perfectly willing to sweep everything away in his path. Everything, even Solis.

Hannibal's is moving so fast it's flaying his palms, but he's catching up to them now. He's already made up half the distance between him and the window that engulfed Solis, when one of the kids falls. The laughter switching to shrieks of horror alerts him.

Hannibal turns to look, sees a ball of cloth with some blond hair whipping in the wind. The poor thing is zooming to the ground in a blur of colour that's passing right by him. Instinctively, he wants to stretch his hand out, but... he doesn't budge. Precarious balance, precarious self-confidence. He can't take any risks, he has to stay focussed on the Malkah. Besides, the kid was asking for it, tough tumbrels. A vile train of thought, a cowardly excuse for his own inaction. Shame on him. He's Primus, and he can't even try to save a poor kid?

Aurelius! The reckless rascal isn't even there to catch the kid that he practically pushed into the void himself!

Shouts. His own, enraged. The poor boy's, panicked. Others, from the boy's startled mates, clinging to the wall a few rods above. A rising current of weightlessness lifts the

ill-fated lad, who's being tossed every which way by the capricious gravity.

This time, Hannibal refuses to miss another chance. He lets go of one of his handholds and stretches his left arm out. Aurelius caught Solis with elegance; Hannibal latches onto the kid with blind force. The gladiator knew exactly what he was doing; the Primus is improvising. The disciple is accustomed to Gravity's weird ways, the behemoth has been cut off from his immutable Earth.

With a sound of tearing skin, Hannibal loses the tips of his fingers and a good chunk of his right palm. He grips harder with his toes to try to keep his balance. In vain.

Knocked off the wall, now he's falling, too.

He hugs the terrified child to his chest, his own back to the ground to break the boy's fall, his eyes looking up. At the window where he last saw Solis.

14.2

The feeling of raw fear is back in Aurelius's gut. It's an old companion, a cumbersome relative that he has had to learn to live with. But since he confronted first Sarash then Hannibal, he notices its presence immediately, recognizing it for what it is. Now he feels its buzzing all the time, like a case of tinnitus he didn't used to have that now rings constantly in his ears...

Far from being bothered by it, Aurelius is delighted: being aware of your fear makes it easier to dominate it... and to instil it in others, too. Master of a new magic, master of his fear, Aurelius has become unstoppable. All-powerful. Called. Sucked in.

He could pitch Solis into a gravitational anomaly at any time. If need be, he could open a wound in her soft princess skin that has never known anything worse than a broken nail, gape it open with a nasty twist of his blade, and pour in some of the canine rose seeds that are his signature, reflecting the Rift's destructive beauty. He can do anything!

Then, seeing Solis soldiering steadfastly on through the corridor of the Gravlev that she had insisted on exploring, he can't help but admire her iron will and her courage that commands respect. You can tell that she's not on her own territory, that she's aware that she's walking through a minefield, like at the border with Mantris, but she's not quaking in her boots. She knows where she's going and why she's going there. Nothing and no one will stop here. Not even Aurelius.

He places one hand on the Malkah's hip, pressing gently to keep her from grazing the wall of the corridor. The dust in the air is flying in opposite directions there, indicating a shearing gravity that would have cut her in half.

"Is that where it is?" Solis asks her guide.

At the instant he answers, Aurelius the conspirator comes

whooshing back, that craving for sudden violence rises in his throat like bile. Once again, he feels himself being dragged into a steady backwash, a sudden desire to kill her that is far stronger than his determination to accomplish his mission. Kill ya, kill ya not; killya, killya not...

Solis senses Aurelius's ambivalent pattern, his heart beating a constantly changing carrier frequency, a kind of undecipherable techno-magical tempo. Absolutely nothing makes sense here, gravity no more than her vibratory intuitions. She feels lost – and almost inebriated at the same time – the omnipresent danger, the strange building, her inflamed feelings towards Aurelius... It's all delightfully disorientating, an exhilarating escape from her over-protected life inside the palace.

Still, she's nobody's fool: Aurelius isn't reliable, not completely, anyway, and she is at his mercy. Overall, she handled the climb pretty well – which is almost as surprising as weightlessness, in and of itself – but she is unprotected. That's the price she has to pay to find the answers to her questions at the top of the Gravlev, and her mind is made up. Still, nobody says she has to act like a babe in the woods; the least she can do is to keep her guard up, her eyes and ears open, in a state of vigilance. This detour through the blasted building's entrails is really no more than an excuse to give Hannibal some time to catch up with them.

With his jaws like a vice, Aurelius nods, "Yes, it's that way." Before him, Solis is moving slowly through the decrepit corridor, taking cautious, prudent steps amongst the rubble, lowering her head to avoid the – some natural, others artificial – cables and mosses dangling from the shattered ceiling. She's fiddling nervously with the crystal disc she found, spinning it between her fingers, hoping to find more of them inside the building.

Aurelius is right behind her, focussed on the gravitational anomalies separating them from the room that the Malkah wants to reach. They never should have come inside the building, the

Gravlev's interior is far more disturbed and unreliable than its façade. If all you had to do to reach the top was climb the stairs, someone else would have got there long before him. He thinks about his feat, seven years ago by now... At the time, he was sure he would die climbing the Gravlev. Now that he's been awakened to Gravity, the exercise feels like little more than an ordinary obstacle course.

"Second door on the right," Aurelius mumbles.

"We'll stay there until Hannibal catches up with us, and then we'll get going again."

Aurelius smirks to hear Solis giving him orders in that tone of voice, in this place where her authority has no legitimacy, no hold on him. That surplus of pride makes him laugh silently. And she notices the vibrations.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, Princess. At your orders."

Aurelius would clearly rather have increased their lead, and get things over with. So it goes. They're still less than a third of the way to the top, the hardest part is yet to come: the anomalies come faster and harder the closer to the top you get. He's exulting at the thought that Hannibal is going to die, struck down by his down-to-earth warlock stubbornness. Killing without lifting a finger, isn't that the very definition of all-powerfulness?

Having arrived at the door, Solis glances inside and freezes at the threshold, her face bathed in light, her breath taken away after a brief, whistling gasp. You could think she's just had a revelation.

Aurelius joins her, and sees the room in turn. Long and narrow, the walls are hidden by a succession of glass-doored cabinets filled with discs like the one in Solis's hand. About half of the doors have been smashed, and the floor is covered with crushed glass. With its crystal discs the size of a book arranged like decorative tiling, the place looks like a library – or conceivably a museum, because of the oppressively musty scent. A crack in the

wall is letting the light in, otherwise it would be a gloomily windowless room. A boringly ordinary ruined office...

Aurelius can't understand Solis's amazed reaction. It's true that the opening is like an oculus with a shaft of soft light falling through it, granting the place a certain solemn dignity. But it's nothing to go into raptures about.

Solis heads to the nearest cupboard, with a scraping of crushed glass. With a slight press on her shoulder, Aurelius redirects her to the next one, to avoid standing in the axis of the oculus. She hasn't noticed the shards of glass that are still suspended around the opening, as though the instant when the wall was shelled has been frozen in time. Who knows if just walking through it would be enough to set the capricious gravity off again?

Solis strokes the row of discs in awe, "A Mantri data centre..."

"Precisely. And there I thought you didn't know a thing about anything outside of the four walls of your pretty little palace."

She turns around, beaming, then gives him a wink that's as unexpected as it is conspiratorial, leaving Aurelius gobsmacked.

"Since when does a Malkah wink at a ruffian from the Rift?"

"Since you, dear, I guess."

"Now you're calling me dear?"

"It would seem so..."

"Wow, a wink and a 'dear', that's a real one-two punch. You better watch out, or you might burst into spontaneous combustion, Princess!"

"Hmmp, now you sound like Sarash! I can eat with my hands and swear like a trooper if I want, you know."

"Seriously? I'd have been less surprised if you told me you could fly with the draks... But I admit that I can't wait to hear it!"

"If you're a good boy, I'll give you a demonstration."

"Not much chance, then..."

Looking mischievous, she doesn't say anything else, and neither does he, while his certainties whirl around some more.

Solis points at a disc player that looks like it's still intact, sitting off-kilter on an upper shelf of one of the cupboards.

"We should be able to read the data with that..."

Before she can make a move, Aurelius places his hand beneath a shelf, and jams his foot under the edge of the unit. Counter-intuitively, the handles are adapted to the local gravity. With his free hand, he grabs the player for her, keeping her out of a breach....

"I doubt it still works," he says, curbing her enthusiasm, as he places the player on the back of a cupboard that has fallen over.

Solis slips a disc chosen at random into the player.

"I guess we're going to find out soon enough."

She handles the disc player with a practiced ease that surprises the gladiator. Garbed in an outfit from the Rift she borrowed for the climb, haloed with golden dust sparkling in the light from the oculus, she looks like an artefact raider. Aurelius's heart is twisting into knots, hurting and tugging at him. He hates to admit it, but the Rift becomes Solis.

Atrocious, ear-splitting static comes out, a strangely human plaint. Gradually it modulates, sheds its strident tones, and acquires a symphony of violins and oboes. Notes of music float in the air and are soon joined by the spell-binding voices of a duo of divas. An opera fills the room with an ethereal presence that manages to rise, unshackled by the bizarre anomalies of the place's terrestrial attraction.

An enchanting shiver runs down Aurelius's spine, an emotion so sharp it's almost painful. The Blast deprived the Riftians of so many marvels, so much hope. He lets himself get carried away by the fabulous music coming straight from another era, another world. It's all the more sublime in that it's so totally unexpected. He may master his fear, but now he's thunderstruck by the beauty of the moment, gesturing ineffectually, gaze lost somewhere in that past that was stolen by the Heroes' War. Tears are welling in his eyes as two angels who have appeared out of

nowhere sing. Two angels... like Isalys and Solis.

Everything stops suddenly with an awful screeching. The end is brutal, violent, definitive. It's the euphoria of a freefall ending with a fatal crash. The hair on his arms and the back of his head is standing on end. He needs to blink several times to realize that the reaction has nothing to do with the end of the opera.

In a loss of tension that's vibrating like a broken cord, he can sense that on the outside of the Gravlev, a kid has lost his grip and brought Hannibal down with him. His delight in that sensation is followed instantly by a fear that Solis, too, might somehow realize what just happened.

"We gotta' go."

Without further ado, he grabs her arm and tugs her towards the exit.

"But we're supposed to be waiting for Hannibal."

"He'll meet us at the top."

"How will he mana...?"

"Listen, the music and all that is all very well, but if you insist on staying her, it's going to turn into a requiem. The Gravlev is going to want blood, and I would just as soon not be here when that happens."

For once Aurelius isn't actually telling her a bald-faced lie. But he has underestimated Solis's natural authority.

"We're doing what we said, we're waiting for Hannibal."

Solis firmly tugs her arm from his grip, and, after staring each other down for a moment, she turns around and goes back from where they came. Behind her, Aurelius is standing stock still with a vague smile playing at the corners of his mouth. He'd forgot how determined and unyielding she can be, despite the benevolence she usually projects. The woman is a study in bold contrasts, a dusky glow on the dunes of the Rift. The proverbial iron fist in a velvet glove. Sometimes he wishes that hand would tighten around his throat and slam him against the wall as her lips come closer and...

Watch your step, Solis. All I have to do is shut my mouth and you'll be crushed by weightmessness.

PRIME VS PRIMUS

Hannibal is shattered. Paralyzed by pain, he feels like his bones have been ground to dust, and his breath is trapped between his broken ribs. His thoughts are foggy and confused, as though he were still falling. He is absolutely unable to stand up, as though a four- or five-quintal rock were lying on his chest. A rock... or perhaps a tombstone.

But despite all that, he's still alive.

Anybody else would be thrilled with relief just at having survived such a vertiginous drop, but Hannibal is raging that he hasn't gotten up to start climbing up again yet. That's all he cares about: catching up with Solis. But his body has decided otherwise.

Just before he crashed into the ground, Hannibal hardened his skin, transforming his muscles to stone. He'll never admit it, but he also got some help from a last, lucky whim of gravity, which twirled a bit just before impact, reducing his collision speed.

From the supine position where he landed, he forces himself to sit up. His head is spinning painfully, like his brain must be spattering everything around him. By attempting movement, he realizes that his right arm now has two extra articulations.

"Lie back down, don't get up," Syläë, who has dashed to his side, suggests.

He pushes the well-meaning hand she has laid on his shoulder away, and gets to his feet: if he doesn't do it now, he never will. He groans, and pins his broken arm to his chest

as soon as he's able. Inside, his broken ribs are piano keys, striking at his lungs and stealing the little air he's got left.

"Hannibal," Syläë tries again, "you can't..."

"What about the kid?" he says, cutting her off.

The Primus of Nature's lips are pinched, and she settles for shaking her head slowly, looking pained.

"I saw you," she says, consolingly, "You did everything you could. It's not your fault."

Yes it is. He shouldn't have hardened his body, that meant he didn't break the kid's fall after all.

"Hannibal, what are you *doing*?"

Without even having consciously decided to, the behemoth is heading towards the Gravlev. He turns his head to look over his shoulder at the other Primus. She's so deathly pale and exhausted looking, you might think she'd just taken a terrible tumble too.

"You won't survive another healing spell, not after the one for Aurelius."

Aurelius. The tally is really starting to add up.

Stoically, he grabs his own right wrist and jams his dislocated shoulder back into place with a sharp twist. The shards of stony bone make a horrible screeching noise as they rub against each other, and the pain pulses through his muscles in waves, racing enthusiastically to his heart and skull, making them pound like crazy... Inside him, every ounce of his body is protesting against the accumulation of traumatism. But on the outside, Hannibal is stubbornly, marmoreally virile.

Having reached the base of the building, he walks slowly around it, head tipped back, in search of the easiest way up. He realizes that the side that that show-off Aurelius chose to climb is leaning slightly, as though it were sinking into the ground. So the other side will be easier.

As he's walking, stones and gravel have been rising from the ground, gradually agglomerating into an improvised cast for his broken arm. As he reaches the far side of the building, he sees that...

A gigantic tube, the size of a ship, is embedded in the side of building?

Stunned to the point of forgetting his aches and pains, Hannibal needs a little time to realize it's a maglev wagon that has somehow impaled the former Mantri building, at about a 45° angle. With his stone eye, he sees that, the train car drilled a hole through the structure that opens onto the roof. It's like a giant needle jabbed into reinforced concrete flesh. The Gravlev – he finally understands how the building got its name – is still hermetic to his vibratory vision, scrambled beyond even his sensorial ability, but he can read the maglev's inner cartography pretty well. The mostly hollow space offers a lot of hand- and footholds – stanchions for passengers to hold onto when the train is in motion, door handles, seat backs and more – that will make this climb far easier.

That's the path he's going to take.

At the instant Hannibal sets foot on the raked façade, his cast is complete. The stone layer is coating his arm from elbow to shoulder, leaving some flexibility to the joints, and solidifying the rest. It doesn't help with the pain, however; he'll just have to grin and bear it. This time, the Primus doesn't hesitate: he uses magic to turn the cement of the façade into sand, so that he can sink his good arm and his feet all the way to rebar grid, using it as a ladder. He's using up the last of his dwindling store of pranah, leaving himself exposed to the possibility that his spell could be weakened – or perhaps worse, strengthened – by the chaos of the Rift, but at this point he's willing to take any risk to catch up with Solis.

Before he's even reached the fourth of the building's thirty floors, reality has hit him square in the face: he's not going to make it like this. Not without having some perception of weightlessness.

He hasn't got what it takes for this building, Aurelius has him beat, hands down.

He allows himself a break, forehead against the wall, feet jammed into a crevice, left hand gripping a piece of rebar for dear life. He can't help letting the pain take his breath away and the fear grip his guts. He's afraid. Not of falling, of losing her.

He can't live without Solis, that's all there is to it.

She doesn't need his protection any more, he gets that. In a position of weakness, clinging to the side of the Gravlev, severely lessened, it becomes blatantly clear that she's right, and that's no longer his role. The fact is, he needs her protection, not the other way around. He needs her presence, her advice, her aura of goodness, her laughter... her subtle, precious carefree attitude when it comes to facing the trials life brings. Her love. He doesn't care if she loves him like a brother, a hero or a friend, but he needs... no, he *wants* to be loved by Solis. Yet all he's been doing lately is demanding that love, instead of earning it. He's been acting like an idiot: Aurelius doesn't matter in the least, only Solis does. He needs to tell her all that... hopefully, he'll find the words.

He can only hope that Aurelius leaves him a chance to do that... that the gladiator doesn't kill her, accidentally or on purpose before then.

Hannibal going to do everything in his power to prevent that.

He slows his breathing and begins incanting softly. Deep inside his ear, hammer, anvil and stirrup start calcifying, becoming stiffer and denser. As the small bones in his middle

ear become as hard as stone, his hearing drops towards the lowest sounds, becoming more severely muffled than if he were diving into deep water. His tympan is being tortured, worse than in a decompression accident. It's as though a hot poker was rummage deep inside his inner ear. Hannibal keeps going, his will stronger than the pain that's making him nauseous. He adjusts his level of perception as though he were tuning a musical instrument. He doesn't know how Aurelius does it, but when he fought him in the cove, he observed the gladiator's rhythm, his pulsations, the way he moved... Hannibal has to be able to set himself to the same vibrations.

Hannibal moans, a sound he no longer hears. He becomes deaf to his own suffering. To let it express itself, he hammers the wall with his right fist until he can feel the three pieces of his broken humerus grating against each other.

Little by little, his modified sense of hearing opens up a new field of perception, offering him a sixth sense. The Gravlev's vibratory slop thins, congealing into lumps that are unappealing, but easier to grab and swallow. To refine his forced mutation, Hannibal closes his good eye and lays his ear to the wall, scrutinizing his whereabouts with his stone eye.

He is finally starting to perceive the weightlessness that Aurelius distinguishes so clearly. It's like... like explosions in slow motion, like a volcanic eruption of molasses spitting out lazy arches of fire. The image brings to mind a conversation he once had with Sarash, when she explained that Galana went through periods of solar eruptions because of an excess of energy. Comparing those eruptions to the epic hangovers of their youth had made them both burst out in mighty gales of laughter. If she'd been there, Sarash would have made the same connection: weightlessness is like

gravity spewing, and if Aurelius is so good with it, it's because he's nothing but a common lush. The two of them would definitely have had a good guffaw at the gladiator's expense. If only she could have been there...

Hannibal knows perfectly well that he can neither create weightmessiness nor control it, but at least he is now able to perceive its anomalies. Only faintly, granted, somewhat like a landscape at dusk, just before night falls completely, when to Aurelius's eyes, they must be as clear as day... But still, they are visible.

And if he can see the pitfalls, he can avoid them.

There are masses of them on this façade, which explains why Aurelius chose to climb the canted wall – and there's not a single kid skipping around on this side. But now that he can detect the danger, his command of the Earth will allow him to ascend the Gravlev as easily as climbing the mountains of Acongua.

So he can finally stop torturing his tympana, he has achieved his goal.

At the end of his rope, completely disoriented, Hannibal vomits brutally. He's heaving bursts of bile without hearing the slightest sound. He senses nothing but a slight trembling in his chest and a warm, moist, acidic sensation in his throat. Stunned by the deafness that has plunged him into an ocean of silence, electrified by the euphoria of having taken a mad risk and seeing it crowned with success, galvanized by the impression that he has finally levelled the playing field, Hannibal roars a cry of victory, a howl that he himself can't hear.

In a sudden epiphany, it dawns on the Primus that he has acted like a Mantri: having already lost an eye, he just sacrificed his ears to modify his natural capacities, just like those humans who are altered with technology. He

transhumanized himself. He paid the price. For Solis. And he would do it again. A thousand time over.

With another shout of joy that's lost in the limbo of his deafness, he starts climbing again.

The roar speeds up towards the towards the sky, climbing twenty stories to reach Aurelius and Solis, who are now just five floors from the roof. Solis is too focussed on her movements to have noticed it, but it grabs the gladiator's attention instantly. Realizing that Hannibal has taken the opposite façade, he grins, convinced that the Primus will fall victim to the weightlessness that's omnipresent on that face.

But that's not the case. Inexplicably, Hannibal is clambering up at full throttle, racing from one story to the next, moving even faster than they are. At the rate he's going, he's going to catch up with them before they reach the roof!

Has he suddenly been awakened to Gravity? Is he getting helped, being guided from the ground to avoid traps? Has he developed a new magic, cast a spell whose power was decupled by the Rift?

Aurelius wipes the questions from his mind, annoyed with himself. Pondering imponderables isn't like him. Cut to the quick, he makes up his mind in a flash: reach the roof as fast as can be, no matter how risky it is.

"Solis!" With a hop, skip and a leap, he catches up with the Malkah, who is a few cubits ahead. "Change of plan, we're going to take the maglev straight to the top."

"But I thought you said it was dangerous, and we shouldn't get inside it until we were further up?"

Aurelius had had a hard enough time persuading Solis to start climbing again without waiting for Hannibal, especially once she'd found out that he'd fallen saving one of the young climbers. A few Primes had had to reassure her about Hannibal's condition before she had agreed to go on. So now

she's wary, he's going to have to be very convincing. Better still: not leave her any choice.

"It's all going to come down to what happens next, Solis! Prove to me that you've got what it takes, prove that you have earned the Rift.

"I don't have to prove anything to you, Aurelius."

"Oh, screw that! That's not the point! Weightmessness couldn't give a dam about which of us is in charge. Because *we're* not in charge, *it* is! So now listen to me, and do what I say if you don't want to wind up getting cut in half. You got that?"

They're staring at each other appraisingly. Ill at ease with her footing, awkwardly rigged out in borrowed clothes for her ascension of the Gravlev, Solis is having a hard time projecting authority. She hesitates for a few more endless seconds, victim of her own vanity... which she's as happy to see as a dead rat amidst clean sheets. Then, grudgingly replies, "Fine."

Without waiting for anything more, the gladiator heads straight towards the train. If Hannibal truly is able to spot the weightmessness zones, he won't dare follow them. Aurelius will be able to handle the gravitational whirlpool at loose in the old metal carcass, not that other lumbering laggard. He hopes not, anyway.

They're reaching the old wagon in the middle, rather than practically the top, like the first time he summited. Poking his head through one of the old doors, Aurelius is the stunned spectator to a veritable paroxysm of weightmessness: in the tunnel of steel, gravity is flip-flopping, coiling around, suspended, accelerating... It's impossible to anticipate the forces of attraction, you might as well try to precisely predict the swirls and eddies of water behind a boat with the wind in its sails. Penetrating the maglev is like throwing yourself into

a meat grinder, with the old seats and handrails standing in for cutting blades. It's even worse than he remembered, it's suicidal. It's hopeless, they'll have to take the outer façade, as he'd originally intended.

For once, Aurelius would rather be reasonable.

Until he catches a glimpse of Hannibal at the other end of the train, three stories below him.

The maglev rammed into the Gravlev diagonally, impaling the last six floors. Aurelius and Solis are level with the middle of the carriage, three floors from the roof. Hannibal is still at the bottom door of the train.

Immobile, the two men challenge each other with their gaze, the sum of all the dangers coming down to the other man's face

For Hannibal, it's out of the question to back down now.

Ditto for Aurelius.

15.2

The gladiator turns to look at Solis, who's still outside the wagon. She can't have seen Hannibal, and she's far too worn out to perceive his presence otherwise. If the Primus had shouted at him, things would be different, but for some strange reason, he had remained perfectly impassive.

Out of the blue, Aurelius thrusts his face so close to the Malkah's that they're practically touching. Grabbing the collar of her jacket to keep her rooted in the moment and to underscore the vital urgency of what he's about to say, he asks her, both frankly and abruptly, "Do you trust me, Solis?"

He would have adored if she had instantly replied, "Of course I do, Aurelius. I trust you completely and totally, I'd follow you into the Invermonde, 'til death do us part. Yes, yes, yes, I do!" Three yesses like a thousand times yes.

But Solis stops to think – for just a heartbeat, the blink of an eye; an infinitesimal hesitation that makes the gladiator's certainties pop out. In the end, she nods. Such a totally reasonable gesture, so lacking in passion.

"It's going to be rough."

"Fine, I'm ready."

"No, I don't think you are."

Solis suddenly twigs to how serious the vibration coming off of Aurelius is. It pours over her like a bucketful of freezing-cold water. In his eyes, which are boring deep into hers, she can read the magnitude of what awaits them: the non-negotiable imperative to entrust her life to his hands. A true leap of faith.

She could have chosen to climb the last three floors on her own, given herself airs of being bolder than the Prime, shown him what she's made of. She feels a magic inside herself rising like a small sun, a kind of blinding intuition, a little something that could have served as a harness to finish the ascension. She

could have, but the truth is that she's dying to find out what's hidden behind the gladiator's skin. A wooden marionette, dangling tautly from the puppeteer's strings, or soft, sincere flesh, a wounded boy who needs to be repaired? She gazes at the face that's handsome enough to die for as though her look could peel it away to see what's underneath.

"There's only one way for us to make it out of here alive." Aurelius is choosing his words with care, looking for the ones that will nip any discussion in the bud, because there's no more time to lose. "We must become as one, unite in flight."

"Meaning?"

Epic fail.

"You have to espouse every movement I make, even the slightest ones. Just like I'll do with yours. Put aside your intellect, follow my instinct. In osmosis is the only way we'll make it out of here alive. One false move, the most subtle disharmony, and we'll be blown to smithereens. You follow me?"

Solis settles for conspicuously lowering her eyelids before reaching out her hand.

Who are you, Solis? Who is the woman hiding behind the crown? A mountain of courage? A valley of absurdity? A desert of wisdom? Or just a forest of faith to protect me from the sun's beating rays?

He clasps her wrist, she clasps his, for a tighter hold, and they leap into the maelstrom of the maglev, together.

They're sucked so violently and instantly that it draws a long, terrified cry from Solis's throat, immediately imitated by Aurelius, for the correlation. They're spinning weightlessly, as though the tunnel of metal had been unplugged, and a train car's worth of water were rushing out. The centrifugal force is pulling them away from each other, Aurelius has to squeeze Solis's wrist even tighter not to let her go. In perfect mimicry, Solis squeeze his wrist even tighter, not to let him go.

Shaken every which way – by the vortex, the fright and the loss of control – they open their eyes. Rolling them around in search

of an ever-elusive fixed point, they look like they're having a two-headed epileptic fit. As the speed of their rotation picks up, their long hair rises to a right angle from their backs, making them look all the stranger and more untamed. With unexpected determination, Solis closes her eyes, clasps Aurelius's wrist with both hands and pulls as hard as she can to draw them closer to each other. Like a mirror image, Aurelius does exactly the same thing.

Until that moment, the gladiator could inflect their trajectory a tiny little bit, instinctively tamping down or pumping up the gravity to keep them from slamming into the walls of the wagon. But the movement of their drawing together unsettles their precarious balance, which spins out of all control. Aurelius's leg slams into one of the stanchions – an electrifying pain in his barely healed knee. Solis's back slaps against the wall, making it ring like a bell that can't save her. With the breath knocked out of her, she uses the rebound to embrace Aurelius, completely and definitively.

Pause. Soft rustling. Matching embraces. Breaths mingling. Scents coalescing. That's when Aurelius completely loses control.

Trembling and tender is their contact, and filled with paradoxical contrasts: panicked trust, platonic declaration, well-tempered temptation, furious tranquillity, shameful desire, off-beat osmosis. Aurelius lets himself get drawn into this whirlwind of a new kind, giving free rein to his imagination, his sensitivity. The two-angelled opera that Solis had brought to life flows back into his ears.

There, at the core of the worst, in the eye of the torment, the epicentre of weightlessness, they dance, they soar, unbound. Hand in hand. In unison to a devilish score, perfectly attuned so as not to fall apart. Not to die.

Never had he danced with Isalys. Never had harmony been to that extent their keystone, the key of G of their relationship. Never. Trust has never been a counterweight on the scale of

their relationship. Sensuality, lust, emotion... they had all been shoved to the sidelines to come after the rest: the factual, the face-saving, the obligations, the mission.

The glorious erection that's throbbing to the beat of his pulsations is drawing him to another place. He blushes at the idea of being found out. He's ashamed of his reaction, then ashamed of his shame – since when has getting hard for a desirable woman been a problem for him? In a flash of understanding, he realizes that he feels the same protective instinct towards Solis that Hannibal does; he wants to defend her to the death, too. Not because she's fragile, because she's precious.

Aurelius has lost his focus, and they're losing their balance, lurching and jolting left right up down. Luckily, Solis counteracts his drift. Immersed in their fusion to the hair on her head, she catches their harmony on the wing, recreating the osmosis indispensable to their survival.

Rapid breathing. Synchronization.

Aurelius's amber is growing warm against his skin, he's branding himself with a hot iron, forcing himself to remember his bond, his oath to Isalys. He has loved her for as long as he has known how to love!

Nestled in his arms, Solis is struggling to fend off the wretched sensation that's wringing her out. Aurelius grew up in the Rift, he's used to this kind of spinning carousel, with the frantic swaying up and down. For her, it's making her retch, and hope for just one thing: that it will all just finally stop soon. In the meantime, she curls up against the Riftian, pressing herself against him to make sure they won't come apart. In his arms, she doesn't have the same sense of being sheltered that she feels when she's with Hannibal. If she were standing in the freezing rain, the gladiator would be a coachman's thick cape, while the behemoth would be a dry cave warmed by a nice fire.

But she has no other choice than to surrender herself to Aurelius. The tempest that's dizzying her shouldn't make her los

touch with her instinct: the gladiator is the one who will set her on the path that leads to her sister... and to renewal of the pranah.

As if to reassure her, she feels Aurelius's amber pendant throbbing with heat. She can sense something else, too, a vibration that's linked to his heartbeat, but not only. A tender, emotional abandonment that's not like him. An oh-so-refreshing sensation in the midst of all this chaos, the endless impression that the ground is giving way beneath her feet.

Weightlessness is wrapping itself around them like a blanket, so tightly that it's going to smother them. The opposing forces are getting stronger and stronger, Aurelius can tell that they're about to spin out of control, but he doesn't try to fight it.

He lets himself go, she lets him do it.

Tugged at like never before, completely unable to resist the perturbations any longer, Solis is struggling not to lose consciousness. Despite her best efforts, her senses are abandoning her, one after the other.

A real kaleidoscope, the maglev is a reflecting tube, a tunnel lined with mirrors glittering blindingly between her half-closed lashes. Having lost the horizon, she closes her eyes in an attempt not to throw up from the pressure.

With the searing amber against her chest, she's burning up, a memorial fire against her skin, the maglev's rusty scent scratching at her nostrils like the endless corridors of the damp favela of her nightmares. She buries her nose in Aurelius's neck.

She hears the wagon's door handles knocking furiously against the doors... unless it's the doors of ONI banging again, screeching like a night fear that makes you grind your teeth. She chooses not to listen so she won't be reminded of the speckled mirror. Of the icy smile in the speckled mirror.

The last thing Solis can feel, the last thread connecting her to reality, is Aurelius's warm body against hers, its contours, the relief map of his muscles beneath her fingers: stoic, proud,

unwavering. If he had wanted to kill her – or worse, driven her literally mad with bad dreams – he would have done it a long time ago by now. He'd been tempted to, had had furtive moments of wanting to – she sensed them, she knows. But the icy smile that breaks up in the speckled mirror isn't him. She knows – can sense via that fragile, silken cord that's still connecting her to the empire of the senses – it isn't him.

In the pit of her stomach, that little sun is slowing her breathing, calming and reassuring her: she can faint, can flee for a moment, abandon herself with complete faith. Everything's going to be fine...

At the far end of the strange tunnel of steel, Hannibal's eyes are glued to the couple. He's all the way at the back of the wagon, while Aurelius and Solis are in the middle. So near and yet so far, because, to reach them, he'll have to cross the worst field of weightmessness that he's perceived yet. To his ears of stone, the distortions in the gravitational field are deafening, like a swarm of hungry harpies whose vociferating is more destructive than being subjected to an earthquake in the middle of a rock. Judging from how erratic his movements are, even Aurelius is having trouble coping with the chaos. In which case Hannibal hasn't got a chance, especially not with one arm in a cast. The weightmessness won't let him get through.

So he decides to tame it.

Indifferent to the risks it entails, the Primus pulverizes a whole section of the façade of the Gravlev. Cement, having turned first into mortar, then into a sandstorm, invades the maglev. The tumultuous scrolls of weightmessness are suddenly visible in the dusty fog, like ferrites lining up with the earth's magnetic field. With help from his eye of stone, Hannibal makes out the fault lines, the zones that have been vibradiated by the Rift, the local leaps and bounds of gravity.

He petrifies it all thanks to a spell with a guttural chant.

WHOOOSH!

The decompression perforates Hannibal's tympana, the only ones that are sensitive to gravitational frequencies. The pain hole-punches his ears; a thread of blood spurts out. His head is filled with a terrible ringing and buzzing that muddles everything, even his thoughts. But he did it! A stone bridge now crosses half the tunnel. The construction is far less elegant than Acongua's High-Crown, but it was no less complex to create.

He begins striding across it... until his throbbing head makes him almost lose his mind.

Aurelius sees Hannibal swooping towards them, sprinting across an unlikely viaduct that has sprung up out of nowhere. The structure is already getting tugged and deformed by weightmessness, which is rebelling at being cooped up like this. It won't hold for more than a moment or two. Still, it's an extraordinary feat.

He's leaving Aurelius no choice: the gladiator tosses himself into the maelstrom tormenting the upper part of the car, where the bridge found no bedrock. He can tell that Solis is barely conscious, she's twitching and spasming against him. The gladiator chalks it up to the over-powering gravity; he doesn't know that a light show is playing inside the Malkah's head, too. Whatever it is, it suits him just fine: Solis doesn't see Hannibal nearly catching up with them. He lays one hand protectively on the back of her head. All around them, the car is getting crushed with a sound like a soda can; stanchions are bending under the pressure before popping out of their settings like springs. Or spears.

The enclosed space is getting more dangerous by the second. Mortally more dangerous.

Even deaf, with a broken arm and ribs, and his head in a state, Hannibal realizes what a huge mistake he has made. He cancels the spell on the spot, and the bridge, attacked by gluttonous weightmessness, crumbles instantly. Before the last bit of rubble evaporates, he uses it as a spring-board and leaps towards Solis.

Aurelius goes with the flow, settling for only the slightest movements to guide himself to the top of the maglev, which opens out onto the roof of the building. It's a critical operation: too much momentum, and he'll be ejected right past the roof; too little, and he'll be torn to shreds. Weightlessness is like white-water rapids: you're better off adjusting to it than trying to fight it. But that's a hard stance to maintain when a leviathan is baring his fangs in your wake!

Keeping his composure, the gladiator tries to inflect Hannibal's trajectory as the behemoth is revving up a punch that could knock his head off. Grasping luckily at straws, he manages to fling the Primus towards the steel wall, where his side is ripped open by the jagged edges of a tear. The behemoth rebounds weakly, spinning into a somersault and leaving a thick trail of blood behind him.

Aurelius doesn't have time to savour his success, because momentum is carrying Hannibal towards him again. Even worse, the backlash from his blow is sending him towards the edges of the whirlpool. He's spinning too fast and too hard. He's going to crash into the wall or be spewed into the air, far beyond the Gravelv's rooftop terrace. In desperation, his mouth filled with the taste that he now recognizes as fear, he raises one arm to try to correct their trajectory.

The wild turbulence brings Solis's mind to the surface just long enough for an anxious cry, "No, don't let go of me!"

Then she's sinking back down again, her body like a top and her mind suffering from vertigo. Aurelius feels a pang: she would never have cried out like that or felt even a moment's doubt about Hannibal.

The Primus himself is no longer in any state to hear that cry of distress, not with his tympana of pierced stone. Yet he perceives the intonation, the vibrant urgency. Before he sacrificed his hearing, Hannibal had finally realized that Solis mattered infinitely more to him than Aurelius did. As his body is yielding,

the tunnel is caving in, and his old certainties are melting away, as everything is collapsing around him, he doesn't settle for just understanding it, he truly comprehends it, feels it in his bones.

Aurelius and Hannibal cross paths, with Solis slipped between them.

I'm entrusting her to you, the behemoth's eyes say.

She's not yours to give, Aurelius's reply.

No, we belong to her.

I don't belong to anybody!

You know perfectly well that you do. She chose you, and I accept that. But if you betray her, I'll be back. Not for her. For you.

Hannibal gets sucked into the whirlpool that crowns the tunnel of steel with a formidable eruption of weightmessness. Tossed and rocked by the grav-storm, he casts a final spell. At his command, his cast bursts into shards as sharp as flintstones that speed towards Aurelius.

The gladiator sees the projectiles rushing at him in a mad dash that's constantly being deviated by the tribulations of weightmessness. It's like throwing a handful of darts in the middle of a storm.

When the first flintstone tears the sleeve of his shirt, Aurelius figures Hannibal got lucky. When the next two strike his right knee and his left shoulder, he really starts to worry. When he has to toss his head to one side, twisting his neck to avoid the next salvo, he finally grasps the situation. It forms a triptych.

Left-hand panel: Every single one of Hannibal's shots is hitting its target with stunning precision. Beyond magical, it's divine.

Centre panel: The Primus's command of the Earth outstrips his own knowledge of Gravity, by far. The question of which of them is the master and which the disciple has been answered.

Right-hand panel: The impact of every single shard is subtly steering him in such a way as to free him from the worst of the weightmessness. The behemoth's goal is to save Solis, not to kill him. Otherwise, he'd already be dead.

Inside the shower of shrapnel so flawlessly orchestrated by Hannibal, Aurelius is controlling Gravity. By combining their skills, he can extract himself from the rush of weightlessness. Solis and he set foot on the roof of the Gravlev as gently as a piece of driftwood being left on the beach by the tide.

Hannibal, however, is catapulted into the air like a cannonball. He disappears into the sky as it's getting ready for sunset, his shadow swallowed by the darkness swelling in the West.

AMBRACING

There it is. On top of the Gravlev. Gaping. Patulous. Shockingly intimidating. The fissure. The tear in the fabric of the world. The one the Riftians call an “an ambrage fault”, when they ought to call it “the abyss of death.”

Opening her eyes, still groggy with visions, gravitational nausea pressing at her lips, it’s the first thing Solis sees. Long and slender, tall and pulsing with black light, disgorging scrolls of mist that evaporate instantly, it’s a smoking wound. Like a curtain affording a glimpse into the other place, a vertical eye whose pupil is looking... elsewhere.

A crack in the matrix of the beginning of the world.

With painful limbs and a mind still foggy from its recent absence, Solis takes one step towards it... then two steps back, moves sideways, then takes another step forward. Caution is battling it out with curiosity: contradictory feelings creating a precarious equilibrium. She’s navigating a narrow ridge – fear of a fatal fall, prophetic vertigo. She knows how to do it though, Hannibal taught her – a certainty as sturdy as the ramparts of Fort Izull.

The very instant her mind alights on the Primus, she’s overwhelmed with chagrin. She’s lost him, he’s dead. Rage

and despair. Yes. No, he survived his fall, the kids on the façade said so. Her sorrow suddenly ebbs, like the sea before a nasty wave crashes on the shore.

Crimson anger, overwhelmed orange, traumatized black, confused green... a whole rainbow is spanning the land of her emotions, with its colours blended and its radiance affected by the vagaries of the Rift. Weightlessness for moods. It's making her eyes and heart spin, getting her intoxicated and inebriated. She reaches her hand out... but finds nothing stable to steady herself on. She feels sick, far more so than in the worst of the vortex that spit her out here like nasty phlegm.

Solis takes a deep breath, calming herself the way Hannibal taught her to. Closing her eyes, she forces herself to recreate a mental image of her surroundings: a vast, square rooftop terrace that would be absolutely unremarkable if it weren't so abnormally tilted, with metal boxes screwed to the floor and invaded by cactus. She focuses on those elements, about the size of a travel chest, forcing herself to see them like air-conditioners rather than rows of small tombs in a cemetery. Children's tombs.

She gradually allows her senses to take over from her impressions. This high up, the wind blowing from the west in musical gusts is carrying a scent of once-lush, now desiccated soil from the Forest of Orcunion, which has been dried up by the desolation of the Rift. Extended towards the fault line, her hands are catching a rippling vibration, about as powerful as the heat from a fireplace, even though her perception of it is on a different level. She's putting off the moment when she raises her eyelids, it's still too soon. Rather than see, she wants to perceive.

A few steps behind her, Aurelius is hunkering down to give himself a chance to recover from the storm of stones

slammed him. He digs some amber out of the sand that's been drifting over it for years, chooses the three biggest chunks and tosses them up and down as though he were about to play jacks with them. They're lying around all over the place, wherever the fault line spit them out. The lode is worth an absolute fortune if you know how much the Aregs and other gangs are willing to pay for amber. But nobody has had the nerve to work this open-air mine... Not yet, anyway.

The thought makes Aurelius deeply bitter. At the rate things are going, pretty soon climbing the Gravlev isn't even going to be a big deal. The tower is going to turn into a goddam tourist destination. People are going to forget that the ascension used to be impossible: deadly and seen as the most senseless thing you could attempt to do in the already copiously lunatic Rift. It's already starting, for that matter, with all those wannabe Primes strutting over the façade. Everybody knows that he's the one true Prime! The others are no more than pale followers, trackers following an already blazed trail. He's the only one who earned the right to show off up here, chest puffed out, hands bloodied, eyes peeled, out of breath, withered and worn out, but overflowing with life and not owing anything to anyone, not even Isalys.

All at once, Solis's presence here is absolutely unbearable. Everything about her rubs him the wrong way: her voice; her soppy mannerisms; her ridiculous conviction that she's special; the slimy spittle-coated hoop in her lower lip; her long, good-girl plait; her stiff upper lip; the affected way she sees the world and everyone in it; her politeness when she should be roaring, and, right this second, that damming way she has of walking blindly towards the fault with her eyes closed. She's going to meet death with her little finger in the air, without the slightest fricking idea what she's doing. It's

pathetic. She's pathetic. Well then, be my guest, princess, go get yourself swallowed up by the fault. That way, I'll never have to see you again – it's none too soon.

Aurelius stops fiddling with his amber jacks. He thrust Sarash into the fault at the tip of a spear, why would he try to keep Solis from falling in now? To follow some stupid plot that's dragging on indefinitely? Is that really what's holding him back? What, has he turned into somebody's lapdog? Him, the true Prime? That'll be the day!

He tosses the amber nuggets away, dusts off his hands and stands up slowly. Takes his time, being sure to do what needs to be done. Nothing is stopping him – no qualms or misgivings – barely a slight tingling sensation in his stomach. Even that's next to nothing: a little excitement rather than apprehensiveness. There he is, arms outstretched, palms barely an inch from Solis's back.

"Aurelius! Can you hear it?" she asks, spinning around to look at him, her eyes sparkling with fireworks bombarding her pupils with pure joy, unrestrained childlike exuberance. She is perfectly unconcerned with the non-protocol image she's projecting. "It's Sarash! I can hear Sarash, she's in the fault! She's alive, Aurelius, alive!"

She grabs Aurelius's outstretched hand, squeezing it between her own over-excited ones. He stares at her, his heart on the fence, his emotions wavering between flooding and drought. Her voice that's so vibrant with pure life, the pure unadorned joy in her smile, the hoop in her lips that gleams like her amethyst eyes, the noble plait that makes her look so stately, the charming spontaneity she has anyway, the way she so sincerely wants to make everyone's life better, the purity of her sparkling gaze, the way she holds her head so high in the face of danger, her lack of anger when he is filled with nothing else...

“What are you talking about?”

“Listen!” she says, turning back. “Sarash? Sarash, is that you?” she shouts into the fault. Facing the gladiator once again, she says, “Listen, it’s her, I’m a hundred per cent sure it’s her!”

Aurelius pricks up his ears, but still can’t hear a thing. Yet Solis seems so sure of what she’s saying...

He is usually impervious to doubt, and suddenly he is literally petrified. Could the Primus of Fire really have survived? Is she going to emerge from the fault like the living dead emerging from a tomb to claim vengeance? Cold sweat soaks his back, the ambient sounds are suddenly deafening. A moment later, he’s sure he’ll be fine. That sudden change of mood doesn’t surprise him any more than a jolt of weightlessness. He’s used to it, he knows that gravitational chaos affects your emotions, too. He can handle it. He’s got rid of two Primi already, he can do it again.

“Aurelius, listen. Don’t you hear Sarash?” Solis’s eyes are so wide it looks like she’s hallucinating. “I don’t understand, Sarash. Where are you?”

“...”

“Use my voice to guide you, Sarash!”

Anxiety comes hard on the heels of euphoria, a change so sudden it leaves Solis dazed. The fault is toying with her sensations again, but she won’t fail. She cocks an ear, filtering out all extraneous sounds – Aurelius’s overly quick breathing, the barely audible static from the world beyond the fault... There, she can hear a voice. A child’s voice, not Sarash’s. Then whose?

Si-fon-fi-her-flee-for-dree
Aye-fall

Oh-rall-sall
Sall-vay-shon

She becomes instantly obsessed with the nursery rhyme itself, more than with wondering who's chanting it. Solis is focusing as though her life depended on it – Sarash's does! She improvises a metronome with her fingers, snapping them to the beat of the refrain.

Aurelius's heart matches Solis's tempo: excited rather than frantic. A moment ago he was entirely exasperated by her presence, and now he wants to help her understand, help her save Sarash. Damm it, how does she do it? What kind of magic is it?

"I got it!" Solis proclaims triumphantly.

She turns to Aurelius to share her eureka moment.

“Siphon fire, flee forgery. Eye-fall, Aural sal-, salvation.”

She is magnificently, radiantly happy, beaming like a third sun illuminating Artellium.

Solis is either mad as a hatter or brilliant. Aurelius can’t decide which it is. And he can’t help finding that much happiness for someone other than yourself beguiling! If that’s madness, he’ll take it.

The Malkah’s brow furrows, eclipse passing in front of the sun of her joy. Sarash may be alive, but she’s still in mortal danger at every moment; Solis has to do something! She’s screaming into the fault, the urgency of saving her friend ticking like a timebomb in her gut.

“Sarash, listen to me! Trust your ears, not your eyes! Sarash, can you hear me?”

No reply. Solis obeys the nursery rhyme: she closes her eyes and cocks an ear towards the fault. She’s convinced that she has unlocked the secret of its syllables, but she desperately wants to be sure. Nothing. Nothing but the rhyme, looping over and over again.

Siphon fire, flee forgery

Eyes fall

Aural sall...

Salvation

Focusing on the pronunciation, each repetition strengthens her certainty: the rhyme is urging Sarash to trust her hearing, not her eyesight. If only Solis understood what a “siphon fire” was, she could surely help

Sarash more. She's already heard the term, but she'll be damned if she can remember where.

Bursting with hope lined with fear, she lets the chant fill her whole being, turning her mind into an auditorium, the better to catch every echo. She becomes a turning fork, except that, rather than setting the tone, she's letting herself vibrate in unison with the singer. It's a child's voice... No, not only, she can perceive another tessiture in a lower, more grown-up register. That other voice is as rare as a coloratura tessiture, one that knows how to pass a message on with very few words, a voice as keen and sharp as the blade of a sw...

Shado! The voice is Shado's!

Is the Primus of Darkness imprisoned in the fault, too? Unless...

The pieces of the puzzle are falling into place, one after another, as precisely as if they'd been cut with a scalpel. A Primus of Darkness can't be held prisoner in his own realm. That purulent darkness is the same magic that Shado masters, she has seen him using it. Solis is convinced: these ambrage faults open onto the Invermonde.

The Invermonde... is cracking open.

Her hypothesis slices through the mystery like a cleaver, and Solis gives herself over to the joyful blade slashing through her bewilderment. She's finally, finally making progress in her quest. She has just turned the random tangle of threads she's been clinging to into the beginning of a warp and weft. To weave the next row, she's going to have to find Shado – and Sarash – guided by the invoker

and his nursery rhyme.

Solis gives in without a fight to the irresistible urge to turn mark this milestone – goldenly, even! She bends down, picks up a nugget of amber that fits smoothly into her palm, and slips it into her pocket. With her red lips painting an earnest smile, she grabs Aurelius's still-outstretched arms, draws him to her and leads him into an incongruous dance on the roof of the Gravlev, criss-crossed by swells of weightmessiness and scarred by the ambrage fault. Carried away by her own cavorting, her face is bobbing dangerously close to handsome Aurelius's, and their lips meet in a breath. Electrical contact – powerful intensity, short duration. High voltage, but highly unsatisfying. Solis stops laughing, stops dancing. There's nothing random about all this, it's all unspooling according to her decisions and determination. If she's making progress in her quest it's because her intuition was correct. Although he doesn't know it, Aurelius – impetuous, yet so fragile in his awful struggle – Aurelius the graceful, undependable, almost-traitor has led her to the right path. She's going to find her sister. And she's going to save the pranah.

She runs her hand down the back of Aurelius's head, slipping her fingers through his long hair and pressing her mouth onto his. With her tongue, she pushes through the barrage of his lips, blending their saliva in a delightfully unending coil.

Aurelius is mesmerized by that fiercely sensual kiss. He gives in to it. He had been fleeing it, wanting it and fleeing it some more, and now here he is with his back to the wall,

his body turned to liquid, like screaming lava. Spontaneous combustion from his pelvis to his cheeks. The hoop on Solis's lower lip is turning him on; he toys with it savagely, languorously, careful to keep his partner on that narrow cusp between pleasure and pain, that place of delicate violence where you feel more alive than anywhere else. The ardour fills his palate with painfully intense desire, an incandescence he succumbs to heart and soul. Trembling, he hugs Solis tight, pressing his hips against hers. Their bodies fuse, amalgamating to the point of branding each other like hot irons, sizzling hot magma flowing over the never-ending, incandescent present.

Smart move, Aurelius, you're in up to your neck now. You've jumped in with feet, hands and tongue tied. Shit, shit, shit!

He doesn't know how Isalys is going to react, and he doesn't give a damn, either. She's lots of things that Solis isn't. The Malkah often acts in ways that her dispossessed sister never would, but... that kiss... Isalys has never kissed him like that.

For the first time ever, Aurelius curses the Rift and its sempiternal distortions. His mind is confused, ill, lost in a maze of mirrors. He doesn't know who to help, who to eliminate, who to love. Who to be. His desires are no longer driving his acts, his damned *emotions* have taken over the rest, and that's devastating him, chopping him up into a million little pieces of himself.

Solis decided for him. She was the one who initiated that kiss. She's his persecutor. A consenting victim, he surrenders to her, completely and utterly. The Rift is the

realm of uncertainty, subterfuge, and uncontrolled evolution... but at Solis's side, the vibrated heath loses its power and turns back into a landscape like any other, one with constant, universal laws. Ground you can stand on, build on, rely on; ground that will still be there tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, for years to come.

Between them, embedded between two chests pressed tight together, the amber is a warming, burning hearth.

They have no choice but to pull apart. Aurelius tries to extend their embrace by sucking on Solis's hoop, but their chests wind up backing off. Their ardour is vanquished, a wild beast chased away by the flames of a furnace. Lips parted, Aurelius is on the verge of language...

She stops him with the touch of her finger. He can't help licking the burn of her skin on his.

"Aurelius..."

The amethyst of her eyes is guiding the gladiator's gaze to their feet. They are floating a cubit off the ground, like two puppets without a string in the hands of a mischievous puppeteer. All around them, specks, droplets and nuggets of amber are floating in the air like stars, a heavenly canopy orbiting around them.

Solis is absolutely weightless: her body suspended in the air over the terrace, her feelings suspended on the future of this nascent, dawning love. She tips her neck back to offer her face to the golden, static snow all around her, entering into harmony with the chunks of amber, their heat and vibration. She wants nothing more than to record their song, like those Mantri devices able to recreate a

symphonic orchestra with a quivering membrane.

But instead of sound, an image comes to her – in total contradicton with the warning in the nursery rhyme, but then, isn't the Invermonde the negative of their world? The suspended nuggets of amber are catching Rainar's rays, refracting them endlessly, as the star is on the verge of rising now. Then a rainbow forms for Solis's eyes only, a decomposition of the magical properties of the substance spit out from the fault, made visible to those who know how to see.

First hue: Amber, the magical power of Artellium, naturally impalpable, made solid... pure pranah.

Second hue: The pure pranah that makes Aurelius's mysterious magic possible: it's the secret of that bloody pendant of his.

Third hue: The Invermonde has indeed cracked open, her hypothesis is accurate: the cracked Invermonde is oozing solid pranah.

Fourth hue: The obvious, logical conclusion: the Invermonde is involved in the degeneration of the pranah.

Solis observes the sumptuous rainbow where her imperious need to find Shado is inscribed in glowing letters of light. Aurelius played his part; he has brought her towards the solution. Now it is up to the Primus of Darkness to guide her towards healing the pranah. And saving Sarash.

She's still floating with her feet off the ground, but already she can feel the weight of her task pressing her down. She's knows that at the very moment her foot sets down on solid ground, the time for relishing the simple

pleasure of having understood the breadth of her quest will have drawn to a close. It will be time to move on to the crushing responsibility of seeking a solution. So she lets herself hover in the air a moment longer, the briefest respite before her age of innocence comes crashing to an end.

Her relief is so intense that tears spring to her eyes. Even more than before, she can let her new feelings for Aurelius wash over her, can treat herself to exploring them to find out if they suit her and to decide for herself if she wants to devote herself to them. She allows herself to do that all the more happily in that she can sense, with an intensity that precludes even the shadow of a doubt, that Hannibal has given her his full, sincere blessing.

She giggles, amused by the confused look on Aurelius's face. He is completely disoriented as gales of laughter gush from the Gravlev's rooftop terrace, flowing all around it, unaffected by weightlessness.

A ways away from there, at the spot where the gravitational whirlwind catapulted him, Hannibal is lying on the ground, his back propped up on a rock, his face turned towards the roof of the Gravlev. The impact was so violent that the layer of tainted dust and debris that has covered the Rift since the Blast was expelled from the crater of his landing. So he is lying on the pure, healthy, unspoiled soil of Solon from before the Blast. Despite his shattered bones and his organs reduced to a pulp, he feels good. His suffering is beyond what any human can endure, so it is leaving him alone. Serene, at peace, free. Ready to give himself over to Death who's cajoling him and will

soon carry him away. But not just yet...

The tracks in the ground show that he dragged himself to the rock; he wanted to be there to give himself a chance to see Solis one last time. To achieve that, he used up the last ounce of fang powder from his scarifications. That way, he could die cleansed of that original sin, that lie of omission he served up to his master, Tumul, when he had been unable to admit that the rockworm was already dead when he yanked the three fangs from its mouth.

The effort has left him gasping for breath. He won't move again. Like an incumbent statue on a tombstone, his body is almost calcified. Only his eyes are still moving. But that's all he needs to be able to focus on the far-off Gravlev.

Despite the distance, he can see the luminous hues shimmering on the roof, he can hear the music of their joyful dance, he can enjoy the shiver of pride playing jacks with his shattered bones, he can feel the breeze of hope depositing a last shiver on his petrified skin and tickling his motionless nostrils. All that dazzling, powerful and inspiring magic can only spring from one source.

For the last time, he lets himself be awed by Solis.

His stone eye goes still staring at that enchanted light, he is now no more than a lifeless statue. Silent and immutable, the Earth welcomes Hannibal, its Primus, back into its bosom at last.

ROCK STARS

“Yeah, she’s still a little under the weather... We don’t really know, but I mixed up a little bioost – a special recipe of my own, you know me! ... Yeah, we’re going to watch the debate, too... It’s really nice of you to offer, but I don’t think it’d be a good idea... Next time, for sure!”

KatK can only hear her father’s half of his conversation with the neighbours – they actually came over and knocked on the door, as though holos didn’t exist... real bioomers! And since they were only half listening, they didn’t really catch much. Still, it was enough to know that her friend Meera isn’t going to show up. Luckily, since KatK just *knows* that Meera would have got on their last nerve with her “brand new SIT, it’s the latest model: super-modular, super-stylish, super-trendy, super everything, I swear, you gotta see it, lemme’ show you!”

Miniature KatK’s shimmy victoriously on her screen-skin.

“Thanks,” Atale says to Fabro when he closes the door.

“No problem. Besides, there isn’t enough of your special hot sauce for seven, so...”

“Still, we’re going to need to come up with a different excuse. I’m in an inter-contract phase, it’s isn’t as though it’s contagious.”

“Aaah, but when I said you were ‘under the weather,’ I wasn’t saying you were ill, I meant it in the sense that you weren’t sure *whether* or not you were going to work tomorrow.”

“Yeah, right, like I believe that.”

KatK is following the scene out of the corner of her eye, gobsmacked to see that her father thinks he’s funny. Their mom’s giggling, their dad’s clowning around to make her giggle more, the two of them kissing over the kitchen island and knocking a spoon into the sauce that splatters it everywhere... Their father who makes a totally not credible face like he’s sorry before pleading for another kiss, their mother who wipes up the hot sauce with her finger to smear it on his lips, more clowning around, more lovey-doviness, more soppy laughter... Honestly, even in a two-battery eromance, you wouldn’t buy it!

The mini KatKs start spitting up waves of baby-pink marshmallows.

On the other hand, their mother has been keeping her promise for the moment: she’s making a real effort with Fabro, and she and KatK have stopped sniping at each other all day long...Which is no mean feat, considering that mom just got fired. When you know how much Atale cares about her autonomous-robot project, she might have gone totally off the deep end, but surprisingly, she took advantage of it to find her place in the family again, being as she had pretty much deserted it... More cuddles for Onyx, more closeness with Fabro, more time for herself. Only KatK gets less: less sermonizing, less pressure, less advice... So in the end of the day, everybody comes out ahead.

The mini KatKs are replaced by colourful, smiling emojis... with just one or two that are sneering like the bad guys in low-budget vids.

Enough with that already, the debate's gonna start soon. Usually they couldn't care less about corruptocrats and their jousting, but... even they have to admit: Arhax vs. the Ordinator should be as exciting as a final at the Appologium!

Connected to the network, they are surfing on the wave of comments about the event – a treacherous, sometimes toxic torrent spewing from every which way, but one that KatK navigates with ease, without getting sucked under. Everybody in ÅPØLØW is on tenterhooks, wanting to swing into action; the outcome of the debate is going to have a real impact on what shape that action will take. A lot of them hope that Arhax will score a few points during the show: he's such a dingbat that people won't be that surprised if young people rise up against him. KatK hates the Robotic, he's exactly the kind of clown that made her mom hate her job.

ÅPØLØW aren't the only ones interested in the holovised duel. The bookies have set the odds at five to one for the Ordi, but the really wild betting is about SeeLung, the technogynous superstar who's doing the halftime show. Is he finally going to reveal what techstyle he belongs to? The sums riding on it are insane, especially among cyb's, who are particularly big on SeeLung. KatK hesitates, restrains herself, then gives in: a little bet can't do any harm, and if by any chance they won... Onyx would be thrilled. One adooores SeeLung. Still, KatK erases it from their activity log, not being entirely comfortable with what they've done...

"No more secrets," Onyx pipes up, sitting on the floor in the middle of the apartment, as usual.

KatK freezes, every bit as spooked as if they'd just been flagged by a Nooria antivirus. How did One know?

"Dad, Mom, stop it! We said no more secrets... You said so yourselves!"

KatK has to hold in a sigh of relief, and can't help laughing

at the realization that they're as scared of getting caught by their kid sister as they would be of an Opax agent. They're going to have to learn to handle stress better if they want to get more involved in ÅPØLØW ops.

"What makes you think we're sharing secrets, sweetie pie?" Atale asks.

"Mothers always know when you're lying, you told me so yourself. And I'm a mother now, too."

Onyx gazes lovingly at her two bobots before training a stricter look on her parents. The effect is slightly spoiled when she starts scratching at the growth that's coming back on her chin, after it got torn off when she was mugged.

"Will you tell me your secret, One?" Fabro asks imploringly. "I've always wanted to understand mothers' secret knowledge."

"It's easy!" Onyx says mischievously, yielding with childlike ease. "The minute you stop talking, Dad, it means you're discussing something hush-hush on the network."

"Wha-a-at??? Hold on there, kiddo, I don't talk as much as all that!"

"Nah, you don't talk *all* the time," KatK says with a snort. "Sometimes you stop to chitchat a bit. You gab occasionally, too."

"And you love to hold forth," Atale adds, her lips tight to hold in a gale of laughter.

"But... but..."

"Prattle, prate, babble, ramble, chinwag..."

"Chit-chat, tittle-tattle, yackety-yak..." KatK chimes in.

"Dad is extremely loquacious!" Onyx tosses out, sounding very proud of her correct pronunciation.

"Hey, this is a conspiracy!" Fabro protests. "I demand a Norianalysis!" he says, pretending to open the Noria app on his SIT. He changes his tone of voice as he looks lovingly at

every member of his family. “Shareholder-citizen Fabro Lag’Chuo, speech-time analysis. Estimated share of each day: 69%.” He goes back to his normal voice. “See, that’s not so much!” He wrinkles his brow as he changes his voice again. “Calculation done for a twenty-four hour period, including when you’re asleep. That represents 100% speaking time during waking hours, in addition to talking in your sleep.”

“Does snoring count?” Atale asks, giggling.

“Okay, okay, I’ll shut up!”

“Come over here, I’ll help you.”

Atale plants a not-very-quiet kiss on her husband’s lips.

“Yuck!” KatK says. “You two’ve got a bedroom, don’cha? how many times do I have to remind you?”

Onyx guffaws with pleasure. She adoooores the in-love version of her parents – Kat’s pretending not to feel the same way, but they prefer it too, One would bet her first-born on it. That makes her smile fade away fast: she’s got a tough decision to make, like when adults say they have to choose between the devil and the deep blue seal.

Kubu or Sphax?

As a reflection of her painful inability to decide, she keeps spinning and spinning her light-stick. The flashlight – the must-have tool for all true SeeLung fans, is made from a pearly com-plast handle topped with a prism as big as the diamond in a fairy-tale princess’s engagement ring, with a flower made out of a golden heart surrounded by five white petals set inside the prism. With a distracted thumb, Onyx activates the – flower-shaped, too – switch, but nothing happens, because the battery is flat. Usually, all she’d have to do is go get another one in the distributor, but she holds back. She doesn’t want mommy to say no, or for daddy to make a dad joke to help mom’s no go down – because he won’t want her to go either. She’s going to have to use the

batteries from her bobots.

So, Sphax or Kubu?

“Dad?” she calls on the special channel that only Fabro receives.

“Yes, my little slayer of secrets?”

“If you had to choose between Kat and me, who would you choose?”

“But, kitten... I love you both equally!”

“Yeah, I know, but what if you just *really* had to choose?”

“Hmmm, let me think about it... Oh, I know!”

Fabro keeps her in suspense, and Onyx can tell he’s going to come out with another Dad joke. She usually likes when he does that, but this is too serious to joke about!

“I’d take lots of bits and bobs from each of you: my favourite unicorn’s head, Kat’s screen-skin... stuff like that.”

“But Daddy, that’s not even possible! How could you do that without both of us dying?”

“Good question, I don’t know! So in the meantime, I’m keeping you both.”

“Hmmp. So Dad, do you think Kubu and Sphax could work with half as many batteries each?”

“I bet your mom could figure out how to do that. And I *know* it would make her day if you asked her.”

Onyx shivers with pleasure, like when the criarunes tickle her neck. She looks up at her father, vaguely aware that it was a gush of love. When he winks at her as discreetly as a stage whisper, she giggles behind her hand before winking back. Then she squinches her eyes so tight the growth on her forehead scratches her eyelid. That’s alright, it was worth it.

“Ma... do you think you could help me?”

The D.I.Y session takes longer than expected, and they hardly notice when the debate starts. Atale is reconfiguring Sphax – who loses the ability to fly, but keeps its cams – and

Kubu – who goes around and around on a single caterpillar track, and loses all its sensors. To feed the troops, Fabro turns one of his sculptures into a peanut distributor equipped with a spring arm that slings the nuts directly into their gaping mouths... or right past them, more often. Onyx gussies Kubu up with a ribbon of bioluminescent led lights, and KatK dangles Sphax from the ceiling. While they're watching a tutorial inside their forearm, they get caught up in the debate: according to their news feed, the Ordi is taking a serious beating, like majorly humiliating.

Intrigued, KatK watches the holo that's on in the background in their flat with the sound down real low. Arms overhead, they're witnessing the Ordinator's total defeat. The effect is all the more striking in that they can't hear it. Limp and unable to parry in the least, he looks as ill-at-ease as a neo-cyb' doing their first solo implant. It could be funny, but it's almost disturbing, as though SeeLung had forgotten the lyrics to his biggest hit in the middle of a concert. Arhax, on the other hand, looks capable and on-topic. He's catching all the light and taking all the air out of the room, like an irresistible black hole. Worrisome, and potentially destructive, too, but radiant.

Theories are scrolling by on KatK's screen-skin: the Ordinator must be sick, or else he's wasted – "I want what he's having!" gReek, the network's star hacker jokes in the comments section. A neuro-psychologist is analyzing the Noria spokesman's performance live, with charts that show a powerful psychological trauma. Caused by what? Not a clue...

They dig up the rare skeletons in the politician's closet, especially that brief but spectacular dip in his Eco-shozen rank, but no one can find anything fresh and juicy about him aside from a few lines in a *Take News* column by Liv, the

investigative chrone.

“That bughole’s gonna’ make me lose all my winnings!”
@ssasumaru rants as the Ordinator’s ratings collapse.

KatK stops what they’re doing, leaving Sphax hung up by a single pair of wings. They get down from the stepladder, which is instantly swallowed up by the memory-form floor, and goes to sit cross-legged in front of the holo. They leave the sound off – the stupidities the adversaries are spewing hardly matter, it’s their body language that counts. With some home-made image-analysis software, KatK can join the various camera fields to recreate the entire studio where the debate is taking place. The tool calculates the reconstitution’s sight lines and vanishing points, so that geometric shapes are superimposed, endlessly live and updated. The horizon and the obliques gradually converge on an individual in the background, one foot backstage and the other on set.

KatK focuses on him. A charismatic smile that inspires trust or antipathy, depending; an electric-blue Assistant worn as a piercing on his lower lip, and a maroon turban covering his head make him all the more intriguing.

The software creates a mapping of his face and launches an info search. A holo-calling card appears almost of its own accord – the bloke’s not shy about sharing his identity: Alcred, meta-consultant from the T-Rose Agency, specialized in public image capital-risk. Tagline: “Beyond your ambitions, the solution.”

“Yo,” KatK’s typing with four fingers on their arm. “Doesn’t it look like he’s the illusionist pulling the strings on this charade?”

They attach an analysis from their program and a few sampled vids to the message. Their comment gets picked up immediately, acquires a hashtag, then becomes a main subject. Enhanced with more research, KatK’s theory starts

trending, and soon goes viral on ÅPØLOW.

As their post soars to the heights, KatK feels bubbles sparkling in their stomach. What they just said, what they just wrote, is affecting how thousands of followers perceive reality. They are doing something really useful, so *they* are useful. It's wild, and pretty thrilling, too!

"The strength of our direct democracy," the Ordinator is saying in response to a question from the journalist who's moderating the debate.

Just like when Onyx piped up with "no secrets" before, KatK suddenly has the weird impression that the Noria's spokesperson is reacting to what they just did, which spurs them to pay attention to the debate after all.

"And in your opinion, Arhax," the moderator – a persona, so the political adversaries can claim 100% of the show's embodied space – asks, turning to the Ordinator's opponent "what makes Mantris the greater power?"

"DALEKs. They're faster than Arkhantan nags and they leave fewer turds behind them."

Chuckles erupt in the studio, as naturally as during a comedy show recorded in front of a live audience. Ignoring Arhax's half-frozen smile, KatK's eyes are glued to Alcred, whose lips are splattered with blue light from his AIssistant, which is clearly functioning non-stop. There's no doubt about it, he's the one who's steering this all-new Arhax 2.0!

"You don't have any other arguments?" the persona says, trying again. "We've got a cumulated holo-viewer share of 82.8%. Don't you think our shozen deserve a more personal answer?"

"Yes, of course. The DALEKs, and the championship that goes with them."

"One of the racers, Julian, was a dear friend of yours," she acknowledges. "His death affected everyone in Mantris. Still,

by a more personal answer, I meant...”

“Stop it. Stop trying to reduce Julian’s death to just another item in the news cycle. His death was a call to arms! I see people trying to ignore that wake-up call. They’re the same ones who want to hide the truth. You know what I want to say to them? Mantris *isn’t* the greater power.”

The chuckles stop short; the atmosphere in the studio drops to below freezing, and in the Lag’Chuo’s flat, everyone stops what they’re doing and looks up. Only Kubu keeps going around in circles. KatK is stunned: how can a face that’s half moulded in ceramet look so intimidating? Arhax’s anger is so scary it makes the moderator’s persona glitch.

Arhax turns to look at the Ordinator, who’s having trouble hiding his surprise.

“That’s my answer,” the Robotic says, throwing down a gauntlet.

“This isn’t the first time you’ve surprised me, Arhax,” the Ordinator replies, “but, this time I’m deeply offended. Who are you accusing of hiding the truth? Your words reek of a conspiracy theory. I represent the Noria, and I won’t allow you to dishonour our institutions. You seem to forget that we are a direct democracy and that you are insulting our shareholder-citizens at the same time.”

Arhax looks up at the ceiling with a grin, shakes his head, looks at the Ordinator as though he felt sorry for him, then replies, almost nonchalantly, “Direct democracy, really? The twenty most popular consultations in the past year were about just three different topics: the Light Festival, the price of skins in the metaverse, and the dome’s weather. And when a serious subject appears – like this disastrous energy crisis that is threatening the lifestyle of every single Mantri home, it gets entrusted to FAITH, some opaque commission that decides to start charging for batteries... without a single

consultation! Do you call that democracy, Mr. Ordinator? Well, I don't! And I'll say so straight into the camera, looking 82.8% of viewers straight in the eye!"

It looked like the Robotic was going to keep soaring in the ratings by letting the magnetic jack of his feelings run wild. He couldn't give a flying fuck about Alcred's calls for calm: he came for a real debate, his project vs. the Ordinator's, not to put on an entertaining show. Just then his meta-consultant's last suggestion, the one he gave just as Arhax was stepping into the studio, pops into his head, "Every time you speak, ask yourself what Julian would have thought."

Now that's one piece of advice he's willing to take...

"Unlike you...", Arhax starts again more calmly, but the Ordinator cuts him off.

"Unlike me?" Thank you, Arhax, I find that reassuring. For a minute there, I thought you didn't realize that we are opposed on absolutely every point."

"I don't know if we are opposed about everything. But I do know that you aren't opposing anything anymore. Especially not our enemies. You've changed, Ordinator. You're burying your head in the sand, smoothing everything over. You remind me of those morticians who put make-up on corpses to hide scars and marks. Because seeing what death really looks like scares them.

"But I saw death, up close and personal. The man I loved had his throat slit by the Magus of Darkness, on the Malkah's orders. I'd give anything to..."

Another about-face in the sentiments Arhax is displaying. Suddenly he looks sorrowful, his gaze lost in the distance. The tormented-soul colour of his eyes is powerfully moving in a Robotic. Blinking tears away, he starts talking again. I don't want make-up on my grief, no concealer. I don't want to be spared anything. That's the price you have to pay for

facing the truth. And for facing down fear.”

The Ordinator is nodding thoughtfully. He knows every trick of the political-comedy trade by heart, but that... how did that conniving, double-dealing Arhax manage to stir his feelings, even for a nano-second? He tries to counterattack.

“I too, once lost someone I loved. I know how awful it is, and how tough it can be to go on. But if I had made governing Mantris a personal affair, I would have been betraying the duties of my office. Leading is not about getting revenge, Arhax! You see, we really do disagree about absolutely everything.”

“That’s true, nothing’s ever personal with you! Nothing rattles you. Doesn’t it bother you that Mantris is in decline? Mantris is no longer the great power it once was. But what’s that to you? You don’t take anything personally!

“Once upon a time, the world bowed to our will. We flew to the moons of Artellium, cured diseases that used to be incurable. Yes, eternal life was practically in our grasp... back then. Back then, we didn’t urge people to settle for compromises, we inspired them to outdo themselves. We didn’t worship precaution, we glorified initiative. We didn’t tremble as we watched our supply of trisel go down, we filled it up! We weren’t afraid to compete, we went into battle light-hearted. Maybe because back then, we took things personally. We took Mantris’ fate personally. We all did. From the top rung of society to the bottom, people took it personally. What happened? Fear is everywhere now. We’re afraid of consuming too much. We’re afraid of upsetting that risible little Arkhantan queen. We’re even afraid of the future.

“And do you know why? Why are we so afraid of Arkhant?”

Carried away by his own speechifying, Arhax is glaring at

the Ordinator, who's out of his league.

“Being so in awe of magic means that we have lost faith in science. But Mantris was built on science! Science has brought us longevity. Science protects us from poverty and disease. Science has freed our shozen from gruelling labour. Science gives our children education and a future. Science raises us and feeds us. Science has built our civilization, day by day and brick by brick. And it's true... all that progress comes with a price tag. All those advantages require energy.

“You say that science has become too dear. You so love the Arkhantans that you want us to be like them: living in hovels and working with shovels!”

“Don't be ridiculous! I don't want us to turn into Arkhantans. I just think we need to keep the peace with that great kingdom, at any price.”

“What about them? Do they want peace at any price? I don't think so. Their territory is ten times the size of ours. And what do they do with it? Nothing! They sneer at trisel. They don't use an ounce of it to improve people's lives. Neither there, nor here. Arkhantan aristocrats disdain the people, both their own and ours!

“People ask me, ‘What gives us the right to exploit mines on their land?’ My answer: ‘civilisation!’ The Malkah says no, and we're supposed to bow to her will? Why not cheer her and offer her a tribute, too, as long as we're at it? I have a question for you, Ordinator, what in trisel's name made you lose your faith in science?”

Normally the Ordinator knows how to compose masks to hide his feelings in the blink of an eye, but all of his training is insufficient in this case. He is suddenly afraid of this new Arhax – still a dangerous psychopath, but now able to rein his feelings in. The restraint is fragile, granted, but it's real. Dazed and daunted by the unexpected opponent, muzzled

by his threats, the Noria's spokesperson is a helpless witness to his own defeat, which is starting to look a lot like a total wipe-out.

"Ah, you're looking away," Arhax rebukes him. "That's you all over! It's true, I am your absolute opposite. I'm not afraid of the truth. I believe in science. I am convinced it represents Mantris's future, its happiness and prosperity. I even think it's worth fighting for. I am not a politician by trade, but I can be the one to stand up for change. I can go get trisel wherever it is, with my guts and my bare hands. I can be the one to pay the price. I won't let anyone stand in my way. Science isn't free, but it is priceless. The Ordinator has forgotten who the Mantri are! We are a people of builders, of innovators, of simple, hard-working people who stand side by side to work together! We'll do it for our children, our families and our neighbours. We are a civilisation. Mantris is a jewel that we're not going to bargain over."

Exalted, Arhax looks at the journalist-moderator.

"That's my answer. That's my offer to our people."

The persona bugs again, not knowing how to react. Caught unprepared, the producer launches the half-time concert on the spot.

“It’s starting!” Onyx shouts as soon as the lights in the studio start to dim then fade to black.

With butterflies in her stomach, she sticks Kubu’s fairy lights back together and activates Sphax’s faceted eyes. Then she grabs her light-stick with both hands and presses it tight against her sternum for the time it takes to centre herself perfectly opposite the screen – a few steps to the left, her soles squeaking on the floor; no, a little bit to the right... there, that’s perfect!

Now that she’s finally in the right spot, she lowers her head so that it’s hanging over the huge diamond. Lit with a trembling finger, the torch projects a beam that the five-petalled flower turns into a torrent of rays of light. Onyx’s face is splattered with colourful droplets, her growths are mottled with a silky glow, the light-stick has turned her into a shimmering princess. Everything is ready. She had to fight for the right to stay up past her bedtime, then to wait patiently until those men stopped talking. And now her time has finally come.

She’s ready. It’d better start soon, she’s so excited she wants to pee!

“I love you, my FFs! My Fantastique Fans!”

“SEEEUUUNG!”

The singer makes a grand entrance, bounding onto the stage to the cries of thousands of fans, synchronized via their light-sticks. The music swells, as tart as pucker powder, and SeeLung starts the show in a flood of frenzied spotlights. Throughout Mantris, children and teens are starting the dance along with their idol, copying his movements with little grace but plenty of passion, shouting, singing, jumping every which way, sometimes even fainting, often in tears from the overdose of emotion.

Mirroring SeeLung perfectly, Onyx throws her light-stick in

the air, twirls around, freezes cleanly, catches the light-stick with one hand, takes a step to one side, then to the other, spreads her arms wide like a bird about to take flight, raises her arms gradually while spinning to make a whirlpool of remanent light, stamps her feet rhythmically, perfectly in time to her idol, stops slightly off-kilter to the screen, still precisely in tempo, raises one shoulder and lays her chin on it, posing with a simpering smile... and starts the cycle all over, twirling even more ecstatically.

The kid is transformed. Literally. Her ill-favoured face has been transfigured by infinite joy, her body, still chubby with childhood, is offering a glimpse of a blossoming teen, the stigmatizing growths have become the indispensable accessories of a uniquely innovative stage costume. Onyx's performance is more than just a tribute to her favourite popstar, shared by thousands of entranced fans. No. She is incarnating proof of a character that can cope, a demonstration that an incurable disease isn't going to keep her from having a fulfilling life, and an unassailable faith in a brighter future.

SeeLung's concert might well leave plenty of Mantri cold, but no one could be indifferent to the display of courage and hope that Onyx is offering.

Not KatK, anyway. They admire their little sister, her inner strength, her belief in brighter tomorrows. Their role as a big sister forces them to be more realistic: tomorrow won't be better, no; tomorrow will be sordid. But watching the infinitely tender spectacle of Onyx and her dancing light-stick, KatK knows they have a small piece of the future that's worth fighting for. They're lucky to have it; One gives them the energy they need to keep on fighting alongside their comrades in ÅPØLØW.

Touched, entertained and slightly discomfited, too, they

look over at their parents in order to share an affectionate laugh about the show – the one in the flat, which is infinitely superior to the holo one. Their mood is spoiled instantly: standing in front of the kitchen counter, with their backs to their kids, Fabro and Atale look deflated, their minds elsewhere, and a little sad. Totally out of step with the feelings welling up inside KatK that they had been hoping to share.

They type discreetly on their right wrist and connect to their parents' private metaverse. It isn't KatK's fault if Fabro their parents use the same password for everything! They infiltrate their parents' virtual space like a lurking ghost, no more noticeable than a firefly in the night sky.

"... can't work for a guy like that," their mother's saying, in the guise of a persona in shapeless, comfortable clothes she would never wear outside of her own metaverse. "You heard him just like me, Arhax is a demagogue of the worst kind."

"At least he tells it like it is!"

Their father's persona looks a lot like the real thing, aside from the bags under his eyes maybe. A little less kharo belly, a little more hair, KatK notices after a while. But the real difference is that in their metaverse, Fabro drops the cuddly papa bear isn't-everything-wonderful act. He's showing his true colours, his real fears and doubts. Listening to Arhax, KatK had a feeling that the politician was keeping something in reserve to convince people, even as he was pouring seeds of fear into the middle-Croesus class's feeding trough. They would have preferred if their Dad hadn't been the first to gobble them down, but how can they blame him? They're scared too!

"Don't tell me you bought into his speech!" Atale exclaims reproachfully.

"As a matter of fact, I did. I bought into it as an

investment for One's treatment."

"Things aren't that simple. Between his words and his..."

"Actually, they *could* be that simple. If you accepted the job offer at ROMA, for instance..."

KatK notices the anger twitching at the corner of Atale's lips before Fabro does. They know only too well what their mother's face looks like just before it explodes. Being the family's human gunpowder keg creates certain reflexes. Even so, KatK can't help the sbing ache that hits her, hard. They had almost fallen for their parents' second honeymoon act. Fake. Worse than a cheap simulation for teens with raging hormones. Yuck.

"I'm not going to work for a madman, a public menace. I'm asking you to open your eyes and try to understand that."

"The only thing that I understand is that because of this damn battery shortage, we can't give our daughter the care she needs. And when Kat finds an alternative treatment, we can't afford it!"

"She found it on the Dark-SIT! We have no idea if it's any good!"

"They..."

"What?"

"They" found it, not "She..."

"Fabro... You know I'm trying!"

KatK's cheek burn red with embarrassment at having eavesdropped on this conversation. They're aware that their mother has trouble with their choice of the neutral "they." She's too Robotic at heart to be able to grasp the cyb' concept of gender-fluid identity... it's too far out there for her. But to her credit, at least when Atale is talking to them directly, she makes the effort. KatK recognizes that as a sign of love and doesn't resent her for slipping up when KatK's

not there.

Fabro squeezes Atale's hand – IRL, not just in the metaverse.

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean...” Long, exhausted sigh. “I just meant that everything's spinning out of control and that Kat's the one finding solutions, which is supposed to be my responsibility. That's my damned job, not theirs! This isn't right; nothing's right... I'm dropping the ball, and it's killing me.”

Embarrassment red shifts to anger red on KatK's cheeks. Seriously? Who does Fabro think he is, wanting to carry all the burdens alone? What kind of old-fashioned nonsense says that only dads can protect their families? When the batteries run out, what does he think he's going to do with his flabby belly and his bioost habit?

Atale squeezes Fabro's hand back.

“Darling, you're a good father. You can have doubts about me, about us, about anything you want... but not about that.”

“You know, Atale, Arhax is right about one thing: I'm scared. All the time. And I'm fed up with being scared...”

KatK tiptoes out of their metaverse, regretting having eavesdropped on their conversation. It's not that they feel guilty, it's more like they just don't want to see their father being so abject. That gets on their nerves, to the point that their screen-skin is bugging. That's so damn typical of him to be resigned, to play nice. Nice dad, nice neighbour, nice shozen... He can't see beyond his own comfort, and when you get right down to it, he doesn't see any reason to change.

And the worst part is that Atale's right: Fabro actually does do pretty well in the old-man department. If he gives up, who's gonna' keep things running at home? Who's gonna' keep everything from going south? Not the Ordi, that's for

sure, and it sure as styrene ain't Arhax! So who's going to have to roll up their sleeves and get down to work then? Everyone that has nothing to do with the current crisis, but who's going to be hardest hit by it: young people, obviously. The only ones whose whole future is at stake in this crisis that Fabro thinks is something they can just hunker down until it blows over. Their father sees Arhax like a bioost for getting past a post-prandial dip, but KatK knows perfectly well that he's a frigging cancer brewing in Mantris. A cancer that needs to be eradicated, cell by cell. And if young people can't save day, they're going to be the ones facing the consequences head on. Supreme quintessence of unfairness!

KatK has a little bit of fear and a whole lot of motivation, but still, they would have appreciated a bit of support. The struggle is a marathon, it would be good to have a place, a shoulder to rest on, to catch their breath and get their strength back. They thought their father could be that place... Finding out he's petrified with fear makes for a brutal end to their childhood. Looks like the marathon's gonna' be non-stop...

The cold rage that's tensing their shoulders and neck, the bitter-tasting disappointment that's making her throat burn... it's all washed away by Onyx's ecstatic shout.

On a new aerial dance step, SeeLung has suddenly proliferated on screen. He is framed by five clones, caricatures of each of the techstyles. The Genetic version, for instance, has smooth skin and perfect features, and the Mantris's face is composed entirely of scrolling lines of code.

"It's a-MA-zing!" Onyx says, swooning with delight. "Look Kat, lo-o-o-o-k!"

The Cybernetic is ridiculous, with trendy, gleaming new implants, an insult to cyb's. KatK doesn't say anything, not

wanting to spoil One's deight.

"We're all the same, my darling FFs, fans of all the techstyles at once!" SeeLung tosses out bubbling with enthusiasm. "Everybody with me now!"

He brandishes his light-stick high overhead, while an interactive map of Mantris is displayed all around him. Every single connected fan shows up as a spot of light on the map, composing a galaxy with the singer as the lodestar in the centre.

"Follow me, and keep the beat, everybody!"

Each light-stick starts pulsing at a specific frequency to the tempo of the dance steps on a single, unchanging colour. Altogether, the galaxy of synchronized suns is multi-coloured, with hypnotically undulating waves running through it. Around Onyx, their flat has turned into a dark, apple-green sun.

"As long as there are batteries, we'll always be together," the six versions of SeeLung gush in unison. "I'm counting on you, my darling FFs. Nothing should ever come between us!"

"Who cares about batteries!" Onyx insists, out of breath but still following the steps. "I'm going to spread magic everywhere!" she proclaims, arms outstretched, shoulders and hips undulating. "*Everywhere*, like in Arkhante!" Another jump, landing with her feet together, then pounding the ground in a stationary race. "I'm even going to put magic into Kubu and Sphax." Final pose, legs firm, back arched, one arm along her side, the other pointing the illuminated light-stick at the sky. "Magic everywhere, just like Nyvenn said!"

“I atomized him.”

Wild-eyed stare, face flooded with sweat and ecstasy, damp hair sticking to his forehead, Arhax is pacing in his dressing room like a beast in a cage.

“I cooked the Ordi’s goose. Deep-fried him like a doughnut. I reduced that bastard to Ordi dust.”

His darting gaze is unable to alight anywhere, his hands don’t know what to do with themselves – tug on his clothes, make fists placed on his hips, run through his hair, shove a bioost high into his nostrils.

“I hauled him over the coals. Fucking O, what a drubbing I gave him!”

All around him, on every wall of the room, surveys, opinions polls, and debate highlight reels are screening on all the immedia. Two graphists, their eyes blocked out by virtual-reality headsets, are reVeRying a campaign holo using drone cams that filmed the whole show.

“Alcred? Where is he, damn it?... Alcred!”

“Here I am, Sir.”

Arhax finally finds a place to rest his hands – on his meta-advisor’s shoulders – and his gaze – staring straight into the agent’s eyes, cobalt-blue implants that stretch to his eyelids.

“Alcred, you gotta’ organize more debates. I want ten, dozens, a hundred! I kicked ass, I can do it again!”

“Who would you like to debate, Sir?”

“How should I know? I couldn’t care less. Your mother if you want. That’s what I pay you for, to figure stuff like that out. So figure it out!”

With an order to his AIssistant, Arhax transfers a generous bonus to Alcred. The Robotic is so well off that it doesn’t even change his Croesus ranking; he’s still in the Top 5. He gets a serious kick out of that! But not as serious as that absolutely exhilarating moment when he slipped into the Ordi’s empty dressing room before the debate and left a hand-written note on

a piece of real paper – so old-fashioned it's impossible to trace. Clever, right? "How's Sathyne?" was all it said. If only the insect-drone left behind hadn't succumbed to the security service's anti-virus pesticide! He would have gladly given up a hundred places in the Croesus ranking just to see that loser's face when he read the note. A thousand, even!

"Your info was pure carb-steel, Alcred. Excellent work!"

Arhax gives him another well-deserved bonus. It bugs him when his AIssistant asks him to confirm the payment – the AI is too damn slow to follow the supersonic pace of his thoughts.

"You gotta look further into that Sathyne thing. Given how the bastard reacted, it must be pretty hard core. I want more before the next debate, you hear me, Alcred? I left him reeling this time; but next time I'm going for the KO. In round one."

His hands leave Alcred's shoulders to go back to their aimless, jittery movements. Suddenly he kicks the air a few times.

"Right in the balls, right in that asshole of an Ordi's balls!"

He wants to stroke his crotch, his dick is tingling. Slowly starting to swell. In fact, what he really wants is to fuck. He wants to come hard, violently. Right here. Right now.

Action-reaction: time to head to his pied à terre.

On his way out of the cluttered dressing room, he grabs three sex-med capsules, tips his head back and squeezes the sachets into his mouth that's open as wide as a baby bird's when it's waiting to be fed. He knows you have to dilute the liquids, and he did: three bioosts diluted by third, he has complied with the dosage. The meds feel tacky on his fingers before they trickle down his throat. He can feel his erection shooting up as though the bioosts were flowing straight to his dick. This time, there's no doubt about it, he's gonna fuck like a god, it's gonna like it was with Julian. He still remembers! He remembers everything, absolutely everything... Julian...

"Hello, Arhax."

Huh? What?

“It’s the Archivist, Sir,” Alcred explains as he guides Arhax gently to the holo of the Noria’s steward, who found a spot for himself on the crowded walls.

The meta-advisor remains stoic, but inwardly, he regrets the particularly unfortunate timing. A few seconds later, and he could have postponed the meeting until Arhax was sober. But it’s too late. Accustomed to handing rock stars, Alcred does what he can to speed the meeting along, before his client gets hit with the flash from the bioosts.

“You wanted to submit a request to the Noria, Sir,” Alcred prompts him.

Arhax tries to pull his thoughts together. The trisel in the Rift, the army of robots... Focus on that, not on the stunning metal body the Archivist composed for the meeting, with gnarled-cable muscles and a silvery patina that’s just asking to be stroked, then stoked with a hot poker...

Shit, focus!

“Yes, absolutely. I have a proposal to submit for your analysis. A war against Arkhante.”

“Very well. What is your data?”

“Alcred will forward it to you, but I can give you the broad, ahem, strokes. The energy crisis is creating enormous risks for our shareholder-citizens: decreased harvests in the fish farms, problems accessing non-urgent care, restrictions on socializing and more.

“The solution is simple: mining the deposits in the Rift. The risk, obviously, is that Arkhante would use that as a pretext to trigger a war. The recent attack against the Wall of Bones showed, however, that the magocracy’s defences are porous, and the Malkah will think twice before sending out her troops. But in the event that that were the case, and if diplomacy were to fail, I propose to send combat robots – preventively, of course – in addition to the mining personnel. ROMA has already approved delivery for the equipment, and the other Robotic corpos are

sure to fall into step.

“Granted, the measure will have a cost in energy, but the working-capital projections are unequivocal: even in the worst-case scenario, there would still be a positive balance of trisel. And since there won’t be a single shozen – only machines – on the battlefield in case war did break out, the First Law of Synthia would be fully respected.”

Having reeled off his rather long-winded speech with growing speed, his presentation leaves him gasping... his desire is growing too, metastasizing faster than a tumour.

“It is up to me to evaluate the respect or lack thereof of the Laws of Synthia,” the Archivist reminds him.

“I know,” Arhax says, cutting him off. “Alcred will send you the data, I’ve got to go.”

The meta-advisor watches Arhax leave – “flee” would probably be the more accurate term. Everything went smoothly in the end!

A cheerful Alcred organizes the long, secure data transfer. The Noria’s steward ingurgitates the estimated losses and risk evaluation with an imperturbable phlegm that never ceases to amaze the meta-advisor. His vast power over Mantris’s infrastructures notwithstanding, the fact remains that the Archivist is still just a super-computer that can’t distinguish between a life and spreadsheet.

Alcred takes advantage of the downtime during the transfer to invest both of his bonuses in shares of robotic factories – mainly ROMA’s, as long as he’s at it. At the same time, he gets back in touch with Atale Lag’Chuo, whose profile could be particularly useful in cementing his relationship with Arhax. If he can recruit her, and if she manages to perfect an autonomous version of the Julian look-alike robots, then he’ll have hit the jack-bot. Arhax will give him anything he wants, the sky’s the limit.

As a seasoned negotiator, Alcred is conducting the conversation with a light-hearted tone, giving the impression he’s improvising when he’s actually advancing step by prepared step,

one argument after another, with the patience of the fanatics who make long, elaborate patterns with dominos.

“Oh, that reminds me, have I mentioned that ROMA executives benefit from an excellent health insurance policy?” he asks, sounding offhand, at just the right moment.

Atale’s aspirated silence at the other end of the SIT signifies his victory. It’s easy to come out on top of a negotiation when you know ahead of time what your adversary’s priorities are.

One savoury detail: he found out that Atale’s daughter was ill while he was looking for dirt on the Ordinator. The Noria’s spokesperson intervened to get Onyx’s treatment covered by the Zoone. One thing led to another, and Alcred wound up discovering Sathyne’s existence. That’s what’s called closing two deals with one stone.

Atale promises to think about, Alcred says he understands, she’s right... But he already knows she’s going to accept his offer. He drags the conversation out to force one of the triple convergences he loves: the call comes to an end at the same time as the data transfer, which is also exactly when he arrives in front of Arhax’s pied à terre. To each their own: Alcred gets his kicks from schedule optimization.

But he hadn’t been counting on Arhax’s endless capacity for sowing chaos.

“Thank you, Ms. Lag’Chuo,” he concludes somewhat abruptly. “I’ll let you get back to me.”

Quick, cut the communication before she hears the Robotic’s ranting.

“Goddamn! Mother! Fucker! What was that? Huh, what the hell was it?”

Through the pied à terre’s wide open door, Alcred can see Arhax beating JuliAI to a pulp in an explosion of hatred that would petrify the most hardened tough guy. The scene is all the more violent in that Arhax is butt naked, dick standing to attention, body dripping with sweat and mechanical fluids while

the poor robot is taking the walloping with an amorphous passivity that's nauseating.

"Who do you think you are?"

Wham! Its jaw is dislocated. Bam! The synthetic skin on one cheekbone cracks, spurting out more fluids. Wham! One eye pops out then hangs from its cable, flinching at each new blow.

"You can't hold a spark plug to him, you worthless piece of shit!"

Four more JulIAIns are waiting, expressionlessly, lying on the bed or standing next to it, all as naked as the day they were manufactured. Arhax viciously tosses the busted carcass of his martyr at the closest one, which doesn't even try to duck or to catch the remains.

"I remember, but you don't!"

Alcred is suddenly second-guessing himself. The sky might well be the only limit to what he can demand from Arhax, but what is the limit to Arhax's madness?

"Ah, Alcred." With a line of mood-enhancing bioost, the Robotic evacuates his fury as though he were flushing a toilet. "I had an idea about how we could be sure to convince the Archivist. We have SeeLung knocked off and we pin his murder on Shado. After that, all his 'Fantastique Fans'..." His fingers make ironic air quotes. "... will be fantastiquely motivated to declare war on Arkhante."

And that is precisely why Alcred adores betting his all on rock stars – and Arhax is one, no doubt about it. Nobody else can match their strokes of genius.

MY NAME IS EZIO

\ORDINATOR \wedge ARCHIVIST \cap 0 private O\\
 {ARCHIVIST ∞ Mantrix \subset Noria}

<Confirm Operation Mine-Blowing: Y/N>

The invitation is floating in front of the Ordinator, as tantalizingly as the slutty holo-ads you click on knowing perfectly well they're junk. Let alone that if he actually answers, his AIssistant will be flooded with similar proposals.

He tries to ignore it while enjoying the view from the roof of the Conclave, where the Archivist has summoned him. The building that houses the Noria soars so high that it seems like he could reach the roof over Mantris in a single bound. Whichever way you look, the city-continent's skeleton of tall buildings and the veins of its circulation are spread before your eyes.

An imposing tree is planted smack in the middle of the rooftop terrace. Thousands of roots – optical fibres with golden light flowing through them instead of sap – converge at the foot of the tree, rising in a thick trunk, then fanning out into branches that reach for the sky before bending under their own weight. The foliage is formed by the tips of the cables whose filaments bloom into a corolla of pulsing

light.

This faux-plant is the Tree of Knowledge, and each fruit it bears represents the soul of a human who has become a Mantrix.

By summoning him here, to the summit of Mantris, in this garden whose vigilant guardian he is, the Archivist is flaunting his hopeless lack of subtlety. Worse, the summons has come with a slap in the face: the steward of the Noria is late, he hasn't shown up for their meeting yet. The message is clear: he has a question, and the Ordinator is going to have to answer it.

<Confirm Operation Mine-Blowing: Y/N>

Another day, in other circumstances, the Ordinator might have approved it. He has signed hundreds, nay, thousands of plans orchestrated by the Archivist. After all, that's his job: making sure the Noria continues to serve the shozen, that it doesn't get blinded by numbers and data, and that both the letter and the spirit of citizen consultations are obeyed. He is the human factor in the process, the technician who, in theory, could unplug the server, even though in practice, he's not so sure there's still a plug at the foot of the Mantrix tree.

Yes, another day he might have signed it out of force of habit, without really stopping to think about it, without dawdling over the implications of what he was doing. But not today, not after the drubbing he just got – live and in Mantri-Vision – against an all-conquering Arhax. The Ordinator had underestimated both the risks and the importance of the debate, and had set too much faith in his own mood and improvisational skills. He showed up overconfident and under-prepared, like a real amateur. On top of that, he had taken a double uppercut to the chin even before the start of Round One, in the shape of an anonymous note – written on paper! – in his dressing room. The note

threatened to expose Sathyne and his secret. The rest was a shower of blows that he was unable to dodge, as though he had lost the debate before it even started. Vanity, negligence and laxness, an arrogant novice couldn't have done worse. No way he's going to make the same mistake twice in one day.

<Confirm Operation Mine-Blowing: Y/N.>

Operation Mine-Blowing: An army of robots invading the Rift to mine the trisel there. It's impossible not to see Arhax behind it; the operation's name reeks of him – a less-than-subtle reference to Operation Mine-Opening, which he himself had been planning to launch after the Appologium. Of course, it had morphed into an attack on the Wall of Bones instead. Only the Robotic could be perverse enough to pun about something like that. Pun that, incidentally, sounds a hell of a lot like proof that he was involved in the attack.

His worst fears are being confirmed: that sicko is doing his damndest to start a war.

$\backslash \text{ORDINATOR} \wedge \text{ARCHIVIST} \cap 0 \text{ private } O \backslash \backslash$

$\{\text{ARCHIVIST} \infty \text{Mantrix} \subset \text{Noria}\}$

<My answer is no, Archivist.>

<Duly noted. For the record, please provide the reasons for your refusal.>

<Are you sure? Do you really want to consign the critical error the Noria was about to commit to the archives?>

“Can you be more explicit, Ordinator?”

The Archivist's voice is vibrating in the air, rather than his neuronal implant. Taken aback, the Ordinator turns to look at the staircase sinking into the floor: the only way to reach the roof. He sees that access, which was clear when he came up, is now protected by a force field.

The curtain of static electricity is being crossed by an

optical-fibre chrysalis that is unfolding to reveal the Archivist. The sheaves of cables forming his silhouette are imitating a shapely woman's as he saunters over, arms unmoving, hips swaying amply. It's an affected gait, like models at a fashion show. Neither completely unrealistic nor entirely natural either. The Ordinator observes once again that machines are able to imitate human intelligence more easily than the human body. There's a lesson there somewhere, something he could take advantage of...

"What are your reasons for refusing to approve Operation Mine-Blowing, Ordinator?" the Archivist insists, stopping exactly two paces away.

"How could this web of code stand up to the demands of the First Law, even for a second? If I tug on a single line, the whole thing will unravel."

"Operation Mine-Blowing's projections are categorical: shareholder-citizens' safety and quantified life expectancy will be optimized in the long term. The First Law has been obeyed, as the Synthia requires. Would you like me to breakdown the equations' parameters?"

"Parameters depend on the coder who's using them, you know that as well as I do. He who chooses the variable chooses the result. You're still just a calculator, when an abacus would be more efficient here. And more elegant, too."

"I don't understand the allusion. An abacus is an inoperative tool compared to a quantum calculator. The 524,288 parameters analyzed confirm that, in the event of hostilities being set off, surgical strikes will reduce collateral damage, reducing the number of human lives lost to an acceptable rate."

"Machines or humans, will nothing ever change? When they start a war, you hear a lot more about victories than

about the casualties. When they end a war, it's the other way around. When Mantris's canals are overflowing with dead bodies, a Class IV maintenance machine will suffice to clean the waterways, but it's going to be a lot harder to erase the view of the corpses from children's minds. What are you going to tell the new orphans: that they should inSIT right away to request ward-of-the-state status? That all of their troubles are going to be solved in one magic click? Or that they should forget their parents and accept new ones chosen by popular consultation?"

"Feedback from the Heroes' War experience shows a logarithmic decrease to the lowest limit of post-traumatic stress disorder among shareholder-citizens who were directly exposed to the conflict."

"Horsefeathers! My PTSD's lower limit is still stuck in the muck in its tank!"

"What are you referring to, Ordinator?"

Suddenly dry is the Ordinator's mouth, keeping him from uttering another word – thankfully, his body is preventing his mind from betraying himself even more. But what has been getting into him, for Code's sake? First Arhax, and now the Archivist! Who could it be even more counter-productive for him to confide himself in? He has got to pull himself together, and fast.

It's all the more indispensable in that he knows he's right. A sense of certainty about that is vibrating at his very core. Hot water and Dalek travel aren't worth starting a war over. Losing a little material comfort is nothing compared to incendiary bombs and charred bodies. It's a no-brainer.

The shozen have forgotten it after these two decades of abundance and comfort, but the Heroes' War had been an unspeakable nightmare. Food rationing because the fish farms had been overwhelmed by toxic fungi, nights spent in

maglev tunnels for shelter from magical storms, soldiers who came back from the front as mutants that no meditech lab had ever managed to cure, and much, much more.

He remembers visiting an elementary school during the campaign for his second or third election. A fierce supporter of improving diplomatic relations with Arkhante, he had arranged to have a vid documentary with lots of archive images of the war screened in a classroom. It had been incredibly difficult to get the paediatric neuropsychologists to approve the screening. The point had been to shock the pupils as a lead-in to his vibrant appeal for maintaining peace – the sequence was supposed to show on all the immedias. When the documentary was over, there was shocked silence in the classroom. Until one kid shouted, “Wow, those were *amazing* special effects, they really looked real!”

Propaganda had turned the War of Heroes into a cheap B movie. The metaverses where you could embody a Mantri soldier going to demolish Arkhantan magi were too numerous to count. It still irks him no end to know that he bears some responsibility for that loss of bearings.

Because he is absolutely convinced that no more war is the only solution! He’s going to do his damndest to make sure that that elementary-school kid, who is an adult by now, doesn’t have to find out that no, that vid was not just an action film with great special effects.

Even if it kills Sathyne?

Ah, there’s the rub. The parasitical thought, the existential doubt, the inner torment. A different version of the slutty holo-ad that you want to click on despite all the bells and whistles going off. Back Operation Mine-Blowing to save his sister, and let the collateral-damage chips fall where they may... He’s writhing with the urge to do just that, like an amputee who’s desperate to scratch a phantom itch. It’s an

impossible, meaningless choice that's splitting him in two, as though a doctor had to remove an organ and asked the patient which one they'd rather give up: their heart, their liver, or their brain. You want it all? Sliced? Wrapped? Is it a gift?

How do you get out of there alive? Kill the doctor?

Can he recant? Abdicate his prerogatives as Ordinator, block the process by refusing to answer? He could, actually, but that's not the solution. He is not one of those people who refuses to choose just because there is no solution that suits them to a T. Choosing means giving something up, not grasping at the advantages of each alternative and waving away the rest. Yet here he is, absolutely unable to decide, not because neither option suits him, but because he is only too aware of the price he'll have to pay either way.

Fine. Since he can't make his mind up, he'll let the shozen do it. He is their representative to the Noria, after all.

⌋ASSISTANT, priority routine.⌋

⌋Overview of post-debate comments.

Selected excerpts scroll across his implant at three or four messages a second – his usual speed-reading pace. It's a real hailstorm, a stroboscopic flood that you could almost say is materializing the painful fact that he's in hot water... over his head.

It all basically boils down to a handful of words: he's too soft, too accommodating with Arkhante and the Malkah. Having been in office for too long, he's lost his edge and isn't up to handling the current crisis. Arhax's iron fist – of reinforced carb-steel – is what they need to get Mantris through this rough patch.

Do the shozen really want to be led by vindictive Arhax? Do they have any idea how unstable that bastard really is? The guy is a budding dictator, and they want to plant him in

the fertile soil of an energy crisis?

Another panic attack is hitting him. His political position is clearly threatened, he can't think straight... Everything's collapsing all around him. The drubbing he got from Arhax was just a symptom; the sickness hadn't really struck until he was with the Archivist. But it's progressing fast, horribly fast.

∩AIssistant, information about favourites in contact list.∩

∩Opax has announced the arrest of Nyvenn, an illegal exSIT, who was captured at a shop called Neither Frivolous Nor Pointless.

∩What?! In her store! Did they find Sathyne?

∩No information available.

∩Search and surveillance top priority!

∩Roger.

Another wave of despair washes over him, making his fingers tingle. He's going to lose his balance; sounds are getting muffled; everything around him is starting to spin. His eyes are rolling inside their sockets, so he takes a huge gulp of air. He's hanging on for dear life to the sides of the slide that's hurtling him down to the deepest depths of his dread.

Choking beneath the unleashed waves of danger crashing over him, lost in the storm, the Ordinator clings to his last lifeline: what would Sathyne have done?

A memory pops into his mind as suddenly as the alert from his AIssistant. Sathyne. Sathyne and him. They had climbed up a tree. Not an artificial one like in the Conclave, a real one, imported from Orcunion and planted on their family's land by their great-grandparents. He and Sathyne were just kids, he couldn't have been more than seven or eight. The tree – a querk, if memory serves – was in full bloom, the flowers swollen with nectar that no insect would ever gather, because there were none flying freely around

Mantris. So the siblings had climbed up to pull the blossoms off and greedily suck out the sweet liquid, then slide along the branch until the next flower. The grass was white with fallen petals, a veritable boneyard of fruit nipped in the bud. The game was who could swallow more, even if it dripped down their chins and onto their necks, even if it wasn't really that tasty, and it wound up giving them a stomach ache. He was determined to win, even if it meant eating until he burst, but as usual, his big sister was outstripping him. So he started taking all sorts of risks, and what was bound to happen happened: he fell.

"Get up!" his sister ordered from her perch on a branch.
"Get up and climb back up the tree!"

"It hurts too much, Sy. And besides, you're too far ahead."

"Nope, you're actually in a perfect position to pull ahead: as long as you're down there, you can climb up the side we haven't gotten to yet. When you're drowning, it's better to hit rock bottom. Then you can kick off and get back up faster."

Hit rock bottom to get back up faster...

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$\{\text{ARCHIVIST} \infty \text{Mantrix} \subset \text{Noria}\}$

<Archivist, actually, I refuse to answer.>

He also refuses to continue this conversation out loud. What comes next needs to be recorded and available to any shozen who has questions. He forgot that AIs are champion impersonators. The Archivist had been manipulated so often that he had wound up figuring out how to do it himself. From now on, the Ordinator is going to have to be more careful around him.

For the moment, he's diving into the formalism of an archived exchange.

<Please record in the archives the fact that I am pleading the Second Law of Synthia.>

<Valid request. Recording the Second Law of Synthia: “The Noria must integrate into its calculations the opinion of the majority of shareholder-citizens expressed by direct vote, on condition that that opinion does not contradict the First Law. The Ordinator, as the elected representative of the shareholder-citizens, acts as guarantor of the application of the Second Law.” What is your request?>

<I contest going to war.>

<Invalid request. It was calculated that the war obeys the First Law. Therefore the Second Law is not applicable.>

<I contest your calculations.>

<Invalid request. Our calculations are phased to probabilistic models converging to infinity. The Mantrices execute a microsecond retro-information that reduces calculation error to a rate close to zero to nine units.>

<I was imprecise, Archivist, and I do realize the extent to which imprecision is foreign to you. Upgrade my request: I contest the *result* of your calculations.>

<Invalid request. The result cannot be dissociated from the calculation in a reversible function. By extension, both of them are accurate.>

<But you are forgetting the calculations’ starting point. The initial data can be erroneous. Your calculations can be done correctly and still produce erroneous results.>

<Incomplete request. The facts under analysis will take place in the future. You cannot prove that the data referring to those facts is inaccurate.>

<That is why I am calling an ad hoc citizens committee to deliberate about the relevance of the Noria’s analysis, as well as an audit of the data supplied.>

<Valid request. Is your request now complete?>

<Yes, it is.>

<Your request has been recorded and archived.>

The Ordinator feels lighter, maybe he hasn't lost his knack after all. The Archivist seems to feel the same way, since he flips their conversation back to non-archive mode.

"A decision like that will allow us to schedule an early election for the position of Ordinator."

"Tell me something I don't know, I wrote the rules of the job. I have held it since its creation, and I've been re-elected regularly for twenty years. Remind me what my worst-ever score was again?"

"According to the archives, 69.176%".

"Huh, I thought it was lower than that. But go ahead, be my guest, schedule an election. Arhax isn't ready yet, he's still too divisive. You'll take a thumping and make my life easier."

"The archives hold detailed files about your breaches of the conduct, Ordinator."

"I know that too. Except that you have to provide facts, and I can make up anything I want. Do you really want to pit your algorithms against my imagination? What would the shozen think if they were to find out that the Noria wants to start a war with Arkhante because it's worried about its servers going down?"

"The Mantrices guarantee that the city-continent's infrastructures, automated systems and retroactive loop circuits always operate smoothly and optimally. The Noria's non-availability is a direct infringement of the First Law."

"You really think shozen are going to worry about feeding the Noria before their own children?"

The Archivist freezes like only an artificial being can. The LEDs on its body are still blinking, fake palpitations of a bloodless heart set precisely to the beat of the Tree of Knowledge's optical fibres. A totally artificial mono-

frequential pulsation, synchronized to the nanosecond.

Never forget that AI's are learning machines above all... or that they learn differently from the way humans do.

The Ordinator glances over at the force field that is keeping him from leaving. To think that he actually believed he was trapped here... More than any other error in judgement, that one illustrates just how shaken and confused he was. Arhax would have held him against his will, he would have let him fry if he had to, but the Archivist would never employ physical violence against him. When he wants to leave, all he has to do is walk towards the exit, and the field will be lifted.

His shoulders drop, his neck loosens, and he's able to hold his head up once again. He has won a first point against the Noria, but their duel has only just begun. Still, at least he has bought himself some time, enough to change the rules. If he can find a solution for Sathyne, a way to temporarily remove her from the equation, then he can do what needs to be done.

In any case, the solution is going to depend on Nyvenn. Who is in the hands of the Opax. He can't think of anything that could have been worse. It's time to tap into his network, which, incidentally, will allow him to check what's left of it.

Dad's right.

No, of course he's wrong!

But he's still right. Sort of...

KatK sighs, chin resting sulkily on the heel of their hand as they stare at the streets of Mantris parading past the Dalek's protective field. Normally they would never show themselves so publicly like this, not ever, but they're alone with the securibot that's escorting them to Nyvenn's. Their parents know where they're going – that's the deal since Onyx's escapade – but they don't know why, or else they never would have let them leave...

What they're going to find at Neither Frivolous nor Pointless isn't what worries them the most. They feel totally wound up... fed up even, with a serious temptation to move on and stop wasting their time with crap like this. The feeling has been clinging to them since the debate, and they haven't been able to shake it off. Usually they wouldn't give a flying force field about who won a joust between a fasho and a social-traitor, so it took a while to make the connection. Yet it clearly did all start when Arhax demolished the Ordo live.

On ÅPØLØW, everybody's wondering what got to him. The theory that's trending highest: the anomaly in the Eco-Shozen ranking is hiding something huge, enough to flackmail him with. Hackers have been scouring the network for more info, but to no avail so far. Of course, the Ordo and the Noria are as thick as thieves, so it's

hardly a level playing field!

But when you get right down to it, that's not what's been driving KatK crazy – worse than wanting to scratch beneath your shoulder blades, the one place on your back that you can be sure you'll never reach. The problem isn't the debate itself, but the certainty that the energy crisis is going to start having a concrete impact on everyday life soon.

Like no more treatments for Onyx.

Which is why they can understand their old man's falling for Arhax's bombast. It's tough to accept, it drives them crazy, it's unacceptable and vile... but it's understandable, too.

They can choose to deprive themselves of a SIT and to deal with the consequences, but Oh can't do without her treatment. And unlike them, Fabro grasped that a long time ago, which is why he's grasping at cables and rooting for the Robotic nut job. It makes them want to jump out of their screen-skin. And their father's hardly the only one, if the latest surveys can be believed. 32% of positive opinions for Arhax, and his number's are zooming up with each new poll.

Through the Dalek's protective field, KatK's observing the passers-by. An old guy playing with animated cards while he's walking. A geekette with a heart-shaped holo with SeeLung's face inside it floating over her head. A Gen' with UV tattoos that are only visible under a neon lamp – you're going to vote for Arhax. Then they start over, assigning every third passer-by the identity of someone who votes for the Robotic. Not you, not you...

You. It makes their head spin. They wanted to get an idea of what the statistics actually looked like in real life, but their idea works all too well.

\ SECURIBOT \wedge KATK \cap 0 private \emptyset \

< Arrival at destination in 00:02:04. >

The notif displaying on their screen-skin is framed by bouncing little mini-bombs, with their fuses lit and blood-red smiles painted on them. The animation is supposed to be funny, but instead it's a brutal reminder of how serious the emergency is. Their field of vision narrows, a sudden flash of heat affects the display on their thighs, their stomach is churning.

They're having a panic attack.

The "I can handle this" program activates automatically. Their pulmonary filters force their breath to slow down, their aural implants switch to the "coolKat" play-list, their screen-skin displays fairy lights to remind them of their bedroom, which is dripping with them... They're starting to calm down.

They can do this.

Still a little febrile, KatK deletes the mini-bombs and the lights so they can re-read the anonymous message they received half an hour ago via ÅPØLØW:

"Nyvenn's been arrested, meet me at her place."

Impossible to know who sent it – the network's hard-core encryption has its downside, too. All their warning lights are flashing "don't go, don't go!" but... Nyvenn is a friend, and may well be Oh's last chance for a cure. So, despite being scared stiff, despite the fact that the whole

thing could be hyper-risky, they are on their way. Kind of like Fabro rooting for Arhax... KatK has to laugh at the thought.

Now, they have to go through with it. They wanted to get involved with more concrete, serious actions, didn't they? Well, here's their chance... even if it would have been nice to start with something less risky and more collective!

They have the Dalek stop a block away from Nyvenn's shop – at the very least, they're going to scope things out before they go in. KatK programs the securibot to raise an alarm if they don't check in for five minutes, then they get out of the vehicle to walk the rest of the way.

When KatK starts walking, they realize they're a little weak in the knees, their heart is beating a little faster than usual and they're having strange hot flashes that are making their palms sweaty. Summoning every bit of courage they can muster, KatK takes a deep breath, wipes their hands on their pants, rolls up their sleeves and strides on, trying to leave that moment of weakness far behind.

They're striding down the main drag. They've got no reason to hide, and besides, Onyx's recent mugging has put them off narrow alleyways. It's late afternoon, the dome is open so that everyone can enjoy the pleasant weather... All in all, it's a pleasant enough stroll. Everything would be ideal if they felt a little less guilty about their parents. They know perfectly well that they're pushing at the boundaries of their agreement. They shouldn't care, but it's actually really bothering them.

Not enough to make them give up though.

An unpleasant surprise awaits them when they arrive: Nyvenn's shop has been cordoned off. A cluster of beacon-drones is hovering in the air, creating a safety perimeter around the building. A luminous spider web displaying yellow-and-black-striped tape with the message "Opax operation underway – Please consult metaverse ZZ1-07XA23/1606 for more information" – has been spun from one drone to the next.

Something's off about it: it's either too much, or not enough. Too big a deal for the arrest of an insignificant exSITed person like Nyvenn, or too flashy to be a trap.

KatK makes a snap decision.

"gReek, all good?" they type on their dark pad. *"Yø, wake up, man!"*

A flood of emojis with scruffy hair and pointy teeth swarm their fat-pixel pad – the lower the tech, the easier it is to fly under the Noria's radar.

"Yeah, I love you too," Kat types with a grin. *"Mät åce: ZZ1-07XA23/1606."*

"You wøke me up for a crappy code like that?" The characters in the typeface gReek's using are dripping with snot. *"Wow, fishy."* The letters turn into question marks as they fade away. *"Low-low safety for an Opax action."*

"Yep. I'm going in. Send me a fake persona."

"Wø, something's off. Opax op, Kat flying beneath parental radar, bad-bad combo, wesh!"

"Øyz, I'm a big girl now, gimme' a break! Persona, pronto!"

"Here you go. But plz be careful, Kat, OK?"

Is it the nearly parental concern, or the “plz” that they’ve never seen gReek use before – I mean, how vintage can you get? – but gReek actually seems to be worried for real. Is he right? Maybe. But nobody ever said that fighting the system was going to be a walk in the park, and KatK’s fed up with waiting for the right moment. If helping Nyvenn isn’t it, then it doesn’t exist.

Suddenly raring to go, KatK uploads the fake persona gReek sent to their neuronal implant, and steps inside the metaverse. They’re in a lo-res environment with truly disgusting colours – they’re bad enough to file a complaint about! Doing a perfect imitation of a nosy shosy, they launch a client-metaverse communication protocol that has a firewall assessment sub-program concealed inside it. What?!? The firewalls aren’t even on! All that data flashing on the beacon-drones is fake, they’re not really broadcasting any data at all! The security loophole is huge, much bigger than they thought: although the place looks like it’s sealed off, it’s actually wide open, with no surveillance at all.

It’s as though someone had already hacked the system! It has to be whoever sent that message. Somebody who’s got clout, since he hacked the Opax. Hacked the Opax, wøw! He’s waiting for them inside, they are going to meet a legend of ÅPØLØW! And maybe become a legend someday too! Finally, they’re moving up to the big leagues. Finally, they’re going to...

Then it hits them again, fiercely, a lot harder than before, like a subwoofer at a meditech concert on tech-tonics. They always figured willpower would be enough,

but now that they're about to take the plunge, they are intensely aware of the risk they're taking, and it's a whole lot bigger than their narrow shoulders. Now's no time to mull things over, though. Just remember why you're there and kick stress in the butt.

You can do it. You HAVE to do it. C'mon, do it. Go!

\ SECURIBOT \wedge KATK \cap 0 private \emptyset \

< Time passed: 00:04:57. Please send the password. >

< Pioxies. >

The securibot's reminder sobers them up and annoys them at the same time. They bristle like a cat that got caught in the rain. Sigh. As long as they're there, they might as well go check out the vids taken inside the store.

The images sweep over the place lazily, showing the storeroom, its concealed door wide open. Oh no! They've found Sathyne's hiding place!

The hair on KatK's arms bristles again. Fear has struck again, but less powerfully than last time, tamed by the urge to know, to act. The cam keeps going until the lens comes across a single figure standing near the tank and bathed in its glow. The picture quality is really awful: B&W 2D, practically prehistoric. Even so, KatK can sense instantly that Sathyne's not in danger. The stranger is giving off an aura of... something, an osmosis or a communion with the occupant of the tank that absolutely excludes any danger for Sathyne.

Who is it? The image is so pixelated that it could be anybody: a robot, a cyb', a woman... What if it were Pollen, the most stylish exSITed jigeen of them all, the queen of infiltration with keys carved into her fake nails?

That would be a-MA-zing!

OK, OK, that's enough of that. Less daydreaming, more action. Time to move.

KatK walks round the outside of the buildings, feels around to find the ladder Nyvenn hid in case of emergency, drags it out of its optical camouflage, climbs up on the roof and climbs through the skylight that's never closed... all under the unresponsive eyes of the beacon-drones.

Clinging to the roof structure, KatK progresses from one beam to the next, between the tiles and the drop ceiling, relieved for once that Nyvenn had moved into an old shanty with insulation worthy of an Arkhantan castle!

"... question isn't... too late..."

Snatches of the person on the vid-cam's voice is coming from the storeroom. It's not a conversation, but someone mumbling to themselves, refining a speech by repeating it until they stumble across the right wording, KatK finally realizes. So they decide to prick up their ears to find out more about the stranger. A ji, judging by the voice. So it's not Pollen. Oh well...

"... the question is not to figure out to what extent our way of life is negotiable, it's too late for that. We all, together, have to make an effort to change our habits. We have to adapt. Fast. Anyone who pretends otherwise is lying to you. I won't lie.

"No, the question is not to find out if our way of life is negotiable. The question is rather to find out with whom we can negotiate. Not the Arkhantans, but our own friends and neighbours, our nearest and dearest.

“In our society, we are used to debating things publicly and constructing compromise. Participative democracy is our strength.

“But those who we need to be negotiating with first and foremost – and who should have the last word – are our children. Yes, our children, because they will have no choice but to live in the environment that we leave them. Our children don’t inherit the world from us, they lend it to us.

“Which is why, in order to be worthy of this debate, which should be exceptional, I am proposing a voting system that is equally so. Instead of one voice per shareholder-citizen, I propose weighting the votes by age. The idea is that a younger person’s vote would matter more than an older one’s, since they will be living with the results of the decisions made for longer.

“And blah-blah-blah. Algorithm designed by the Noria, schedule, accreditation for lobbyists, etc. Nothing too technical, or I’ll lose everybody.”

The spell is broken. The tone of voice changes so suddenly that KatK feels like they’re going to lose their balance.

“Whadya’ think, Sy?”

KatK’s heart starts thumping again. Stress is tying knots in her vocal cords. The affection in that voice... The sound of the nickname in that ji’s mouth is exactly like Oh in KatK’s. Why are they even here?! They should be home with their sister! KatK takes their head in their hands, wrapping their fists in their hair, tugging until it hurts, being aware of their body there, on the verge of pain,

being aware of their body in order to anchor themselves in it. For Oh. Fight for her sake, so that the siblings future will be as cute as Sphax and as sturdy as Kubu.

“Please join me, KatK, I’ve been expecting you.”

A hand slipping under the dropped ceiling tile makes the teen hesitates. They’re more miffed than scared about having been spotted. As though they’d been caught in the act of amateurism. If the person is a heavyweight in the game, ÅPØLØW or not, it’s too embarrassing for words. And besides, who does he think he is, whistling for her like a pet? Still, KatK was gearing themselves up to tell him that the speech wasn’t too bad, far less stupid than the ones they’ve been hearing lately... but he shouldn’t get too full of himself, either.

They take the time to climb down carefully... no point in scurrying down fast, now that they’ve been found out – how did he do that? – besides, he’s got his back to them! By the time KatK reaches him, the stranger has operated several gear sticks, archaic hydraulic-pressure mechanisms. The tank shivers, the rhythmic algae inside sway, as does Sathyne’s long, floating hair. Then the tank begins to sink slowly into the floor, like the rescue capsule of a space station in distress.

“Who are you?” KatK tosses out, having stopped far enough away to hide her heebie-jeebies.

“Don’t you recognize me?” He turns around, revealing an evolving mask on which the eyes and mouth have been reduced to figurative black-and-white splotches. “I’m a friend of Nyvenn’s. We’ve bumped into each other here.”

“That still doesn’t tell me who you are.”

“What did you think of my speech? It’s still just a rough draft, but I’d like to get your opinion.”

“Actions speak louder than words.”

“But action is exactly what I’m suggesting with my new voting system, right?”

“Take your mask off first, and maybe then we can chat.”

“You’ll never guess where I got the idea for an age weighted vote. Circumstances forced me to mobilize all of my contacts – a network patiently woven over two decades in politics. And you know what caught my eye when I was doing that?”

“That your network is as bugged up as a voting metaverse?”

The Ordinator laughs good-naturedly. It was true, his contacts had abandoned him one after the other. Some of them didn’t even bother to act like they felt bad about betraying him. He even managed to make himself some new enemies, like the deputy director of Opax, whom he’d had to blackmail in order to get him to turn off the beacon-drones so he could evacuate Sathyne. Not that he was surprised exactly, but still, it had been a sheer drop. With no rappelling rope.

In the end of the day, Sir Vine was the only one who had stayed faithful to him – which is ironic, when you think about everything he had demanded of the schaman.

Was evacuating Sathyne another abandonment? Is he in the process of protecting her or getting rid of her? No, of course not! He’s not abandoning her, he wouldn’t have bothered to summon KatK to free Nyvenn if he didn’t give a bug about his sister.

A migraine is starting in between his left eye and eyebrow, flailing about painfully before settling in. Probably guilt, or maybe shame. Even his own line of reasoning is embarrassing: recruiting a teen and trying to free Nyvenn out of total self-interest, is that what he calls “protecting Sathyne?” Nothing to be proud of. He’s been steeped in political sludge for so long he’s become as cold and slimy as a crocodile.

In the meantime, Sathyne’s tank is slowly getting swallowed up by the emergency-evacuation tunnel that will lead her to the sewers of Mantris.

“I suppose,” he agrees, his amusement evaporating on the spot. “But above all, I realized that all of my contacts – every single one of them, is at least three times your age. It’s time to change that.”

“Nothing’s going to change as long as you keep that mask on.”

“I need your help, KatK.”

But KatK’s fed up with being ignored, so they turn around and storm off. Whoever the ji is, he’s no Pollen, nor anybody else of her stature in ÅPØLØW. KATK knows the distinguishing features of all of the bigshots by heart. Not that they’re a fan, not at all... But they do want to be ready, just in case they run into anybody really badass... Make a good impression, you know. Not come across as a baby hacker. It all boils down to the fact that this guy is not from ÅPØLØW; that’s as plain as the screen-skin on her body.

“I know where Nyvenn is being held,” the Ordinator says to coax thm back. “But I’m going to need your help to free

her.”

KatK turns around again, one angry finger pointing at whoever summoned them here.

“I’m not your... “

They leap back, as though they’d just seen a horrible, hairy spider on their pillow. The man has removed his mask, and they do in fact recognize him... instantly.

Mother-bugger... they do know him... and how!

Nyvonn’s best client, the real-wood-furniture lover, the ji who gave Onyx her new headphones... was the Ordi! This whole time, it was the Ordi!

That bug-tard has been following them for sure. He must have been wire-tapping Oh’s helmet, flagging their activities on the network, breaking the code on their notifs, spying on Mom and Dad... Fucking Ordi... he must have sent Salomé... In fact, even the mugging must have been staged! And now, because of KatK, ÅPØLØW’s going to be dismantled, ripped apart cell by cell, and gReek and all of the rest of them will be thrown into jail metaverses. There they’d been daydreaming of becoming a star of the resistance, and instead, they’re going to be accused of betrayal and seen as a snitch! What a code-twat they are! A cosmic code-twat!

The cascading revelations are ripping through their mind like a plasma shot: something at the speed of light, a short, highly focused wave that destroys and cauterizes everything in its path, leaving bodies intact but annihilating minds, turning you into a zonzomb.

The Ordinator should be jubilant, it’s his moment to shine. But no. You can see it in his eyes, doubt is eating

away at him worse than acid. The throes of fragility and suffering he's obviously in can't be faked. Nobody would expose themselves like that, not even an actor, and certainly not a public figure.

The Ordi extends a friendly hand that KatK doesn't dare take, convinced that if they do, the Matricial Guard and Opax agents are going to blow through the roof of the store room in a stealth craft, shrieking, "Go! Go! Go!"

The Ordinator is keeping his hand patiently extended as he gradually tips his head to one side.

"Hi, my name is Ezio."

COMING DOWN

Exhausted by everything she's just been through, Solis walks slowly down the stairs of the Gravlev, a smile toying at her lips – more of a grimace of fatigue, really. In her mind, there's a backing and forthing of paradoxical emotions passing each other like hurried travellers until they wind up colliding into each other. She lets herself be crisscrossed by this many-layered cake of feelings that is coating her and sugar-coating her.

And slicing her open.

She takes a brief break to let the vertigo that's been assailing her catch a draft of weightlessness and sail far away over the desert of the Rift. Images that have been hurtling through her and making her nauseous, revelations that both relieve and profoundly upset her all float away.

Presently, she's going to have to digest the whole, hard-to-stomach dish.

Then all of a sudden, as though the wild adventure she's just been through weren't enough for one day, snatches of the dream she had in the oasis loom up without warning: a kaleidoscope of images coming back to haunt her like a long-ago crime.

First the building that says “ONI.” Then the endless corridor with all those dreadful dark nooks. The nightmare doors that slam noisily, intrusively and violently, sealing off any other possible paths. The tree with its blossoms of blood. And finally, the reflection: hers, her own gleam in the mirror that betrayed and misled her, and wound up shattered... shattering her into a thousand pieces of herself.

That night, when she had just entered the Rift through the Wall of Bones, the dream had all the makings of a nightmare. Today, Solis has matured, she doesn't spook so easily any more. If doors slam, all you have to do is open them to let the air in, and make all futures, all options, accessible once more.

She's different now. All the way up there, on top of that building that could be mistaken for an inverted inferno, something deep inside her has been profoundly modified. She's so sure of it that she's even discreetly feeling her own stomach, hips, face and neck. Her mind may be playing tricks on her, but she's convinced that her body is –inexpressibly, magically – not like it used to be.

“The door on the right,” says Aurelius, who's right behind her on the stairs.

Solis follows his advice, despite her firm conviction that she'll no longer be affected by any gravitational anomalies she might come across. Paradoxically, considering everything that's weighing her down and submerging her, she feels so light that weightlessness couldn't possibly get a hold on.

She steps inside a former Mantri apartment whose dimensions rival those of the reception room in her palace in Nephtys. While the Rift's colourful sand has left its mark on the place, the room was spared by the blast. From the fireplace frozen behind a sheet of safety glass and the glyphs transformed into aesthetic motifs to the point that all of

their magic has been drained from them, to the mechanical sculptures reminiscent of a pair of chained draks... the room betrays the shareholder-citizens' interest in Arkhantan culture. Granted, it's a fearful attraction that only dares to reveal itself in Solon, the Arkhantan territory with the closest relationship to Mantris – but one that still locks reality up behind protections like metaverses' firewalls.

As for Solis, she doesn't want to insulate herself behind barriers or place filters before her eyes any more. Never again. That seems to be her new doctrine, ratified on top of the Gravlev. Leaving the palace to face the harshness of the Rift has to count as one of the best decisions of her young reign. Leaving her comfort zone has allowed her to observe unvarnished reality, to stare facts in the face without blinking. Without pretending not to see.

But most of all, she keeps reminding herself that if she hadn't taken that risk, she would still feel unmoored, hesitant and disembodied in her role; she'd be pusillanimous and affected, a real princess. She would never have the wherewithal to relaunch the cycle of pranah from her gilded palace.

Furthering that goal, many were the revelations received atop the Gravlev. First among them, the most unexpected one: amber is solid pranah.

She squeezes the bronze-hued nugget she found on the roof tight in her fist. The amber is pulsing beneath her fingers, radiating the pure magic contained in its structure. A magus should be able to free that energy with chanting, like a stonecutter brings out the shimmering diamond in the rough stone. Aurelius can do it, anyway. Solis doesn't know how he goes about controlling gravity – a type of magic that's not associated with any arkhome! – but it's obvious that his pendant feeds his powers.

Apparently, that's not the only reason Aurelius wears a piece of amber around his neck: Solis can feel in her gut that Isalys uses it as a channel for communicating with her. *Hello, Solis. Can you hear me? It's me. Your sister.*

The flashes, the dreams, the obvious familiarity oozing everywhere... it all explains the powerful attraction she feels for Aurelius in villainous waves. The visceral yearning to hold and be held, the craving for his hands on her rattled body, the corrosive longing that burns inside her whenever their eyes meet... it's all just desire, diluted like wine with foul water.

Solis has sensed that blatant vibratory connection from the very first time they met, in the infirmary. It was a raw truth, a trembling sensation so powerful that it screamed at her to follow him, the gladiator, into the Rift. A bond that feels so much like... Yes, that's it... That spark...

The Magic of Light.

The conversation she had with Syläë in the garden they made together comes back into her mind. "You have the makings of a Magus of Light," the Primus of Nature had told her. The makings of Light... Like an evening gown that could be seen from the sky.

Does Isalys have the gifts of a seer, too? Might it not be a family gift, a kind of phosphorescent atavism?

At that conceit, Solis comes to a standstill, her fiery amethyst gaze plunged into her own thoughts, igniting the void all the way to the dusty horizon.

A sister...

There she had thought she had no living family members, and all at once, she has a sister. A relative. She tips her face to the ceiling, closes her eyes, bursts out laughing and sighs a huge salvo of relief. The idea is delectable. Staggering, too, granted; but so enjoyable. A sturdy guardrail she can lean on.

The Malkah is no longer alone. The blood of a queen runs in another woman's veins.

She can't wait to find out who she is and, especially, what she looks like.

A sister...

Wat's the first thing they'll say? Pleased to meet you! I'm so... so what? Happy? Surprised? Disappointed? What words could cross the gulf of twenty years of separation, of deafening silences? Will they clasp hands? Heads? Pin their gazes on each other like medals? Will their silences be awkward, or warm mortar?

Solis sighs once more. There she goes, rationalizing again, instead of just experiencing. Feeling. Enjoying. Just living the pleasure of the emotion to the fullest extent. She fiddles with her plait, counting the hoops, clinging to them the better to let go altogether.

A sister...

Her gaze goes far beyond the vast bay windows illuminating the dusty room. They're curiously intact... Actually, no, the glass has been splintered, shattered and smashed to smithereens by the blast and the wear and tear of the years, but it's held in place by a highly localized gravitational anomaly. In fact, the shards are trembling from the wind at that altitude. With the indolence of tectonic plates, they are rubbing against each other with a screech of insects on the cusp of the audibility limit. A noise that it takes a while to perceive, but the instant you do, you can't think about anything else. Like an awful truth long concealed behind a curtain of lies.

With the tip of her finger, Solis delicately gleans a salty droplet that just pearled in the corner of her eye. Fascinated, she observes it, scrutinizing it as though she were looking through a jeweller's loupe, then, without stopping to think,

she brings it to her mouth the way you would ingest the potion of another person's memories. She hastily devises a fake Water Magic ceremony with herself, a spell that could legitimize the evaporation of her own thoughts so that she can metamorphosize guiltlessly into another. She wants to fully experience everything Isalys has been though since she was taken from Nephtys as an infant with free and limitless empathy, to become totally one with her sister.

The magical artifice works so well that Solis immediately starts vibrating like Isalys, and sharing her imagined memories.

19.2

Starting with the depth and breadth of the shock when she learned the terrible truth about her roots. The cataclysmic dispossession of her certitudes, what she had believed herself to be – or not to be. The gash in her blood. The incomprehensible tragedy of having been abandoned by her parents to a world ravaged by war, constant violence, chaos, famine like a guillotine blade, but not just that: the danger everywhere, all the time. The deprivation, the wrenching away, the dismemberment of the facile life that her little sister, Princess Solis, enjoyed without ever sharing so much as a crumb with anyone.

Isolis shivers, her mouth dry... unless it's Salys. She feels sullied by having been raised in luxury. She disgusts herself, as though she were wearing a soiled coat or had washed in the stagnant water of a swamp.

Isalys must be feeling it all the worse. By far. Isalys feels disgust, she must be out of her mind with rage and anger. Isalys lusts for revenge, Isalys wants her head on a plate, she has to get what is rightfully hers back. And she's right!

How would she have felt in her place? What volcanic fury would have erupted after such a betrayal?

As a child, Isalys turned garbage dumps into playgrounds with a vitality that allowed her to overcome most of the infections and mutations that were rife in the Rift. Never having known anything else, it all seemed normal to her, a given, including her harmonious relationship with her real family from the Rift. She never climbed tall, straight trees, but she played with the capricious gravity with a sense of normalcy that would have stunned any child of Arkhante.

Granted, she never ate the most refined dishes in Artellium, but she rarely went hungry, either. Mostly she patiently ingested a family bond, a typically Riftian dish: filling, spicy and nourishing, it strengthens your stomach. It's a dish eaten standing up, near a fireplace sputtering thick black smoke, with winks galore, tons of love and tons of coarseness, but with the coarseness of true, powerful love.

Until the day the secret leaked like an accumulation of firedamp in a mine that had been waiting for a spark. It hardly matters how she found out. The knowledge hit her like an avalanche, demolishing all the truths in its path and upending her fate: she should have been born with a silver spoon in her mouth and her little finger in the air, been raised in an Arkhantan palace.

It should have been thus. That is what should have been written.

Suddenly the filth becomes unbearable; the food, foul; her beloved parents, deceitful kidnappers.

Cries of pure rage torment her throat more harshly than the worst thirst, injustice coats her heart more thickly than the deepest calluses on her hardworking hands. Anger, bitterness, resentment, fury and a haughty sense of difference cut her off from her nearest and dearest as efficiently as the Malek had isolated Solis, but what's that to her? All she wants is revenge.

But Isalys is nobody's fool. Very quickly, she evaluates the implications of what she has learned. As a dispossessed bastard child, a shameful branch that the Malek hadn't dared to saw, Isalys realizes that there's a danger hanging over her head and that her survival hangs by a whim, a negligence. And she's just a kid from the Rift with no family or allies. She's alone – the sister that she found out about by chance doesn't count, obviously. The magnitude of her

powerlessness only strengthens her resentment about the hand fate dealt her.

Was it her childhood rage that triggered her Power of Light? Maybe. Or maybe not. It hardly matters. Whatever it was, being constantly on her guard all the time, Isalys eventually started to be able to read inside the minds of people around her. The everyday lies, the clan secrets, her real-fake parents' discomfort with her palpable mistrust, her playmates' fear – the moment her back was turned they called her cheater, traitor, demon... and by the names of so many other vibradiated creatures...

So sly Isalys hides her abilities, calls on the Light in the darkness, and takes advantage of it as soon as possible: the ambushes avoided, the answers people count on her to give, a sense of anticipation that could almost be called prescience. And the whole time, she has been preparing herself.

For what? For revenge on her sister, who is conveniently unaware of everything she has stolen from her?

The hypothesis bites the back of Solis's neck savagely, dripping its venom down her spinal column. A feverish chill shakes her, nausea splashes around in the bottom of her stomach, and an irrational fear takes her breath away, paralyzing her.

Nothing about the situation that was so painful to Isalys had been Solis's doing. On the contrary, she would have loved to have a big sister, for a thousand and one obvious reasons.

But what difference does that make? There's not much of a chance that Isalys is going to pardon her for being the legitimate sister, the crowned sister. She's not even sure she's going to be able to pardon herself.

Desperately seeking moral support and reassurance, she

turns to Aurelius. He knows Isalys, could tell her exactly what the deal is. In fact, she should have asked him about her a long time ago. Suddenly she has an imperious need to know.

Her questions die in her throat when she sees the closed expression on Aurelius's face, which is half concealed by the hand he has raised, palm forward, towards her. He is standing on the other side of the door that she walked through to enter the Mantri flat. Seeing him like that, silent and unmoving, it's as though a fierce predator were on the prowl, on the lookout for the slightest clue that could betray his prey.

"Whatever you do, don't move!" he orders her.

The gladiator crouches down slowly to gather a handful of sand that the storms have blown all they in here, inside the building. He blows on the little pile resting in the palm of his hand, which he's sweeping back and forth in front of him. Swirls of dust spread in lazy eddies that seem half asleep. When they draw even with the door, they suddenly get twisted every which way, like a curtain that several hands are trying to open by drawing it in opposite directions.

Still crouching, Aurelius is observing the doorframe attentively.

"There's no two ways about it," he finally declares. "We have to wait for the passageway to open again."

"Fine. How long will that take?"

"There's no way to know. I'm going to look for another way out."

"No, stay!"

"Why?"

"I need you to."

"You? Need? Me?"

"Tell me about her."

“Her?”

“Isalys. Tell me about Isalys.”

Aurelius raises his hand to his neck. He tries to make it look like he’s scratching at something itchy, but Solis can see perfectly well that he’s fiddling with his amber.

“She’s strong. Sharp. A sabre.”

“She’s far more aggressive than I am, is that what you’re saying?”

From the other side of the invisible veil of weightlessness, Aurelius stares at her fleetingly. Then, “She’s more like you than you can imagine,” he declares, then walks away.

She couldn’t have hoped for a more satisfying answer, she so wants to believe it! Is Aurelius telling the truth? Is there a chance that they really are alike? A prayer that they might someday become sisters that a cruel fate hadn’t pitted against each other?

Overwhelmed with unreconcilable emotions, Solis doesn’t know how she feels any more, tortured or relieved, torn or soothed, in ashes or in tears. Everything’s colliding inside her. Slowly, and bravely, she casts light on herself, dissects her feelings until she can pull out the heart, the throbbing pulse, the profound vibration, the essential drop. And what she draws out, after much pressing, is fear. A pure fear that’s pounding its beat, pummelling her thoughts, battering her with blows that are all the more vicious in that Solis feels guilty. The fear that Isalys will hate her forever. That fear that she’ll be even more alone than she was before she knew of her sister’s existence.

And nothing’s worse than feeling alone with someone else.

Solis takes a deep breath. That awful fear hasn’t won the war yet. What she’s surrounded by at this very moment is demonstrating that: if a gravitational anomaly can keep

broken windows in place, then somewhere in this world there is a force able to heal two sisters' shattered fate. Solis is convinced of it, Isalys and she can overcome the gulf that others dug between them.

It may be no more than a shiver of hope, but Solis can feel that it resonates with profound truth and that it can billow many sails. She wants to feel better, to find an antidote for the poison of doubt, to ward off and bury her fears. She didn't come to the Rift only in search of answers, she's going to find a version of the future that meets her deepest desires. And if that future doesn't exist, then she'll build it. Isalys and she will build it together.

While she's waiting for Aurelius to get back, Solis contemplates the area around the Gravlev, which offers her another version of the world, more unlikely and uncertain, yet more permeable and open, too. A large-screen vision of a freer future.

As fearsome as it is appealing, the Rift's savage chaos is on full display through the picture window. The Gravlev's towering height allows Solis to see the vast canyon cleaving the rocky plateau stretching to the north. Over there, in one of the meanders of a dried-up riverbed, is where Sarash vanished, swallowed up by an ambrage fault.

A smile tugs at the corners of her lips, because she knows: her friend isn't dead, only imprisoned in the Invermonde. To most people, that wouldn't change much, but Sarash is anything but most people. If Magi of Darkness can enter and leave the Invermonde, then Sarash will find her own way out. There's no doubt about it. It won't be a conventional way, granted, and it might singe quite a few corners of darkness, but she'll find a way. Yes, Solis is sure of that. Sarash will make it out.

Like a stage curtain, Solis's smile opens even wider when

she spots a piano in the next room. It seems to have dropped straight from the sky. It's a Lov, the most prestigious brand of instruments in Arkhante, made by a family of Nature magi that raises their instruments like their children. The piano's voice will have been milk-fed and pasture-raised. The instrument is a promise all by itself.

Cautiously, Solis raises a bit of dust scraping one foot forward, her senses peeled for the slightest perturbation of gravity. No red flags are raised, and by dint of cautious steps, she eventually manages to perch on the stool placed in front of the instrument, whose keys and pedals she tests.

The sound it produces is atrocious, out of tune, hoarse with wear and tear and sand. Larger still Solis's smile becomes, until her teeth are showing. In the end of the day, who cares if the strings are worn out or even broken, as long as the keys still move. Like she did with the piano-harp, Solis knows she can play it with a mix of strings and percussion, even if she has to write her own symphony with the vibration of her memories.

Her fingers are weaving a score to accompany the whirlwind of her thoughts...

Solis herself doesn't know what is affecting her the most deeply: being reassured about the fate of her friend Sarash, knowing she's going to meet her big sister soon, feeling her lips still burning ecstatically from a passionate kiss, or having understood that the Invermonde has split open. The ambrage faults are so many wounds bleeding solid pranah, a haemorrhage so severe that the cycle has been critically disturbed. If she can close those faults and heal the Invermonde's wounds, then Arkhante's magic will be restored and everything can go back to normal.

The Malkah will save her realm, the orphan will find a family, the woman will get her friend back and wallow in

romantic passion. When your entire world is in turmoil, an ounce of euphoria can make even the worst-case scenario unfold more smoothly. Solis chuckles at her own burst of optimism, but slips inside it and lets it soothe her.

On the edges of her consciousness, doors keep slamming, like the branches of the tree of possibilities snapping in the wind of change.

And the whole time, she never stops playing the instrument, which she's tuning to her mood...

On a landing just a few rods away, a captivated Aurelius is standing stock still, listening to the melody. After the improbable duo of divas they heard in the old Mantri data server, now she's drawing notes from a rusty old instrument. It shouldn't even be possible, and yet he hears the music clearly, a curious blend of determination and melancholy that evokes nights he spent sleeping under the stars. The image of Solis the musician, conductor of his most peaceful emotions, settles deeply inside him.

He'd like to listen some more, but the amber hanging from his neck is starting to sear his skin. He takes the pendant off, pleased that it hangs from a leather thong rather than a metal chain, otherwise it would be burning his palm.

An impatient Isalys is banging on the door of their mental bond. He can't keep acting like he hasn't heard her, so he opens the door.

"The future Malkah awaits your report, Aurelius. Must I inform her that you have failed?"

The voice inside his head is calm and collected, but that doesn't mean the gladiator can't detect the icy anger it contains. Isalys has gone way past the stage of plain old impatience.

"I beg your pardon? Must I understand that the future Malkah has no faith in her champion?" he replies in an

arrogant tone.

“It’s more that I don’t trust that impostor, or what she’s capable of getting you to do.”

Can Isalys hear the music? Does she feel spellbound too, or is he the only one who can perceive the melody amongst the out-of-tune notes?”

“I got rid of Hannibal.”

“I know.”

“That’s it? That’s all you have to say?”

“A trifle.”

“A what? A *trifle*? Are you out of your mind?”

“A secondary objective, at best.”

“Now I’ve heard everything! Two Primuses bumped off all by myself, and you call that a secondary objective?”

“Until your mission has been accomplished, yes, of course I do.”

“Hagging hell! Nothing’s ever good enough for you, you’re never satisfied!”

“You’re wrong about that. I’ve been satisfied, and happy even, or else we never would have got handfasted. Or else I never would have expected you to win the Appologium and eliminate two Primi.”

“Hmmp.”

“Tomorrow, Aurelius. I want her before me tomorrow. At my feet. Not one day later. Tomorrow. Do you hear me? Do you remember, Aurelius?”

“I hear you... And yes, I remember.”

“Well then. You promised me, and a promise is gold. The rest is nothing, hot air. Too light even for weightlessness. We two are well above all that.”

“Yeah. You promised me something too, Isalys, if you can recall.”

“Yes. Tomorrow.”

The connection breaks, leaving Aurelius alone, his mouth filled with unspoken words, as hard to chew as gravel. His ears, on the other hand, are filled with imaginary musical honey.

19.3

She could save him. Try to, anyway. But she doesn't have the strength left. Nor the nerve....

So Syläë settles for preparing Hannibal for his final journey.

She had told him not to try to climb the Gravlev again, but stubborn as he is, he wouldn't listen. Even the head of a pickaxe is shattered by basalt. That a Primus of the Earth had to prove the truth of the old saying for himself is ironic, but not really surprising.

Hannibal's resilience is still amazing: even falling from a height greater than the canopy of Orcunion wasn't enough to do him in. She couldn't bring herself to leave him to die in the crater of his fall. A Primus of the Earth deserves some respect, after all. So with the help of Ronan and a few other guards, she carried him into the royal tent, the only place in the whole camp that's sheltered from the sun and from prying eyes.

Now that she's sent the others away, Syläë is washing the behemoth's body: covered with black and blue marks, his chest sunken from all the broken ribs – it looks like a hill ridged with collapsed mine galleries. The scarifications, the battle scars, the skin blotched from old burns... so many symbols drawing the map of his life of pain. Hannibal is a sword of welded steel that was heated red hot, pounded thin, folded and pounded over and over again, until a flawless blade was forged: both strong and sharp. Hannibal is a weapon of war all by himself, and yet even he plummeted. The bigger they come, the harder they fall. It's as though he

were intent on proving proverbs today...

As her damp cloth washes away the blood and dust, the stigmata of battles and suffering grow ever more visible: nothing and no one can erase them. Syläë purses her lips to muzzle her feelings: anger over a life wasted out of pure stubbornness, sadness over losing a faithful companion.

And most of all, shame at not doing more for him.

To save Aurelius, a near-stranger who would mean nothing to her if he weren't handfasted to Isalys, she hadn't hesitated to sacrifice the seed that had been destined for growing her own posterity in the Family Glade. And now that one of her peers – a pillar of the seven arkhomes, a man she has known for years, with whom she has laughed and fought, and whose former teacher she admired – is dying, all she can offer him is a hasty bath? How could she have stooped so low?

The implications of that question are spreading through her body like a canker that has gotten under the bark. Doubt has insinuated itself inside her, as toxic as a parasitic fungus, as impossible to eradicate as a weed.

Steadfast loyalty, that's the image that Hannibal projects. Stubborn, rigid, obtuse, smug, heavy-handed, clumsy, obstinate... He was all that towards Solis, but he stayed loyal to her unto death.

Syläë, on the other hand, as a typical Primus of Nature, is horrifically, unbearably indecisive. Was she right to have taken Isalys's side, or is she making a terrible mistake? Is she still supporting her out of conviction, or only because it's too late to back down now? Isaly's supporters are politicians who profit from chaos, opportunist weathervanes who watch to see which the wind is blowing and when it's starting to change – Veliva more than any of them, of course. Unlike Solis's: Sarash, Hannibal and Tumul before him – are the kind that you can, without overstating things, call true

heroes. Hannibal wouldn't have doubted. Unshakeable, he wouldn't have wavered.

Beneath cyclical Nature, the Earth has always been immutable. What Syläë usually sees as a weakness, suddenly seems enviable to her.

Convinced a moment before, the Primus changes her mind in the blink of an eye. Impetuous Sarash, a heroine? Conservative Tumul, a role model? Not a chance! They are obstacles to the changes that need to be made, impediments to evolution. And now look at her, idealizing them just because they're gone! Granted, it takes class and courage to die for your ideals, but that doesn't prove that they're right!

Syläë can legitimately have doubts about some of the alliances she's made, but she has to be pragmatic, and she refuses to procrastinate about a subject as serious as the disturbance in pranah. It's impossible back down now, it would be like trying to make the cycle of the seasons go backwards, or hoping that a leaf will shrink back into a bud. No, you have to move forward. Isalys has to ascend to the Sculpted Throne to impose the changes that are needed to revitalize Arkhante. End of discussion. Her youth spent in the Rift will have been a perfect school for austerity, and her unbending willpower will allow her to keep a firm hold on the reins of the kingdom when its inhabitants balk at adapting.

She will succeed where Solis has failed.

Of all mothers, Nature is the one that knows best that some of her children must die so that countless others can be born and flourish. Life blooms unrelentingly on rot, manure and death; it's the oldest form of magic in the world. By the time the tears of mourning have dried, the first sprouts are already swaying proudly in the suns. Solis has to be erased so that Isalys can blossom, that's just how it is.

Besides, Syläë has no time to hesitate, now that her own winter is bearing down on her. She can feel it: her skin is withering and drying out, her hair is turning from red to grey, her horns are as brittle as dead wood. She doubts whether she'll see another spring. This cycle would appear to be her last.

She must succeed, whatever it takes.

In the meantime, here she is, winding Hannibal in long strips of linen, preparing his body for its final journey. Mantris turns its most brilliant minds into computer data, while Arkhante mummifies the remains of its greatest heroes and heroines. Still, this is not just a famous man she's burying, but above all a comrade, a friend. About that, she can feel wholeheartedly sad.

"Is he..."

Syläë raises her eyes to the door to the tent. Solis is holding the flap open, immobile while the cloth flutters in the wind. Dignified, she is bearing her sorrow with a nobility Syläë can't help admiring.

"No," the Primus of Nature replies as the Malkah steps towards her. "He is still wandering at the edge of the great dark forest, sometimes he steps out, then disappears into it again. He might hear you if you call him. He would want to listen to you, I'm convinced of that. He'll want to stay."

"But he's suffering," Solis says worriedly, her voice trembling like the hand she stretched out to take the linen winding sheet from Syläë.

"No, he's enduring."

Syläë entrusts the bandages to the Malkah, whose eyes never leave Hannibal.

"The linen winding sheet is a ritual of symbiosis," the Primus explains. "Its fibres are woven from each of the seven dominions of the living." Syläë pauses, just long

enough to take a breath. Then she dives in, “If anyone can activate the ritual, you can: what connects the two of you could keep him with us. If you can achieve that, perhaps Hannibal could live to see another cycle.”

Nothing is truly dirty in Nature: excretions, mud, ashes and putrefaction are all part of the bigger picture, the delicate web of life. Despite that truth, Syläë suddenly feels odious, sullied at having handed Solis such a burden. The hope is real, but slim... and so cruel. Selfishly preserving the little bit of her own strength that she has left is bad enough, but shifting the weight of her own responsibilities onto the child she watched grow up, the girl she raised and loved, is despicable of her. It's as ugly as a skin sore, more frightening than the dolines swallowing up whole corpses at once. Another characteristic of Nature is that it never acts out of cruelty, only out of necessity. For all that, Syläë isn't proud of herself as she leaves the tent, her body bent over like a tree that's been half uprooted by a storm.

Solis doesn't even notice her former nanny's departure. Her mind is elsewhere, on the edge of the great dark forest where Hannibal is wandering.

Between her fingers, the linen strips are vibrating, trembling, alarmed by the task that is theirs. Their fragility strikes a strong contrast with the behemoth's muscular sturdiness, their whiteness standing out against his dark skin swollen with bruises and scarifications.

“Forgive me, Hannibal. I beg you to forgive me. I feel so bad about having...”

Dropped him? No, it's more than that. Worse than that, too. She kept him at arm's length, rejected him. When the Malek died, what she wanted above all else was to quench her thirst for freedom, for change. In the new horizon opening up before her, Hannibal stood for continuity, like a

kind of border demarcating the space she could explore. She hadn't seen that he was actually serving as the rampart of a mobile camp, capable of going wherever she wanted him to and ready to defend her against the natural dangers of an unknown territory.

Solis had been seeing Hannibal as a prison fortress, when he was actually the shell into which she could withdraw at the slightest threat.

“Don't leave me... don't leave me alone.”

Alone. Alone to face the appetites whetted by power amongst her detractors, alone with the doubts that undermine her confidence when she needs to be flaunting herself in public, alone to ward off the conspiracy that's threatening her.

She'll be able to make a stand, she'll surprise her adversaries with her resourceful determination. About that, Solis has no doubts. But with Hannibal gone, who will speak truth to her power? Who will have the strength to say “I'm not proud of you,” to her face, without her taking offense? In fact, quite the opposite, while still making her feel loved, to urge her to improve and to achieve a better outcome?

The fabric of the tent is flapping around her, around them, in time with the wavering that has overwhelmed her. In response, she tugs the winding sheet a little tighter, pulling the weft so the bandage will hold better. She's applying herself, taking her time, entirely devoted to her task. Nothing matters more than what she's doing right now. Tears drip in the rays of sun pouring in through the opening to the tent.

Solis is crying over Hannibal's fate; spilling the tears she refused her father.

“If I had had any say in it, I would have chosen you...”

In fact, she had chosen him. Hannibal was her chosen family, the true-blue friend who's as good as a blood brother.

An eruption of anger makes her curse life, that she-wolf that decided to laden her with a father she didn't want, while depriving her of Hannibal, whom she had chosen to adopt.

She feeds that rage, anaesthetizes her soul with it, the way you get drunk to forget a bad day. Sarash swallowed up by the Invermonde, Hannibal shattered by weightlessness... what else will the Rift dare to do to her? Does this accursed moor not know how awe-inspiring her wrath can be when it is unleashed? It may have survived the blast, but it will never recover from the fury of a Malkah scorned!

In her head, she can hear doors slamming again. This time, the sound is worrisome: the thud of tombs closing on the bodies of her friends, the pillars she depended on. So her fury turns into fear like a growling wolf metamorphosing into a cowardly mouse.

Solis isn't aware of her own fingers running over the bandages the way they did over the legendary instrument during her concert in Nephtys. She doesn't see the tears wetting the linens with the secret messages of their ephemeral runes. She doesn't hear Hannibal's light breaths, as imperceptible as the accumulation of shed rockworm skins that nonetheless formed the Acongua ridge over time. No, she doesn't notice any of that. Her too-heavy chagrin is a deadweight that's dragging her inexorably down into the icy ocean of mourning...

She doesn't know exactly when she finished her task. But Hannibal is fully wound now, that's all she knows. His face creates a dark stain on the dazzling white linen, a threatening cloud dripping damp, glistening diamonds. Solis wonders if he cried, but assumes she probably inundated him with her own sorrow. She strokes his cheeks tenderly, all the way up to his eyelids. Then the Primus of the Earth does shed one huge, unexpected tear. His stone eye slips out of its socket,

as though he were abdicating his title to better prepare his demise.

With a quick, hasty movement, Solis snatches up the sacred stone, squeezing it tenderly and respectfully in the palm of her hand. In the other, the amber gathered on top of the Gravlev is throbbing. Her hands turn into a pair of scales, weighing the two gems: one represents the brother chosen by love, the other, the sister related by blood.

Perfect equilibrium of forces between Hannibal, who is slipping away from her, and Isalys, who is calling Solis to join her. An equilibrium that's perfect... but unstable, too.

"It needs to be done," Solis declares, her voice sounding resolute, though hardly firm. "It has to be gotten over with, I've put it off for too long already."

She leans delicately over, kisses Hannibal's cheek that's as warm as lava stone. She lingers in contact with his skin, then, with the strength of renewed determination, stands up. Dignity incarnate, her mourning seems to be garbing her like dewdrops: fragile but with a glittering gleam. She dusts off her knees, tugs her plait over her shoulder without fiddling with the hoops. The time has come.

Solis steps out of the tent without looking back. Beneath Hannibal's winding sheet of magical linen, the amber has been slipped. While his stone eye has been placed beneath Solis's belt, wedged into the dip of her navel, precisely at her body's centre of gravity.

ABANDONED

“Are you sure it’s really here?” Solis asks, looking askance and with a sidelong glance.

Aurelius nods, apprehensively clicking his tongue against his teeth. That display of nerves, which is so unusual for him, propels Solis to take a second look at the building the two of them are standing in front of.

“Are we going to the gallows?” she says jokingly.

“Stop it... I hate this place. Too many memories.”

Solis stares at him for an endless moment... long enough, in any case, to give him a chance to say more. But Aurelius being Aurelius, he stays silent. He really is scared. The winner of the Appologium is *scared*? It can only be because he knows what’s inside the building.

As for Solis, it’s not that she’s not scared, of course; fear is gnawing at her belly, but she’s handling it. She’s uneasy, granted; nervous and impatient, clearly, but she’s not overwhelmed to the point of being paralyzed. She’s staying cool-headed, refusing to consider the worst that could happen, trying to be prepared for anything.

Turning around now is not an option.

So she focuses on what’s ahead.

ONI. The letters inscribed on the building are so exactly

like her strange dream during the night at the oasis that they're like an alarm, a flashing Mantri light that her heartbeat is synching itself to.

The bunker is stocky, its colours faded by the suns, its shape aged by the desert. The letters, that were said to represent the demons of time, are nothing more than the vestiges of a sign that used to say "ZOONE" – whatever that's supposed to mean.

Nothing terrifying about that.

She stares at the big red door. Then she closes her eyes, the better to read the vibrations that should be coming from it, but no, there's nothing, truly nothing. Everything is disturbed by the blasted Rift. Hyper-focussed, she doesn't even hear Aurelius telling her that everything's going to be okay. She empties her mind in order to be fully present in the moment, this time of reunion. Freed of all outside influences, she is preparing to dive into the unknown. That's what she's feeling, she finally realizes: the fear of jumping into thin air paired with the euphoria of being in freefall. The two feelings contradict each other, balancing each other out and leaving her feeling misleadingly calm, in dangerously unstable equilibrium.

Should she give up? Refuse her sister's invitation? No. It's out of the question. Unthinkable.

Yet Isalys did more than just send her an image that night. The dream was swarming with fear and danger, imbued with a sense of ineluctability that's still lodged in a lump in her throat, like a dry cough you can never be entirely rid of. That succession of doors, those furtive footsteps that were more like gliding, the supernatural shadows looming up from another world that haven't stopped eating at her... All that is far more than just a bad dream. More like tatters of pure memory, raw traumatizations, wounds half-healed with swollen,

unhealthy scar tissue.

That, on the other hand, is terrifying.

“The most important thing... just stay true to yourself,” Aurelius advises her, while smoothing her hair with a misleadingly indifferent gesture.

Taken aback by the show of tender familiarity, Solis watches him walk away with a slightly awkward gait. She hesitates once more, shoving her doubts away a moment later.

Without dithering another instant, she heads straight into the building.

The dark, echoing interior is more like her nightmare, which is almost reassuring, in a strange way. She forces herself to be cautious, progressing slowly, taking the time to observe where she is, scrutinizing every detail attentively. Tension is starting to knot over her shoulders, not like a blanket, more like a soaking wet rope. The crushingly brutal, utilitarian architecture heightens the oppressive atmosphere. Paradoxically, the sense of security the spot gives off reinforces the seriousness of the threat.

The deeper inside she goes, the stronger the blend of serenity and unease grows inside Solis. Wanting to get it over with and being afraid to go too fast. A positive and a negative chasing each other around in circles. A terrible thirst when there's nothing but poison hemlock to drink.

Solis rolls her shoulders to relieve the tension, resists the temptation to wrap her plait around her index finger and rubs her neck instead. The palm of her hand is getting damp, the veins on her neck are throbbing. The hair on her arms suddenly stands up.

A cry. A wheezy groan. Deep, endless, abominably plaintive, horribly human.

Terror petrifies Solis, although it doesn't keep her from

turning her head slowly towards the door where the sound is coming from. The hand on her neck squeaks, adding an insect-like scratching noise to the sound slipping out from behind the half-open door. Solis is instantly plunged into the underground tunnels of the Crucible, where the astrogant is imprisoned. What dark magic is this? It's impossible. He can't, he **MUST NOT** be here.

The astrogant... Solis stills remembers the violence of the prophesy...

*Will be born sisters cleaved in two
A beginning and an end
One must live and as Malkah reign
The other, assassinated must be
Then pranah revived will be
Otherwise will perish*

Overcoming her stupefaction, Solis strides over to the door in question, her mind made up to enter the hall and uncover the hoax. Neither her father nor the dynasts had managed to decide how she would behave as Malkah, so she was damned if she was going to let the ravings of a prisoner – albeit an immortal one – do it in their stead.

She gives the door a sharp shove, and it squeals like an elderly woman with arthritis. Inside, a stingy light tries to flee and let the place settle back into its dark shadows. The groan goes up an octave, then two, frightened at not having been scary enough. The whole macabre set-up collapses in the face of Solis's grim determination, leaving only a dusty stage setting behind. A Mantri laboratory with technology that's been obsolete for twenty years.

The room is austere, like the scientists who used to work there before the Blast. All that's left of them now is a row of

lab coats covered with grey dust and hanging from the wall like ghosts hovering a foot above the ground. A row of vertical tanks makes her think of the barrels in an abbey brewery. The three cracked ones each contain a mummified body that has collapsed in a heap like an abandoned puppet, its shape deformed by decomposition or mutations – who can tell? The other tanks are still filled with a greenish fluid with unidentifiable debris floating inside them. Solis divines its origins with a shiver of revulsion.

Through the cracked wall – proof that the Blast was more powerful than anything the bunker’s architects could have dreamed off – a ray of light is drifting slowly east, away from an old quartz battery it briefly recharged. That small burst of energy had allowed a scientist’s recording to play, rather like the opera she had brought back to life as they were climbing up the Gravlev.

In her dream, this place had been run by demons who could control time. In fact, it’s just a bare old no-frills lab where horrific experiments were carried out. Nothing supernatural about it, once the mystery had been exposed.

The unscrupulous scientists’ blind spot reminds Solis of her own misguided ways. Less cruel, but they splattered others besides herself nonetheless: her performance on the piano-harp after Arkhante’s victory at the Appologium.

She remembers how her own coal-black confusion had spread doubts when she had interpreted the vibration of Darkness, the notcht, the counter-wave. The Malek’s fury, violence and rancour, the loneliness of the Throne... so many naively underestimated, repressed and ignored demons. But she has grown wiser since then. She has ploughed straight on more than once, following only her own bravery. Now she understands more, starting with the fact that her worst flaws can be allies in moments like this, assets that

shield her and prepare her for the worst.

She lifts her head, getting her haughty posture back, and strides into the hall, feeling totally sure of herself, confident, combative, heading straight towards her fate like the warrior queen she is.

Then she remembers the tree with the red fleurs-de-lys, its roots in a cracked vat that its branches had escaped from. The only touch of colour in her black-and-white dream, and proof that life could spring from the ravaged landscape of the Rift.

A tree, an isolated fleur-de-lys... Isalys.

The symbolism suddenly takes on new meaning, a kind of hope that carries her away in the whirlwind of its promises. Trembling with restlessness, impatience and excitement, goose-bumps – though not from fear – are coating her forearms. Solis lifts the front of her gown and picks up the pace, convinced she's going to find the tree exactly where she dreamt it would be. Indifferent to the horrors lurking behind the many doors she's hurrying by on both sides, she won't stop until she has found what – or rather who – she's looking for.

Until she gets there. Unmistakeable, the place is glowing with a soft, crimson light. She draws to a stop before the door that's looking her up and down, stares back haughtily too, and, without a moment's hesitation, steps over the threshold.

Solis goes in.

The Malkah has entered the room.

The light is blinding. She raises her arm in front of her eyes to give herself a chance to get used to it. Taking a deep breath, her chest swells, her nostrils quiver, her lips open slightly. She gapes her eyes painfully open, wounded by a world she's having trouble observing. It's like being born. Re-

born. Suffering and liberation all at once.

She can finally see.

Everything is exactly how she remembers it: the hybrid-tree with its blood-red blossoms, the vat with the shattered glass, cables stretched between the branches like vines, the metal floor pushed up by the roots... She takes it all in at a glance, in the time it takes to draw one shaky breath. With a trace of nerves still lodged in her gut, she's looking for the spotted mirror to cling to. But there's nothing, not a single shiny surface. Even the sides of the vats aren't reflecting the slightest image.

And yet.

Her reflection is still there anyway. In the middle of the room, not bouncing off of anything or anyone, with no frame to contain or explain it. Her. Her hands lying on her bosom. Her. Her shaved temples. Her. Her immaculate gown. Her. Her striking allure. Her. Her amethyst eyes twinkling brighter than gemstones...

Her. Her precisely.

All at once, Solis gets it.

I have a sister. A twin sister.

The words are unable to evacuate all their muddled syllables through my lips. My eyes are speaking instead of my mouth. They're as talkative as can be. They're stuttering and they keep repeating the same words until it makes them true, obviously true.

Isalys is I. We are the same thing. I am Isalys. One, twinned. I am, we are, she is twinned.

My double.

I can feel my blood pulsing in my temples and turning them red. I change how I'm holding my head, straightening my posture a bit. There's nothing I can do but accept it, so I accept that Isalys is exactly me.

A twin.

My blood mixed with hers inside our mother's womb. The same sac. Our cords intertwined. Months of confinement. Embracing. Dovetailed like two pieces of carpentry. Sharing everything.

My sister.

My other.

Not an illegitimate, bastard child. Not at all. A peer, a compeer, an accomplice, a confidante. An ear that will understand everything without dipping it in a pool of eloquence – why should I need to do that, when we come from the same water, the same amniotic fluid? We are one. It's wonderful. The metronome of our hearts that beat as one. The shared vibration – dual and yet identical, amplified, magnified. One in two. Two for one. Sisters split in two.

In vitro emotion.

It's soft, wonderfully warm, and terrifying. I'm afraid because I'm no longer alone. I'm terrorized. I swallow my cyclone tears. I breathe in, slowly. Instinctive attraction. I hold back the urge and the desire to dive into her arms.

My heart aches, Hannibal, my old brother. You would be

so happy for me. Grouchy, obviously, but you would toss your head and snort to show me your joy. Happy. Just happy to find out the news.

We're twins!

I look at her, she looks at me.

But.

There's something compact and chilly between us.

A massive, suffocating awkwardness that imposes silence, a distance that forbids touching... A stabbing pain that keeps me from taking a step forward, a strange alarm ringing in my eye that slathers me with suspicion.

Finally.

Here she is. Flesh and blood. More mawkish than life. What she projects is unbearable. Dripping, dramatic, nauseating. She turns my stomach. Makes me want to throw up. I have to turn my eyes away from her to keep myself from pouncing on her face, even though a gorgeous deep scar from one cheek to the other would suit her so well. A beauty mark would burnish her, give her some depth. You're so lissom, Solis.

You're oozing nonsense. Your nose is dripping naivety, you're shitting fear and ingenuousness. You make me sick.

You're risible.

Your eyes are fluttering, overjoyed. How can you be enthralled with what's coming your way? You're so sad it's pathetic.

You're not like me in any way. Not one bit.

Relish it, my girl. Relish the long-awaited moment. Relish your own downfall. Relax before the ordeal. Dilate your pussy, loosen your tight buttocks. Delight in the calm before the storm. Enjoy it. Because you're going to pay through the nose.

Revel in it, Isalys, the Throne is yours for the taking. Revel

in her suffering. Her unease. Her rich girl fear. She's panicking. She reeks of terror and trepidation. Revel in it, darling, tattoo this precious moment under your skin.

She's charming, but not overly so. Dignified, but not overly so. Malkah, but not overly so. Nothing about her is either too much or not enough. She reeks of being of two minds, of compromise, of doubt-filled hesitation, fragile limpness, of indecision that tries to pass itself off for determination.

Revel and relax, Isalys. Restrain yourself, don't snap her jaw right away. Wait a little while, let her drool her disgusting little discourse dripping with sisterly love in her fawning little voice. Soon she'll be pleading with you in a high-pitched squeal that will be so much more enjoyable. It's going to be unbearable for you at first, at first, but resist the urge to slash her carotid open with your teeth. Don't smash her cheekbones with the heels of your shoes, don't tear clumps of her hair out like tufts of grass. Not now, not yet. Relax, relax, darling. Let your restrained rage sink down into your belly until it makes you shudder. Your vengeance is an endless orgasm.

The twins are staring at each other, drunk with joy and hatred at discovering their own mirror image. Becoming fully conscious of each other for the very first time.

Solis extends a hand towards Isalys, slowly, cautiously, as you would to a wounded wild animal with one leg in a trap as you come close to try to free it. But which one of them is wounded? Which one is caught in the trap?

Isalys isn't surprised that Solis is taking the first step. Exactly as she had anticipated, her sister is acting impulsively, without weighing the pros and cons of anything she does. She lets Solis do it.

"So... How does it feel to touch the original?"

Solis jerks her hand away – the wild animal is growling,

showing its fangs.

“I...”

“You what?”

“I... I...”

“Oh, my word, you stutter! No one told me that delightful detail: the Malkah stutters!”

“Not at all! I... I...”

“I-I-I d-d-don’t st-st-st-stutter!”

“Not at all, I don’t stutter!”

“Well then, spit it out, let’s hear what you have to say.”

“I don’t understand.”

“What a surprise! What exactly don’t you understand, little princess?”

“Well, uh...”

“Come on! Ask your question already, for pity’s sake!”

“Why was your grace’s existence concealed from me?”

“She’s using honorifics! She’s amazing!”

Isalys makes an ironic face then suddenly starts doing an over-the-top imitation of a courtier.

“Would her royal highness be so kind as to deign to relax her sphincters in my presence?”

“But...”

“But what? We’re twins, in case you haven’t noticed. We can drop the ‘your grace’ nonsense,” she says, rolling her eyes. “My word, you’re even worse than I’d pictured.”

Stung by her twin’s tone of voice, staggered by the violence of her words, Solis blushes. In shame, fury, shock and disappointment. But despite the short length of her reign, the Malkah has developed a faculty for overcoming surprises quickly. She goes on as if she had never been interrupted.

“And so you brought me here out of a desire for vengeance.”

“Ah, so you are capable of understanding. Though not very quickly, it must be said.”

“It’s true, Isalys, we are strangers to each other. Thus was it decided by those who separated us; neither you nor I can do anything about that. But you must be terribly unhappy to speak to me that way.”

“Wrong again, little sis’! I’ve never been so pleased to meet anyone before. You are so true to your reputation that it’s wickedly entertaining.”

“What reputation?”

Isalys takes three steps back without turning around. An ecstatic grin is stretching from ear to ear, the smile of a painter contemplating her work, aware of having achieved a state of grace, a stroke of genius, and relishing the moment for everything it’s worth.

“I never wanted this,” Solis assures her, “and neither did you, I sup...”

“Oh, do shut up, for pity’s sake! And don’t ‘suppose’ anything about me. You are mistaken, so terribly mistaken! You don’t know anything. You’re so ridiculous, so... predictable, it’s astonishing!”

“I can assure you that...”

“But you did know, of course. You know very well what happened, you know perfectly well the life I led, you have the gift of clairvoyance, so don’t get all high and mighty with me, or I’m really going to lose my temper.”

Now Solis is the one who backs up a step. After the hurtful tone of voice and the violent words, the real blow comes from a sudden certainty that’s rummaging viciously through Solis’s gut, ripping at her innards and her breath at the same time.

Isalys is right: she did know.

Solis isn’t backing up any more, she’s staggering. Like that

day when she was just eight years old. In the middle of a reading session, she had cupped her hand over her knee so suddenly that she had torn the codex she was holding. Her tutor had thrashed her fingers with a stick, yet the pain could not compete with the one that was radiating from her knee, as though a carpenter were seeking the best angle for slipping a chisel beneath her kneecap. The memory is so intense and so excruciating that she unconsciously bends her leg, as if to check that it hasn't stayed blocked these past twelve years.

Isalys notices the movement behind Solis's gown, a twitching that stirs her own knee, which had been so grievously wounded when Sigil smugglers had attacked them in order to plunder the Blades clan's full silos.

Solis in turn picks up on Isalys' movement – a volley of memories bouncing back and forth between the twins. She realizes that the pain had never been hers, but her sister's. She had felt what her twin sister had been feeling, despite the distance, despite the fact that she was unaware she even had a sister. It seems incredible, nothing can explain the existence of such a bond, yet Solis believes in it as naturally as she does in magic.

Solis remembers trying to explain through her trauma, with her tearful, little girl words, "My knee hurts, why does it hurt so much? Ow, it hurts!" Her tutor had called her a liar, the healers had assured her there was nothing wrong with her knee, the servants had patiently waited for her caprice to end, and her governess had lectured the bad little girl. For days, no one had listened to her, not even Syläë, who had settled for an ointment until things went back to normal. More than the pain, Solis remembers her distress at not being believed. Her fear, too, that it might start up again someday.

That memory was the first rock that worked itself free from the cliff and triggered a rumbling rockslide. As a kid, her unjustified fainting spells, pale imitations of the sunstroke and privations dues au Rift. A teen, her stomach aches, which she had blamed on her capricious menses, when they were actually her sisters'. And as a young woman, her lower lip and ears that had throbbed with pain once more when Isalys had started wearing the same hoops as she...

"You're right, I knew," Solis admits. "I've always known." She drills her gaze into Isalys' as though her life depended on it. "No one believed me."

Isalys cuts her off in a more puerile tone of voice than ever, an insulting imitation: "Nobody believed me, I'm begging you to believe that. Daddy wasn't nice to me, he used to say I was a bad girl."

Then, going back to her most vitriolic tone, "How dare you?"

Isalys grabs a shard of glass from the vat pierced by the tree, snaps off a slab in a spurt of blood erupting between her raging fingers, and pitches the fragment at a wall, where it shatters in an unbearable racket. Solis winces, startled by this blood-red anger, this devastating and devastated wrath. Fear begins to grab her, agglomerating beneath her sister's anger and hatred that she's starting to feel deep inside her own flesh.

And Isalys is already hitting out some more. "Tornhil behaved like a total asshole – at least he was consistent! And he made of you his worthy successor? Well, he succeeded at one thing! But not for long... You haven't got what it takes, Solis, so not. From here on in, the Throne is mine!"

Isalys nibbles at her own lip, a habit that electrifies her down to her chin. Accursed hoop, what kind of stupid idea is it to pierce your mouth like that! If Solis had ever spent so

much as one single day in the Rift, she would know that jewellery gets infected and torn off too easily. Bursting with ire, she spits the bitter taste in her mouth onto the ground. Taken aback, Solis's hand flies to her own mouth.

“What, are you shocked, princess?”

Solis's gaze goes hard. Here we go, Isalys thinks, she has finally realized that she's about to lose everything and that her sister holds her fate between her hands like an overripe fruit that's about to explode from the pressure.

Solis herself is bitterly dismayed. She had taken not a few risks to come here to meet her sister, had revelled briefly in the knowledge that they were in fact twins, had delighted in this new opportunity to build a family after the tragic failures she has experienced. And now Isalys was quibbling over a Throne she never even wanted? The disappointment was dizzyingly equal to the height of her hopes.

This time, Solis doesn't let herself get sucked in by the sensation of the void; she remains lucid and factual. Don't give in to emotions, shelter yourself behind logic and pragmatism. Give up by turning wisely around rather than trying to force love that doesn't seem to be requited. She has already walked that path with her father, she refuses to make the same mistake twice.

The twins stare at each other, squinting their eyes slightly as is their wont when they're frustrated, unconsciously mirroring each other's expression. Yet each of them is mistaken about what the other is thinking...

Solis breaks the silence – magnanimity towards the underprivileged, in her mind; a sign of weakness of character, according to Isalys.

“The Malek dispossessed you of your childhood, it's true; but I did not dispossess you of the Sculpted Throne. The Primi entrusted it to me, I am not free to pass it on to you.”

Isalys shivers, a trembling that shakes her almost to the point of pain. She has won, she has led Solis exactly where she wants her, straight into her trap. The sensation is intoxicating, exhilarating. Aurelius must have felt this way when he won the Appologium.

“You really don’t have a clue about what’s happening to you” Isalys says with feigned concern. “Let’s take stock of your supporters, shall we?”

First Lantana's green chasuble, then Bayan's blue one appear in the room behind Isalys. The two Arkhonts have witnessed the scene from the beginning, concealed by a sort of transparency spell.

"The Arkhome of Light stands behind Isalys," Lantana declares ceremoniously.

Isalys relishes the deference in the voice of her tutor, the person who initiated her into the arcana of Light. The pupil had surpassed the teacher, and their relationship had reversed, quite some time ago by now. The fact that Lantana had obeyed so docilely, without Isalys even having to make the slightest sign, was a brilliant demonstration of that.

"Am I meant to understand that you are speaking on behalf of the five Arkhonts?" Solis enquires ingenuously. "I don't see Cantor at your side. That is hardly a surprise. During the investigation into Sarash's disappearance, he seemed more imbued with a sense of duty towards the Throne than you did, Bayan."

Without waiting for a reply, Solis addresses Isalys, her voice firm despite her anger and trepidation.

"I'm terribly sorry, dear sister, but two Arkhonts do not a Primus make."

"The Arkhome of Fire stands in support of Isalys."

Solis turns to see Ethell entering by the main door. It cannot be denied that the disciple has a certain panache. With his flaming hair and stylish outfit, he radiates self-confidence.

It's all just a façade though: Ethell knows he's taking a huge risk. Only the Assembly of the Great Hearth has the authority to speak for all of the sorcerers and sorceresses. He will be disavowed soon enough... But how could he let a chance like this slip through his fingers? Fortune favours the bold, and Isalys has ensured him of her support as the next Primus.

Sarash will have him roasted piece by piece if she ever shows up again, but that doesn't change much: he has been living with that threat for a long time now. Ever since the day that, out of unrequited love, he triggered a flashback that did away with Cyrine. It hadn't crossed his mind that Sarash would assume responsibility for her death, but since Cyrine loved her and not him, there was a sort of immanent justice in that. Yes, Ethell had every reason to stand with Isalys. By his very nature, he enjoyed playing with fire.

"Ethell..." Solis sighs. "Sarash's fury is volcanic, you should know that as well as I. You won't be able to flee far enough to escape the fallout, I fear."

With a smile to mask the panic blazing up in his eyes, Ethell strides to the centre of the room. At the very moment he's about to take the floor, Solis addresses Isalys.

"Two Arkhonts and a disciple... Isalys, we don't have the same definition of a Primus."

"Nor do we have the same one of a Malkah."

Everyone raises their eyes to watch Veliva descending slowly through the crack in the ceiling that fills in for an oculus. Everyone except Isalys, that is, since she orchestrated the whole thing.

In the pillar of light illuminating the fleur-de-lys tree, Veliva's white hair glitters, vying in hoariness with her alabaster complexion. The Primus is pleased with her dramatic entrance; she looks like an angel descending from heaven to dispense the divine word. Therein lies the verbal force and virtuosity of the magicians of Air. Solis is too pure to use such artifices, which makes her difficult to manipulate. Isalys, on the other hand, is so greedy to prove to her worth that she will take Veliva's advice. Isalys will be the next Malkah, and Veliva will wield the real power, the one that crouches behind the throne.

“The Air stands behind Isalys and wishes to depose Solis.”

This time, Solis takes it hard. She takes a step back, managing to make it look like no more than a change of stance, but her confidence is starting to crumble. Veliva has always been fickle and flighty though. So although her change of allegiance is disappointing and vexing, it is hardly surprising. But what in magic’s name is the Primus of Air doing here in the Rift? She is supposed to be accompanying Calyps back to Nephtys, where the climate suits him better. That shirking of duty startles and bothers Solis more than all the rest.

“Come on, Calyps, stop playing hard to get,” Veliva exhorts. “Tell us who really floats your boat.”

The greenish fluid in the only vat that is still full suddenly comes alive, like in the wake of the brush of an artist who can bring an entire painting to life with a single line. The Primus of Water seems to be emerging from the vat, when he had actually settled for just hiding behind it. His features are blurred and hazy, as though he had just been crying. Solis clings to the notion that that’s a good sign.

“Calyps?” Solis scolds him gently. “The Salt Lake wasn’t enough to convince you of the dangers of the Riftian desert? Did I not urge you to take care of yourself? It would seem that my sister has not the same concern for your well-being.”

A ripple floats across the Primus’s face, betraying a tidal waveful of scruples and indecision that looks like no more than a swell at the surface. He has always been shifty, not dishonestly, more like the tides. When the tide is high, he has faith in the Solis he got to know at the thermae in Plenition: open-minded, intelligent, inspired, as brilliant as the suns’ gleam on the still sea. When it’s low, his allegiance goes to Isalys, who isn’t afraid to reveal dangerous reefs, the better to skirt them. Now that he is in their joint presence, his inner

currents – torn between the conjugated forces of those two moons with their diametrically opposed powers of attraction – don't know if they should be rising or falling.

“The Arkhome of Water will remain neutral on this issue,” Calyps finally says, sounding soggy.

“You watered down your wine, my wishy-washy friend,” Veliva chuckles, “instead of draining it to the dregs.”

Isalys can tell from the expression on her face, Solis has taken that withdrawal as a sign of support. The poor thing is like a fish floundering on a riverbank, the hook still in its mouth, convinced that if it only writhes and jumps hard enough, it can still make it back to the water. She's panicking, and fear is masking the fact that she's in her death throes. She doesn't see the sole of the fisherman's foot descending to pin her neck to the ground. Isalys herself doesn't stoop to such a lowly task, she lets someone else handle it.

“Sylaë!” Solis cries out.

One final confession of weakness, the convict's supplication to the executioner before he raises his axe.

No, not her. Not her amah.

The Primus of Nature has entered in turn, a serious look on her face, as befits an execution.

“Isalys is right,” Sylaë admits, in a voice as stricken as if her own head were about to go on the chopping block in Solis's stead. “She is the elder. The Throne is hers by birthright.”

Solis is devastated, a savage and brutal tempest has laid the forest of her intimate beliefs and guidelines low, leaving behind nothing but tattered ribbons of bark, torn-off branches and a ravaged plain of dead wood. Her soul has been stripped bare and left to the mercy of the next storm, which will trigger a mudslide.

Nothing had led her to suspect this betrayal most foul, nothing!

Her favourite of all the gifts that Syläë gave her as a child flashes into her mind: dominos engraved with pictures of dozens of plants and animals. The idea was to lay them face down, then turn them over to make matching pairs. Throughout her childhood, she and Syläë had played many exciting games brimming with laughter and good cheer. In this last, decisive round, Solis turns the pieces over to find awful, distorted images. Syläë has cheated, they both know it...

Syläë is speaking to her, rationalizing her decision, but Solis refuses to hear it. Nothing the Primus can say to her could ever be taken for anything but mendacity and duplicity, as has clearly been the case for years now. Had in fact always been the case. Solis had built the highest temples on her faith in Syläë's maternal feelings, but the ground has proven to be a squalid swamp.

When children grow up, the idealized image they have of their parents always winds up dissipating. The shock can be violent, potentially destructive even, but most of the time it is the price to pay for understanding that even adults make mistakes and that even love doesn't preserve anyone from human blundering.

Solis hadn't needed to be fully grown to realize the extent to which her father was a bad, hard-hearted person, a soil as sterile as the sand of the Rift. But Syläë... Her amah had been a mother in her eyes, as truly as Hannibal had been a big brother. A chosen family that she had loved, and opened herself up to. A garden that you had planted on land you had taken the trouble to clear yourself.

And now, that plot of land was scorched earth crusted with salt.

Her amah had preferred the other version of her, the one that's better, more perfect. Flawless.

Solis presses the back of her hand to her mouth to keep herself from gagging. She will manage to hold back her tears – decency will grant her that mercy – but perhaps not the bile flooding her throat. She staggers, unable to make it seem natural this time. She winds up with her back against the fleur-de-lys tree, encircled by the rogue Primi and their disciples. Traditionally, the Malkah hand down judgment from beneath the shade of an aboze tree. Finding herself backed up against a hybrid tree by an assembly of traitors was a complete reversal of that image, a crude materialization of the conspiracy she had fallen prey to.

Her trembling arm falls powerlessly back to her side, as though she had been wounded and was losing blood. All of her limbs feel numb, her legs might give way at any moment. Slip down against this hybrid trunk, slump to the ground gracelessly... the humiliation would be supreme, but she so needs to sit down.

She holds on. Tottering but still standing, dumbfounded but not defeated. It is at precisely this moment that Aurelius chooses to make his entrance.

“Stay true to yourself,” he had told her just before they entered the bunker. Now she understands why.

He’s here for my sake.

The thought asserts itself in Solis’s mind with the clarity of indisputable fact. She had impressed him with her ease during the climb, her reasoning about the ambrage faults. And most of all, they had kissed at the top of the Gravlev, a bond had been woven between them.

Still shaky, Solis turns to Isalys with a defiant look in her eye. Aurelius had been her champion, winning the Appologium to grant her a diplomatic favour. He can take on that role once more, here and now. All is not lost.

Isalys looks at her sister, grinning smugly to see her getting

her composure back. She gives her a knowing wink before walking to Aurelius's side. She runs her fingers through his hair, incidentally smearing his cheek with blood from her injured fingers. She pivots the two of them, as in a half-hearted waltz, clenches her fist in a possessive gesture then places her greedy, wide open mouth on the mouth of her intended. Isalys stares straight at Solis briefly, then shifts her focus to her own darting tongue. Far more than just a kiss, this is erotic foreplay, filled with sexual tension that can't be released until it has been lain on a bed. Less a sign of love than an act of passion, and of possession.

They finally pull apart, lips gleaming, eyes locked. Isalys can read in Aurelius's gaze that her intended has not forgotten a word of her promise to him. She can also divine something else, a reflection on the water, a late ray lagging behind. As ever, she can read Aurelius like an open book, but this time, she is stunned to see that a few pages have been heavily crossed out.

She'll deal with that later, nothing can tarnish her triumph...

Solis was an idiot, Aurelius has never been her champion... and never will be. She's almost tempted to thank Isalys for having reminded her of that fact. On the other hand, there is someone she knows she really can count on. A trump card.

"Shado." Solis straightens up. "Shado is still on my side. He is the royal assassin, the maker of queens. And he will stand by me."

"Ah, the famous Shado," Isalys says, tipping her head slightly to one side, in a gesture seemingly suffused with commiseration that is actually an attempt to hide her annoyance at seeing her sister back in the saddle so soon. "I've heard tell of him. They say he's not negligible, I'll grant."

Isalys turns to Syläë, who looks worried. She and the other Primi warned her: the master of Darkness could scuttle their plot all by himself. Have they still not grasped that her manoeuvre is legitimate? The Throne is rightfully hers, and neither Shado nor anyone else is in a position to deny that.

“Fine,” she pretends to concede magnanimously, “Shado will be the judge, if such is your wish. I would have preferred to spare you that vain hope, but since you cling to it.”

Solis raises her chin, proud of having prevailed. She watches her sister head to a large sheet that she hadn’t noticed until then. Isalys yanks it away, raising a cloud of dust that eventually settles, revealing a speckled mirror. The one from her dream.

“Prithee, come,” Isalys enjoins her.

Solis isn’t sure she has the strength to take those few steps, so she bides her time by staring haughtily at each of the traitors. The Arkhonts evade her eyes by darting theirs towards Isalys; Ethell preens, the better to hide his doubts; Veliva sees through her masquerade yet can’t help admiring how well she’s pulling it off, Calyps looks back with a wavering gaze. Syläë’s lips are trembling with chagrin, Aurelius’s are pinched. Solis affords only the briefest of glances to those two. They’ll find out soon enough that although she may grant her trust easily –some might say “too easily” or like a babe in the woods – no one betrays her twice.

Now that her legs are sturdier, Solis joins Isalys in front of the mirror. The elder puts an arm around her sibling’s shoulders, like two sisters who are happy to be reunited. Their twinship leaps out of the psyche mirror, an improbable double reflection in which the garb differs more than the flesh.

Before Solis can react, Isalys has clasped a thick, wrought-gold bracelet onto the middle of her arm.

Solis's image disappears from the mirror, leaving only Isalys.

"A little invisibility spell," Isalys says with a smirk. "The Primi know there is only one Malkah, as you have seen. But until all of Arkhante becomes aware of that as well, I prefer to take a few precautions. For your own good."

Isalys turns towards her twin sister. She's having a hard time reining in the exultation setting her pelvis on fire and electrifying her heart. She is now the orchestra conductor, the tympani of power are pounding to her rhythm, to her tempo.

"And if you get it into your head to try to escape, know that I have detained your precious Hannibal."

A wave of tranquillity washes over Solis, a quietude that exists beyond the shuddering that has been convulsing her ever since the conspiracy was revealed. Perhaps the loss of hope kills fear, or an overflow of emotion cushions the shock of unpleasant surprises. Perhaps it is thus with the notcht of Darkness. She is fully aware that she has stepped through the mirror, been erased by Isalys, become the phantom of a dream. Yet she feels surprisingly serene. She will even be soothed if only she gets the answer she's hoping for.

"Sylaë," she says, without taking her eyes off of Isalys. "You have lied to me every day since the day I was born..."

"Solis, you have to believe me...", the Primus tries to interject. But her voice trails off, silenced by Solis's absolute indifference as she goes on as though she had never been interrupted her.

"... but I enjoin you to speak truthfully to me once, just this once. Did you truly nurse Hannibal?"

"Yes."

For Solis, her reply grants relief, like a bit of blue sky in the midst of a tempest at sea when you're on a dinghy no

sturdier than a walnut shell. Hannibal may not be out of the woods yet, but at least everything has been done to offer him a chance. It's more than she had dared to hope for at this point.

“My dear sister, you are making a grave mistake by bringing Hannibal with us,” Solis warns her. “Whatever scheming you come up with, he will stay loyal to me forever. As will Sarash.”

“Sarash has fallen into an ambrage fault and will never come back.”

“Wrong again. Sarash will make it out. I'm sure of it, because I know someone else who went through hell and turned her suffering into an all-consuming desire for revenge: You.”

FORCED CONDUCT

“Waddabout me? I could go,” Onyx offers.

“What???” KatK says, nearly choking. “No way!”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re too little!”

“Precisely!”

KatK spins around, furious, to look at the jigeen who has the nerve to meddle in their conversation. Nobody is going to get between them and their sister, nobody!

Except their anger gets stuck in her throat like a streamfood ball that went down the wrong pipe. But the jigeen in question is none other than Pollen, the Empress of Parkour, to whom all locks bow down. An ÅPØLØWNIAN icon who has always been KatK’s role model. And now the heroine of their youth wants to toss their little sister into the blazing inferno of a clandestine op?

You should never meet your idols.

With a hand with key-shaped nails, Pollen points to the open trap door, which is clearly too small for either of them. But not for Onyx. KatK gapes at their sister, whose confident, knowing smile seems to be saying, “C’mon KatK, you’re supposed to be on my side!” Then they stare at the trap door, glance at Sphax flitting around their little troop,

and look back at Pollen, whose eyebrows are arching impatiently. KatK looks like a weathervane, spinning like the fan on a retro hard drive. Inside their head, it's even worse, ideas are whirling and swirling into a complete muddle.

"K," Pollen says adamantly, "You said you could deal. So deal."

The tension in her voice resonates with the cries coming from the open end of the cul-de-sac, the opposite end from where the three of them are hiding, the over-excited demonstrators are chanting slogans non-stop.

"The Ordi says no, but we say go!"

"ExSITted and proud, we exist!"

They're getting louder and more excited, the diversion is working perfectly, everything is ready for the protestors to overwhelm the detention centre where Nyvenn is being held... All that's left to do is to slip through the trap door and open the doors from inside the building.

The trap door that's too damn small.

But KatK had planned everything so carefully! Hacking the maintenance-conduit diagram: check. Downloading it into Sphax's memory: check. Copying the signature of every single Class IV maintenance robot in the centre: check. Convince ÅPØLØW how brilliant her plan was: check. Tell their parents that they were bringing Onyx to Repet, the bobot musical comedy, then recoding the securibot to keep an eye on Oh during the show so they can slip discreetly away: check. Create a diversion to allow them to reach the trap door thanks to Pollen's' acrobatic skill: check. And all of that crazy-hard work is going to go down the drain because of one tiny little unforeseen circumstance, the size of the trap door? Say it ain't so...

This must be karmic payback for collaborating with the Ordi. They are going to wind up in hell, some kind of 2D

metaverse with a low-speed connection. That's what you get when you work with the Noria's lapdog.

Because that's where things stand: they are working with the Ordi – not “for” the Ordi, you hear? – just “with”, which is hard enough for them to swallow. He helped them come up with the plan – a little – and pulled a ton of strings to make sure everything fell into place. He even lent them his SIT to trick the centre's security system into opening the door to the demonstrators! Even if KatK did an amazing job, they have to admit that the Ordi's contribution was anything but negligible. He had to stay in the background, obviously – can you imagine ÅPØLØW agreeing to work with him? So KatK is the only person who knows just how much he helped. There's no other way to pull it off. But the secret still weighs heavily on their conscience.

To make up for that, KatK has tried several times in the past few days to convince themselves that the Ordinator must have brainwashed them. After all, manipulating people, fucking with their heads with nothing but his words is his stock in trade, the most basic job requirement for the Mantrix's spokesperson. But despite their best efforts, it's no dice.

Now, when they think about the Ordi, his crooked political manipulating and sexist, paternalist holos aren't what pops into their head. Instead, the first thing that floats up is that moment when he removed the mimetic mask to ask KatK for their help. At that precise moment, his face was projecting a rare authenticity and a totally unexpected fragility... He was distraught, but like, for real. All of a sudden, it was as though the Ordinator had revealed his secret identity to KatK... and he was a guy with a bloody heart beneath the bloody mask. Okay, so a bloody heart where a face should be is a disgusting image, it's true, but

that's still what it looked like to KatK. And now they can't see him any other way.

KatK doesn't know what to think any more. They're pissed off and moved, affected and incensed when they think that the nice old guy that gave Oh the state-of-the-art sound-cancelling headphones turns out to be their sworn enemy. Ordi, Ezio. Ezio, Ordi... How can anyone be *both*?

Damn, he has really essed-may with their ed-hay...

"I can do it, you know," Onyx repeats, more insistently.

"We gotta get moving!" Pollen says impatiently.

KatK looks at Onyx with disbelief and confusion. She's supposed to be laughing and dancing in a holo-theatre, and instead, she followed them all the way here. And besides, what kind of time warp turned their sickly little sister into a mini-heroine ready to infiltrate a protected building?

Fabro and Atale are going to kill KatK if they ever find out that they let Onyx go in there. And KatK would agree. In a painful flash of empathy, KatK feels like they're inside their parents' heads. As though their minds had been blended in a mental mixer, KatK feels the exact same thing as them. Frozen with fear at the idea that One thinks she's perfectly capable and autonomous when KatK knows it's not so. They've got no time and no words to explain to her that life is an abusive, remorseless virus; that some of the dumb shit we do means we can never go back. The powerlessness they feel looking at this kid who's growing up too fast, who seems to be in a hurry to trade in her innocence for a chance to dive straight into the dangers of life.

It's a little too close to home... so like KatK that it makes them feel guilty. Oh is following in their footsteps, and it makes them feel sick to their stomach to realize they're 1,000% responsible. On the other hand, they're a little tiny bit proud, too, to see their sister's bold bravery... the kind

that adults all seem to shed, winding up slumped on the couch with their heads in some stupid metaverse.

Yesterday, they would've resented their parents for being so blindly overprotective. But now, KatK can practically touch the outlines of the fear of watching your little one fly the nest.

The whole thing has taken KatK's breath away and turned their lungs into ice that creaks and cracks when they try to breathe. They force themselves to remember who they are: the bold, idealistic KatK with firmly held beliefs worth fighting for ... not the MamaBear.exe that doesn't budge from their rocking chair even when everything around them is virussing to hell in a handbasket... KatK always hates it when their parents decide for them what they are or aren't capable of... So there's no way they're going to do that to their little sister.

Still, it's scary, and KatK wishes it were easier. An old Mantradage pops into her mind: "Only a dwork looks at the bug without seeing the person who coded it."

And it is time to recode society, which is diSITegrating.

"If you say so, then go for it, Oh!"

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"Arhax Imperator's preparatory hearing in the context of his candidacy for the position of Ordinator is now open. The interview will be archived in a file that will stay sealed until after the elections, in accordance with the Citizens' Charter currently in effect."

Arhax is slouching in his seat, one arm on the armrest and his flesh-and-blood cheek leaning on one fist. He's staring at the commission composed of five Mantrices –one per techstyle – selected by the kind of probabilistic calculation

that the Noria has patented. They are arranged around him on bleachers in a semi-circle, in the kind of blank, minimalist decor you'd find in a medical clinic. The holograms' subtle gleaming could almost be mistaken for the morbid excitement of medical students gathered for their first live autopsy. The Archivist, the only member of the Noria who's physically present, is waiting patiently – and discreetly – in a corner.

Alcred blinks to take a picture of the scene. Considering how he's sprawled there, Arhax should look small and impertinent in the face of those honourable shozen, who have all died and been immortalized for quite some time. Yet he's looks so absolutely, totally laid back that he winds up ridiculing the once and future heroes whose outfits – what they were wearing on the day of their Elevation – display several centuries of Mantri fashion.

The meta-consultant had to work stupendously hard for this interview to take place: he mobilized a huge swath of his network and worked things out down to the tiniest detail. Yet he knows ahead of time that Arhax is going to surprise him, that his carefully drawn-up plan is going to wind up looking like a haemostatic dressing or a Deconstructivist painting, because for Arhax, surprises are a principle and the unexpected is his signature. Who cares, it's worth it just for the shiver tickling his gut... precisely the kind of sensation he hasn't felt in years.

“Citizen-shareholder Arhax,” the robotic Mantrix begins, “I see in the agenda for this meeting that you would like to make a preliminary statement. Very well, the commission is listening.”

“It is not a statement. I urgently require the presence of the Chief Engineer of the Conclave.”

“Anîs?” the cybernetic exclaims, taken aback.

“Yes, that’s her name.” Arhax runs a finger over his eyes, back and forth several times. “The one with a neuronal headband.”

“This commission is reserved for Mantrices,” the Meditech representative reminds everyone, “a citizen-shareholder doesn’t belong here.”

“Fine.”

Arhax slaps his palms on the armrests and stands up. The tickling sensation in Alcred’s gut turns into a cramp.

“This meeting is adjourned,” the Robotic says. “We might as well save everybody some time, myself first and foremost, because I clearly have better things to do than to wait around.”

“Anîs is not authorized to evaluate candidates for the position of Ordinator,” the genetic Mantrix explains.

“Oh really?” Arhax replies, sounding fake-surprised. “Yet she is the one who decided that Julian couldn’t be Elevated, *n’est-ce pas?*”

Disconcerted by the ironic tone in Arhax’s voice, the Mantrix opens her eyes wide, then takes another stab, “Her decision was strictly technical, the candidate’s memory was too badly damaged.”

“Here’s a bit of advice: if you don’t have anything worthwhile to say, don’t say anything at all.”

“But...” the Mantrix sputters.

“Did anyone have the presence of mind to question her judgement?”

“Anîs has four Ph.D.’s in quantum physics. She is the person who is the most qualified for making that sort of assessment.”

“Who gives a shit!”

Arhax is running his hand over his face more and more often, faster and faster too. He starts talking again well

before he's calmed down; that would take too long.

"You want to know what I have learned over the course of a long career? When the head of a corpo makes a decision, everybody rushes in to criticize it – especially those who know less than nothing about how to run a business. But let some obscure scientist jabber on about some incomprehensible junk made from adulterated tachosaurus drool, and nobody dares to contradict them out of fear of looking like a fool. Well not me! And you know why not? Because I'm no fool. I know that perfectly well. You know that perfectly well. So, let's back up a few steps, and you'll give me a different answer."

His hand swipes across his forehead again.

"Despite her slew of degrees, Anîs made a serious mistake. An unacceptable, unforgivable mistake. I can't forgive her first and foremost, nor will I forgive anyone who chooses to stick up for her. Can your algos grasp that or should I call in a scheman to draw a picture?"

Arhax makes a face. He can feel the small black hole in his gut growing bigger, devouring several feet of his intestines and reaching all the way to his cock. It hurts like hell. He wants to make that bimbo Anîs feel just how bad it hurts. He wants to see the dread in her eyes when she realizes that he's going to be the next Ordinator – because it's inevitable, it's written in the stars and in every last damn line of the Noria's code. Pretty soon, that big fat cow is going to understand that she made a mistake of cosmic proportions. *If* she manages to Elevate Julian and turn him into a Mantrix at some point, and *if* she goes down on her knees and begs for mercy, *maybe* he'll consider sparing her, but right this instant, he doubts that very much. Right this moment he's obsessed with just one thing: wrapping his hands around her neck and squeezing tighter and tighter until her eyes pop out of her

head from the pressure. The idea is something of a turn-on, actually...

“We are not here to evaluate the Chief Engineer’s work,” the robotic Mantrix replies. “You are free to leave if you wish, but you should understand that in that case, the interview will be over, not adjourned.”

A hint of a killer-clown’s smile passes over Arhax’s face.

He couldn’t give a damn about being here. The Mantrices are nothing but pathetic little valets taking orders from the Synthia, and they think they’re kingmakers? What absolute rubbish! He’s enjoying what’s rising in him, an erectile vengeance that’s whispering in his ear that it is his manifest destiny to be the next Ordinator. Oh yeah, that’s right: the shozen are going to elect him, and that fucking Noria is going to bow down and point their arses up before him. Why should he always have to explain things, convince people and negotiate? Those so-called scientific “experts” never have to go through any of that nonsense, and these fools want to force him, Arhax, to? The bastards! If his Julian didn’t absolutely need the Noria in order to be reborn, he would already be burning the damn commission and the whole damned Conclave with it. It would make one hell of a fireworks shows. The perfect way to celebrate his appointment as the next Ordinator.

If only the transfer had worked, he wouldn’t be feeling this way. With a crumpling of his heart, he reminisces about the day of the Elevation, in that private room near the top of the Conclave, when the stela turned grey, instead of the usual shimmering hue...

“Has Anís explained to you why the number of defective stelae is increasing?”

Arhax spoke in one go, without even taking a breath first. Quick, spit the words out before his brilliant idea fades away.

Now that he's put it out there, he can grant himself a breath before he goes on.

"Julian's Elevation didn't fail because his memory was damaged; it failed because the stela that was supposed to receive him was corrupted, infected. That cannot have escaped your attention, can it? So, did you ask her about that?"

The Mantrices' worried silence is music to his ears – music as sweet as that Arkhantan ballad the two of them had been listening to just before... before...

"No? I knew it! So summon her immediately. No more technical drivel, I want answers. Do you still believe in stela that drain their energy all by themselves, for no reason? Poppycrack! Everyone – you, me and the rest of Artellium knows perfectly well where all this malfunctioning is coming from. Hell, even those assholes in Arkhante probably know: it's the damn energy crisis! A stela without a clean battery is going to disrupt. That's an indisputable fact. We're short on trisel. Even you Mantrices in your tower of light must be starting to feel the squeeze. We're short on trisel and everyone is looking away. That level of cowardice makes me want to puke! It took Julian's assassination to open my eyes. Mantris has to be reborn, regenerated, better and greater than ever. And... my Julian, too."

"We will question the Chief Engineer" the genetic Mantrix vows. "That is not, however, on the agenda for this meeting. Do you wish to continue your hearing?"

"Why waste my time? I transmitted all of the information concerning Operation Mine-Blowing to the Archivist, you have everything you need to understand it. There's just one little thing that you and I need to be clear about..."

"We have gathered here to hear you out," the Mantrix representing the Noria acknowledges.

“Mantris is going to elect me. You can stick your probability calculations where the suns don’t shine, because it’s a sure thing. Mantris is going to elect me, because Mantris needs me. Pretty soon, I’m going to re-Ordinate our city. I’m going to go down into the arena and get my hands dirty. And I’m going to give as good as I get. No more weepy Ordi hiding behind speeches. You can kiss that Fried Piper farewell. Arhax is different. Arhax is action, not words. Concrete Action with a capital fucking A.”

“Precisely what actions might you be referring to?” the meditech Mantrix inquires.

Alcred grants himself a second, precisely one, to relish the way Arhax has turned the power relationship to his own favour. The next second, he is querying his AIssistant, which instantly begins analyzing news from around Mantris. Noteworthy events are scrolling down the meta-consultant’s ocular implant, sorted by the parameters he has established since he’s taken Arhax on as a client.

He spots the dream opportunity instantly.

\ALCRED \wedge ARHAX \cap 17 private O\\

{ARHAX | Chief of Operations \subset © ROMA}

<Sir, a group of exSITed’s has gathered in front of the banishment centre to demand the release of one of their own.>

<Perfect. I love it! We’re going bust those shirkers’ heads in. I’m sure they will appreciate the language of plasma.>

<We could supply the centre’s security agents with ROMA’s latest exoskeletons, couldn't we?>

<It’s almost a good idea, Alcred. But we can do better than that. >

Arhax takes a supremely theatrical breath.

“You asked me what actions?” he says out loud, to the Mantrices. “I would advise you to turn on your immedia.”

With one last glance at the trembling holograms, he heads for the door. “Soon enough, you’ll have something to chatter about, since that’s what you do best. As for me, I’m taking my first concrete action.”

“Yiiiikes!”

Onyx slaps her hand over her own mouth to muffle the little shriek that escaped her. Fluttering a few feet in front of her, as silently as a dragonfly, Sphax is illuminating the darkness of the narrow passageway with beams of light projecting from his mimetic eyes. He freezes, hovering in place reproachfully.

“Okay, I get it!” Onyx mutters.

She bites her own lip to keep herself quiet. Sphax is actually right, everything echoes horribly inside this maintenance conduit. She can’t let KatK hear her, or they’ll never let her fulfil her mission as a secret agent.

Even so, it felt good to let out that little shriek. “Sometimes, it’s best to let it all out,” as Dad likes to say. It’s really filthy in here, and it’s too dark to know what gross things she’s putting her hands on. Her bobot couldn’t care less, he’s flying!

Outside of the building, in front of the main entrance to the banishment centre, KatK is blending in with the demonstrators. At first, they figured they’d stay near the trap door waiting, like a fool, but what good would that do? They can’t help Onyx now, their little sister is on her own.

Fist waving, soul rebelling, they are chanting slogans along with the others, screaming at the top of their lungs to cover up the small voice in their head that can’t forget the terrible danger their little sister is in.

“They took our batteries, it’s an assault on our rights!”

Louder, they have to shout louder.

FAITH is a law-breaker; shozen, that’s a deal-breaker!”

“Anti-control, we’re losing our self-control!”

“We’re not tired, we’re all exSITed!”

But shouting doesn’t help, no matter what they do, the fear

is lodged inside KatK. So they focus on the plan instead, the one they repeated to Onyx a dozen times as their sister was slipping inside the trap door.

“Listen to me, Oh,” KetK had said. “Sphax knows the route, I programmed it into his memory.”

“You fiddled with my bobot without even asking my persimmion?” Onyx had replied, indignantly.

“You’re right, I shouldn’t have, my bad, but PLEASE listen to what I’m saying? You have to follow Sphax. Just follow him, and you’ll see, it’ll work.”

Onyx can’t take it anymore, it’s hard to breathe in here: it’s stuffy, and the stale air is making her cough. She has to keep smoothing her hair down. Static electricity is making it stand on end, like when she plays too close to the dome’s pillars when the roof is lit up. Only now, since her mop of hair is drenched with nervous sweat, her head is giving off green sparks – a real shock of hair. It might sound funny, but it hurts, and it’s actually a little scary, too!

It’s gonna’ work.

She closes her eyes and thinks of KatK, imagining her big sister – sorry, her big sibling – hugging her and saying “You did it! You’re a badass, Oh!” So she keeps going, wriggling and slithering her way down behind Sphax.

It’s gonna’ work.

The metal sides of the tunnel are slippery, and they quiver all the time, as though they were shivering with fear. As though they felt the same way she did.

It’s gonna’ work.

Onyx chokes back a sob and smiles to herself in the dark. It’s her ritual when the doctors announce that some new treatment doesn’t work. She doesn’t cry, she smiles to reassure her dad, who comes to all of her doctor’s appointments. She often throws in a shrug that’s meant to be

mean, “No biggie, better luck next time,” too. But the tunnel is too narrow, so she settles for smiling with trembling lips.

Besides, there won’t be a next time in this case. It’s now or never – Kat was very clear about that.

And so she goes bravely back to crawling behind Sphax... Even though she keeps stubbing her knees and elbows, even though she can hear the scuffling noises of rodents scurrying away from the bobot’s beams of light and the chitinous crackling sound of the rare species of insects that survived the comprehensive sterilization Mantris underwent before it was sealed under the dome. But what she’s working the hardest to ignore is the horrible dust that’s tickling her nose, and that is full of dead human skin cells! It’s hard to believe, but it’s true – her dermawfultologist told her so – and she has no choice but to breathe it in. Yuck!

KatK’s throat is aching from shouting so loud, but it’s not helping ease their fears for Onyx. Besides, there’s no point, nobody’s listening to the demonstrators, nobody could give a flying Dalek.

Actually, that’s not entirely true.

A few onlookers are watching the demo, like rubberneckers staring at an accident – with compassion shaded with morbid curiosity. It’s true that the crowd of exSITted demonstrators really stands out from the gawkers. Their group is full of teens, cyb’s and marginals. Altogether, they make up a shambolic picture, a joyful parade that’s evacuating the anger they’ve been brooding over for months. They’re revelling in joy, joy fed by hope – hope that change is finally on its way. A gathering like this is surprising, thought-provoking and inspiring, and it can make you feel so much better... maybe even happy for once.

How passers-by react to the demo says a lot about who they are, deep down. They’re almost all surprised, but that

emotion comes in infinite variations ranging from amusement to disdain. Many are just nozy-shozies, but a few stop, look and decide to join in. Like an old lady with her elder-care robot whose servo motors are stuttering because of a low battery, making the two of them look equally arthritic. And a woman who's carrying her little boy on her hip instead of taking him out in a self-driving baby buggy. A Sunday-morning athlete whose performance-analyzing implant's battery just died; he's listening to them while tapping the implant, in the vain hope that that lo-tech solution might get it going again... Basically they're all shozen who feel vaguely concerned, not people who are struggling deeply. Still, when they finally walk away, they might carry a bit of that rebellious energy home with them, a little bug that just might be liable to recode their matrix.

"A little seed ready to sprout," Nyvenn would say, "as long as it's watered regularly." Or some comparison like that, something as old-fashioned and poetic as Arkhantan magic. Onyx loves when Nyvenn says stuff like that.

KatK's worried heart skips a beat as soon as Oh pops into their mind. "Never let Sphax out of your view," they told her over and over...

Onyx took her cyb' sib's advice to heart and is sticking to it scrupulously. Fortunately, the bobot is easy to follow, since it's the only source of light in this darkness. Or it was, anyway, until it suddenly went on the blink and stopped shedding any light whatsoever.

"Arrrrrgh!"

Onyx's cry of dismay chokes off when the light blinks back on, then rises up again even louder when Sphax's eyes goes out again. On-off, on-off... the bobot has turned into a flashlight that starts blinking just before the battery dies out completely.

Darkness falls for good in the conduit, enveloping Onyx in its cold, damp cloak. The girl tenses up, her breath stolen straight away, anxiety galloping through her guts, pressing on her bladder. She clamps her headphones to her ears. Maybe if she cuts off the sound from outside, the fear monster won't hear her how fast her heart is racing and will seek out other prey. With her eyes squeezed so tightly shut that the blood is pounding in her temples, and her hands pressed hard against her earphones, she's waiting.

She changed Sphax's batteries not long ago, she's sure she did, so why...?

"Why?" KatK is wondering at exactly the same time, but in a different place. Why has the number of gawkers swelled all of a sudden?

They're scrutinizing the crowd that has come to a stop, like a vid' on pause. Realizing that they're all looking the same way, KatK looks up too, and sees the walls of the nearby skyscrapers splashed with an ephemeral holograff. A 2D animation of a huge gun has appeared on the façade of a Robotic corpo. It's an antique six-shooter with a shiny black barrel. A stylized finger presses the trigger, producing a silent detonation and a plume of smoke. The image of a projectile slashes across the glass-walled surface of the building next door as slowly as though it had been fired through water... or molasses. Because it's so slow, everyone can see that it's not a bullet, but a battery with a tapered profile.

The network is going nuts on KatK's screen-skin.

"Tema, Heyla's here!"

"Free publicity for the revolution, that's hard core-po!"

"Ay-ay-ay, that' wild!"

Though they're usually hooked on the network, KatK barely glances at the messages: they'd rather be watching it live than posting about it.

The light show is still showing on the tallest building around, a shopping mall whose walls are covered with advertising space. As the battery-bullet comes near, the ads start to drip like diluted paint. The colours are rearranging themselves into a children's drawing of a stick-figure family holding hands, happy about everything they bought that day.

When the projectile pierces a shopping bag, a huge cartoon-style onomatopoeia bubble pops up displaying "CRAACK!" The contents of the bag fall at the feet of the child, whose smiling face is replaced by a triangular one with its hair standing on end, and its mouth misshapen by a silent scream.

The battery-bullet continues its trajectory, exploding the neuronal implant of the largest of the stick figures. With a stylized "BAAAM!" its head is replaced by a blood-red scribble.

A cubical ambulance with a poorly drawn red cross is clomping over to rescue them, but it breaks suddenly in two with a huge "BOOOM!" when the munition, which has swelled to the size of a missile, traverses it, too.

The holograff doesn't have a soundtrack, it lets the power of the images be the detonation. There isn't really any noise to speak of until the work of art fades from the walls.

The noise you can suddenly hear is the rumbling of the crowd...

Even in the maintenance conduit, a rumbling has started. With her sound-cancelling headphones on, Onyx feels it more than she really hears it. The surface surrounding her isn't just quivering any more, it's vibrating to the point that it's making her whole body shake.

Onyx scrunches her eyes closed and pushes the notching on her headphone to max to cut off all sounds, convinced she can escape the monster's vigilance that way. Still, she can't

help blinking her eyes open to see what's tickling her nose like that.

"Sphax? What are you do... Yiiikes!"

The panicked bobot keeps flying into Onyx's face in an effort to get away from the horrid creature that's coming towards them: a nightmarish giant bug bristling with antennae that are groping around in the dark and generating famished sparks!

Onyx is screeching at the top of her lungs, using up every speck of air in her body. Sniffling, she catches her breath, her throat clogged with sobs, on the verge of puking in fear. Sphax saves her by flying into her eye then bumping into one of the growths on her forehead.

"Owww!"

The monster had left her scared stiff, but pain makes her flee. Onyx backs up blindly, scraping her knees in her haste. Her dungarees are getting all scrunched up and are giving her a wedgie, but she couldn't care less. Nothing can stop her now, all she wants is to get away from there as fast as her limbs can take her. She's going to find a way around the monster. She has to! Kat and their friends and ÅPØLØW and the whole world are counting on her!

The monster is still coming, in a click-clacking of its voracious mandibles...

It's gonna' work...

"You think your kid sister is gonna' make it?"

With a start, KatK shudders before pulling themselves together and answering boastfully, "She's tougher than you and me put together!"

"Yeah, right. But she better. I wish she'd hurry up."

Pollen waves a hand towards the force field that's still blocking the way into the banishment centre. An authoritarian, regal blue, it forms a protective shell hugging

the façade and the sidewalk in front of it, entirely sealing off the entrance. A handful of security agents are standing behind the throbbing halo, alert, but clearly in over their heads.

The upper section of the force field is closing back up behind a delivery drone labelled “ROMA” that’s flying away amidst general indifference. With one knee on the ground, the head of the guards is handing out what looks like reinforced gloves from the crate that was just delivered. His colleagues pull the gloves on and squeeze their fists twice to activate an exoskeleton that unfurls piece by piece, like an Arkhantan knight’s plate armour.

What worries KatK most isn’t that security was just reinforced, it’s that the guards suddenly look like they feel invincible. They’ve been authorized to use violence now, and they’re chomping at the bit, ready to take on the angry crowd. KatK can see it in their eyes – as well a pinch of relief, which proves that they’re still worried. Firearms have practically disappeared from Mantris – why would they persist in a city where discourteousness is about the worst thing that ever happens. But some men are still obsessed with them. The minute they have a gun in their hands, they feel virile and all-powerful, as though rules no longer apply to them... It’s an atavism that even two decades of peace haven’t been able to erase.

“This stinks,” KatK says between clenched teeth.

“Yup,” Pollen agrees.

Sweeping her eyes across the crowd to see how the demonstrators are reacting to the new situation, KatK sees that more and more shozen are joining the excited exSITteds. The blending is working better than usual, which isn’t all that surprising: with the energy crisis, everybody’s in the same Dalek. That’s good... and not so good, too! Since their

objective is still to storm the banishment centre, a crowd this big might actually complicate things.

KatK eventually notices a group of about a dozen people trying to blend in. They've got all the right gear to do so: holo-discs displaying pro-exSITted slogans, second-hand clothes, no visible SITs – but the expression on their faces is nasty and aggressive, totally out-of-step with the good-natured atmosphere.

KatK tips her head toward them to point them out discreetly to the hacker.

“You know them?”

“Nope. There's starting to be too many people, I'm not liking the look of this.”

“Don't worry, my sis' can handle it.”

KatK runs the plan sniffing in their mind one more time – they desperately need to convince themselves that everything's clear in Oh's mind, too : follow Sphax to the maintenance room, place the SIT that Ezio gave them – “Ezio is Nyven's friend who gave you the headphones,” they settled for explaining in front of Pollen – “and afterwards, dive back into the tunnel because tons of people are going to be pouring in, wanting to demolish the place.” They didn't say it in exactly those terms, but they made it clear that that's what they meant.

“You'll see,” they concluded, looking, straight at their little sister. “All you have to do is go straight.”

Except Onyx can't go straight anymore because of the monster with the lightning antennae.

She scurries back as fast as she can, with no thought in her mind but getting away. Still, despite her panic, she becomes aware of a drop beneath her right shoe. A sideways passage, that's right, she remembers passing one on her way in. She'd like to turn around to check it out, but that's impossible. The

passageway is too narrow to turn around, and even if she could, it's too dark to see anything.

So without further ado, Onyx backs into the side tunnel. It's the only way to escape the killer monster.

Tying herself into knots, bending her knees the wrong way, pushing and stretching, and not achieving anything but pain, she panics and whimpers. Then she tries again, putting her other foot in first, and finally gets her hips through. Urging herself on, she takes a deep breath, scrunches her shoulders together, snuffles and sobs, turns her head when one of her growths catches on the edge, holds her breath and...

She's getting there, she's getting there... she's made it in!

So focussed is she on squeezing her way in that Onyx doesn't even notice the drop, which is beneath both feet now. Which is why, in order to escape an inoffensive Class IV droid that she could have shoved out of her way with one hand, Onyx is hurtling down a three-storey tall chute feet first.