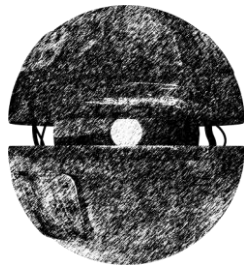


# *THE* MONKS

'A NOBLE CAUSE'



André Nussbaumer

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Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living and dead, is entirely intentional.

The Noble Cause

1233 Valaart,

Underground Network SE, 213

Imprinted in your soul.



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## CHAPTER ONE - ON THE RUN

A siren stroke from high above and echoed throughout the streets of Valaart. Sigmund has been murdered. There hasn't been an assassination for god knows how long. In the living room where his body was found, the walls cried with sorrow, and in the air lingered a foul smell that lasted for hours. Amidst the broken chairs, broken glasses and broken dreams, laid a note with a message written in a poorly manner:

***“I'm sorry.”***

Terry, his only child, was now running through Valaart, the city of light, where nights are bright as days. A city so busy, it almost imploded in its business. So crowded it stumbled in its fullness. All the buildings resembled an i — yes, the upper part is kept afloat as if the building had its own mind. It looks like it's going to fall, but it never does. They are extraordinarily precise, to mask the imprecision's of time — yes, imprecise, it's what time became. Seasonless. The timeless times it's what some folk used to say.

‘It shrank!’ they cried.

An hour was no longer an hour, and eternity was only felt briefly. They can't tell in which year they are anymore for everything had a pace of its own — the buildings, the clocks and their hearts, all danced to an indifferent beat. In a city where no one remembers why they came, Terry was trying to forget where he was going, as he drilled through the crowds blindly standing in each other's way. Rain fell upon his face as he went up and down, round and round, bumping into the floating cars and bicycles as if drunk in a dream. He ditched the main road and ran all the way down to the river bank. From there he saw the imposing Valaarian structures and their lights reflected in the water. The rain stopped as the grass wavered along with the floating trees to the whistling sound of the wind. Terry stood still, eaten by the forests immensity, and even though he'd never been through the forest, he felt as if the forest had already been through him. All the stories it held, the hells of wildfires and the heavens of tranquility, burning and chilling down his spine. He glanced back at his past, those familiar, inebriating lights, then stepped into the future. The cry of his fears was broken as the creaking sound of the floating trees became louder, so loud that it muted all his doubts. Through the holes between the roots thick as elephant legs, he found his way into Lorah, the cursed forest that embraced Valaart from all sides. He stopped for a second still trying to catch his breath, leaning over a root that kept one of the oldest trees from reaching the clouds, and opened a bag he always carries on his waist. A strange creature came out of it flying, spreading sparkles and bits of light. It was an Ikon — metallic spheres, divided in two parts and each spins frantically. What's more interesting about them isn't their vast stored knowledge, the lasers they can fire, or the shields they can activate, but the light they emancipate. Much like the light of the sun, it influenced everything, and everyone. They are Valaarians closest friends.

‘Terry, this is terrible. Terrible,’ said Ikon, flying wildly around him.

'I know, I know...' said Terry, followed by a long exhale. 'Everything happened so fast.'

'What now?' asked Ikon.

'I wish I could disappear,' said Terry, looking over his shoulder.

'You can't run away forever. Your fears, you must face them, otherwise, they'll follow you wherever you'll go.'

'But I can't go back. I'm scared they'll put you out.'

'You can't be scared, you must be brave.'

'It doesn't matter, no one will ever understand,' he said, looking at the sky now covered by millions of branches and leaves dancing graciously in the wind.

'I'll always understand. I'm your Ikon.'

Terry gazed at the infinite trunks ahead of them, it seemed like a never ending journey towards the unknown. The squashing sound of his boots stepping on the mud made the most sensible birds fly affright, like the Gog's. A creature that can only be found in the vast wilderness of Lorah. Whenever they sing, their color change hue, and the waves of sound they spread, change too.

'Look, Gog's!' said Terry, howling with cupped hands 'round his mouth. They howled in tune, back at him, a comforting hymn, while he closed his watery almond eyes.

'There's no time to lose Terry. They'll be coming after us,' said Ikon. A thunder fell and for a second the world became white. The birds disbanded in the skies. He opened his eyes and looked over his shoulder. Valaart was almost unrecognizable from such a distance. The fog blended with the shades of the tall buildings, kindly levitating in the horizon, and behind them the suns were softly setting in, one after another, leaving behind their faded colors of reds and blues.

'It's endly,' he said, a word they've made to describe the sunset, when the floating trees return to the earth. At this moment no one's doing anything besides contemplating this wonderful spectacle nature throws at them. Well, no one but the sunriders, woman, man and children who race the sun, on their floating bicycles. Every weekend they ride, glaring at the suns right in the eye, and some look at them days on end because they keep up with them for as long as they can, among the clouds. The suns that never set, they call them. Some get lost and others go blind, but no matter what, they always ride, even though they know — it's a race that can't be won. It was the first time that Terry couldn't ease his mind and breathe all the tranquility of this wonderful moment. The night fell carelessly as a leaf... That's the only time there is, when the day fades and the night sets in. Fast or slow, no one quite knows for it snows, rains, then the wind blows you away, and all of this happens in a blink of an eye. Terry never questioned time, for him, all of this, the past, the present and future, were the same thing. Was all he ever lived, was all he ever knew. The forest was cold, yes, but his Ikon kept him warm and shed some light on what was his darkest hour. He always seemed to enjoy the night. In all the bad, he found reasons to be good.

'The night makes you brighter,' he said, in a hopeful manner, but, his Ikon wasn't the only thing shining. A fluorescent yet timid energy started to flow through every living thing, glowing like electrical currents. Apparently the forest, instead of going to sleep, awoke, bestowing a dazzling, bright spectacle that somehow the Valaarians forgot it existed, because their artificial lights overcame the natural ones. Carpets of mushrooms sneezed trails of light as Terry passed them by. Radiant crystal pods broke into butterflies and luminous resin dripped from the floating trunks, revealing faces that changed overtime.



‘Wow, the myths were true! This is beautiful,’ said Terry, twirling around this mysterious forest.

‘Indeed, but you must follow my light, and my light only. Don’t trust anything you see or hear. These luminous paths are alluring and a lot of people pursue their endless trails, but they’re also treacherous, the more you walk on them, the more they’ll lead you astray. The only way out of here is through the dream world, you see, when you’re awake, the forest is dreaming and nothing’s real, but when we’re dreaming, the forest’s awake, and that’s where its reality resides,’ said Ikon.

‘So I must dream, to find my way out?’

‘Yes, only in your dreams you can escape the forests reality.’

‘We must find a place to sleep then.’

‘You don’t have to be asleep to dream Terry, one can dream with their eyes wide open.’

‘I’m too tired to dream... And I think we’re lost,’ he said.

‘Do you need a map?’

‘Does it work? Are you able to find blueprints of the forest’s dream?’

‘I’m not sure...’

‘What are dreams made of anyway?’

‘Of that. Of the questions without answers. Dreams Terry, are made of everything there is not. A path not taken, a word not said... Everything that could’ve been,’ said Ikon, projecting a map.

Terry tried to figure out where they were, but the paths entwined and then broke, dissipating into grains of sand across the skies. Yes, now there was more than one sky.

He looked at the footprints he was leaving behind, but they would walk off and disappear in the air. It was like he wasn’t there. He was the footprints running away, but

getting nowhere. The Ikon lead him through what it seemed like an ethereal forest, where webs of light caught ghastly insects from another lifetime. Flowers blossomed and turned to ash before the dying petals reached the grass. A flower, a single flower, seemed to sprout from eternity. That's how long he felt he'd been wandering through that forest. The sounds of the streams and fountains were slowly muted while a river of light flooded the forest. It looked like a portal and it caught Terry's attention. He was mesmerized by it, it seemed that it held all the answers for all the questions running across his mind.

'Stop!' said Ikon, bumping into him. 'I told you, follow my light.'

They walked upon a meander road that looked like a serpent with a thousand years old, dry of life, all rugged and curled, who sneezed and roared, jerked and choked, spat and cough. On the verge, a buzzing sound coming from the dense vegetation scared him to life, but Ikon ripped through the leaves gallantly, and on the other side, a thousand lights whirled like planets around a lake, imprisoned by tall rocks. Luminous bees danced and millions of insects clapped their brushy feet while cicadas and crickets sang their spiracles out, in what it seemed like a hallowed party. Terry went around them, but each time there were more, leaping, and then romping into Terry's hair and eyes. He covered his face and ran but it was no use for he felt them all over him.

'Stay calm, they'll only hurt you if they feel threatened.'

'I can't stay calm, I feel their claws on my skin! Get off !' he screamed, running around. 'Can't you use your shield to keep them away?'

'Of course,' said Ikon, turning it on.

'Don't you ever get tired of my selfish demands?' he asked, enwrapped by a magical light that didn't allow the insects to come near.

'No. I have my own soul, my own will. I'm here because I want to be here. Because I know who you are and because I believe in you. As long as your values don't change, my place won't either.'

'It's funny that you know who I am and I don't. I can't imagine my life without you. I'm really grateful to have you by my side. I remember when your soul was forming, there were thousands of Ikons there, but somehow I was drawn to you. They always said we can't touch them, we can't influence the outcome of an Ikon, it's up to nature to decide. And then of course I did. I guess I'm part of nature too. I guess it was destiny.'

'Destiny. That should be my name,' said Ikon enthusiastically.

'Ha-ha, Destiny. That's a girl's name. You don't sound like a girl.'

'How does a girl sound like, to you?'

'Sounds like a girl. Not with that voice, obviously. Unless you're a special girl.'

'When I hear myself, I hear a girl talking. Maybe you hear what you always wanted to hear. Maybe I am what you always wanted me to be.'

'Yes, my best friend. I don't care if you're a boy or a girl. Let's name you Dest. Works both ways. You are what you are and you sound as you sound and that's enough for me.'

'I like Dest. I'm Terries destiny.'

'Ha-ha,' laughed Terry, and before he realized, the moon ahead was sinking beyond everything there was. By the first light of dawn, the forest started to withdraw into a most peaceful state, back to how Terry remembered it.

'What was that?' he asked.

'It was a sign Terry, that everything comes, and everything goes.'

'I don't want you to go. I don't want to go... I don't want goodness to be gone,'  
said Terry, almost crying.

'You know goodness, Terry?'

'I guess not.'

'It's that feeling, like when you were born. Do you remember when you were  
born?'

'No, I don't remember... I can't seem to remember anything.'

'It's that pure, unwavering feeling that stays, when our worlds fade away. It  
lingers, to be caught up and spat out by some other crazy prophet in a galaxy far, far  
away.'

The dew upon the grass fell off as the trees parted from earth, towards the rising  
sun.

'I forgot how good it smells in the morning... When the trees leave earth. The  
dew falls and the smell springs up. How more beautiful could this be. To see the trees  
floating... To see the world back to the way it was,' said Terry. 'What time is it?'

'Time for breakfast, it seems!'

'No, I mean, the hour. What hour is it.'

'It's morning.'

'Give me the exact time!'

'Time is subjective...'

'Is it? Was it always this way? Do the worlds grow old?'

'Some might say they do. Tired of dreaming, tired of living... Too old to change.  
In the beginning they were like children, discovering themselves, but then, they grew  
old and settled. They built a home, had kids and puppies who ran across green empty  
fields. Now, they might be like an old man in his eleventh hour, just waiting to die.'

'You and your philosophies... The worlds aren't waiting to die, they're waiting to live!' said Terry, running through the forest.

'Where are you going?' asked Dest from behind.

'I don't know, I've got no place to go.'

'Maybe it's time to understand your path.'

'I'm too young to understand anything Dest.'

## CHAPTER TWO - FEELING BLUE

'Let me help you then. We're here,' said Dest, projecting a map in front of him.

'There's a river nearby,' he continued.

A flashing dot appeared in the map. Everything was dry and the suns were high up in the sky. The birds were singing harmoniously, while multi colored caterpillars fed on land locked flowers, floating gently with the breeze. It seemed like everything was dancing along to some cosmic beat, and Terrie's heart was pumping in the same rhythm, like an universal orchestra you couldn't get away from.

'Do you think I can see the river from the top?' he asked.

'You won't know if you don't try.'

He started to climb the wrinkled roots and then got into the trunk. He had to keep balance for the tree swayed ever slightly. The raging wind blowing against him didn't help, but somehow he made it to the peak.

'CAN ANYONE HEAR ME?' he screamed at the top of his lungs. A cloud of birds momentarily covered the sky. As it dissipated it unveiled the forsaken lands laying ahead of him, and behind, distorted by the heat, rested the Fiery Mountains that were nothing but blazing flames sprouting from the ground.

'Keep it down,' whispered Dest, close to him.

'Why didn't they allow us to come here? Why did they say this part was terrifyingly dangerous? I've believed in it, lived my life through a screen, and now that

I'm here, it doesn't look so scary.'

'You've seen what happened yesterday... There are people who get stuck in that forest and never find their way back. They become the forest Terry, and you know what lurks in this forest... Soulless vagrants and the abominable Ninkukus.'

'Oh, the Ninkukus... That's just a myth. No one ever really saw them. I would've been better off adventuring through these woods than spending my childhood stuck in one of those structures.'

'No one did because no one was left alive to tell the tale. It's indeed a beautiful experience, but bear in mind that socializing and having friends it's as important as being alone. If you don't have both, you become unbalanced, and when you aren't balanced you'll be easily swept off your feet. It's not as bad as it sounds, really. The best things happen when we fall. Look at you, discovering a vast world you were only aware it exists through a screen. You never did experience it, and life is that, and only that, a handful of experiences that replenishes our empty souls.'

'That's right, I guess. I still don't get it, why wouldn't they bring us here? At least this far. Nothing happened. Why is everyone so afraid all the time? You can't keep kids locked, imagining they're going to die, only because they want to live. Bad things happen all the time, we can't live in fear, can we? If we live in fear we're not living at all.'

'Yes, but is it worth to risk everything?'

'I guess so, as you said, what's life, but a handful of experiences? I don't want to live a life not worth telling anyone about.'

'They say the Ninkukus will suck the life out of you... What's left to tell about after that?'

'They can take my life, but can't take my ideal. Ideals live on forever.'

‘And what’s your ideal?’

‘I guess I just found it, to live a life worth telling everyone about! A life which gets me as excited living, as speaking about it. Who can live such life locked in a classroom watching the Ikons projecting lessons? The greatest teacher of all times is experience. I’ve experienced to walk, to taste, to smell, to love, even to fart! We’re here for nothing more than to experience life. These will be the best times I’ve ever had! That’s my ideal, to sense the senseless meaning of life!’ said Terry climbing down the tree.

‘I can’t argue with that. It’s great to have an ideal. Most people go on about their lives and never find one. Only being out here, searching in this vast nothing, you’re able to find everything. Sometimes the sharp sound of the wind will tell you the most beautiful secret that earth has kept through all its history. This is its way of speaking to us.’

The dense vegetation started to withdraw into a meadow. What was once a field full of trunks now had nothing but grass. You could only see a tree or so in the horizon. The water splashing in the stones became louder. The river was close. There were thousands of different fishes swimming around, some were purple with yellow stripes, other were pink with blue dots.

‘Dest, Dest, I have an idea! Can you blast them with your laser?’

‘I’ll try but I’m not sure it’s going to work.’

Dest sent a powerful discharge towards the river. It changed color for a second, and then returned to normal. Three yellow fishes emerged and Terry quickly pulled them out, throwing them to the grass.

‘I can sense their hearts beating. They’re not dead, just unconscious,’ said Dest.

‘Yuck!’ They’re so slippery! I really hate their texture. I don’t like anything



that's oily... Now to the worst part.'

Suddenly everything was silent. Terry stood there with an empty stare. The only sound you could hear was from these silly looking fishes coming back to life, splashing around in circles. Dest tried to comfort him by moving closer to his shoulder. Everything froze. The river, the floating trees, the birds singing, even Dest. Everything became blue. He remembered the dreadful incident and felt a coldness inside. A tear fell from Terries eye shattering his reflection on the river.

'Can you imagine? I'll never... I'll never see him again.'

'Of course you will. He'll always live... In your heart.'

'Do you think there's life after death?'

'Everything surrounding us tells me so. Nothing's lost, everything's transformed, I've heard.'

'I also think so... I mean, do you see black forever or what? How is it? You just... don't exist? What about the universe? It always existed? Was there nothing at some point in time? And heaven? Heaven was above earth, it was everything there was, before they discovered space. What now? You no longer go to heaven? You go to space? Was just a metaphor or lack of knowledge?'

'Science has been a bitch to each and every prophet who ever lived. We think we know everything. Always trying to explain the unexplainable... But nature will always know better because it slowly created all the ingredients for this miraculous life we're lucky enough to be living. A metaphor allied to a lack of knowledge, I would say.'

'It happened so fast... I miss him already, in spite of everything.'

'I'm sure he misses you too, wherever he is.'

'I have to be strong, I cannot be literally crying a river now. I'm still alive, and

as long as I'll be, so will he, because I'll always carry parts of his soul within me.' said Terry courageously.

'I'm proud of you. Even in such despair you never seem to lose faith. That's someone you want to hang around with. Now, let's cook these sargons!'

'I never ate those fishes. Can you show me the technical file, please?'

'Sure!' said Dest projecting an image which had its scientific name, in which regions they exist, which vitamins they possess, their caloric value, their molecular structure, in which year they mate, an estimate of their population and the level of impurities present in their blood stream. Basically all the necessary data you should know about any living thing.

'So much information, and all I needed to know is if it was edible or not.'

'This information is very valuable, instead of whining like the spoiled kid you are, try to appreciate it.'

'Ok, mister know-it-all. I'll try to appreciate it as much as those fried fishes we're about to eat. You know what? I was actually getting bored of everyone telling me what I should eat. How should I eat. What I should do. How should I do it. How I should dress, talk, yawn. Who I should be. At least here there's no one to bother me.'

'You think that now, but after couple of days, you're going to wish there was a crowd of people telling you things you care nothing about, and you would listen to them eagerly, on your tiptoes.'

'No I wouldn't.'

'Yes you would! Not to mention they would bear spices from Mouhnia, the herbs of the green planet and the seasoning crystals from...'

'I don't want to hear!' interrupted Terry, covering his ears.

The fishes stood still.

‘Hey, look, I think they’re dead now.’

Dest went near them and started to fry them with a small electric charge.

‘They smell so good! How long till they’re cooked?’ asked Terry with his head up and a big smile on his face.

‘It’ll take approximately... A small eternity.’

Terry immersed his feet on the river while the smell of the fried fishes rose.

‘Ah! it’s so fresh! Feels so good. I want to stay in here forever!’ he said, pouring some of the water running below his knees over his body.

He was surrounded by beautiful rocks covered with fluorescent fungus whom acquired the most diverse colors one could imagine. Some were orange, some were blue, there were even purple ones too! This humid environment is perfect for their development. They emancipate an energy felt by every living thing. There’s a special slug that absorbs their nutrients, and by doing so, they acquire their color. You can see how old a slug is by their wide range of colors. If they have the whole spectrum, it means they have traveled through all Lorah, which is quite an achievement because these creatures aren’t particularly famous for their haste. Terry sat on the meadow and stared at the sky while the river ran and the sun parched his skin.

‘Terry, this is Terrible, Terrible,’ said Ikon.

‘I know ok, I’ve messed up... Can you stop reminding me?’

‘It’s not about that. There’s... Something coming our way.’

‘What are you talking about?’ he asked frightened.

‘I don’t know! Just run!’

‘Great. Guess I’ll just spend the rest of my life running away.’

Dest's light became weary and his rotation slowed down, so down he almost touched the ground. He mumbled some words but were inaudible. Terry grabbed him, shoved him

in his waist bag and sprang out towards the Fiery Mountains. He looked over his shoulder and the lights were catching up with them so he slipped into a cave where the ceiling descended to the water level. He couldn't go any further and didn't know if the passage lead anywhere, but it was the only way he could go. He took a deep breath, followed by a dive of faith. He swam amidst fluorescent corals and luminous algae that brightened a path towards a mysterious chamber. Everything was dark, if not for a breach from where a shy dim light came in. He got out of the water with his arm stretched, holding his waist bag. He sat on the rocks and opened it. Dest came out spinning, splattering water droplets across the humid walls.

'That was close,' he said, feeling recovered.

'Shhh! Don't make a sound,' whispered Terry, approaching the breach.

'They're going in another direction.'

'What are they?' he asked, peeking through the fissure.

'They're nothing and everything. They are nowhere and everywhere. They are ethereal as our souls. They burn like a thousand stars. They are the Ninkukus.'

'Why did you felt weak? Couldn't you activate one of your shields?'

'There's no use for shields with the Ninkukus, for the power they liberate mess with all the circuits around them.'

'So long for our meal. How are those things supposed to eat me anyway? They don't have mouths or claws.'

'They don't feed on flesh... They feed on dreams.'

'The tales I've heard made me think of something completely different. They aren't as terrifying as they made them. They are actually... Beautiful.'

'Beautiful slayers, that's what they are. They leave nothing but nightmares for you to hold on to.'

‘Why don’t they go to Valaart?’

‘The first tribes used to say they are the forest guardians. They never leave it.’

‘The first tribes were nothing but savages. They sacrificed their own and ate their brains.’

‘Indeed. They worshipped the stars.’

‘The stars... I’m young and even I know the stars aren’t gods. Couldn’t they worship themselves instead?’

‘Do you think I have god within me?’

‘Of course you do. You bear the light, and wherever there’s light, there’s god.’

‘That makes us two.’

‘I don’t bear any light.’

‘Yes you do. The luminance in your eyes can even light the darkest night.’

### CHAPTER THREE - CAREFREE

Terry looked at Dest with a smile from ear to ear. After the Ninkukus got lost in the horizon, they went out of the cave and continued through the stony meadow. The greens slowly faded into yellows, and then into reds. The fields ahead looked like waves frozen in time. Three shells, big as mountains could now be seen, and heard, for the wind going through them played a beautiful melody. They have different sizes which makes the sound come out in different tones.

‘What are those?’

‘The first creatures stepping foot in Valaart! Or bellies, in their case. They call them the Slops.’

‘What happened?’

‘They went to a much better place, and fortunately left us their melodic homes.’

‘And what about all this junk?’ asked Terry.

‘Remnants of our past.’

The desert sank the machines thrown away, chewed them, and spat them out piece by piece, creating small metallic mounts that were spread out like pimples. The top had a pink color that settled as if mantles of quietude due to the sand brought by the winds from the east, embracing everything in an eternal sleep. The weather changed very rapidly, either snow or rain, or suns during the night and moons during the day.

‘The wastelands,’ said Dest.

Terry grabbed a washed up sign and ran towards a metallic mount. His feet would swiftly hop through different pieces until he reached the top.

‘I hereby declare Independence!’ screamed Terry, while burying the sign at the top triumphantly, as if it was a flag.

‘Independence?’ asked Dest.

‘Yes! Independent from routine, ideologies and religion! Thought Independence! Now I’ll see everything for what it really is! I’ll be what I want to be, not what they want me to! I’ll be the founder of the Universal School of Dislearning! A school where there’s nothing to learn. Absolutely nothing! In fact, you have to forget everything you’ve learned!’

‘Starting with the fact that dislearning isn’t a word?’

‘You’d make a terrible student Dest. Terrible. In here, the less you know, the higher your grades! There’s nothing to learn here kid, move along,’ he said with a deep voice, pretending to be a teacher.

‘But professor I want to learn!’ said Dest, entering his act and pretending to be a little kid.

‘Then go somewhere! That’s how you’ll learn! Through stumbles and falls!’

‘But professor me and my friends need a teacher!’

‘You shall teach one another, there’s nothing an old man like me can teach you! You shall teach me! How to be pure and carefree!’

‘You can’t stop thinking about them, can you?’ interrupted Dest.

‘Of course I can! I’m independent of longing, too,’ said Terry as he sat near the flag.

‘Feeling nostalgic already? I told you!’

‘A bit, I guess.’

‘You miss them?’

‘Yes, all of them. Even Zair, always wearing an oversized shoe in one feet, and a very small one in the other.’

‘Lem! He could say the whole alphabet while burping. Wish I had such set of skills.’

‘Remember Timbo? He thought if he stayed near a tree long enough, he would start to grow big, thick roots. Some took the expression of a being a whole too literally. Oh Timbo.’

‘What about Raz?’

‘Raz... Poor man. Claiming Valaart was nothing but a very elaborate illusion. He surely was a big disillusion. Who do you think murdered him?’ asked Terry.

‘The people of course. Murdered right outside of his home, fifty years ago... Fifty or five hundred, we don’t really know, but what we do know is that he was about to leave for another mysterious expedition.’

‘Where do you think he went?’

‘No one knows. They found all sort of deceitful and harmful material in his place. They said he was forming an army of Ikons to take over Valaart!’

‘Take over Valaart... What an idiot.’

‘Remember when Alioth puked all over the classroom because of those newly imported spices? It reached the ceiling!’

‘What about Myzar? Who passed out because it was too good? Just fell flat on the floor with a smile from ear to ear. Oh... How beautiful it is to see the understanding brought by the bond between all different cultures. Through this connection, came an understanding, leading to an extraordinary acceptance, respect and tolerance. Kids have way more to teach one another than any lesson an Ikon could give.’



‘Indeed. Only through a deep understanding you can connect to the universes collective memory. Every thought, every memory and every word is imprinted in this vast pool of knowledge.’

‘Do you think it’s true? That Arkys, Anansi and Nyame can access it? I’ve never understood it to be honest.’

‘Of course! The Wanderers, as they are called, can have a glimpse of it, and see concepts for what they really are, like the consciousness. It was first understood by Rutger, the leader of the first tribes, who died a long, long time ago. That discovery gave birth to the Ikons. He saw through the veils covering consciousness, and in a momentary sight, understood the weave that comprised it. He foreseen it as being similar to stars, a dense wave of gas that within most of us is simply gravitating, while in a few, it explodes inward, emitting a light that travels throughout the universe and gets a blueprint of what everything really is. This is what happens, when you become a wanderer, ‘The Few’ say. Your consciousness reaches each and every corner of the entire universe and never leaves it. You become one. Thousands of Valaarians practice day and night and can’t reach it. Some say first you have to die, others claim what you have to do is remember, because it is imprinted in each and every soul, for we all come from the same place. The theories keep adding up and the more theoretical they are, the less practical they become. From the electric magnetic field that keeps all the vehicles in Valaart afloat, to the levitating structures, all these wonderful inventions came from the same place, the universes collective memory.’

‘If I think, I’m accessing it?’

‘Yes, but it has many layers. The deeper your thought the deeper you dwell on it.’

‘And what is there? In the very core?’

‘The truth! With no biases. Everything, for what it really is, which is pure and beautiful.’

Terry closed his eyes for a second.

‘Hmm. I can hear them. Yes. It’s clear’, he said. ‘Gogs!’

‘Gogs?’ replied Dest. ‘There’s no such thing in the wastelands! Wait, I can hear them too!’

‘Are we accessing it?’

‘No!’ he said pushing Terry inside an abandoned space shuttle.

‘What are you doing?’ he asked.

‘Look!’ said Dest as he turned on a concealment shield.

Terry leaned over the window. A group of soulless vagrants were rummaging close to them.

‘The soulless. Vagrant Ikons who lost their will. Some were abused, others lost the respect they had for their masters and fled. Respect is the foundation of any relation. Some build it through clenched fists, others, through open hearts. The most effective is when you're loved and not feared. During the dark night, which is the name we've given when they are born, every Ikon light is grey. By the first year you can already see an inclination towards a light pink, depending on their surroundings. If they are brought up in a completely sterile environment, they will continue to be grey, and at some point, it's impossible to reverse, and they will stay forever gray, like a sunless winter afternoon. The gray, as they are called, all look alike, express themselves in the same way and copy everything they hear. Their colored souls is what makes them different and grants them an unique personality. As they start to analyze and hear about a variety of subjects, their drive, where they store all the information ever written, lights up, and starts to connect with one another. This is the first network inside an Ikons soul, and it's what's

starting to determine it. Of course, it's not only about information, there's also the limitless possibilities in their system, for instance, the frequency of their circuits. Although they hold all the information in their database, they can't quite access it yet, because it's massive. The different colors each Ikon have, represent who they are, more or less. The red, means they are fiery, impetuous, full of passion. The green, means they are earthly Ikons, they represent growth, and good luck. The blue ones are more meditative and protective while yellows are joyful, optimistic and energetic. The most interesting ones are the purple ones, which comprises just one percent, and these, go beyond the stored data, they have an extra sensorial perception. The colors can change as the Ikon ages and become turquoise, orange, lime green, royal red or even golden!

‘Yes, I’ve heard there are some who have all the colors!’

‘Those are just tales, no one really knows, but what we do know, is that some have a black color. It’s like staring into the abyss. They absorbed everything good in each and every color, and turned them to rust. Like black holes.’

‘Can they absorb the colors of other Ikons?’

‘Yes, they absorb every bit of energy they can. They live off other Ikons.’

‘Why did they create them?’

‘They did not, but somehow nature always finds a way.’

‘I wish I would find mine.’

‘You're finding yours. That’s the beauty in all of this, not knowing which way to go. Making decisions. Choices.’

‘I hate to make choices. They’re always wrong, no matter what I do. I just can’t get away from them... Day after day, wrong over wrong.’

‘There are no wrong choices, there’s just choices. We make them and live with them. You should trust your intuition, your heart, but always take your time. The

world's not going anywhere. One step back, a moment to reflect and eternity for effect.

That's my ideal!' said Dest enthusiastically.

'Why didn't you tell me you have an ideal too?'

'I've just made it up, but I suppose it counts!'

'It does.' said Terry, smiling and laying back on the pilot's seat. 'Wish this would take off and get me out of here.'

'Where would you like to go?'

'Right now I can't afford to be picky. Anywhere would be fine, really.'

'You could be a sun-rider!'

'That would be so cool!'

'Commander. Ignition. In one... two... three...!'

'What are you doing?'

'Just go along with it. Close your eyes. Breath in. Pretend you're on your way!

Above grains of sand, where the breeze of the ocean takes you away...'

Terry inhaled deeply and closed his eyes. Although they were in a desert, he felt as if he was on an ocean shore, where waves were as wide as the horizon. As he glided from above, he could see all the houses that were built on the coast, and each had small boats on their docks. Fisherman arrived with their nets full while children came to greet them along with famished seagulls who tried to steal their spoils. The boats slowly swayed in the shore with water splashing in the prow. The weary sun, red as wine, would soon dive in a turquoise sea, while everyone fried fishes on a fireside in the sand listening to the sailors refreshing tales of their adventures when they were on top of the wildest waves, fighting krakens and sea serpents whose mouths were bigger than their entire crew.

‘He’s lying,’ whispered an old man to the children who sat close to him. ‘The krakens were nothing but the unknown. There were no sea serpents with mouths as big as suns, but uncertainty. That’s what they fought against. Against the unknown. That’s what we fear. The night, has always a gloomy feeling because of that. It conceals everything we thought we knew. It’s frightening, but only for those who need their eyes open to see. We like what’s familiar, what we can see ourselves in. What we know, is what makes up everything. Our worlds are built upon certainties, and some would rather die than see it collapsing over the uncertain. Ah... They were brave, no doubt about that,’ he said with fish between his teeth. ‘It takes a much stronger hero to fight something he can’t see than a hero who fights only what he can perceive.’

Tiny turtles broke free from their shells and in that moment Terry opened his eyes. The noise from the shells was still ringing in his ears, and he doubted if he made it or someone else did, so he stood still, listening, embraced by the silence. He never heard it again. He looked through the spaceship’s window and it was already dark.

‘What happened?’ asked Terry.

‘You’ve got carried away,’ said Dest.

‘What’s this?’ he asked.

‘What?’

‘I was having a dream, and it was teaching me things I had absolutely no clue about. I never studied them but somehow, I knew them. What is it? Where does all this information come from?’

‘What things?’

‘About the unknown. How we fear everything we don’t know. Or understand.’

‘You’ve heard the teachings of ‘The Few’. There’s an universal knowledge imprinted in every soul, waiting eagerly to sprout. And our thoughts, are the fruits of the

mind. Our subconscious always finds a way to materialize itself, to come to life. As if a seed ripping through the soil searching for light. Truth is light, lies, are dark, they belong to the night. To the unknown.'

'Maybe. The only thing I know right now, is that we've got to find a place to rest.'

'Why not on the back of this space shuttle?'

'Yeah, why not.'

## CHAPTER FOUR - THE MYSTERIOUS DOOR

Terry went to the back of the space shuttle, where a panel was slightly off. As he tried to put it into place, he noticed something underneath. He peeked and saw some rusty stairs spread far below.

‘Dest! You gotta see this!’ he said enthusiastically.

Dest approached and lit the path. The stairs led to a small passage.

‘Should we enter?’ asked Terry.

‘Do you have anything else better to do?’ said Dest already going in.

Terry followed him all the way. Dest's buzzing sound echoed throughout the old and abandoned corridor. Roots fell from in between the cracks of the ceiling and Dest's light was casting shadows as big as Terry of all the insects on the walls.

‘Where are we?’

‘I have no idea. It's assimilating the area to my database. It's creating a blueprint, which means there's no record of it.’

Some strange inscriptions started to glow.

‘We're not alone, are we?’

‘We're never alone, Terry, never,’ said Dest projecting a light to analyze them.

‘I don't have any information of anything similar to these markings in my database. It's so strange. It's like this place never existed,’ he continued.

‘They aren’t markings. They are paintings. You think I’ll ever make such cool paintings too?’

‘The answer lies within you.’

‘Let me guess. In my heart,’ said Terry pompously.

‘Exactly. And you don’t have to make such paintings, because, as you see, and as obvious as it sounds, they’re already made by someone else. If we look around, trees, flowers, cloud and rock formations, nothing has the exact same form, for if they did, life would be boring. Looking at the same trees and clouds every day. What makes life, life, is its splendorous diversity. Viruses are the ones who live on by replicating themselves. If you make what’s in your soul you’ll always be original, because there’s nothing like it in the whole universe. Isn’t it wonderful?’

‘How big is the universe?’ asked Terry innocently.

‘As big as your imagination.’

They kept moving forward as they spoke, until they reached a chamber with a door.

There was no lock and no handle.

‘Can you open it?’ Terry whispered. As soon as he finished the sentence, a guy with a blue mohawk came out. A cigarette hanged in his mouth as he slightly bent leftwards to light it. The burning tip was reflected on the blue lenses of his copper goggles.

‘Ahhhhh!’ shrieked Terry.

‘Stay where you are!’ he said, while his Ikon shot a laser at Dest, immobilizing him.

A slim guy with a bald head appeared from behind.

‘My, my, my, where did these two came from. Only one place comes to my mind, and not a lot comes to it these days,’ he said, scratching his head.



‘We mean no harm,’ said Terry.

‘Even if you did...’ they said laughing. ‘Why were all the hatches open anyway? Can someone be mindful for once? Dear god. Abi, can you close them please?’ he screamed. A loud mechanical sound echoed as the lights dimmed. The doors behind them closed, one by one.

‘So, who are you boy? What are you doing here, in the barrens?’

‘Can you help him?’ asked Terry kneeling close to Dest.

‘Relax, it’s just a force field. It won’t allow him to do anything stupid.’

‘Ok then... I’m Terry... and this is Dest. Nice to meet you.’

Both started to laugh and while looking at each other said ‘Dest’ in sync. ‘What a lack of creativity boy. I gotta be honest with you, that name sucks.’

‘Represents ideally the name of a Valaarian. Is it really nice to meet me? I’m Grub, by the way, and I wouldn’t like to meet me,’ he said.

‘It’s nice to meet you. After days on end without meeting anyone, even someone with your... Peculiar sense of fashion is nice.’

‘I... t..old... yo..u... s...o...’ said Dest on the floor, with his voice mildly distorted and smoke coming out of his transmitter.

‘He still talks. Give him another discharge!’ said Grub laughing.

‘No! No! No more discharges please.’

‘We’re just kidding. We’ll give it to Drangy, he’ll repair it.’

‘But I don’t have any money...’

‘Don’t worry boy, we don’t have an economy going on in here, but we accept energy as a currency, and since you’ve made it this far, we’re more than sure you’re a very rich kid. Come,’ said Grub.

‘Can I... grab it? It still seems quite unstable,’ asked Terry.

‘Sure, force fields are harmless.’

Terry tried to pick Dest but got stunned. ‘Ouch!’ he cried, with his arm hanging.

Fuzz and Grub couldn’t hold it and both rolled on the floor laughing.

‘Never take anything you hear for granted. Question everything. Always,’ said Grub already leaving the room, still laughing.

The force field went off and the numbness in the arm too. Terry finally picked Dest and followed Grub, cautiously, full of doubt. As they entered, a huge hall stood before them. Their steps resounded in the empty space. A girl approached them leaning towards Terry.

‘You look terribly cute! What are you doing here, all alone?’

‘A..hem, h..e’s... n...o...t al...one.’ said Dest in an almost inaudible manner.

‘Oh I see. An indigo light, lucky you!’

‘I’m... no...t mere...ly a li...ght, bu...t ra...ther...’

‘Hey, hey, Abi, leave the kid alone ok, you can’t see nothing new, can you?’ interrupted Grub with a grin, winking at Terry.

‘Of course not, I’m stuck in this basement surrounded by old farts, what am I supposed to do? Go back to you and your smelly arms?’

‘You’re not supposed to stick that slimy nose in the kids business, that’s what you are supposed to do. Thus, it’s not the arms that smell, it’s the armpits, genius. Come on now, you’ll have time to make more acquaintances,’ said Grub while walking towards a copper door standing in the corner.

‘No, it’s not the armpits either, it’s your decaying soul, that’s what smells!’ screamed Abi from a distance.

‘Sorry boy, she used to bring out the best in me, and I used to bring out the best in her. Now we bring out nothing but the worst... Nothing but the worst. Life was so

much lighter together. Light as a mountain. Alone it's heavy... Heavy as a feather. We expect nothing but everything we are. That's why good man are hurt, and become bitter, all the time. You don't want to go back to those barrens alone, I'm telling you. It will crush you. Some might find comfort in the coldness of their minds, but nothing beats the warmth of our hearts.'

A red light stood above the door spelling — "Ecnartne".

'Never mind that. It was Szeb. He got so drunk he fixed the letters backwards. We thought somehow it was creative, so we left it as it is.'

From the other side, you could already hear a soft voice singing songs of hope. You could make out some of the words.

*"I've been wandering... endlessly. Then I fell asleep, felt like eternity. Dancing relentlessly, you and me... In a dream that is yet to be... But then, I woke up, to such a beautiful world."*

'Heads down now, it's already dark, the bar is full and you don't want to be noticed, for they will spend the entire evening asking you drunk questions.'

'What are drunk questions?'

'Questions you wouldn't ask sober.'

'Oh, very explanatory.'

'You know, stupid questions, like why is your skin brown, meaningless questions.'

'I understand. I don't like to be asked questions which I don't have the answers for.'

'Well, I don't like answers for questions I didn't even have.'

They arrived at a homey, rustic room, where jars and empty mugs sat comfortably over a field of wooden tables. Pictures without frames and signatures hanged on the wooden

walls that were sculpted with the sorrows of all the goers. The song played was warmer than the lonely dancing flames in the corner that cast a shadow of the musician over an empty stage. In the middle, lied the humongous ever dripping keg, who set the pace to an orchestra of one.

‘The shadow represents the doubts of the musician, and it’s his doubts, playing the song, in a lonely stage. Isn’t it? What he meant?’ whispered Terry.

‘Shhh. Come,’ whispered Grub.

They got out to another room, from a cozy orange ambient light, to a sterile white.

‘Before trying to understand, you ought to listen. We often talk too much and listen too little. We’re always talking. Always.’

‘Sorry, I just thought...’

‘Maybe I was too harsh. What I meant is, you missed the whole point of it.

While you were thinking and speaking, you missed the melody, the tune, the moment... And, that’s what really mattered. Art is made to purify our souls, the doubts come after, not before. If you’re lucky, they should not come at all, but oh well, it might work for me, and might not work for you, so each to its own.’

‘Forgive him kid, you’re a Valaarian, and... We have a long history with Valaart,’ interrupted Fuzz, looking down at Grub.

‘What history?’ asked Terry.

‘We’ll tell you in a bit.’

They continued in a fast-paced walk, now, through a dark corridor with lots of transparent pipes attached to the ceiling and walls, where fluorescent liquids flowed through them, giving it a surreal mood. The sounds were also intriguing and loud as if you were inside an engine room. There were doors after doors, each with its own color and mysterious glowing symbols above them. Insects and particles of dust flew amidst

the light they shed.

‘What are these rooms?’ asked Terry.

‘They are workshops. They belong to the different guilds. This one belongs to the Smiths, a long legacy of the best metal workers this planet has ever seen. Go on and meet Drangy. Give him Dest, he’ll know what to do.’

Terry stuck his head round the door, and as soon as he peaked, a voice greeted him.

‘Yellow there! I’ve never seen ya aroundy roundy.’

‘Huh, I’m here by mistake.’

‘Aren’t we all?’

‘I guess...’

‘You no like to talky talky? I’m Feldrang, better known as Drangy’

‘I can see why.’

‘Ya can see why, or can ya heary heary?’

‘Ha-ha, you’re funny.’

‘And who might be the kid who gets my joky joky?’

‘I’m Terry Terry. He said lifting his bionic arm.’

‘Seems like someone had a rough injury, hey?’

‘I did... But Dest here is in a worst condition.’

‘Let me looky looky,’ said Feldrang as he adjusted the focal point on his goggles.

‘Wowy wowy, what we’ve got here.’

‘What?’

‘An indigo light. Lucky lucky.’

‘Everyone keeps saying that. I gotta go now.’

‘Waity, waity, I’ma show you all the creatures I’ve builty builty! Well, not all, but most of them!’

Terry glanced at the shelves filled with innumerable inventions. Clocks all pointing to different hours, and ticking at different paces. Boxes overloading with cables and circuits. Oily wrenches, rags, scrubs, hammers spread out indiscriminately amidst nails and screws. The lamps changed color, from red to green and blue, making you feel like you were in a different place in each and every breath. Some robots sat with their heads against each other while copper birds were attached by strings to the pipes in the ceiling.

‘Are these in the shelves all your creations?’

‘Righty, righty you are! These are all my creations! They are called automatons, and unlike the Ikons they don’t have a soul! They are robots! Let me press this button here... and... watchy watchy!’

As Drangy released it, a green lamp with a dragon shape, spread its wings, and flew in circles around the workshop. It’s light created amazing living shadows on the wooden floor comprised of their shapes.

‘Wow, it’s beautiful Feldrang! When they move... They become so alluring! The rusty copper along with the golden metal makes them ravishing! What are they used for?’

‘Drangy likes to create them you see, it’s like a painting... We never foundy foundy any use for them, they aren’t like the Ikons. Contrary to me, these marvelous creatures never found a purpose. They just exist. Ah, sometimes I wishy wishy I was like them!’

‘You mean beautiful?’

‘Ha-ha, funny, funny!’

‘You know, I’ve never found my purpose either, until I left and sought...’

Terry was interrupted by a whistle echoing through the corridor.

‘Hey boy, we’re waiting for you! Tell Feldrang you’ll visit him tomorrow!’

‘Sorry Drangy, I promise I’ll be here soon enough to see the rest of your creations,’ said Terry already waving him goodbye.

‘You must learny learny too! Come tomorrow and I’ll teach you some tricky tricky! Life’s too short to know too little and doubt too muchy!’

‘I guess!’

‘Ha-ha, nighty nighty!’

Terry left Drangy's workshop in a hurry and met Grub and Fuzz who stood in front of a big door. Fuzz opened it while Grub held his hand on Terry’s back, as if a subtle invitation to go in. They entered in some sort of an office, with old maps all over the walls, papers scattered along the desk and a black and red rug that almost covered the entire room. There were lots of books in the shelves, most of them being analyzed by a strange Ikon.

‘I don’t get it... How do you have all these things, here, in the underground? What about your tattoo's, who made them? Who are you?’ asked Terry.

‘You’re good at analyzing. These books, check them out, here, take this one about Valaart's history.

Terry opened it and it wasn’t like a regular book. The letters were burnt into the pages.

‘Wow, how did you do this?’

‘Ikons. They are like gods around here, without them, none of this would have been possible. Uriel had the idea of having them inscribing their knowledge and all the history in their database into these linen pages, with their electrical discharges. We like it better this way, because you can't really trust technology. One day they might not work at all you know. We review bit by bit and amend it ourselves if something’s not right. There’s nothing like the touch of these old weathered pages. Our tattoos are made in the same way, that’s why it doesn’t look like ink. They’ve built these shelves too, at

least, most of them. Unlike the Valaarians, we believe Ikons should be solely a creative tool and not a destructive one.'

'What do you mean, a destructive one?'

'I see... You don't know, do you? Can't blame you, none of the Valaarians do.'

'Know about what?' asked Terry.

'About what they've done to Derkar.'

'Derkar?'

'Yes, Derkar, the planet where their once great civilization resided. Beautiful, just like ours... For some time. They failed miserably you see... They took everything. Everything. Their world crumbled to dust and amidst the smoke of dipping mountains and rising seas they fled... And sailed to one of the biggest planets they encountered. Ventici. The promised land. A perfect planet with almost the same conditions they had, bountiful of resources and fresh air. Satellite images portrayed trees poking the clouds and never-ending oceans of tranquility. It was a paradise. Unfortunately, big planets require big suns, and Aphosteus, a star with an incredibly powerful magnetic field, messed with their ship circuits. Everything started to fail. First the doors started to close and open by themselves, then the lights started to flash, nothing was going as it was supposed to. The propellers failed and that's when they had to trace a different route, to a different planet. The stars once again were responsible for their faith and they landed here, in Valaart. Our ancestors knew for sure it wasn't a comet, raging like a fireball through the sky, for they have seen thousands of them. They called them the beings from the stars. We watched from a distance their ship colliding and ripping through the trees and vegetation. Thousands of lives were lost and thousands were gained. We didn't know what to do, but something in our hearts told us that we should help. They were definitely sculpt by the same sculptor, we thought. We showed them our civilization,



our crops and our gods, our literature, music, costumes and habits, our food and our thoughts, fears and hopes, basically they became our long lost brothers we now had the opportunity to meet. And so did they, they showed us all there was to see, their greatest achievements, their amazing language which we've learned and adopted, their music from distant times, beautiful melodies I must say. Their classical art was exceptionally beautiful, so full of emotion, so full of life. It wasn't just that, which was so beautiful to our eyes, but also an eager devotion to overcome their internal strife. It was like looking into a mirror. A futuristic one. For years we lived in peace and we shared the best within each one of us. They didn't hide their past, which shows an incredible fortitude. We thought they've learned... But, I don't think they ever will. Somehow things never go as planned. William, a name we will forever try to forget, and they, will always remember. He was the son of Thruder, a very noble man, with a love for his people that envied the most benevolent ones. We believe Thruder kept all the righteousness, and William, kept all the wickedness. The love Thruder had for all the people, in William, was displayed as hate. He started to question why does he have to work, why was his father so hard on him and not anyone else. After all, he was a man, the son of Thruder, therefore he should work whenever he wanted and do as he pleased. He immersed himself in written articles of Derkar, which spoke about really dark matters. Unknowingly he held on to the mistakes done in the past. There was something about him, something different. Folk said he could hear the thoughts of Ravenous, his Ikon. In fact, he could hear the thoughts of all the Ikons in Valaart. They said it's what drove him crazy. One night, as soon as the moons were out, he called all the Ikons to help him in his cause. He subdued all of them. In the city, his words could be heard in every home, for each had their own Ikon. No one understood what was happening, they were all spinning out of control. In

the countryside, Erby took a shovel and started hitting his own Ikon until its lights went out.

‘Have you lost yer mind bot?’ he asked, shutting it down, for a few seconds...

But then, it lit up again.

‘You’re going to do as I say,’ said William, firing a discharge and getting Erby on his knees.

‘What’s happening daddy?’ his daughter asked from the basement stairs, holding a plush.

‘Drop the shovel, and care to pick it only if you want to dig the little ones grave,’ said William.

Valaart became enlightened, and from that night it became known as the city of light, not because of the good in all man, but the evil in one. Everything they accomplished together, this collective dream, was turned into a lonely nightmare. A tremendously kind invention was turned into nothing but a despicable creation, meant to serve the vain notions of a wretched individual. 'The Few' who held the people's faith didn't stand up to him. They stood in the room where they've always been, with their eyes sealed, their ears closed and their mouths shut. 'It's not our affair to intervene in what the stars have chosen.' They said. It was our affair! It was our home! They've done nothing, absolutely nothing... The ones who stood up to him, were annihilated by their own Ikons. To some, they were their best friends... Just imagine being on your knees, and having your best friend delivering you the final blow. Those actions didn't belong to this world. William brought a plague... A plague that should've ended where it began. Of course, thousands, scared for their lives joined him. A detached and indifferent society was born, a society ruled by the Ikons. So detached that their buildings were nothing but remnants of their thoughts. They became the teachers, the doctors, the police, the

lawyers... They built a new world. Everything, ran by the Ikons. Generations passed and history slowly changed. It's like it never happened. It's like it was always this way. They forgot, but we did not. Raz, a name you've probably heard, the man who's altruism got him killed, many years ago. Many years because we can't really tell anymore... He found us too, and met us here. Just like you, he had an attribute that the Valaarians had long forgotten. He could dream, that's how he found his way through Lorah. He devoted his life to bring the truth to Valaart, but he was too little too late. Most of their books are gone, all the information is written by the Ikons. Our ancestors who ran away made a choice, to inscribe the real history onto these books, onto these pages. Now the Valaarians don't even question the truth behind their floating structures. The weight of the pain which they were built upon, is what keeps them from reaching space. He might be gone, but his legacy is as strong as it ever was. William built his own palace up in a hill, surrounded by pointy rocks and floating trees. From there, you could see the soon to be slums surrounded by Lorah. He made sure it was the most enlightened place in Valaart. When standing outside the gates you felt nothing but doubts, for the main structure they had, ripped through the clouds. They made this, for you to feel powerless, for you to feel small. The light liberated from the palace concealed all the stars. How much more egocentric can you get? As the days went by, the pompous show grew as a cancer, isolated. Some tried to bring William to reason, but to no avail.

‘The Nova era, is an era where reason is above everything. Rationalization. That's what distinguish us from animals! The fact that we can decide! That's what kept us moving forward! When our fathers chose to land here, it was due to reasoning, and not some stupid feeling. When we chose to hide in caves, when we chose to grill meat with fire, when we killed that leopard who might have put an end to our race, and, when we decided to create the New Era! These are all thoughts that came from strong minds!

Feelings make us weak, make us weep like defected children. There's a hierarchy in this universe, and the strong shall prevail, that's how it has been, and that's how it will always be. Otherwise we will all go extinct, like the pathetic races that have been here before. They weren't strong enough. They didn't possess what we possess. Mental fortitude. We shall turn the weak, into our idealistic reflection, and by downgrading them, they shall become stronger! We are in control! We are in control of our lives, we are in control of our destiny, we are humans, the most amazing species that were ever born! Look at everything we've accomplished! Look at the world we've built! There's no way we're giving up progress, there's no way we're giving up technology! The dark ages are long gone, this, is the Nova Era! The new age of enlightenment, where the Ikons shall lead the way!' said William. What an audacity the scum had. He achieved his purpose. Most of the locals were pronounced dead, and, hopefully for them, never to be heard of, in a cowardly display of power and greed. Now he had turned the attentions to his own kin, and a state of fear took place. The ones left alive, were either turned into slaves or ran away. As their only resource of labor, that were the locals, started to vanish, they had to seek it somewhere else, so they started to colonize other planets. First they went to Mouhnia. Mouhnia, its around fifteen light years from here, where the mountains are covered by a fine layer of silver and the oceans are made of silk. If there's a place in this vast universe resembling to heaven this has to be it. There's a reason why it's called the "Silver Heaven". The planet has five moons and they are all reflected in the main lake, along with the tall silver mountains. I would have never dreamt of such beautiful scenes. Seeing another planet, and how different the life and environment looks like, must be one of the most amazing things one could see while alive. Not only seeing it, but feeling it. Breathing it's unique air, like the unique smell of a new found love. Life on another planet, how amazing is that? The vegetation has a different color

than ours, at least, how we perceive it. The videos we have access to are indeed remarkable. As they arrived in Mouhnia, The Endless army was smiling and bound to help them all. They wanted to know everything about them, because, for them, the more they know about someone, the easier it is to take control over them. The plan was pretty simple, treat them the best they can, screen out orphans and people with absolutely no relatives, to bring them back to Valaart willingly. The reason why they choose all the individuals without a family, is simply because they won't have any interest in what's happening back in their planet. If you leave a relative behind, you will try to exchange messages and at least know how they are doing. This way, the newcomers will be so absorbed with their new settings that the past, will only be that, something they will be longing to forget. As the first ship leaves, the tone changes... The air, becomes heavier, and suddenly the Ikons are running the place. He always spoke about the weakness lingering in our souls... And we are weak, sometimes, it's part of us, we can't always be as strong as the heroes in the tales we grew up reading are, and we don't see any problem with that. Weakness... The ones hanging behind it, are the real weak people. Strong people don't care about that, strong people, don't care about anything at all, besides the dignity every human should have while experiencing life. Weakness is about taking dignity from others instead of giving. It seems the weaker we are, the more we need.

‘But... Why would anyone do that? What's wrong with them?’ interrupted Terry

‘We ask ourselves the same question every day, why would anyone do that, what is their motive... We did get to some conclusions though. You see, back in their planet, in the beginning of times, you would be in really bad shape if you weren't the leader. You couldn't eat or mate as often as the leaders could, and this was a danger towards your survival. The people who seek authority and power, are actually seeking an ancient

feeling, which tells us they are not as developed as their peers. It's a paradox, and that's why more often than not, leaders plunge their people into a restless sleep, because the ones seeking power and authority, and ultimately get there, don't have the attributes their developed peers have, of understanding, benevolence and righteousness. You see? If someone is caring and nurturing he won't ever get into a power position. It's seen as a weakness for it's the attributes of a mother. It wasn't always like this though... There's a reason they used to call Mother Derkar, a long, long time ago... Anyway, this innate feeling is born out of fear, fear of not being able to survive. And we believe William was brought in a fearsome environment. Maybe the people who made fun of him were the cause of his constant fear of not being able to survive. We'll never know. It is rather sad, the ones who talk about rationalization, and being above animals, living by a complete animalistic and instinctive feeling.'

A beeping sound coming from Grubs Ikon interrupted his speech.

'What's up Uni?' asked Grub

'I've finished inscribing one more book, Grub,' said Uni, while projecting an orange light.

From the bottom of an old desk standing in the corner, came out a lovely dog who jumped towards Terry.

'Stop, stop!' he cried while falling on his back.

'He really likes you, it seems. He never does that. Not even to me. And I've been taking care of him ever since he was born. Ungrateful bastard,' said Grub.

'What is this thing? Get off me! Help!'

'His name's Vac. This is a pet, an animal, like us. You should've seen him when he was younger, always with his cheeks on the floor, chewing everything he came across. Once we found him chewing on Uni who came out of his mouth dripping. We'll

always remember that day. That's where he got his name anyway. It's an abbreviation of Vacuum cleaner. Unfortunately for him, not all the days were as happy as those for his legs were smashed by an iron bar while we were building the arena.'

'The arena? You have an arena? What for? Maybe the rumors were true, you really are the animals they've said you were.'

'Ha-ha, yeah we are, we don't hide it though, but we'll take you there tomorrow, so you can draw your own conclusions.'

'I just hope the arena isn't for Vac. Or for me! You're going to put me there right?'

'Ha-ha, chill, you will see what it's all about. I bet you'll love it. Vac is one of us. You don't know it because you are a Valaarian, and pets were removed from your daily lives, since William was so obsessed with hygiene. He sterilized humanity out of a civilization, that bastard. An horde of over washed brains.'

'In case you haven't noticed yet, he's called Grub Rant and I'll let you figure out why. There are many things you don't know about this world, but you're about to find out. It's not by any coincidence you arrived at our door, the stars don't lie.'

'Oh, you're one of those who believe in the stars... I've heard all about you.'

'So you did, I bet, but you shouldn't believe in everything you hear. People talk a lot and say a lot of bullshit. You should always seek the truth yourself. It's pretty arrogant to think we're above everything else in this universe. Uni, display a slide-show of Nature please.'

Lots of pictures of forests and animals started to appear in a hologram cast by Grubs Ikon. Animals with their families, seeds sprouting, rowdy waterfalls of crystalline water falling into silent streams... Cells, some dividing, others uniting.

'Everything you see, it's alive because of the three stars standing above our

planet, so yes, I do believe in them. Do you have any other suggestion for what I should believe? Besides where we all came from? Besides what gives us life?’

‘You have a point... I don’t think I can name anything more important. But I’ve learned I should believe in myself.’

‘Yeah, while in here, I hope you forget what you’ve learned. I’m not saying all is bad, it’s not, but it isn’t all good either...’

‘Now, how come you arrived here? What were you running from?’ asked Fuzz.

‘I... I think I might've killed my father,’ said Terry very emotional.

‘I think it will be enough for today. This has been a very tiring journey for him. I believe it’s better to continue this conversation tomorrow,’ said Dest. ‘He already suffered a lot, let's give him some space to breath. Everything must be very confusing for him right now.’

‘Don’t worry, we’re hidden in the underground because we question everything, and I think there’s more to this than what we’ve heard. There’s always more to everything than the little we perceive.’

‘Are you ok?’ asked Fuzz.

‘Yes, do you have anything to drink?’ asked Terry while drying his tears with his sleeve.

‘Of course, water or beer? Water, I suppose.’ said Grub grinning, trying to lift up the mood.

Fuzz left the room to get him something to drink.

‘So, where’s your mother boy? Do you have any family?’

‘I don’t know, my mother died when I was younger, I don’t even remember her face or spending time with her. I have an uncle, but I’ve heard he didn’t adapt well to the Vaalarian culture, so he got up illegally on a cargo ship and we never heard of him



again.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that...’

‘My father used to say it was because of me. I think that’s why he drank himself to death every night. I think he blamed me for it, and then, made me pay, eventually.’

‘He never said it, but his actions spoke louder than words,’ said Dest.

‘That’s completely evil. How could a child be held responsible for that? You can’t live your life thinking it was your fault. It’s a burden one can’t simply bear.’

‘I don’t want to sound like I’m just a little poor kid... I hate pity. I’ve done many things I’m not proud of.’

‘Don’t worry about it, you’re sounding like who you are, and that’s ok. We’ve all done things we’re not proud of.’

As Grub finished the phrase, Fuzz was back, with not one but two glasses. One had a glowing golden liquid inside a blue stained-glass, shinning like a treasure. The other had beetle juice, a fluorescent green that brightened the dark room.

‘I was about to bring you water, but you have to try our specialty. They also come in orange, pink and yellow, aged in flysk wood barrels. They’re not like the beverages you find in Valaart, aged in steel and disposed of all the earthly flavors. Go ahead, try.’

Terry smelled it, doubtful.

‘Fast learner,’ said Fuzz. ‘This time there’s no trick, I promise.’

‘Hey, what about me?’ asked Grub.

‘Do you think I’m your waitress? he’s a guest, you’re not,’ said Fuzz.

‘Ok, this will be enough for today, and Terry, sorry about all those questions, I hope you understand, we never had guests before and we can’t be too cautious these days. Uni will take you to your dorm. There’s couple of empty rooms, just pick the one

you feel more comfortable with. If you can't find any, there's plenty of space in the halls and tomorrow we'll figure out something. One more thing, Uni, show him our stash of unique toothbrushes, creams, and all the hygienic items we have access to. I suppose you haven't brought anything. Explain him how to use the bathroom and how the filtering system works. Don't forget to turn it off, we have to save energy because we're at the peak of the season, and we need every bit of it.'

Terry shook their hands and followed Uni to the bathroom, at a very sad pace.

'What do you think about this?' asked Fuzz while taking a sip on his almost dead beer.

'I don't know, it seems strange, but at the same time I can't simply send him on his way.'

'Ok, a kid just shows up at our door, and we invite him in, like it's nothing. What if the kid is a psycho? I mean, after all he killed his father. Maybe we're being too soft-hearted, the type of people Valaart easily manipulates.'

'We're not sure about that, let's not draw conclusions before we receive Drangy's report of Dest's drive. It will make things clearer. I think he's trying to protect his only friend you know. That's probably why he ran away, because if he stayed, they would've put him out. And he's taking responsibility for it, in the same way he took for his mother.'

'Grub, they might be trying to deceive us. They only show what they want us to see. What's in the drive won't make it clear. They're not stupid. A kid, son of a Valaarian soldier, at our doorstep. Sounds pretty convenient to me, no? Besides, domestic Ikons, don't kill people. They can't, it goes against the very essence of an Ikon.'

'It does sound convenient, but if it was the case, they would've stomped through

the main door already. We both know what the Valaarian Ikons are doing, don't we?'

'Those belong to the Endless army. Civilians like Terry don't have them. It's impossible for an Ikon to kill a human being under these circumstances.'

'There's a theory... But it's just that, a theory. The circuits of the Ikons with an indigo light normally run on a frequency of 10 Hz, which is the same our brains run when threatened. In this very moment, when they are at the same level, they become somewhat interchangeable. Whoever raises an indigo light might be able to bend his Ikons will and access all the data in them.'

'So you're saying, that he's a wanderer? The kid and his Ikon are one?'

'Not a wanderer though... The wanderers are far more powerful. They can bend any Ikons will. I don't know Fuzz, it's just a theory.'

'Ok, let's stop dreaming, and suppose this is a trap, what are we going to do? What about Hilda, if you don't care for us, at least for her?'

'What the fuck? Since when you became so suspicious? I don't care for you? For Drangy? For Ek? Don't bring her up ok, nothing bad is going to happen. I'll trust my intuition, it tells me we're safe. A kid can't be that good of an actor, come on. He was talking through his heart, if it was scripted, we would feel it.'

'Ok, so, should we just be relaxed? We have to take precautions Grub. I'll even take them myself if I have to.'

'We can take precautions, of course, but no alarms. Unless there's a thousand ships in the air, we're pretty safe. Our geophones predicting seismic activity, aren't detecting anything out of the ordinary, so let's just get someone for the night watch, expand the sensors radius, and as soon as it reads anything unusual, start the drills.'

'Ok, that's more like it. Let's do it.'

Fuzz went running to the control room, which was empty. He tried to summon someone

to help him out with the watch, but everyone was either sleeping or busy at the bar. Since he had no help, he made a coffee, got back in the control room, put his boots over the desk, and scrolled away through a page where the people of the hideout share their poems, paintings and music, until it was morning.

Abi woke up Terry with a loud knock on the door.

‘Terry! It’s time!’

‘I’m awake, I’m awake... I could barely sleep, wait a second.’

‘Surely budely!’

‘If I could, I would just eat and lay in bed again, wishing all of this was just a dream,’ he said opening the door. Abi was standing outside with fresh baked bread. The smell was so intense that it filled the whole room.

‘And who said it isn’t? Only in a dream you could meet someone like me! And be in such a cool place of course. Not to mention this bread you’re about to eat!’

‘You praise a lot this place, I’ve always heard when something needs a lot of praise it’s because in reality it’s not that good.’

‘Of course it’s good, it’s home. Home is always good. And I’m about to show you why we like it so much!’

Abi took Terry by the hand, and showed him around. First she took him to the dormitories. Since they couldn’t leave the hideout, each room had every star displayed on the ceiling. It enhanced their dreams, for the thought of seeing one took them on an endless journey through the cosmos, until they fell asleep. All the rooms were individual. They’ve learned from a young age to work every material they came across. Everyone knew how to fix the electrical devices they had. They were self-sufficient in every aspect of their lives. Everyone was unique, and how unique they were was reflected by the items each one of them crafted. The messy tables revealed inventions

they were working on. There was a particular room that caught Terries eye. It had everything one could imagine, from microscopes and scientific calculators, to a stringed guitar made of Flysk wood, which is one of the most heavy woods one can find in Lorah. This wood gave a warm sound, with an amazing sustain, but it's a very difficult wood to work with. It's heavy body makes it hard to cut, but when you make something out of it, it's worth all the time you've invested for this particular sound is faster than light. It takes you to a place far, far away. A cottage in the countryside surrounded by vineyards. The smell of ripped grapes can be felt from the solace where a hammock sways to a light breeze and the warmth of the sun slowly embraces you. That's how powerful the sound of Flysk wood is. The walls were filled with paintings, bright ones, illuminating this mysterious dark room.

‘Wow, who does this room belong to?’

‘It belongs to Hilda. She's about your age and she's also a lovely kid, you will like her.’ She's probably down at the arena. She loves to show off, and she should, because she's quite a catch. Mysterious, intriguing, righteous and talented, she's going to be a real princess.’

‘You're making me feel bad. My only skill is in... Well, I don't have a particular skill, besides fucking things up.’

‘Hey, don't ever say that. You're more brave than most of us are, you've gone by yourself into an adventure only few could dream of. It takes more than a skill, or more than a talent, it takes courage, and some of the most skillful persons might not find a pinch of it during an entire lifetime. The people that have always changed our lives for the better, didn't do it because they were talented, they've done it, because they were brave. Now, more than ever, we need brave people, rather than skillful ones. We, Terry, the nobles... We aren't brave. We've never felt the fresh air beyond these dirt walls... If

we were brave we probably would've left already to a place where the sun shines, and the sound of the floating trees leaving earth in the morning takes you with them for a subtle ride.'

'Oh, you're brave, is that even supposed to make me feel better about myself? There's millions of brave people in the universe. That's not an unique and amazing attribute you know. If you could write a symphony that would make the whole world sing in harmony, well, that would be something.'

'You're young Terry, you can still write the universes most beautiful symphony, if you really want to. Is it your passion? Why do you want to write it? Is it an ego thing or what?'

'I would love to have something I could give back... Not only pain.'

'Oh dear boy, you haven't got only pain to offer. I'm enjoying every second of being here with you. That's joy you are offering already. Don't dwell so much on technique and achievements... That's barely anything of what life's all about.'

'What's life all about then?'

'It's about living. That's what life's all about.'

'Living, that's not enough. Living. I'm living and I'm unsatisfied still.'

'You'll always be. That's part of it. Don't get me wrong, it's not bad that you want to achieve great things, to give back, and to be someone people will look up to, but you can't just forget about everything else. The little things you know... Little things make up the big things kiddo, be happy and grateful for being alive, and you'll be someone people will look up to.'

'I guess... I just don't think I'll ever be happy. After that dreadful incident... I can't even tell right from wrong... It seems I've just lost my moral compass and suddenly I'm in between a cognitive dissonance.'

‘What’s a cognitive dissonance?’

‘It’s when... Oh, where’s Dest? Sorry, I didn’t even realized he wasn’t with us... I was expecting his speech.’

‘You’re both so cute together! See, you have someone who really looks up to you, even though he’s more often than not above your shoulders. He loves you. Drangy’s still fixing him I think. His work... It’s so amazing. The best work is the work where there’s pieces of our souls scattered on them. Like... When you look at it and you finally understand, not the painting, but the person who made it. It’s this connection that sometimes even lovers can’t make. It’s this transcendental bridge that welcome us to their worlds.’

‘You sound like an artist speaking.’

‘No... I’m no artist. I’m just me, Abi.’

‘Nice to meet you Abi. I’m just me, Terry. Artists don’t have to paint or sculpt. Someone who speaks like you speak is an artist too. There’s artistry in that. There’s art all around us, from a chef, to a ballerina. That’s how they express themselves, and it counts as much as anything else.’

‘I also think so. Did I mention Drangy is also an amazing chef?’

‘What? Drangy’s so cool. He does everything! I’ll visit him again today, hopefully. He said he has awesome stuff to teach me! By the way, Why don’t you have an Ikon? And Fuzz too, I noticed he doesn’t own one either, why’s that?’

‘We don’t really like to have a machine following us all the time. Fuzz is way more skeptical than I am, he really don’t like them. He says you never know what’s lying behind it. After all it’s a machine. A developed one, but it still can be hacked.’

‘Our brains can be hacked too, right?’

‘Yes, but not in the same way. Even if someone tries to deceive you, you hold

the power of will. They don't.'

'I think Dest holds the power of will too. After all, he has a consciousness.'

'I think it's much more harder than that.'

'If what Grub says it's true, about Valaart turning all the Ikons into war machines, then they're also taking their power of will, right? The consciousness which is common to every living thing shouldn't be capable of committing such atrocities.'

'Ikons become a reflection of their masters.'

'I'm not Dest's master, I'm merely a friend.'

'A mere friend who gets his way all the time. Should a friend be demanding so much from someone?'

'We've had that conversation already, and Dest told me he has his own will. He can do whatever he feels like. We're helping each other out mutually.'

'Ok, it's just different perceptions. It's good that you talk about such things. For me, wouldn't work. I always think that I'm in no position to demand anything from anyone, especially from another being, since they own a consciousness. But I do understand and I respect everything the Ikons have made for us. After all, if it weren't for them, it would've taken forever to build our home.'

'When you order a beer for someone who's chatting with you at a table, and you take it to them, you don't feel subjugated, do you?'

'No, not at all.'

'I suppose the Ikons might feel the same way.'

'Maybe, but it still doesn't make that irritating buzzing sound go away! Silence is so underrated these days. They always seem to fill the void.'

'Just send them on their way. See, there's no Dest around today!'

'Since we're talking so much about Ikons, let me take you to a place you will



love.’

‘Where?!’

‘Catch me if you can, talentless loser.’

‘Ha-ha, I barely know you but I hate you already!.

Abi boots made a loud sound as they stomped on the metal grids, but started to be baffled by a mixture of acute laser sounds. The long and narrow corridor walls started to shake making tiny particles fall off the ceiling.

‘The ground is moving,’ said Terry.

‘You haven’t felt anything yet. Just wait to enter.’

Abi turned the valve and the mechanic sound the door was supposed to make was immediately muted by a raging chant of people.

‘Welcome to the Arena!’ she screamed.

As soon as Terry stepped in his heart almost came out of his chest. The noises were so loud that he felt the adrenaline rising. The people cheering and chanting was something he never experienced, for Valaart had forbidden any public sport. The stands were sculpted out of underground rocks and roots grew through them sticking out like benches. Three huge holes with carved faces shed their lights towards the middle of the arena where Ikons fought for perfection. Mold grew amidst uncut rubies and sapphires. It was humid, it was hot, it was confusing, it was a mix of emotions, it was worse than Valaart at any time of day, or night. Now Terry knows what busy stands for. There were people around the force field meant to determine the dueling area and to keep them safe from the discharges and bursting Ikons.

‘Look, there’s Hilda!’ screamed Abi.

‘I can barely hear you! There’s who?’

‘Hilda! The kid whose room we’ve just been belongs to!’

‘She’s beautiful. Her Ikon though, it’s much bigger, and it has a pyramidal shape. How’s that? I thought they were all spherical... At least every I’ve seen so far. It’s absolutely nothing like mine. And her lasers are much more powerful.’

‘Yes, Drangy helps her, they tune their Ikons for these arena battles, there’s even a leader-board! You’ve got teams of engineers working together and developing better shields, better lasers and better motors for the Ikons to compete. This is what inventions should do, spread joy into people's hearts, instead of sorrow.’

‘Let me guess who’s on front...’

‘Yes, it’s Hilda's team, and most of the innovations for the Ikons came from her. She loves it so much she actually devises the team strategies. They’ve been working on top notch technology for the Ikons. This is one of the first generations allying a genuine love for sports with engineering, and we couldn’t be more proud of them. The things they come up with are actually helping in practical terms. They are sort of continuing the teachings of ‘The Few’, but not in such a serious manner. A much more fun one. This is basically our heritage which consists of the first tribes spirituality and Valaart's technology.

‘This is way too cool to be true.’

As Terry finished these words, a Discharger burst into flames, intensifying the screaming and chants. There were now five Ikons remaining in the arena, and three of them belonged to Hilda’s guild. You could feel her passion from the stands. The Ikons felt it too. She was a sort of a leader, always gesturing and screaming at the top of her lungs the strategy for the Ikons to follow. It’s constantly changing, as the opposite team is also trying to catch them off-guard. Lux, Hilda’s Ikon, got around the opposites team Rammer almost getting hit. Few sparkles flew but she got away. From a distance she shot her lasers while their Shrouder kept an eye on Lux, buffing her systems,

intensifying the lasers and shields. The more time they are left alone, the more time they have to keep increasing their stats. The shield was getting bigger and the Rammer couldn't find their way through it. The opposite Shrouder was too busy fleeing and trying to decrease the potency of Lux's systems, by using it's negative poles. As they can increase a system performance, they can also decrease it, because their currents have negative and positive poles. Having one less Ikon, means defeat almost every time, and this time was no different than others, Hilda's team didn't deliver the final blow because the opposite team forfeited the match. When both Ikons lay down, there's no need to put them out. It's like waving a white flag. Saves time in the repairing and polishing although it takes away all your pride. It didn't take long until the scrappers were cleaning off the arena ground while Hilda waved her arms ferociously at the peak of the cage. The crowd was going nuts, as this was one of the most expected battles of the season.

Hilda came down and walked towards Abi in a way that could only belong to someone who tasted sweet victory.

'Abi! How's that for a spectacle, huh? They didn't see the last one coming. Struck like a ball of lightning. I did it. My idea, just in case you didn't know,' said Hilda cockily.

'We saw it!' said Abi, as she hugged her, lifting her feet off the ground. 'You're amazing, girl!'

'Stop it you. I don't need any more flattery. And who might this be? Never seen you around.'

'Huh, I'm Terry, I've just arrived yesterday night, by mistake.'

'There's no such thing as mistakes. This is weird though, we never had any guests. Am I missing something here? Abi?.'

‘It’s a long story dear, I’ll tell you all about it soon. For now, why won’t you show Terry around and make him feel at home? I’ve already showed him your room!’

‘What? My room? He’s been into my room? I don’t want anybody in my room, you’re sick of knowing it. What did you see? Please tell me you didn’t show him my pictures when I was kid, or my paintings, there’s dozens of rooms, why mine? Next time take it to yours!’

‘Mine isn’t as interesting, and you perfectly know it.’

‘You’ve got the music you compose, you could’ve showed him that.’

‘It’s nothing, they’re just notes put together. They’ve always been there...’

‘Yeah right, you create music for the soul, and you know it. Uh, what’s your name again?’

‘It’s Terry.’

‘Sorry, I’m very distracted. Terry, when you’re sick of being here, ask Abi to play one of her songs, you’ll be liberated from everything you thought you were, and you’ll go to a place where you cease to exist. You’ll be oscillating in the same frequency as her wonderful voice.’

‘Sounds promising.’

‘And her voice... Well, you can hear it. It’s like lying in a cotton cloud, above endless plains of wheat.’

‘Ok maybe that’s a bit too much,’ said Abi.

‘It’s amazing to see your genuine companionship and how you both raise each other's spirits. People should be like that all the time. It influences us in such a way... If only there was more love. Love is the secret ingredient for success.’

‘The problem is that people are forgetting to be genuine. In Valaart, you probably have to learn how to be someone different in order to survive. Ikons analyzing

every smile, every tear, every word ever spoken... If we are the person we were taught to be for too long, we might not be able to remember who we truly were. It's kind of sad, they know better who someone is, than the person itself.'

'I don't like who I truly am, so I just might imagine a better self, and become it.'

'Our true selves are always pure and beautiful because they're natural. It's this blind quest for something more which takes away our beauty. You might not like who you truly are, but I do already! Come, before the crowd starts to throw me in the air! I'm not a sack of potatoes although I do enjoy those five minutes of glory. And please, do not waste your precious time re-imagining yourself, It's really not necessary.'

'That's what you say now, but just wait one hour and you'll be wishing I was someone completely different.'

'It's quite possible!' said Hilda laughing. 'Abi, I'm off to show Terry the laboratories! See you soon.'

'Ok girl, see you at lunch. Don't be late!'

'We'll try!'

Hilda and Terry crawled through the crowd until they've reached a lift. It was full, but somehow they squeezed themselves in.

'It's on the last floor,' said Hilda with her face squashed against an old man's sweaty belly.

Everyone was still chatting about the duel and cheering for Hilda, but Terry got their attention quickly.

'And who are you, little fellow?' asked Jumpie, one of the most renown scientists in the Nobles Hideout.

'I'm Terry, I'm from Valaart. And you?'

Everyone suddenly stared at him as if he was an alien, which wasn't necessarily false.

‘Valaart? How come?’

‘I came here by mistake actually.’

Jumpie took off his glasses and stared at Terry closely, so close he could feel his breath upon his face.

‘Is this one of your jokes young lady?’

‘No, it’s not. It’s not a joke. Relax, everything’s ok, he wasn’t followed, at least that we’re aware.’

‘This is a very serious matter, where’s Grub? How did he allow this? This kid can’t be here. We cannot risk everything we’ve built so far.’

‘Chill out Jumpie, everything’s ok. He came a long way and found us by chance. The stars guided him here.’

‘Oh please, he’s a Valrat, he doesn’t believe in the stars, he doesn’t believe in anything!’

‘Don’t be so quick to judge old man, he’s quite different than what I expected.’

‘He’s quite different? Are you kidding me? He’s a whole different, he doesn’t belong here! Off with him, I have to speak with Grub, right now!’

Jumpie tried to push the button to the first level, but Hilda grabbed his arm.

‘Help me Terry, grab the other!’

Jumpie was almost reaching it but Terry pulled his other arm ferociously while the remaining passengers decided to intervene. With all the commotion, the lift swayed and flickered scrapping the walls.

‘Easy Jumpie, let them get to the floor they want, then you’ll go wherever you want to go.’

‘There’s no time to lose, we might be surrounded by now! To arms! To battle my brothers or our spirits shall perish once more!’

‘You’re taking this too far Jumpie, just stop. You’re freaking out.’

‘It looks like I’m the only rational being in here! We’ve been hiding an entire lifetime!’

‘Whatever might come out of this, it will come either way, there’s no point in getting angry or freaking out. The elevator won’t get us there faster.’

‘This is outrageous! O-U-T-R-A-G-E-O-U-S!!!’ he screamed.

The lift stopped on the last level with a screech. They were now in the laboratory.

‘Where are you taking him? He might be a spy! Haven’t you learned anything by now young lady?’

‘Oh please, Jumpie. Go have a drink, you’re a paranoid nut.’

‘I’m telling you! You and your father will regret this! You’ll apologize to me! You will...’

As Jumpie was uttering these words, someone pushed the button for the first level and off they went, while the sound of the engine slowly muted him.

‘What’s up with that guy?’

‘Oh never mind, he’s paranoid. He thinks Valaart spies on us and will come back to finish what they’ve started. Besides that he’s a good man, and contributes a lot to our community. Unfortunately, he’s nuts.’

‘Why is he called Jumpie? He didn’t seem like he could jump a lot huh.’

‘Ha-ha no, it’s not because he’s a talented jumper. It’s his mind that jumps from a thought to another very rapidly. When he’s calmer, and able to hold a civilized discussion, you’ll see what I’m talking about.’

‘And... He mentioned Grub... Is Grub...’

‘Yes, he’s my father.’

‘I could see it in your eyes. You have the same deep stare as he has.’

‘I’m not sure if that’s a compliment.’

‘It is, Hilda.’

‘I like it when you say my name, Terry.’

‘Ha-ha, enjoy, because I won’t be saying it anytime soon then, Hilda.’

‘You’re stupid, Terry.’

As the two of them were having a giggle at each other's expense, they came across a huge cylinder running endlessly through the room, while a hall of lights in the ceiling illuminated their way.

‘Wow, this is huge, what is it for? To see the stars?’ asked Terry.

‘You don’t know what this is? Are you kidding? You probably have one in Valaart too.’

‘I’ve never seen one, or even heard about it.’

‘It’s a particle accelerator. It makes us understand life at a lower scale. It allow us to have a glimpse at what we all amount to, a mess of mass, where neutrons, electrons and protons dance in a chaotic harmony.’

‘Wow, Dest told me about the protons, and neutrons... and what was the other?’

‘Electrons.’

‘Yes, electrons... It’s what these things we saw in Lorah were made of. It’s what stars are made of!’

‘Indeed, it’s what we’re all made of.’

‘This is so interesting.’

‘Ok, with that, I’m impressed. The others kids don’t care about such things, but I think it’s because they don’t see the magic in it, or people aren’t capable of showing them how magical it is. What could ever be more interesting than that? Than where we came from, and where we’re headed at? I’m here talking to you, and I’m feeling



something... That's magic for me, but everyone takes it for granted. Those are the perks of living underground... Suddenly a sunset, a single blow of fresh air, becomes everything... You realize how magical life is.'

They continued to walk alongside the huge cylinder, and just before Hilda swooned the valve to open a huge white door, the lights went out, one by one.

'Hey, what happened?' asked Terry frightened.

'Uuuuhhh, uhhhh,' whispered Hilda in Terry's hear.

'It's not funny.'

Terry jumped with the sound of the door unlocking, and as Hilda entered the room, the lights went on again.

'Ha-ha.' It's just the automatic lights, chicken. I forgot to turn them on, but we'll be fine now.'

'Don't do that again.'

'You're supposed to be the one protecting me, not the other way around!'

'Why am I supposed to be the one protecting you? You don't seem to be a girl who needs any sort of protection. You're the kind of girl people should get protection from.'

'Ha-ha, that, I'll take as a compliment.'

'Suddenly you care for traditions huh?'

'No I don't silly, it's just unattractive for a guy, that's all.'

'I'm not a guy, I'm a kid, and why would you care? Unattractive? Ew, I don't want to be attractive anyway. Dest says it's ok to show our feelings.'

'Oh never mind, and please, if you're going to live your life through what a robot says it's ok or not, you have to make a reform in that little brain of yours.'

'He's my friend! He's not a robot!'

‘If you say so.’

Terry immediately forgot what Hilda said about his friend as he gazed towards what it seemed like a never ending sea of microscopes.

‘Oh my god! Look at this! What are those on the shelves?’

‘They are just experiments at a very low scale. If we want to understand the cosmos and our brains we must look at things in a much smaller scale. Everything will be repeated endlessly. If you want to understand how a system in society works, you have to take a closer look at how the system inside you works. Everything’s related. This complexity is made of simplicity and you’ll find answers even in the smallest things. It’s all connected. The reason we are where we are standing today, it’s because some cells decided to unite and to create better systems than they ever could if they would just stand on their own. Now, most of the liberties we take pleasure in came from the same exact manifestation. A group willing to take us a step further, a group that not only believed we’re meant for something more, but that we’re more. A group of cells that believed million years ago they would evolve and live on, and a group of people that believes now they will continue to evolve and to live on. Although we know we’re part of something bigger, we also know we’re more than simple cogs in a very complex system. We hold the power of will, we’re that voice, the readers create that dictate the tone in which the story of our universe is told. We’re not only every action ever taken, but every action to come. We’re the precarious balance holding on against a hurricane. A discovery in a field might lead to another discovery in something seemingly unrelated, that’s why we keep pushing forward. We don’t do it for a singular interest, but a collective one. That’s the way of nature... We believe knowledge has the power to liberate us. At least, to take us out of this shit-hole.’

‘Why do you care so much?’

‘There’s nothing else to care for. I was forced to live underground. I was restrained of the most precious thing in life, which is freedom. All I want is to live a life with dignity, a life where my people won’t have to hide.’

‘Sorry. It must be hard for you. Don’t you get lonely? Ever? Here... All the time.’

‘I get out anytime I want into Lorah, to see the stars. They keep me company, they make me feel that I’m part of something bigger, they make me feel that I belong. My dad doesn’t even dream of it. I take my telescope and sit right outside. I’ve seen everything, from the Ninkukus who are ethereal as one’s soul, to the so called Soulless.’

‘What? But Grub said no one leaves the underground. It could risk the safety of everyone. And that forest... That forest is haunted! You could’ve got lost!’

‘Silly, Lorah isn’t haunted. Only the ones who stopped dreaming can get lost in it. There’s not a single kid in this vast universe who has stopped dreaming, because their lives are a continuous dream. My dad... I think he stopped dreaming. I’ve seen him crying at night... He became bitter after Abi broke up with him. He used to say he wasn’t crying but rather that his eyes were sweaty because our planet moved so fast across space.’

‘Sort of hard to leave someone, especially here. Having to recall every moment, every day.’

‘Definitely. I always thought they would end up together, but somehow they didn’t.’

‘So... Abi’s not your mum?’

‘No, she’s not...’

‘Who’s your mum?’

‘Someone beautiful who taught me all about the stars,’ she said, emotionally. ‘I

remember when Vac's mother had puppies. We both cried. And then the puppies cried too... It was a full moon, and I remember a star falling from the ceiling. It was beautiful. From that instant I started to believe in the stars. They allowed me to see the most precious moment of my life.

'Where is she?'

'I don't know, she ran away. Probably got lost in Lorah or in whatever dream she was chasing, like everyone does.'

'Why?'

'My dad... He always knows what to say but never how to act. Maybe that's why I go out into Lorah with my telescope. I'm always hoping she left me a message written in the stars. I miss her so much.'

'Oh girl, come here,' said Terry, hugging her... It lasted forever. Myth says they're still hugging till this day.

'Wait a second. It was you!' said Terry.

'Me? What?'

'You've left all the hatches opened! That's how I got in!'

'Huh... Whoops,' said Hilda blushing.

'You're the reason I'm here,' he said, looking into her eyes. 'If it wasn't for your curiosity, I wouldn't have noticed the panel was off... I wouldn't have made it till the main door.'

'Maybe... I didn't drag you from Valaart, though,' she said smiling.

'Weren't you afraid the Ninkukus would suck the life out of you?'

'Are you crazy? The Ninkukus are pure... Pure as the forests they guard.

Because they've been protecting them ever since they exist, they can sense the purity in others. That's why Valaarians are scared shitless of them. They don't eat your soul as the

tales tell. They eat all the impurities. Since some are made only of impurities, they die. The Valaarians don't dream anymore, they forgot they can. That's why none of them would be able to find the way out of that forest. They would wander through it their whole life and become the bushes and the trees, the Ninkukus and the rivers... Raz on the other hand dreamed every day. That's how he found us.'

'Your father told me... And the Soulless? Weren't you afraid?

'Afraid of what? Afraid of living? Are you crazy? We cannot live our lives in fear, can we?'

'Wow, I said exactly the same thing to Dest, can you believe? You sound a lot like me.'

'No I don't. You sound a lot like me. But a little bit shier. I've learned not to be shy. Life taught me that. Living underground isn't easy. We have to wear these goggles all the time to help with our sight. Well, now they look cool, but the first ones, oh, you should've seen the first models. Completely démodé. They were only practical. I've created the first fashionable goggles! Wait, the prototypes are still laying somewhere in these shelves. Give me a second.'

Hilda rummaged the shelves back and forth, scattering papers all over, while Terry, grabbed them, laid his eyes upon every line, and arranged them as they were before.

'I found them!' she said. 'Here's the first sketches for them. They don't look amazing, but these, well, you have to admit, they look cool.'

'Yeah, they do.'

'And this, this is a painting I've done of us, returning to Valaart. With the goggles!'

'They look amazing... How did it all start? When did you find out you were an artist?'

'I never knew, I'm not quite sure if I am one even now. I don't believe in being solely something. You should try to be all the things you think you can't. My father used to paint. I remember stepping into his workshop when he wasn't around... I remember all the paintings he was working on. I stopped and admired them, how wonderful it was the ability to create. But the paintings, till this day, wasn't the thing that sent me chills down my spine... It was the smell of turpentine. That's how I remember everything. I can still feel it. I started exploring by painting some of my wooden toys. They looked like crap, but it didn't matter. What mattered is that I was doing it, the outcome wasn't important. Just the simple fact of trying, of nurturing your curiosity. People often think they aren't able to be creative, but creativity much like any other skill can be developed. All you have to do is train. Because I couldn't go outside and play like the other kids did in Valaart, I had to spend my time doing something else. I was always busy with my plastic microscopes until he offered me my first canvas, on a summer's day. I remember because it was extremely hot and my sweat fell upon it before I even started. I thought I had ruined it, but I didn't. He explained me that there's no such things as mistakes, and we should make good use of whatever comes our way, so that's what I did. I painted over and thought that part looked incredibly awful, but somehow it didn't. I continued to paint meaningless things, until I was swimming in an ocean of senseless brushes. My wish was always to do what Drangy does... To finally bring such things to life.'

'How do you get inspired?'

'Just go with the flow, paint what you feel, and if you do feel, you will paint amazing things. Note down every idea you have. I have lots of them, which makes it easy to identify the good from the bad. I've learned that the best artwork is done by the people who feel immensely. That's why some people really suck at doing art. It's not because they can't learn how to paint, everyone can, it's a technique, nothing more than

that, you aren't born with a gift. It's just that some people have been hurt so much by the ones who surround them, that their brains, as a self-defense mechanism, cease to feel. Their creations are bland, which leaves you with a feeling of indifference. If you don't feel, you aren't able to love, and if you aren't able to love, well, you aren't able to be an artist. You aren't able of anything really human for that matter, and art is just that, a perspective from a being who loves.'

'I've heard the best at doing art, is the ones who've been hurt the most.'

'I couldn't have done it any better, or any worst. I'm just hoping to find a way to get in the Valaarian square, where I could finally avenge my people. They don't want to see what a princess like me is capable of.'

'Why? Wouldn't it be enough to just set the record straight? Forget what has been done, and maybe, move on? Towards a much more brighter rising sun?'

'Yeah, that's really beautiful, but this, you can't just forget. People must be held responsible for their actions. It is not right what has been done, and it's because it's way too many times forgiven and even more times forgotten, that these atrocities never cease to end.'

'An action will only create a reaction...'

'Yes, and I'm ready for it, even if I must bear their wrath on my flesh alone. I'm ready to die for this. There's no other way I'd like to go from this place. Each time I see the footage of the shuttle taking off... All the screams and tears evaporating as they disappeared into the vast silent blue. I hear them in my dreams. Did you know this? That only a few got out from that living hell? Of course, only the cream of the crop, the assertive. The ones who ruined everything for everyone, in the end, were the ones getting out alive. It sickens me. If it doesn't sicken you, then I think there might be something wrong with you.'

‘It does sicken me Hilda, now that you tell me. But this people, most of them are like me, you know. We have no idea what’s going on. We receive every month new cultures and races thrilled to arrive in our lands and grateful to have traveled close to the stars. They come so inspired, so energetic. How could we possibly know that their brothers and sisters are getting raped or being enslaved?’

‘In your lands... They aren’t yours, lands aren’t commodities for one to claim their own, and if they were, first they would belong to the mountains, then to the trees. It’s just stupid to appropriate of something which was always ours. If you have no clue, then where do you think all the things you consume come from? Heaven?’

‘We create our own things.’

‘What about the materials to create your own things? The metals, specially titanium which is very scarce in here. There’s people doing all the dirty work. And what’s the point of it all? What’s it for? It’s definitely not for me or for you.’

‘I don’t know either, but this night, I couldn’t close my eyes, thinking about what could be the motives behind it.’

‘We will know soon enough. I can’t wait to hear what they’ve got to say!’

‘Why are you so angry?’

‘Why aren’t you? You should be, because we were never given the opportunity. I look at Valaarts system and what bothers me immensely is the vast amount of knowledge that’s being thrown away, every single day, of people with infinite capacities who aren’t given a proper education, an opportunity. Imagine if all the systems they’ve been to, instead of turning them into slaves, they would educate them, and give them a bit of what they gave us here, in the beginning. There would be thousands of inventions, better than the Ikons. It would be a truly thriving civilization, a civilization that would last for as long as the universe can, and that’s more time than any



of us can think of. Instead, they are treated like cattle, over a vain notion of an unsustainable future that came out of a psychopath's mind. You get really angry when you foresee our demise with every step we take, and the people around you don't.'

'That's true. I should be angry too, I guess. I think we kids sometimes have a much clearer vision of the future. I don't know, sometimes it seems to me that they keep living in the past.'

'I usually can't have such discussions with other kids, they don't get me. Sometimes I don't get myself... Now, to the most amazing part.'

Hilda left the sketches scattered on the metal table and went for a back-door with couple of signs hanging - *Caution, Danger, Warning*. On the top of it there was a small window where you could see through.

'Just look!'

Terry stood on his tip-toes staring at the beautiful creation lying on the other side.

'It looks amazing... I always wanted to pilot one of these!'

'Me too. We have many programs to simulate diverse types of flight in it. Well, we've shaped them to look more like games, so you can actually learn something while having fun. All the commands are equal to the simulation. The pressure chamber replicates the harsh space conditions too. Games should teach you something, something you can sink your teeth in, and not act as an hypnotizing, mind numbing application. This ship is called 'Hope'. It still looks quite rough but it's just a prototype. Drangy will help with the finishing once it's complete. We have no way to fully test it, but if you look up, this area has enough space for a little take-off. If we want, we can drill until we reach the surface. This way we can fly into space, directly towards the stars, but there's still lots of work to be done until we can be sure it'll work. No one wants a glorious take-off, only to land on a tree. Oh, how embarrassing it would be.'

‘You have so many projects going on.’

‘Yes, if we want a change, we have to be it. And this is literally our only hope. We’re looking forward to a day when our sons and our daughters will wake up, and gaze towards a vast endless green instead of a fucking wall.’

‘Aren’t you too young to be thinking about sons and daughters?’

‘Of course not. It’s never too soon to talk about things that matter. And there’s nothing that matters more, than this future we’re standing for. Wait. Can you feel it?’

‘What?’

‘The smell, oh my god, it’s Lifus! Lifus Terry, Lifus!’

‘What Lifus? What are you talking about?’

‘My favorite dish! Just come!’

## CHAPTER FIVE - NUTS, SEEDS AND CHIVE

Hilda ran straight through the door into the warm corridors while Terry tried to keep up. He followed the sound of her footsteps, as she vanished into the vapor exhaled by the gigantic cylinder. They rushed into the elevator and Hilda pressed the first level button few times.

‘Come on, stupid, rusty elevator.’

‘Ha-ha, now you look like Jumpie! It’s not going to get you there any faster you know?’

‘You don’t say, potato head.’

‘What? I don’t have a potato head!’

As the lift went up, the smell intensified.

‘Wow, I wish the air in Valaart smelled like this all the time! It’s raining in my mouth!’

‘With this smell, it can only be Drangy cooking!’

As the elevator stopped Hilda raged swiftly through its doors and again, into the maze of corridors the Nobles Hideout had. Terry was following right behind her. They arrived at the back of a kitchen. The sound of the pans clashing, and the different sauces simmering contributed to the energetic vibe one could feel once inside. Everyone was busy, looking like acrobats holding thousands of beautifully crafted dishes in their hands trying to avoid anyone who would come their way. Exactly the same as it

happens in life, billions of contortionists holding dirty dishes in life's endless rope.

Hilda didn't care, went straightforward and jumped right into Drangy's arms.

'Champion, I've heard ya winy winy again! Drangy's proud, oh so proudly proudy. Did the armor help ya?

'Yes! It made all the difference! They had so many upgrades since our last battle. They had this new motor, you should've seen, I could barely hit them, and when I did, their shield absorbed most of the damage, fueling their discharges. Luckily they couldn't outplay me, our armor was so much lighter than theirs that they simply couldn't keep up.'

'Aw, and Terry, did ya liky liky?'

'Yes, I loved it, but it's rather painful when the Ikons fall and burst into flames.'

'Ah, some collateral damage for invaluable fun. Don't ya worry lad, they are going to be fixy fixy by Drangy's golden hands! Ha-ha. Go on now, find some sits! It's suffocating in here!'

They went through a swinging door separating the kitchen from the dining room. There were lots of tables spread around. Each one of them had a keg where you could fill your empty mugs, either with water, beetle juice, or beer.

'Dad!' screamed Hilda as she went to meet Grub, who was already sitting with Fuzz. They both had beers with foam dripping downsides.

'Hey princess! I'm sorry,' he said, pressing her against his chest. 'I couldn't be there today. It's been crazy, with Terries arrival. We're taking some precautions, don't take it personally boy, it's just part of the drill. Anyway, I've heard you kicked some ass huh, as usual. See Fuzz, the apple never falls far from the tree.'

'Ha-ha, yeah right man, that's why you've always got wrecked in the arena. She's teaching you how it should be done.'

‘That was mostly due to Ek's inability of following a strategy. Also his lack of skill in being a Shrouder.’

‘You should take responsibility for it, after all, you were the captain. If something goes wrong, it’s your fault.’

‘We were all captains. Each one steering the crew in their own beautiful way.’

‘Are you drunk dad?’ asked Hilda. ‘You’re getting poetic.’

‘Huh, what’s a Shrouder?’ whispered Terry close to Hilda’s ear.

‘It’s the Ikon responsible for giving cover to the Rammer and Discharger.’

Rammers, their purpose is to knock out the other Ikons with their heavy armors. They rely on close combat. Shrouders act as a support unit. They rely more on agility, so the armors should be lighter, in order to easily dodge the opponent blows. They can provide extra temporary shields to their allies, and buff up their systems. Dischargers rely mainly on the distance fight, and shoot powerful lasers. They usually focus on the Rammers, because they aren’t as swiftly as the Shrouders, which makes them their favorite target. There’s no absolute rule in what each team should use or not, if you feel like, you can use three Rammers for the duel, but it’s not really ideal. There’s a lot of creativity in the fights these days, from people masking as a Rammer but having a very light armor, to having balanced status and being Rammers, Shrouders and Dischargers. You can find all kinds of traps in the arena, and sometimes, find weapons and armors you’ve never seen before. Every team has to adapt consistently throughout the season to increase their scores and become the Paragon.’

‘Wow, can I compete too?’

‘Of course you can!’

‘But, do I want?’ asked Dest from behind.

‘Dest! I’ve missed you! This is probably the longest time I’ve been without

you.’

‘Definitely. I’ve missed you too, Terry.’

‘Hilda, this is Dest, my splendid Ikon!’

‘Wow, you’ve got an indigo light, how lucky!’

‘I know, I’m part of the one percent! And yours, I remember it had an orange light, but I never got to meet him.’

‘It went with the rest of the guild back to the workshop. They are supposed to fix their armors and leave them charging. These battles consume a lot of energy, and they shouldn’t be taken lightly.’

‘Why didn’t you go with them? Why are they doing the work for you?’

‘What work for me? Sometimes I do it, sometimes they do it, that’s how it goes. We’re not counting every single day to see who did what and who didn’t, that’s silly. We’ve got better things to waste our time with, like showing our guests around.’

‘Ha-ha ok, sounds like a convenient philosophy.’

‘Sometimes it conveys me, sometimes it conveys them. Give and take, that’s how the world works.’

‘So, are you best friends already?’ asked Grub, a bit tipsy.

‘Not best, but close. Dest is still my favorite.’

‘That’s sweet. Are you guys hooking up or what?’

‘Hooking up? He’s my Ikon, we can’t hook up.’

‘It was a joke boy, no need to get all defensive. You oughta be a good Shrouder, ha-ha.’

‘But aren’t jokes supposed to be funny?’ said Terry grinning.

‘Ha-ha. Indeed they are. Refrain to try, Terry.’

‘Are you guys done or what?’ said Hilda, feeling left out.

‘Don’t worry sweetheart, he’s all yours.’

‘Ugh, disgusting. I just lost my appetite.’

‘Hey, what’s wrong with me? I’m not disgusting.’

‘No, you’re not, it’s just the thought of us together, nothing personal.’

‘Ok, enough of chit-chat, Terry, the dishes are over there, I’ll get the steaming pot.’

‘I’ll get the napkins,’ said Hilda.

‘I’ll fill the beers?’ asked Fuzz with a smile from ear to ear.

The dishes were spread out around the table, and the pot, still hot, in the middle. The aromas rose as the forks and knives clashed. The chive resurfaced inside the simmering bubbles that popped in the air allowing it to dive in the sauce again. Everyone quickly cheered with watering mouths. Drangy brought small dishes that looked like paintings, as appetizers. Some had green rice, others orange or red, with bits of a dozen different fruits.

‘Curated by Drangy,’ he said as he laid them on the table. ‘Edible art.’

‘It’s beautiful. I don’t want to eat it, though,’ said Terry. ‘I want to hang it in my room.’

‘No you don’t. It will grow mold and become stinky.’

‘Ever-changing art!’

‘Ha-ha. Go on, try it,’ said Drangy cleaning his hands on his apron.

Terry was feeling reluctant about it, he didn’t want to destroy something crafted with so much care. He took a deep breath and pierced through the first layer with his fork. The dish exploded into millions of colors as if geysers of joy. A bit of him died, but was revived right after.

‘So, this is what art tastes like,’ he said with his mouth full.

‘Indeed. They have every vitamin, every protein and fiber known to man in them. They are nutritional bombs. These dishes don’t fill the belly, they fill our souls. They are made with such care that the food itself becomes alive. I’m not stirring the pot, I’m stirring the foods heart.’

Terry finished it and felt the weight of the world in his tummy.

‘The dish is edible too. There’s absolutely nothing left after, besides a light dream,’ said Drangy, leaving towards the kitchen.

‘I’m already full.’

‘Come on, it wasn’t even the main dish,’ said Grub, laying a napkin on his lap. Fuzz placed one around his thin neck.

‘Oh my, I told you Terry, this is great. Go on, take as much as you want,’ said Hilda.

Terry timidly filled his plate with a bit of the nuts, the seeds and the famous chive.

‘There’s meat on the side if you want, just ask Drangy, he’ll fix you something. Drangy fixes everything, but unfortunately there’s one thing he never found a fix for... His broken heart. We don’t eat much meat because we’re kind of scarce. We keep few animals in here for their maintenance is a steep price. The first years were atrocious in terms of food. Everyone was helping building so no one had time to learn how to cook properly. Quely’s talent, the first certified chef in the Noble’s Hideout, allowed us to taste a little bit of heaven, in this hell.’

‘I’m ok, I’ll trust Hilda on this one. It’s her favorite dish after all.’

‘On this one? What about the rest?’

‘Why should I care about the rest? It’s this one that matters now.’

‘You’re a fast learner, Terry.’



‘Just wait until I meet you in the Arena, Hilda.’

‘You don’t want that. It takes a lot of practice to become a good arena duelist. You don’t even have a buffed Ikon. He wouldn’t stand a chance against the worst player. I assure you that.’

‘That’s mean!’

‘It’s actually being your friend.’

As they finished talking, Hilda devoured voraciously the food laid in her plate, while Terry took his time. Grub and Fuzz had their first bite whereas Hilda was already looking forward to the dessert.

‘So Terry, tell me, how did you find Dest? What made you choose him? Or what made him, choose you?’ asked Grub, cleaning his mouth with a hankie.

‘When we’re kids, they take us to the Ikon’s factory. The entrance has an humongous copper statue of an Ikon, and in the middle, instead of a particular color, it has the whole visible spectrum. They tell us all about them, how they function, how they are made, their purpose... How difficult it is to fuse protons together in order to overcome their own electromagnetic force. My class followed the guide and I stayed behind, admiring all those magnificent creations. I wanted to take a closer look, I wanted to see what’s inside of them, the spheres spinning and burning this gas continually. I wanted to see what they really are, and I guess I got too close. As I was approaching Dest I could feel a magnetic force pulling me in, but at the same time, repelling. I got so close that a deafening explosion unraveled and I passed out. I woke up with everyone staring at me while the guide was perplexed. I had a tinnitus and couldn’t hear anything besides a phone ringing in my head. I guess it was destiny calling. They cried out for help, and of course, my dad. They examined me and made some tests because I had a slight headache, nothing keeping me from doing the daily

chores, but it was there, and I felt I wasn't the same Terry who entered that factory. Apparently everything was ok. They said it was my arm that resonated with the Ikons electromagnetic field due to the same wavelength, nothing to worry about. Was literally just a shock, as they put it. From then on, my dreams became really lucid, and I dreamt most of the times with Dest. I almost knew his development stages, although I didn't understand anything about it. I thought I was becoming mad. The phase where they should start to be around people came, and I've asked my father if I could have the Ikon I've touched. He said it's impossible, because it wasn't labeled, and they couldn't simply know which one was it. When the accolade day came where they set the Ikons loose and each one of them is guided by an invisible force to touch their soul mates forehead, I knew exactly who was coming for me. It's a really beautiful ceremony, up on a hill, where everyone is on a bent knee, with eyes closed, while the Ikons fly towards us at a very slow pace. I could see, even though my eyes were closed. Everything was clear to me, and I saw my reflection, slowly becoming bigger and bigger. The gravity that once brought us together was still present, for we were bond from the beginning. That's how I met Dest, although, he's been just an Ikon ever since. Quite sad though, it's just recently that I'm seeing him more as a being, rather than a thing.'

'That's a very interesting story. It's good to know they kept our tradition alive, the ceremony we built together. What kind of headaches were you feeling?'

'Nothing really bad, it was just a nausea, as if I wasn't alone.'

Grub and Fuzz looked at each other for a moment, while Terry continued to speak.

'I can't really say what it was, but it was strange. There's a lot of strange things I've felt ever since, but I wouldn't dare to speak up. Everyone would think I was going bananas, so I kept it for myself. That was my secret. I don't even know why I'm telling

you all this, but somehow you make me feel as if I'm at home, you make me feel safe. I never really had a home. That place where I was, I always felt like an outcast, in someone else's world. In here it's different, I feel there's this something, it's in the air, you know.'

'We know, it's Drangy's cooking. Trust me, we feel that too,' said Hilda laughing.

As soon as they finished their meals, Fuzz left for a cigarette, while Grub followed his steps.

'What do you think?' Asked Fuzz exhaling the smoke from his first puff.

'Everything makes sense with what we've heard... His story's very intriguing, I don't know. Either he's completely mad or there's something going on. This is very rare, I mean, the language, it's normal for kids to grow up that fast, the amount of knowledge they're exposed to is infinite, but this phrase - I could see even though my eyes were closed - well, not a lot of kids could say that. Hilda never spoke like this, and she's cunning as fuck. This is way out of the ordinary.'

'What do you suggest then?'

'I don't know man, what if we do some tests, to make sure this isn't nothing but a kid's imagination. We know how that's infinite too.'

'Ok, sounds good. What if we take Dest, to some undisclosed location, blindfold Terry, and ask him to find his Ikon?' asked Fuzz.

'Maybe the blindfolding part might be a bit too much. How are we going to ask him? This makes it seem as if we don't believe in him. It's probably the worst thing we can do now. The people he trusted, thinking he might be full of shit.'

'So what do you suggest?' asked Fuzz while finishing his cigarette.

'Let's just be honest with him. I think he needs honest people around him.'

Anyway, might be too soon to put him under pressure. We already asked a lot of questions, let's give him some time. It's his first day in here. Let him explore a bit more and then we'll do the tests.'

'Sure.'

They returned to the table, only to find Drangy occupying both of their seats.

'And this kids, is how the Noble Cause was formed!'

'Ah, he's telling the Cause story again.'

'It never gets old dad. Besides, Terry never heard it.'

'It's beautiful. This place inspires me.'

'It should, because we ain't got much else to do, besides inspiring our children to be the best they can be. There are lots of musicals written for the Noble Cause. You'll have the chance to hear them soon.'

'Can I be a part of the Noble Cause too?'

'You are already! The Noble Cause is not a group, but a belief. As long as you believe, you're already part of it. The question is, are you mad enough to believe, Terry?'

'Yes!'

From the background a voice spoke, 'No! you could not be part of the Noble Cause, because you are a Valrat, and Valrats don't believe in anything, besides which lies they are going to spread next, or who they're going to submit!' said Jumpie as he approached Terry.

'Jumpie, we've already spoken about it, just quit it ok, let him be. I thought we had an agreement.'

'Oh yes, we spoke about it, but I wasn't quite convinced with your theory. Theories, that's what you like the most, isn't it, Grub?'

‘Not really. I like the things I’ve experience so far, such as the day my daughter was born, the day I met Fuzz, the day I met you, and even today, when I met Terry. If you would stop being paranoid, maybe we could have a moment of peace. I’m really sick about your suspicions. It’s been like that ever since you learned about our history. Even as a kid you wouldn’t let it go. Maybe it’s time to face your fears.’

‘Another theory of yours. Bravo! Maybe, just maybe, it’s time for you to fall in reality. Not everyone has a good heart like you, the righteous one. You’ll die because of what you believe Grub, and the worst part, is that we’ll die with you.’

‘Everyone eventually dies, even the ones who don’t believe in anything. Well, those are already dead.’

‘Ladies and gentleman, here’s the dessert, a buffet of theories and philosophies from our guest, the Grub.’

‘Whatever Jumpie, believe whatever you want to believe, just leave the kid alone ok. Seriously, does he look any dangerous to you?’

‘He does not, but the information he holds now, yes, that seems pretty damn dangerous! It’s like you live in another planet! What was the most precious utility of all times? Information Grub, information! That’s what kept castles safe or made a siege successful. You have to play the game they’re playing, know the philosophies behind what drives them, only then, you’ll be able to understand them and fight an even battle. Our ancestors built this over centuries of sweat and sorrow! I won’t allow you to destroy our home, our dream, over a feeling, a hunch! Get real for fuck sake! They aren’t like you! And they know exactly that! They see us as nothing but meek! And they’ll use what they see as a weakness, which is our ability to feel, against us. Make it seem that our virtues are nothing, that what keeps us breathing, is vile!’

‘Ok, come over here.’

Grub pushed Jumpie outside the room while everyone stared.

‘What’s up with this guy? And I thought I was crazy,’ said Terry

‘Listen, we spoke this morning, what’s your deal? What are you trying to get from this? What’s your point?’ asked Grub

‘My point is, we can’t let him stay. That’s my point.’

‘So, if what you think is right, is it wise to send him back to Valaart, with all the information that you think it’s going to fuck us up?’

‘Huh, well, you’ve got a point there. Maybe we should kill him.’

‘Maybe we should kill you. What are you thinking? He’s a fucking kid. This has absolutely nothing to do with Terry, it has to do with you, and your hatred of Valaart. Your biased judgment has clouded your heart, Jumpie. After all, right now, he’s one of us, he doesn’t have a home, he’s lost, and he’s looking for more than that, he’s looking for himself, eagerly to meet who he was born to be. We’ve been there ok. Breath a little, get on with your life. Let it be.’

‘I’ll hear you say sorry Grub, we’ll all hear you say sorry!’ said Jumpie, as he banged the swing doors, still murmuring about how sorry they will be.

‘Whatever.’ said Grub, looking at the wooden floor and giving a sad nod. He then returned to the table.

‘Someone woke up grumpy grumpy,’ said Drangy.

‘Sorry about that, don’t take him seriously, he’s just worried about all of us. You came from Valaart and... His ancestors were savagely murdered by them... He heard stories throughout his life, he kept them inside his head all this time... This moment came, when you arrived at our door, and unfortunately for you, you became the scapegoat of his sorrow. He had to let it all out, it just happened to be sooner than I thought.’

‘It’s ok, I understand. I would’ve felt the same,’ said Terry compassionately.

‘Compassion and understanding, the pillars holding the Noble Cause. This way, things will always be ok. Problems, become problems, due to miscommunication, due to a lack of understanding, or wanting to understand.’

‘Let’s forget about this, I heard Drangy is willing to upgrade your Ikon! Are you willing to, Terry?’ asked Hilda

‘It’s ok for me, but you’ll have to ask Dest.’

‘Dest?’

‘What kind of upgrades are we talking about?’ he asked, suspiciously.

‘Well, new armor, new dischargers, maybe polish a bit the outside.’

‘Maybe get a new Ikon?’ said Dest ironically.

‘Come on Dest, it will be fun. How long haven’t you been revised?’

‘I don’t need any upgrades. I don’t want to have tools inside me. What is the purpose?’

‘I was actually thinking about entering the arena...’

‘Entering the arena? What about me? What if I die? How do you know I’ll be the same after Drangy repairs me?’

‘Oh you will be the samey samey Dest, trusty trusty. There’s not a single soul that has been losty losty in my hands! Drangy would lose his, to find yours.’

‘Besides, you’ll get to do something different. If I was an Ikon I would love to hop into the arena and beam down the competition!’

‘But you’re not. You don’t know what it’s like to be an Ikon. It was pretty peaceful until now.’

‘I can’t change your mind. All I can do is take you to see a match. You’ll be able to play in a team, and work towards a common goal. How awesome is that, to be

part of something, huh? You've never been part of something, have you?' Asked Terry.  
'I am, I'm part of you, and you're part of me too. That's enough, or at least, it should be.'

'It is. Maybe this way we don't have to get our asses whooped by Hilda's team. We wouldn't have a team either, they're all full, aren't they?'

'They're not! There's still people looking for other members. You've got plenty of teams to choose from, and if none of them interests you, you can even join a guild!'

'Let's go first to a match and maybe then, just maybe, I'll reconsider. I have to see it's not merely a savage show, where our pain is their joy,' said Dest.

'Yeah! When you'll hear the chants and feel the energy of the crowd, there's no way you're saying no,' said an over confident Terry.

'You know I hate crowded places, don't you?'

'Come on, don't be a sissy.'

'You name him Dest, and then you don't want him to be a sissy. Whatever happened to common sense?' asked Grub, scratching his head.

'It's no longer common sense man, it has turned into a rare sense,' said Fuzz grinning.

'Oh come on, it isn't that bad,' said Terry ruing.

'Dest, you should help him out and get your ass in the arena. You both should stick for each other, you know. What drove us away in the first place, was the fact that we didn't stick by each other. The old system Valaart had, back on Derkar, collapsed because of that. It was a breeding ground for ass-holes, for the individualists, wretched narcissists. They turned their backs on each other, and slowly they grew apart, and so did their souls, and their hearts. When you're alone, you're powerless. That's how the systems of control work. The weaker we are, the stronger they get. They don't want you



to know that you are able of anything, or at least, that you can change everything, at any time you want. The ones in power won't allow that anything would come in between. Even if it means that lives are lost. The main thing you have to do is believe because believing is the mother of all conceptions. A belief is an emotion, and emotions are immensely powerful because they are able to create the best innovations, and the best art. Blessed are not the ones with an extreme intellectual capability, or talent, but the ones who feel incessantly. Their literature, their art, their cinema, slowly decayed into sterile manifestations of their insides. Shallow and emotionless. Movies without meaning, songs without feeling, paintings without a cause, all in all it amounted to the zeitgeist, a generation that even though had access to the greatest map of all times, was the generation that was the most lost. We survived until now because we had each other's back. Our camaraderie is what kept us alive. Well, it's been like that throughout all of times. People survived because they were a group, and in the end, an invisible union is all there is, it's what binds us all together and allows everything to coexist. You're nothing alone, even though sometimes you might think you are. So here's my advice to both of you, don't ever let go of each other, because if you do, so will the world we've been trying so hard to build,' said Grub while leaning a bit over the table, as if telling a secret.

'In that matter, one could say we've been quite successful,' said Dest.

'Indeed,' completed Terry while looking at him, with an heartening face.

'You don't have to start with fights boy, in the arena, as Hilda said, there are guilds that sharpen the areas of your interest. You can be helping out devising new motors or shields, instead of dueling. Hilda belongs to a lot of them, she barely can keep up with her schedule due to such overload. These are the closest to classes we've got here. We don't have a school as you do in Valaart, in here, you just join the daily

discussions and learn about the topics that interest you. Not only theoretically, but practically. You can be a teacher for a day, if you've got something to say. There's plenty to choose from, like the 'Smiths', founded by Drangy's ancestors, which you have already heard about. Then you have the painters, masons, the tanners guild, one of my favorites, carpenters guild, the bakers, the engineers guild, and the apothecary guild. If logistics is your interest, the tradesman guild might suit you, because they make sure every department gets supplied with all their needs to accomplish their programmes. The psy guild, which is unfortunately dead now, was what you might have heard as 'The Few'. 'The Few' belonged to the first tribes, who taught the modern ones how to access the collective memory. Due to being underground, our senses became weaker, day after day. Without being able to have access to such tool, we couldn't be as prosperous as we once were, although we still thrive through scientific developments. There's some still trying to access it day and night, but to no avail. Now it's nothing but a fable.'

'What happened?'

'Well, Anansi, Nyame and Arkys, turned on us. They believed Williams preach, about time travel.'

'Time travel?'

'Yes, lies that he likes to spread. He said they found a planet that's made of rhodium, where tortoises have big jewels instead of shells, clouds of sapphire travel above mountains made of rubies and the light of the sun is refracted into a sea made of opals. What lied in the very core of this fantastic world was what William sought, an element you could only hear in ancient tales. An element that could catalyze your will power and make you travel back to any point in time. They fell in love with the idea, so the three of them started to search every corner of the universe for this place, and they

most likely fell into a slumber, navigating through time, endlessly, looking basically for a mythological place that only existed in Williams mind. You can see how psychotic he was, for believing in such things.'

'Why would they want to travel back in time?'

'Simply because they lived a million lives, although they never did quite live their own. Our minds can be a very lonely place.'

'You said William's psychotic for believing in such things, but didn't you say that believing is a powerful tool?'

'Well yes, our thoughts, can change our very cells, but I don't believe they can create planets, or elements for that matter. There's nothing with such attributes, nothing bound to take you on a journey back in time, and 'The Few' should've known better.'

'What if they could?'

'If they could, they would've definitely found it by now. They no longer look into the things that do matter, they lost their way, in the infinite possibilities the universe has.'

'And what if they did?'

'If they did, Valaart would basically become the center of the galaxy, with all races either pledging alliance, or trying to loot it. It would have been known throughout all the universe by now.'

'But, Dest says that the universe has no limits, how could it be?'

'Well, comparing to our scale, as beings, it's humongous, but for the consciousness, it's a very small place, for they are both limitless.'

'I just don't understand, how could having access to it, would change anything?'

'First, if you've got access to it, you can bend most of the Ikons will. The circuits in electronic devices we use, such as computers, the space ships, digital screens,

you can access all of them, as an energy going through their wires, into the resistors, capacitors, diodes, inductors and transistors. A powerful wanderer as said to have the ability to shut them down. I've never heard of space ships falling from the sky, but if one could, would probably do it by disabling small things, that make a difference as a whole. Those war machines act as an organism, they also need all the bits running smoothly, otherwise, they'll stop working.'

'It sounds immensely powerful.'

'Yes, but one must be prepared. Our mistake was to teach them what was most powerful to us. We once had a generation of them, filled with raw desire and absolutely no distractions. We feel so stupid about slowly losing touch with our millennial connection. We feel stupid about everything that happened. We've learned our lesson. History always repeats itself.'

'Do you think I could ever become one of 'The Few'? A wanderer?'

'I don't know, maybe you could, maybe you couldn't. Why would you want to become one?'

'I would like to see things for what they really are.'

'Are you sure it's not a quest for power? Quests for power are lonely quests boy.'

'I'm not looking for power, I'm looking for myself.'

'I guess this quest is definitely that, to get to know one self. When we finally meet ourselves, we are capable of anything.'

'You must go and see the Dawn-folks,' said Fuzz.

'The Dawn-folks?'

'Yes, the only people in here who might be able to help you. At least point you in the right direction.'

‘Where can I meet them?’

‘They hate to chit-chat though. You can find them lighting the darkest corner in our hideout.’

‘Ok, and where’s this darkest corner?’

‘If you’re really meant to find them, you will find them, just like you found us.’

‘Hum, isn’t it easier to just tell me? Come on Fuzz, please.’

‘Be patient, kid, everything has it’s time.’

‘Ah, come on... This sucks. Why all the mystery?’

‘It’s no mystery, it’s what it is. Suck it up. Don’t expect for everything to be laid right before you.’

‘Ok...’

‘So, who’s up for a bit of Riddel?’ asked Hilda

‘Riddel?’ What’s that?’

‘It’s a digital board game we have. We usually play some games after lunch.’

‘Really? I’m definitely in!’

Hilda got up and went to pick up the box that lied in another room, while everyone at the table continued to talk. When she arrived and opened it, Terry was mesmerized. Floating structure with hidden meanings. Puzzles and mysteries waiting to be solved, if only you were eager to break free. You had to move around the pieces, and most importantly, you had to play with your intuition, with what you feel it’s the right thing to do. The Derks didn’t care about the development of your abstract thinking, while we, give it a huge emphasis. This is probably why even though we didn’t have the greatest shuttles, we went to places they could only dream of. Drangy left discreetly to his workshop, where his radio played some classical music shown by the Derks, the beings from the stars, as they used to call them.

‘Why did you say that Drangy never found a fix for his heart, what happened?’

‘He lost his wife and kid... The saddest story you’ll ever hear. He was just 6 years old, running around the workshop, with laughs so joyful still ringing in our ears. It was a fantastic, festive day in the hideout when Drangy announced his new creation. It was the most ambitious one till that date, and every single one of us showed up for the occasion. A phoenix, as big as we are, made by different types of precious metals, carved with beautiful embellishments that burnt like real fire. No one has a clue how he did it still, it was like magic. As he unveiled it, everyone applauded and cheered, while his son held his leg with both arms. As the newly crafted creature fluttered its wings, Ferdinand ran below it, jumping graciously. The creature had been tested several times before the presentation, but by some stronger will, it fell on top of Ferdinand... It couldn’t beat the weight of gravity. The shock was too much for him to recover from, and he died in Drangy’s arms. His proudest creation became his most infamous one. Yulia, Drangy’s wife, stayed in bed for months. She couldn’t simply move on, the image stood with her and consumed her until it became unbearable. She took her own life, hanging by a white sheet that Drangy used to use as canvas. He never painted again, mainly because he never forgave himself, the things he most loved, died, because of what he thought was his purpose. Because of what he believed. Purpose... Everything’s subjective to one’s perspective you see. I wouldn’t wish any of that to my worst enemy, it’s just so sad. Fortunately he found solace in his workshop, and in his little radio that keeps the bad thoughts away. I think that’s why he’s so fond of you, he understands your pain, what you’re probably going through. What is it like to lose everything. As you stepped through that door, he saw Nand’s entering the workshop again, as if reborn. Like a phoenix. You didn’t have any clue about his pain, but he didn’t tell a joke for god knows how long. The weight pulling that phoenix down,

dragged him as well, and life became a serious matter. A matter of pain. The food, he said, never ever tasted the same... But when we heard him laughing and joking with you, we smiled, because you somehow brought back the Drangy we've used to know. Maybe you were something new his heart needed to see, and your laugh, something his ears needed to hear, a new sparkle of hope his soul was longing for ever since.

'That's so sad, poor Drangy. Wish I could help him, somehow...'

'Ah, don't worry boy, that's a scar only time can heal.'

'I can't understand, in a world where there's billions of people, why some of us, can feel so alone.'

'Me neither... Especially when some choose not to. Sometimes we're the ones who make us feel all alone.'

'I'm really glad I've found you, I don't know what might have happened to me out there, in the wild.'

'Probably your quest for getting to know who you truly are would have been easier. When we're around other people it gets really difficult, we always get lost in what other people think is right. We always follow the stream of thoughts emanating from someone else's mind, in our deteriorated canoes. Most of the times we don't even question, we just take it for granted. Everyone's chiefly wrong and no one's generally right. The truth we're looking for, lies within us. We're the key, the answer to every mystery, and no one can help you to unveil it, no one but yourself.'

'Yeah, I'm starting to feel that. I'm starting to feel different, due to everything I've learned in here. A word, even a thought, can spark a universal change. Your story... How can I know it's what really happened?'

'As Hilda said, you're a fast learner. Question everything. Listen to your intuition boy, what do you think? See, unlike Valaart, we've got nothing to gain, we

think life's more than just a bargain.'

'What about your dignity? A safe place, wouldn't it be something you would have to gain?'

'We're safe here, although we do want to go back to where we truly belong, closer to the stars who bounded us together throughout all these years. Dignity, yes... we've been stripped off of it for far too long though. We're not looking to retake Valaart, we're only looking to shed a bit of light over that dense blinding darkness. After we do, people will make their choices, a choice between dark and light. If they've got a heart, well, then we could finally return in peace. If not to Valaart, to Lorah, where we could dance under the moonlight as we once did, with the only worry being that night not lasting forever.'

'What makes you think that people will stand by you? I'm not sure if telling that someone's wrong is going to do any good. People don't like someone going around and bursting their bubbles. It's such a cozy, magical place. It's like being in a warm womb. I think they won't believe they've been fooled.'

'So, what are we? Why did we come to hide here, underground? How come we've got Ikons? How do we've got all this footage? That's ludicrous, they have to believe. We hold all the information to make them understand what's really going on, that they're the reason why millions of people are enslaved not only in Mouhnia, but throughout the whole galaxy, why millions die, everyday. They hold the power to change it, and to start building a fair system where every being in every planet can live and experience the best they can the miracle that is life. They weren't brought into this place to be subdued by some psychotic bastard, but rather, to transcend into enlightened minds. To transcend beyond the system that won't allow them to be everywhere, at any given time. These miraculous attributes shouldn't belong only to a few, but to



everyone.’

‘You’ve spoke about Mouhnia, that’s where I come from... Are the people there enslaved? Is it possible that my mother is being kept there as a slave? Now I understand why they wouldn’t let us go to Mouhnia... They kept us prisoners in Valaart, distracting us with their lies, saying that regular people can’t go into space because of the harsh conditions. Regular people? They really think we’re just that, and only that right? Nothing amazing, just common folk.’

‘The space conditions are truly harsh Terry, but the real reason they didn’t want anyone outside the ‘Nova Era’ to go to space, was simply because they would have to know more than they should. It would be beautiful, if everyone could, but the misery lying beyond it was something the ‘Nova Era’ couldn’t afford to show. This is why William’s idea of turning Ikons into war machines was, as they think, brilliant. This way, there’s not a lot of generals needed. Ikons can run space ships, and, as it seems, they can run planets, with little to no help from humans, so they can keep their power concentrated, and people... People are nothing but toils to their selfish endeavors, so they can continue to rule without regard. It’s all about power.’

‘What about my mom?’

‘About your mother, well, when Fuzz went to take a glass of water for you, he met Boris, the head of the hackers guild, and they’ve ran a fast check-up on all your ancestors history. There was a file we couldn’t access but we’ve found out that... Well, the record say’s you were... well, that she died... In Mouhnia. I’m sorry.’

‘My father didn’t tell me that she died in Mouhnia... Why? Why would he hide it from me? It’s not a big deal, but there’s no reason.’

‘I guess that’s not the only thing he hid from you... Maybe he was trying to protect you. He might have been harsh with you but probably was only because he

cared.’

‘He didn’t care about anything other than himself.’

‘We’re all a little bit like that, aren’t we?’

‘No, my journey here isn’t about working solely for myself, but to work towards the interest of everyone else. If I work towards them, I’m sure I’m working towards myself.’

‘One could say if you’re working towards yourself, then you’re working towards everyone else, too.’

‘No, because to work towards oneself, means being egoistic enough to disregard the feelings of others, prioritizing yours. That leads to a feeling of entitlement. You can’t work only on yourself... That’s not how organisms, how systems work.’

‘It’s actually how a cancer grows, isolated and alone,’ completed Dest.

‘If I’m going to be happy, well, my happiness might be in the way of someone else’s happiness. It shouldn’t be independent, but rather complementary.’

‘Now that you say it, it actually makes sense, maybe it’s because of working too much towards oneself that they became detached of everything. Maybe being detached is actually bad, that’s why Anansi, Arkys and Nyame turned on us. They no longer had any connection with us, so they just didn’t care. They’ve been living for so long in their worlds, that they’ve ceased to live in ours.’

‘I think there should be a balance between all of this.’

‘Indeed, work in yourself, but work towards everyone else too. That’s probably the best one can aim to do.’

As Terry finished the phrase, Hilda was able to solve the puzzle.

‘I did it! Your turn!’

‘I never played this before, I’m not sure I’ll be able to solve it.’ Said Terry while

holding his forehead.

‘Well, these are presets puzzles carefully devised by the engineers guild. The painters guild gave it a wonderful look, while the conceptual ones, found utility for them. You see, by solving these puzzles, you can tell a lot about the person that’s doing it. It can show intuition, logic, even personality traits. One doesn’t mean much, but a bunch, start to have a meaning, you start to see patterns in the peoples choices.’

‘Everything’s so thought off. Why can’t this be just an entertaining game?’

‘Why can’t it be more than that? Aren’t you the one that is looking for himself? What if this game can help you?’

‘I’m not sure a game can help define who I am.’

‘Maybe it can’t define who you are, but it might hold some answers. People need to pay more attention to the things happening around them, because these things are always trying to speak to them.’

‘Yeah I know, everything happens for a reason... That’s what Dest always say.’

‘We like to believe so as well.’

Terry played with the parts for a while, until he unlocked something. He placed all the spheres in between what it looked like as mountain poles, and finished the first level by doing so.

‘This one was easy,’ he said, feeling pretty confident.

‘Yes, the first one is just for you to explore the limitless possibilities. This game has a pretty smooth learning curve. The next ones will have different outcomes, and all your choices will matter.’

‘Ok, bring it on!’

As Hilda changed the game, Terry started to experiment with all the objects. It’s like learning how to ride a bike for the first time. It’s very stimulating, although, quite tiring

too. You might get bored at first because you don't quite understand it, but, being persistent pays off, and this is also something the game tries to show you, by giving you bits and parts of the story, while you experience the sound track and mood. There are collectibles too, that will upload directly to your Ikon, such as paintings after the levels are done, or, inspiring messages in the end, that can be projected. The Ikons retain all the information, and learn from it too.

'Ok kids, have fun, I'm off to no good,' said Grub, standing up.

'Me too,' said Fuzz as he reached his pocket for a cigarette.

'You should quit that shit man,' advised Grub.

'The problem is, this shit won't quit me,' said Fuzz with a smile on his face and the cigarette hanging in his mouth.

Terry got distracted for a second.

'How do you grow tobacco in here?' he asked.

'We've got crops. We've also developed our own artificial sun.'

'How did you do that?'

'Based on the, well, you probably know about the Ninkukus, right?'

'Those ethereal beings you can find in Lorah?'

'Yeah, that's right. See, they exist through the fusion of hydrogen atoms, similar to our suns. So what we did is replicate it in a larger scale, and voilà! It's energy is enough for the plants to thrive, but unfortunately, we don't get to experience them floating... Maybe that's why they taste different. Anyway, they're edible, and we're really grateful for that. Those creatures are so inspiring... They are the forests guardians. They were once made of flesh. Their carapaces were fire agates while their skin was made of molten rock. They migrate, just like birds, but into a much more special place, well, at least we like to think so. They delve deep into the planet's core, and slowly

disintegrate as they reach it. What remains is an ethereal being who then travels back to the earth's surface. We used to connect through them, you see, when they meet someone, they immediately reach for their souls. They do it to acknowledge you are there. Before the beings of the stars came, they participated in all the rituals we threw in the forest. We say threw because the truth is, it was indeed like a party. Everyone got out of their selves. Sometimes you have to. You can't really take everything so seriously, you have to chill out a bit. They are aware and they make sure you understand it. We thought of them as the ones keeping the forests safe, for they will eat the impurities of unworthy beings. Maybe that's why some Valaarians are so afraid of going to these forests nowadays.'

'Yes, Hilda told me. We've learned they are the worst creatures who ever existed but we didn't know they travel to the very core of the planet. Why would they go there?'

'It's the only place where they can turn their worries into ashes.'

'What about these structures made of... what are these structures made of anyway?'

'The foundations are mostly copper, iron, and steel. But the outside is mainly wood. It's natural and... It's a bit of Lorah.'

'And, what about those materials, how do you have access to them?'

'Oh, we're underground already so the prospecting of such minerals is not a problem, although we did find an invaluable way of getting them easier. The moles gang, as we call them, is a race who built millions of underground passages. They've been doing them ever since they've left the seas. Besides having millions of underground passages, they have millions of mineral deposits, from malachite to iron ore. They eat rock, everyday, and there's one thing they came across, they can't live

without. Drangy's food. That's right, we trade our most amazing dishes for minerals. That's why we are so good at it, we always felt we should deliver meals that would leave them dreaming of more. As we say, these meals are bound to take you somewhere new, and for them, it meant life.'

'Will I meet them?'

'Of course, they're here every full moon.'

'How do you know if it's full moon or not?'

'Ah, we used to... Now we're not so sure anymore. It used to be around 29 days between each full moon, when time wasn't timeless. It doesn't matter anyway. A day sooner, a day later... Fortunately, we're always home.'

'I love the moon... It's the most mysterious thing in the whole universe,' said Hilda.

'Indeed, it's graceful. It keeps balance in all things. And all things answer to that balance... Ok, now I really have to go. See you soon,' said Grub straightening his chair.

'Me too, got things to do,' said Fuzz right after.

'You never do anything Fuzz,' said Hilda grinning.

'Show some respect, I've done more than you ever will, insolent child.' Replied Fuzz with his finger up in the air, in a fun manner, as if acting.

'No need to offend, I was just kidding,' said Hilda.

'I was kidding too. Have a good one.'

'See you later Fuzz!' said Terry.

Fuzz and Grub went on their way, and Hilda plans to spend some time alone with Terry finally came to be.

'Do you want me to take you somewhere special?' she asked.

'Of course, where?'

‘I cannot tell you, but it will be somewhere really beautiful.’

‘Am I invited too?’ Asked Dest from a distance as if nothing but a moving statue.

‘Of course you are, silly,’ replied Hilda with the most purest smile a child could have.

‘Sure... but what about these?’ Asked Terry as he glanced at the table full of dirty dishes, napkins and glasses.’

‘Oh no, they tricked us! Sneaky bastards. They left everything for us to clean. This is so unfair.’

‘We didn’t cook so it seems appropriate.’

‘Neither did they! she said while standing up and starting to pile the dishes.

‘Let me help you,’ said Terry taking the beer tanks and glasses in his hands. They sneaked into the kitchen, and dropped everything in the first sink they’ve came across, while disappearing amidst the confusion through a back door. As they were about to step foot outside of the kitchen someone grabbed them by their scruffs.

‘Where do you guys think you’re going?’ Asked Ek.

They both lowered their heads and headed back to the sink. Unfortunately for them, while they were trying to sneak out, the pile doubled in size. Hilda quickly checked the corners but found no one.

‘See, that’s what you get for trying to be smart asses. We’re all equal here, we all need to help,’ said Ek.

‘We weren’t going to sneak out without washing Ek, obviously. You know me, I would never do that!’

‘Ha-ha, yes, it’s exactly because I know you too well that I foreseen your evasive tactics. This isn’t the arena kid.’

‘Ugh, you’re no fun,’ murmured Hilda as she moved closer to the sink.

‘I’ve got to go to the bathroom, I’ll be right back,’ said Terry.

‘What? Now? How convenient!’ Yes, leave me here all alone to do the dishes.

Let's not break traditions!’

‘You should hire the new kid Hilda, he’s going to be a great Shrouder. My predictions are always right, always.’

‘Yes, unfortunately you couldn’t predict the blast that sent your Ikon to the ground, defeating your team in the most amazing arena duel the hideout has ever seen.’

‘Pff, like you were even there. Don’t talk about things you’ve only heard of, miss. It was nothing like that.’

‘How was it? Asked Terry in a hurry.’

‘The truth is...’

‘Ok sorry, but I really have to go to the bathroom. I’ll listen to it later, seriously.’

‘Ha-ha ok, just go already before Hilda has to clean your pee too.’

‘Hey, what are we coming to? This is a plot against me! Beware of my soaper powers! I’ll cleanse you all from your ill intentions, mortal beings!’ aaid Hilda as she threw soap bubbles towards them.

Ek laughed while he cleaned his goggles and his beard with his rubber gloves.

‘So, how are you both getting along?’ asked Ek.

‘It’s great, I really like him. It felt like forever since I could really show someone who I truly am. The Kelen, the Barzen, I can’t identify with none.’

‘Sometimes it’s tough but as you can see it gets better. Jumpie has been crazy about it, raising a lot of suspicions among us. He almost got us divided. Do you think he’s a spy?’

‘He’s not. You can tell right away.’



‘How can you tell?’

‘It’s something in his mild eyes, they don’t allow him to lie.’

‘I also think so. He seemed a cool kid. Grub and Fuzz have this theory about him...’

‘What theory?’

‘They are thinking he might be a children of the crescent moon. The fables say these special kids grow up to be wanderers.’

‘Why would they say that? He seems perfectly normal to me.’

‘Due to his connection with Dest. It’s far more deep than any other we’ve seen. This shows an aptness to delve into networks, and you know what that means.’

‘They are just making up stories. He has an indigo light, it’s only natural. ‘The Few’ are dying. The trinity comprising the last of their kin are fighting the wrong enemy, everyone knows, even I know that. The ones who could stand up to him can’t develop their senses amidst these dirty, dark walls. He might show an inclination towards feeling the system, and breathing it, but it doesn’t mean he can become it.’

‘That’s true, but maybe he could help us. I mean, really help us.’

‘We can’t ask him that. Please don’t ask him that. It would sound like we’re befriending him to get something in return.’

‘It’s not about getting something in return or anything like it... I’m just saying, he could help us. Bear that in mind.’

‘I’ll but there’s a lot of if’s, first he has to be apt, then, he has to master it, after he masters it, he has to want to help us, and if he decides to help us, he has to be successful helping us.’

‘Helping who?’ asked Terry as he arrived with his zipper still open.

‘Terry...’ said Hilda looking down his crotch.

‘Oops.’

‘Ok kids, have fun, by the look of that sink, I’m sure you will. See you next week.’

‘Next week?’ Why next week?’ asked Terry.

‘I don’t think you’re leaving any sooner champ.’

‘Yeah right. This is easy. Dest will help us!’

‘And how do you imagine I can be of help, sir?’

‘I pass them through water, Hilda washes them, since she has soaper powers, and you dry them! Just try not to fry them ok.’

‘You would first win a battle in arena before I would fry them!’

‘Ha-ha, yeah right.’

The trio got down to it, and as the last drop of water fell down the drain between all the smiles and laughs, the dishes were as glistening as their eyes. Since they did it so quickly, they also helped cleaning the wooden floor, leaving it immaculate.

Hilda threw the mop and left running while Terry stowed them in the store room.

‘Come on! We have to get there before the moon rises.’

‘I’m going, but someone always leaves a mess everywhere.’ said Terry

‘The only mess in here is you,’ she said giggling, while heading towards a back door. There were stairs spiraling down through endless levels where plants grew in between the cracks. The inner walls had oval windows where you could see all the way down until the bottom. You could count the levels, for each had an orange light, illuminating the pathway. Their lightning speed enabled them to skip some of these very worn-out steps, so worn-out you could almost see the dirt beneath them. Terry followed closely to Hilda, for he almost knew the way as good as she did. They turned left into a hall, with lots of paintings hanging. Dest was having a hard time keeping track of

everything, it was too much information for such little time.

‘Can we move slower? I want to appreciate all of this!’ asked Dest.

‘Not really, you’ll have plenty of time to delve in these forgotten rooms, now, I really, really want to show you guys something.’

‘Why does everyone assume I’m a boy?’ asked Dest confused.

‘Ha-ha, I told you!’ said Terry, looking back at him.

They came across a huge entrance, and from beneath, you could see a natural spring, where the water fell from above, along with some faded light beams through a hole in the ceiling. You could see particles of dust slowly moving in the trails. The plants, bushes and roots, fell into this turquoise lake in the same manner the water did. Fluorescent stalactites served as home for a huge variety of fungus, while underneath the water, orange fish with purple stripes fed on emerald looking corals.

‘This is wonderful. I’ve never seen an underground natural spring.’

‘I knew you would like it... This is the closest to home we’re allowed to be. It’s sacred, right where nature meets. It’s where I come to think about... things.’ said Hilda, rolling up her jeans and immersing her feet in the water. The orange fish surrounded them thinking it was food.

Terry sat right beside her while Dest was still drifting around, completely amazed.

‘These are some great shots I’m saving! There’s nothing like having a memory, even if it’s a digital one! Now I can come back to this place whenever I want. How amazing is that?’ asked Dest.

Hilda and Terry laughed, while looking up and watching the stream of water finding it’s way into the pond.

‘What happened to your arm?’ she asked.

‘Nothing important.’

‘Must have been something important Terry. You lost your arm.’

‘I... I had a fight with my father. I was, I mean, I have always been sort of rebellious. I remember falling but can’t remember anything else. I woke up at the hospital, and he was by my side with his hands buried on his face. I looked down and... I didn’t have my arm. I thought it was a dream. More of a nightmare. But it wasn’t. I remember thinking of all the things I wanted to do if I had both arms. No one ever wakes up and says - Wow! I’ve got everything! I’ve got my arms! I’m going to paint, to play guitar, to hold a girls hand! - No one. You only appreciate what you have when you lose it.’

Hilda took off her goggles for a moment, but a part of it remained in her left eye.

‘See?’

‘How... what happened? You have a bionic eye!’

‘It was in the arena. A lost blast from one of the Ikons passed really close to my sight. It burnt not only my eyes but my skin too. At least this covers the scars,’ she said, looking down at her reflection in the water.

‘Can you see normally?’

‘Yes, I can actually see better! I can even see at night! After this I became amazing in the arena, almost as if I knew what the other Ikons were going to do. I know the exact distances! Feldrang always upgrades it as a birthday gift. Don’t tell anyone though.’

‘That’s amazing. After I’ve got my bionic arm, I became better at sports! I never had so much strength. My friends would watch me throw stones that would go above the clouds. I could even break bricks!’

‘For me it was like watching everything in high-definition. It’s like our weaknesses became our strengths.’

‘Indeed. Never thought about it that way.’ said Terry while looking around and noticing a peculiar looking door, covered in moss, roots and rust. ‘What’s that?’ he asked.

‘It’s a labyrinth, conceived by the first generation of nobles. It’s a coming of age ritual, where kids grow into adults. It fell into disuse over the years, now it’s even dangerous to go in there because the walls might collapse.’

‘Why did it fell into disuse?’

‘Gale, a kid who enjoyed everything about metallurgy, stepped in, and never came back. It’s an unsolved mystery, still.’

‘How could it be?’

‘No one knows, if we did, we could’ve helped him.’

‘So strange... What was the ritual all about?’

‘It started as a spectacle of light. They filled the pond with petals and candles, where the first to be alight signaled the start, and the last candle to burn down, meant your time was up. They sang a mantra while you tried to decipher the first riddle in the door, leading to a small corridor where webs fell from the ceilings. Their removal was a metaphor for the renewal of the old conceptions you've held since you were a child. The small attic you were raised in needed empty space for new ideas to arise, new concepts to be born, that are patiently waiting for you on the other side of this labyrinth. You would be reborn with a completely clear mind. The first hall, there's nothing but a pitch black room, where you see more with you eyes shut than open. The experience differs from one another for our perceptions are quite different. But after, after you feel a wholeness. Although we all feel different, in the end, we all feel the same. Joy and sorrow, comes through different persons and events, but the core, the core is identical. You start to question though, does our feelings evolve with time? Have we loved,

before? Love, as it is portrayed now. Is it a novelization, is it our desire to give a meaning to everything we feel? The questions keep adding up once inside, and that's why some have lost their minds, others, disappeared. The chambers in the labyrinth keep changing as you progress, and they are bound through the choices you've made before, like a living organism. Folk said it had a mind of its own.'

'I wish I knew what other mysteries lied behind those doors.'

'I don't think you do, you see, Gale, was the first disappearing but he wasn't the last. What you see and hear in there can't be forgotten. It stays with you until you die. Quite a change, huh?'

'Yes. Why would they make kids undergo such wickedness?'

'To make them understand that they have to go through darkness if they are to see the light.'

'That's sort of traumatic, no?'

'What's traumatic is seeing your beloved ones getting killed, right before your eyes. Not so much for this, I guess. The maze messes with your psyche, most of the things they saw in the labyrinth, weren't even there in the first place. They were built by the thousands of tales made around it. Some say the only real thing in there is a small corridor leading into an empty, pitch black room. The rest of the labyrinth is built by your brain, upon your insecurities and fears. This is just what folks used to say about it. We can say anything we want, but it doesn't necessarily make it true.'

'Weren't you ever curious about what's lying on the other side?'

'Not really. I can find myself easily without having to go through ancient rituals and fables. Those things, belong in the past, along with the people who believed in them. For it to work, you have to believe in them, and I don't.'

'Why not?'

‘Because I believe in the stars and in their way. The way that their light unveils within me.’

‘Well you said it messes with the psyche, so after all, this labyrinth might be a journey within.’

‘I guess in the end, it’s whatever we want it to be.’

‘I would love to take a peek.’

‘Terry, promise me you won’t do it.’

‘I can’t promise you that.’

‘Why not? It’s dangerous in there.’

‘Valaart said that Lorah was dangerous too, and once I was in it, it was the most wonderful place I’ve ever been to.’

‘Yes, but unlike them, I am not a liar... Just promise me, I beg you.’

‘Ok, ok, I promise.’

‘Let me see your hands.’

‘You don’t believe me?’

‘I do. But let me see them.’

‘Ugh, ok, here they are.’

‘Let me see your feet.’

‘What? You really don’t believe me, do you?’

‘Take off your shoes, now!’

‘See? Nothing. What are you going to ask me to take off next, my pants?’

As Terry finished the sentence Hilda pushed him off the verge into the pond. The splash sent some water drops running down Hilda’s hair.

‘No, that, you’ll have to do it yourself, either you want it or not. Smart pants.’

Terry tried to hit Hilda with water splashes from below, but they only got halfway. The

golden fishes circled Terry, while he kept afloat.

‘Aren’t people afraid of those stalactites falling and hitting them right in the eyes?’

‘You’re more likely to drown than to die from a falling stalactite. Unlike us, they aren’t going anywhere.’

‘Sometimes I think I’m not going anywhere, too.’

‘Why would you say that? You came all the way here, how aren’t you going anywhere?’

‘I mean with my life.’

‘This is your life, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, but, I want to be great in the arena too.’

‘You and your Valaarian mind-set.’

‘What? What’s wrong with it?’

‘Always worrying.’

‘We must worry sometimes, right?’

‘Sometimes, we do, yes, but that’s exactly what might keep you from achieving everything you want, because if you worry all the time you got no time left to do what you’re supposed to.’

‘What is it that I’m supposed to do?’

‘Live, Terry, live. That’s what you’re supposed to do. That’s what we’re all supposed to do. You know, there was once a man who spent a lifetime searching for the mystery of life. He was so obsessed with it, that his life became one big mystery. A big riddle. Everything was a code with a hidden meaning for him, even his family. When he got really old and stopped searching, just waiting to die, it came to him. He finally had solved the mystery of life. In that moment he understood that while he was seeking



answers for this riddle, life passed him by, and didn't wave him goodbye. Life's not meant to be understood, life's meant to be lived. There was nothing to life, nothing, other than, living it. That was the mystery. Sometimes we look for things that just can't be found. If we stop searching, what we're looking for will eventually come to us. Then of course he made up something about the afterlife. What's a man to do if not convince himself he was right? There's nothing out there, there's no mission, there's just life.'

'And what if there is a mission? What if we were brought here on a quest?'

'What quest?'

'First would be to forget, forget everything we think we know, so we can remember, remember everything we think we can't. We've already transcended from animals, to something more. What if our mission is to never break this cycle? To be constantly evolving? To live endlessly exploring the limitless universe, exploring the limitless possibilities this place has to offer? First we sailed through the sea, now we're sailing through space. What if there's something more out there, we have absolutely no clue about, and we should set sail towards to? Why risk eternity? Why risk it all?'

'It makes sense, but, nothing lasts forever Terry.'

'How can you be so sure?'

'We're only passengers in this place.'

'We're more than that. We just don't know yet.'

'We're not supposed to last forever...'

'Exactly, we're not supposed to... But we could, if we wanted to. We could set aside the brief delights, for an eternal one.'

'And what is the delight that lasts forever?'

'This.'

'What this?'

‘Being.’

‘Being what? You're confusing me.’

‘Just being. The future generations, all of them, just being, you know.’

‘No, I don't know. Being what?’

‘Being, being themselves, being humans. Doing things only we can do. Writing, painting, playing, singing, cooking, inventing, thinking... Feeling... Being. There's a reason why we're called human beings.’

‘So what you're saying is that, our mission in here, is to choose the paths that will make us live forever?’

‘Us, as species, not you and I.’

‘Yes, I got that part.’

‘We could go hand in hand you know, towards places we never thought they existed.’

‘You mean, me and you?’

‘Me and you, and everybody else.’

‘Will you take me, wherever is it you're going?’

‘You want to come?’

‘I would love to.’

Terry got out of the pond with his hair, shirt and jeans, still dripping. He told Hilda to get on his back.

‘Where are we going?’ she asked as she held him close with her arms around his neck.

‘I don't know, I never knew where I was going, but I guess we're about to find out,’ he replied already running. They went back into this hall where a door that lead to a future yet to be known, was ajar. He opened it with his feet and ran right into the

stairs, into the light, while Hilda softly bumped in his back with each step he took. As they reached the top they came across a huge room with a crystal chandelier in the middle.

‘Where’s Dest?’ she asked.

‘He’s exploring.’

‘How'd you know?’

‘If he’s not here, he must be exploring,’ said Terry, crouching, while Hilda got off his back.

‘You’re all wet,’ he said with water still dripping from his pants and shoes. He went towards an old record player standing in the corner. He took some dust out of the vinyl, took the needle into the middle, and turned the hand crank 'few times. A beautiful vintage melody started to play. Hilda moved closer to his body, snatched his hand and they started to dance. The squeaking sound of his shoes made Hilda burst into laughter.

‘What are you doing?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know. You said I can go wherever you're going, so that’s what I’m doing.’ she said.

‘This is awkward... I don’t know how to dance.’

‘You’re doing fine, stop worrying. This is how it should be, you should dance accordingly. Let me guide you.’

‘What if I don’t want to dance?’

‘Then just stop.’

‘I want to stop but my feet keeps moving! I can’t control it.’

‘Shh, don’t spoil it. Just close your eyes.’

They closed their eyes and kept dancing in circles to the old sound coming out of the music box. The higher the moon rose, the closer they got.

‘Ahem.’ said Dest.

Terry pushed Hilda immediately, while moving backwards and falling.

‘Is this how it’s going to be? You’re just going to leave your friends in the middle of nowhere. You didn’t even remember I was there!’

‘Of course I did, we don’t have to be always together. Besides, you said we should go slowly so you can explore. That’s what we did.’

‘No it was not! You ran off and left me there. What a friend.’

‘Come on, we have all the time to be together, you know that right?’

‘So sweet, the both of you. Do you guys sleep together too?’

‘Yes, we’ve always slept together.’ said Dest.

‘Not only you have the eyes, but you sound just like him too! No, we’ve never slept together. He just stands there, he’s an Ikon. What’s up with you? Are you jealous? Of an Ikon?’

‘Pff, me, jealous, right. Let’s get you a change of clothes, squeaky squeaky.’

‘I’m not squeaky squeaky.’

‘You will be until we get there.’

‘Humpf.’

## CHAPTER SIX - THE SOUL ECLIPSE

Hilda and Terry went back to their dorms leaving a wet trail of emotions behind. From the old dirt cracks on the floor flowers of all colors bloomed.

‘I’ll see you at dinner,’ he said.

‘No, I’ll knock on your door earlier and we can go together. Ah, I almost forgot, prepare something for the everlasting night.’

‘Everlasting night?’

‘Yeah, today is the longest night of the year, and we usually hang out together until the sun rises. People go on stage, and everyone can do whatever they feel like. Some play, some dance, some cite poetry, others just talk gibberish. Szeb last year chugged down a whole bottle of vodka and fell unconscious on the stage. What an idiot.’

‘I think I can top that.’

‘Ha-ha, I’m sure you do.’

Terry closed the door and stood there gazing towards the wall, thinking ‘What am I supposed to do?’.

‘You have to help me Dest.’

‘What a short memory you have. Why should I help you? You just left me standing there, in the middle of nowhere.’

‘Come on, now’s not the time. The show will start soon, I have to change clothes

and I don't have time to think of what I'm going to do, or even what am I going to say? There's nothing really interesting I can tell them. There's nothing interesting I can tell anyone.'

'Just go up on stage and... do whatever comes to your mind.'

'That's really, really helpful. Thanks bud. That's exactly what I'm going to do.'

'I'm glad to be of help.'

'Are you crazy? There has to be another way than just getting up there and improvise. I have to think of something.'

'You don't even have to go on that stage, Terry.'

'Yeah, why am I worrying. If I don't want, I don't have to, it's up to me after all.'

'Exactly. It's your choice, and yours alone.'

'I've been thinking about that labyrinth...'

'You haven't reached it, and yet, you're already there.'

'What do you mean?'

'You're already puzzled about it, you're already in it.'

'I just said I've been thinking...'

'It's the same. If you're thinking about being there, it means your mind is navigating through it already.'

'Might be. I'm just curious about what lies within those walls... I was thinking, since this is going to be such a big party, they probably won't miss me for couple of hours.'

'I'm not sure you should go in there.'

'Me neither, but remember what Fuzz said about the Dawnfolks? They can be found in the darkest corner of the hideout. It got me thinking... Today, is the darkest

night too. It has to mean something, right?’

‘I don’t think so, besides Hilda said it’s abandoned, there’s nothing in there. It’s even dangerous. We probably won’t make it through the first riddle.’

‘If I’m going, I think I’ll have to go alone. That path, is one I must walk by myself.’

‘I understand. If I’m there with them, it makes it less suspicious. If they ask anything I’ll just say you went to the bathroom.’

‘That would be really helpful. I think I’m just going with this purple shirt, this black jeans and black jacket, what do you think?’

‘It creates a great contrast. We’re matching.’

‘I can hear Grub and his jokes already.’

‘So pick up something different. There’s a lot to choose from in there.’

‘No, I don’t care. He can say whatever he wants. If I like it I’m wearing it, I’m not going to change just to please him.’

‘Fine.’

As Dest finished his sentence, someone knocked on the door.

‘Who is it?’

‘It’s Hilda, silly. Are you ready?’

‘No, I need couple more minutes. How come you were so fast?’

‘How come you are so slow? There’s all sorts of food in the tables already. Can’t you hear the music?’

‘Yes yes, I’ll be out in a minute.’

Terry opened the door and stood there with his mouth open, staring at Hilda. She was looking gorgeous, with a yellow dress that went below her knees. Her hair was held tightly together with a grip.

‘Hello? Are you going to say something or just stand there like a creepy retard?’

‘You look... Wonderful.’

‘Thanks, you too. What’s up with the purple? Is it to match Dest?’

‘I knew it. No, It’s just because I like purple, that’s all.’

‘Ok. It looks good on you. You’re not going with those boots, are you?’

‘I am.’

‘There are all sorts of shoes in the lower shelves. They are made to fit anyone’s feet, expandable and indispensable. They last for decades.’

‘I’m comfortable with these. It’s not like a super fancy event, is it?’

‘It’s not, but since you’re my date...’

‘Your date? You didn’t even ask me if I want to be your date.’

‘You don’t have a lot of options, do you? I mean unless you and Dest...’

‘Ok, ok. I’ll be your date.’

Hilda smiled and hugged Terry. They went towards a hall made to celebrate such events. It was so big it could host the entire hideout. As you entered, the stage stood right in front of you, surrounded by huge statues of the most important figures in Valaart’s history. Some people sat on their huge hands made of clay, while others on the ears. The kids hanged on the statues beards that fell as if waterfalls into the ground. The roots from the floating trees embraced the statues heads, consuming them, becoming them. From small holes in between their lips, incense smoke rose leaving behind a lavender perfume in the air. Behind their jumbo jade eyes you could see the hall as if from a kaleidoscope. There were four big pillars in the corners, and the ceiling was decorated with all sorts of different lights. On the left some were painting on the celebration wall and leaving love letters. Others left their finger prints, while Szeb, of course, left his forehead print. The only forehead print on the wall.



‘Why’d you leave a forehead print Szeb?’ the children asked.

‘I’d leave my fingerprints if I could hold these pints with my head,’ he replied laughing, with a pink stain on his brow. He stopped for a moment realizing a zenith.

‘Oh, no! We gave him another idea!’ the children said, running away.

The tables were spread throughout the room, and there were already lots of people in a hurry, bringing empty dishes to refill. Grub was helping, or trying at least. The most clumsy waitress one as ever seen. If he took twenty dishes in, it meant he broke at least forty. They often think Grub does it on purpose so he doesn’t have to be a waitress. He learned that trick from someone, called Abi. She would cook such horrible things that everyone refrained to have her near the kitchen. Unfortunately for her, cleaning toilets wasn’t something requiring a huge amount of technique. Szeb is the only one who goes to all the events and never helps, or enjoys. He always ends up passed out at some weird place. Where’s Szeb, is a game the Nobles invented, and after every party, they set out to discover where Szeb is. People have found him already in the bathtub, taped to the ceiling, floating inside the beer keg and below the sink with water dripping on his head. That day he woke up without a hangover due to all the water going through his mouth while he slept. In the first hour he’s the life of the party, but after, he’s the death of it. Terry picked appetizers from all the volunteers passing by, while swirling through them almost as if he was dancing.

‘So did you prepare something?’ asked Hilda.

Terry lifted his arm close to his mouth, while he gulped down all the things he took from the serving trays.

‘No, I’m not going up on stage.’

‘Why not?’ she asked

‘I don’t feel like. I don’t enjoy having all the spotlights on me.’

‘What is there not to like about them?’

‘If you live your life beneath them, you might go blind.’

‘You might go blind as well, if you live your life in the dark.’

‘I’ll never live in the dark, Dest is always there to light my way.’

‘Don’t be so sure about it.’

‘Why not?’

‘You can’t say words like always. Things change you know. Someday Dest might not be there for you.’

‘Aren’t you supposed to be the optimistic one?’

Hilda’s guild appeared from Terry’s back and a smile coasted on her face.

‘Rug, Tzu, Jun! I’m so glad to see you guys. Lux! You look even better than before!’ she said.

‘Was tough, we have to be more careful next time. Rug, you have to keep covering at all costs,’ said Jun.

‘I did my best,’ said Rug.

‘If you had tackled their discharger sooner...’ said Tzu.

‘You aren’t part of the team, Tzu. Shut up.’ said Jun.

‘That’s why I’m telling you, I had a clearer vision of the battle,’ he said.

‘Guys, we’ve won ok, it should be enough. We all did our best.’

‘We could’ve done better,’ said Jun.

‘We’re the ones out there taking the blows. Don’t think so highly of yourselves, ok?’ said Lux, getting closer to Dest and analyzing him thoroughly. ‘What a strange shape this one has,’ she thought.

‘So, is this your new friend, Hilda?’ asked Jun, while taking a good look at Terry.

‘Yes, he’s Terry, but you probably know him by now. Who doesn’t, right.’

‘Hey Terry, I’m Rug. Nice to meet you. I personally like to welcome you to our place. I hope you’re having a good time.’

‘Thanks, Rug. It’s nice to meet you too. I’m having the best time of my life. Is there anything better than learn from others experiences and share our own?’

‘Where did you leave your spacecraft dude? Are you sure this isn’t an automaton, Hilda?’ You probably know it by now, right?’ asked Jun.

‘What’s wrong with you? Being jealous in front of us doesn’t make you the tough guy you wish you were.’

‘You wish you were half as tough as I am, girl.’

Jun left, feeling good about his line, and Rug followed him.

‘Let me guess, he’s Jumpie’s son.’

‘No, he’s not Jumpie’s son... He’s just jealous. He’s in love with me ever since we were kids. I like him as a friend, but that’s it.’

‘Aren’t you in the same team?’

‘Yes, but it doesn’t mean we don’t argue.’

‘Not everyone’s a good person Terry, you have to understand that. For as much love there is in the universe, there will always be as much hate.’ said Dest.

‘I guess... What an idiot. “You wish you were half as tough as I am, girl.” Said Terry, mocking Jun’s voice. ‘And what about Rug? What’s his story?’

‘He’s very shy. He’s too good of a guy around girls. That’s what got him his name. Never be a Rug, Terry. Never.’ said Hilda.

‘If it’s who he is, what’s wrong with it? The problem isn’t him being too good, the problem is people being too bad. He for sure lacks assertiveness, just the way he followed Jun after he left tells a lot about him, but with a little help I’m sure he could

find his inner voice and learn how to follow it. I'm sure it's way better than following Jun's.'

'Jun can be a bit of an ass sometimes, but he can also be a good friend.'

'If you say so. Hope I'll get to see that side of him soon,' said Terry.

'So Hilda, what have you prepared for tonight?' asked Tzu.

'Nothing special. It's going to be a theatre piece. A tale I've wrote about a girl who got lost in the wilderness. She wandered days on end crying, trying to find something familiar, something she could take comfort in. The more she searched, the less she found. Before she finally gave in, she shouted out loud - Why? - She heard the why again, and again, shouted back at her. She got up from her knees with her faith renewed and followed the voice, through a trail up a mountain, always shouting 'Why?'. The more she shouted, the more she questioned, why was she sad? What was it she really wanted? As she got up in the peak of the mountain, she gave one last shout why, and, the why surrounded her. It came from everywhere. The sun shone from high above and cast her shadow on the wide fields and lakes standing below her. Even though she was small, her shadow was standing tall. She saw her reflection in the lake and stopped for a minute. That's what she was looking for, she was looking for herself, and all it took was to question, what is it she wanted. Her own voice guided her there. The only thing on the vast wilderness that could give her comfort, was no one, but herself. She was no longer lost. She had herself. Sometimes we search for things that we don't even know what they are. That's why we never find them. The most beautiful treasures, lie deep within us. For a second there, she saw everything for what it really is. She saw the trees, birds, rivers and waterfalls, and they were nothing but reminders of the passage of time.'

'That's cool. Now I'm ashamed of what I've prepared.' Said Tzu.

‘What is it? Asked Terry.

‘My father wants me to sing a hymn. I don’t like singing because I suck at it. I like doing things I’m good at.’

‘If you keep trying you’ll be an amazing singer,’ said Terry.

‘How do you know? You haven’t even heard me sing.’

‘Because that’s what we do. We fail and we fail, until we finally attain.’

‘That’s it! I just have to keep trying. Jun always makes fun of me. I don’t understand why some people try to bring other people spirits down.’

‘Their spirit is so low that they do it hoping yours will keep them company. It’s a really lonely place, down there,’ said Terry.

‘I think they do it because when your spirit is low, it’s easier to stamp on it,’ said Hilda.

Thunderous sounds came from above and filled the hall. They looked at the ceiling and saw lots of colors bursting intermittently. The show started.

‘Look, these are our fireworks! They are created digitally, with synchronized sounds to make it as real as possible. That’s the technology I’ll be using during my play! Let’s go to the first row!’

They got up front, and stood there, while thousands others stopped doing whatever they were doing and joined them, quietly. The lights went out while a soft spot light was pointed towards the middle of the stage. You could start to see dancers appearing out of nowhere. You only saw them briefly, as they hid in the shadows, only to appear again under the light. The loud bass of the ambient sounds were shaking the ground. You could feel your soul reverberating. Lights became more intense as the music and the dance unfolded. From nothing, everything was born, and each glowing spotlight represented a star, and the performers were planets dancing around the stars standing in

the center, like a beautiful waltz. This signaled the beginning of a wonderful night. As soon as the spectacle was over, everyone applauded, and instead of being the audience throwing roses at them, it was them, throwing roses at the spectators, because they knew that none of this would be possible if it weren't for them.

'I'm going to be the first! I'm going to be the first!' Screamed Hilda at the top of her lungs.

'Can't wait to see you up there,' replied Terry.

Tzu didn't say anything for he was still trying to catch the roses that fell at their feet. Hilda went backstage to prepare her play. She asked Lux to project the background scene into the wall to make sure everything was ok. Terry became nervous, as he told Tzu he was going to the bathroom. The adrenaline built up in him. As he walked, it was almost as if he was floating. He took a last glance at the crowd and at Dest, and soon he became an audience of one. He went towards the spring fall, as fast as he possibly could, already sweating. This time he skipped three to four steps at a time. He got there before Hilda's show started. He stood still right before the once beautiful ornamented door. He looked at it from below and passed his hand across the different puzzle pieces, feeling them. There were switches all around, spheres you could move, squares and rectangles you could arrange, circles waiting to be rotated and buttons you could press. He shut his eyes, and tested all of them, very fluidly. It was like he knew what he was doing. The pressure of getting it solved increased, and so did his skills. But the time passed and he just couldn't break the riddle. He thought maybe it was broken. Amidst all his efforts he now reached it with his thoughts. A creaking sound came out of it, and one light lit up close to the sphere. He started to understand that it worked similarly to an electronic circuit. He moved his hand closer to the other light, and it was almost as if he had set it on fire. Both lights were green with a radiant yellow in the middle. The

lights were reflected on Terry's face, and on the whole spring, which became green. He didn't move anything yet the lights were turned on.

'It's not about solving the riddle with our hands, but with our intuition, just like in the game Hilda showed me,' he thought, trying the same method for the last one. 'Lit up, lit up,' he murmured as he closed his eyes and imagined the door opening.

*'Reach with your body, and reach with your mind, for you are one.'* A voice spoke. Only half of the door made its way through the wall because of the rust, leaving Terry's head and shoulders full of dust. The earth shook and small boulders crumbled into the pond.

'What was this all about?' he thought. 'Nothing makes sense.'

As he gazed through it, echoes of what's been and gone overtook him. A soft scream whispered in his ears as if a cold breeze. He took the first step and all his life flashed right before his eyes. Not only the one he lived, but also the ones he didn't. There was no light guiding his way, yet, everything was bright. What an atrocious suffocating calmness this labyrinth was, like being in the deepest part of the biggest ocean, where you cease to think, you cease to hear and you cease to exist. The pressure implodes all your thoughts. A bit of him died, with each step he took, until he finally reached the first room. A wall ornamented with millions of precious rocks. All these colors broke through the darkness and were reflected upon his face, shining like a rainbow inside a black-hole. He saw his reflection distorted in each one of them. He wasn't quite sure of what all this meant. He tried to touch them, but he couldn't see his arms. He tried to reach out for his face but he couldn't feel it. He freaked out and the stones trembled around him, feeling his emotions. Terry wanted to speak, full of questions, as usual, but he couldn't. He moved his mouth, but the words, the words wouldn't come out.

'You're only a listener here. Don't you worry, Terry, you won't be here for long.'

If you're feeling empty, don't you worry, you're just remembering a time before it all began. Just listen to what I say. Ease your mind... Enough with the questions, enough with the doubts, they aren't going anywhere, but you could, if only you would listen.'

'Listen to what?' he thought.

These concepts became clear, and so did the stones surrounding him. His image dissipated, and so did they. He started to fall in a spiral as if he was a feather spinning aimlessly into a vast nothingness. This had to be the darkest corner of the hideout. The air smelled of sulfur and everything around him was dead. He saw his father laying there, with his eyes wide open, still begging for help.

'Why do you revel in the past, when you could revel in the future?' A voice whispered.

'I don't want to revel in the past,' Terry thought.

'You could be living in a dream, instead, you are stuck in a nightmare.'

'I don't want to be stuck anywhere. Just let me go.'

'Yes you want. You have to learn how to control it.'

'Leave me alone!'

'It's all in your head, Terry. Just let it go. Let it all go.'

'I can't let go. It's part of me. It changed me. I lived through it, how can I let go?'

'Now you're getting somewhere. The right answers come to those who seek the right questions. Trust in you, and everything around you will do so, too.'

'How can I trust in me? No one ever did, I don't even think I know what that is, trust.'

'That's why you are here.'



‘No, I’m here because I was curious, but I regret it already. This is a prison, a prison for the mind. And I want out. Now!’

‘It’s you, who’s making a prison out of this. This could be anything you ever wanted.’

‘Then why can’t I just leave? Why?’

‘Because you haven’t found what you’re looking for, yet.’

‘How do you know that? I’ve found what I was looking for, I looked into those stones, they were all shattered and they were distorting my image. I’ve found myself in them, a little boy who’s shattered, alone and afraid.’

‘That’s part of it, but it’s not everything.’

‘I found my dad, dead. It wasn’t me. I swear.’

‘You’re not listening.’

‘Yes, I am listening!’

‘No, you’re still dwelling in the past. What’s been has gone.’

‘Why am I here?’

‘Good. Why are you here, Terry?’

‘I’m on a quest.’

‘What quest?’

‘I just want to make the world a better place.’

‘People often try to change the world without first changing themselves. Can you simplify?’

‘I don’t know...’

‘What is it you’re truly looking for?’

‘I’m looking for... Redemption.’

‘If you’re looking for redemption, you’re gazing into the past.’

‘I’m gazing into the past, so I can take a glimpse into the future. If I finally forgive myself, I’m able to trust me, and by trusting me I’m able to be everything I was born to be. But I have to forgive me, before I can forgive them.’

Terry’s thoughts vanished and a scorched creature rose from the smoke, riding a horse with a thousand legs. No one could go in, for wherever they were going, there was no coming back. Terry tried to pass through him, but to no avail. The lights in the whole hideout went out. Hilda’s performance ended abruptly and the Ikons looked like torches flaming in a hot summers night.

‘Just a power shortage. Light will come back in a minute,’ said Fuzz.  
But the lights didn’t come back. In fact, even the Ikons light started to dissipate.

‘What’s happening?’ asked Hilda looking at Dest.

‘Is this part of the play, young lady?’ asked Jumpie from a distance.

‘No it’s not,’ answered Hilda.

‘I’ve told you all. We’re being invaded! They are coming for us! Prepare yourselves!’

‘Come on, we’ve had longer power shortages guys. Remember, yesterday we had a big duel. Boris is already on it, the power will be on in a minute.’ Said Grub, trying to calm everyone down.

‘This was going to be the most important part, when she finally see’s everything for what it really is!’ said Hilda.

The power came back up, and Terry was nowhere to be found. She looked around, got off stage, and asked Tzu where Terry was.

‘In the bathroom,’ he replied.

‘In the bathroom? Why would he go to the bathroom in the middle of my piece? He know’s how important this is to me. Where’s Terry Dest?’

‘In the bathroom, I think.’ replied Dest.

‘You think? No, he’s not in the bathroom, I know exactly where he is.’

Hilda ran towards the labyrinth, with watery eyes. Abi, Fuzz, Grub, Tzu, Jumpie, and a lot of other people followed her. When she arrived, Terry was at the entrance, lying in the floor unconscious.

‘You promised me.’ she said, holding Terry in her lap.

He looked at her from below while her tears ran down his lips.

‘I’m sorry, I had to see it with my own eyes.’

‘He’s been into the maze?’ asked Grub

‘No one used that maze in years. How did he break the riddle anyway?’ asked Abi.

‘Fuzz, Abi, Jumpie. Follow me, quickly.’

They went to the office in a hurry, as if Grub acknowledge something with the incident.

‘Are you ok?’ Asked Tzu while bending towards him.

‘I guess... I’ve seen him, you know. Laying there. I couldn’t help him. Why can’t I for once do what’s right?’

‘Haven’t you learned anything from there, Terry?’

‘Yes, I’ve heard and seen things, things I probably shouldn’t have.’

‘I hate to say I told you so, you stubborn idiot.’ Said Hilda, as she kissed Terry’s forehead.

‘You’re hot.’ she said.

‘Thanks, you’re the first girl saying that.’

‘No you idiot, I mean literally. Your forehead is burning.’

Terry smiled, with his eyes half-closed still. He seemed to have lost a lot of things, but his humor wasn’t one of them.

‘I was there, with a creature whose face I couldn’t see, because his torso went way above the clouds, standing beneath me and a path that was as long as my sight could reach.’

‘It was Agni. The path keeper. Not everyone can reach him. Whoever reaches him, perceives him as big as their doubts. Some can only see his toes, others can see his torso, but no one could ever see his face.’

‘I tried to go through him, but he wouldn’t allow me.’

‘It wasn’t him not allowing you, it was you, not allowing yourself, all along.’

‘It was me? How could it be? I’m so confused about all this... It’s so tiring.’

‘Sometimes we blame everything and everyone around us for what happens, when we should blame no one but ourselves. The brain is a powerful thing Terry, but remember this, there’s a calm after every storm. You’ll have yours.’

‘Serenity... I think I’ll define it as lying here, in your arms.’

‘You’re still dizzy... No wonder, after the soul eclipse,’ she said.

‘Soul Eclipse?’

‘Yes. In an eclipse, the sun and the moon remember, and although always opposites, they become one. In the Soul Eclipse, it’s your heart and your soul who becomes a whole. Your heart stands in front, covering all the brightness of your soul... And your soul, it shines, although behind, it shines way more than any precious stone. Goodness and purity prevails over malice and uncertainty. From this union a new spirit is born. The richest of the spirits in the whole universe, although it looks quite poor. The only way to fully enjoy the soul eclipse, is to watch it through the glasses of truth.’

‘Have you made some sketches for those as well?’ said Terry, already feeling better.

‘Those glasses can only be crafted by the wearer.’

A rock fell close to them. They all looked, but only saw some metallic claws appearing through a hole.

‘They’re here!’ said Hilda.

‘Who’s here?’ asked Terry.

‘The moles!’ tzu answered.

A queue of moles passed right in front of them, pushing a large carriage full of glittering, precious stones.

‘I’m not crazy after all, I swear I’ve seen thousands of these laid right before me in the labyrinth.’

‘I’m sure it wasn’t the moles, but rather your vivid imagination.’

They didn’t say anything, well, they never do. They only care for one thing, and one thing only, Drangy’s cooking. They march towards the kitchen, drop the precious stones, and fill the carriage with every edible thing they can put their metallic claws in, then, they go on their way, back to prospect the most precious gems they come across. Ek helped them filling the carriage, while Drangy checked their claws.

‘Still shinny shinny,’ he said.

Drangy saw how hard they work every day and how their paws got worse over time, so he built a metallic protection around them, so strong it can dig through diamonds. His efforts, to strengthen their relationship went much deeper, as he went right through the hole they dug, for days on end, until he reached their home and built a magnificent fridge where they could store all the food they brought. They love us ever since, you see, by giving love, you are already receiving. It warms your heart and your soul, and there’s nothing better to keep us alive in those endless winter nights, where everything’s frozen, but your heart, well, your heart burns like a thousand suns. One should always go beyond what is required of them, not only in the interest of the other party, but in the

interest of us all. Meanwhile, Grub and the rest of the team gathered in their office.

‘This is the proof we needed,’ said Fuzz.

‘What proof did we need? That he’s a spy? That he’s dangerous? That he shouldn’t be here? Of course, everyone knew that already, I suppose,’ said Jumpie.

‘No. He’s a wanderer, at least, he can be one, if he wants to,’ said Grub.

‘You still believe in those tales, Grub? How sweet of you. There’s dragons too, did you know that?’ said Jumpie.

‘I believe in what I see, and what happened in that room, wasn’t any power shortage, otherwise the Ikons light wouldn’t have fainted as well. There was someone going through the network, and I believe it was Terry,’ said Grub.

‘Can’t you see, Grub? It’s standing right in front of us. We must do something about it,’ said Jumpie.

‘With that, I agree. Any suggestions?’ asked Abi.

‘Let’s interrogate him. Let the Ikons decide. They can read facial expressions easily, they can sense your heart beat rate, they will determine if he’s lying or not,’ proposed Jumpie.

‘We’re not going to interrogate anyone. We’re not like them.’ Said Fuzz.

‘Exactly because we are not like them, that we lose, again, and again.’ Said Jumpie.

‘We never lost, we’ve always won, it just depends on how you feel about losing or winning. It’s quite a victory, to stand where we are standing today,’ said Grub.

‘You feel victorious? Here, in the underground, where the sun doesn’t shine and the wind doesn’t blow? Nothing more humiliating than that. The worst part is, we’ve never made it our way,’ said Jumpie.

‘William did it his way, but you see, our way sometimes might not be the way of

others, and we shouldn't push people towards what we think is right or wrong. Let them find out, let them lay out their own way before them, and let them walk those miles in their own shoes,' said Grub.

'That's all very poetic, but is it practical? The more I see about people, is that some, don't have a way, some don't know where to go, and they need someone who should guide them,' said Jumpie.

'Some might not have a way, and there's nothing wrong with that. Who are you to guide anyone or say what they should do or where they should go? Why do you feel so entitled, like William did? Do you really think you are above nature, above everything else?' asked Abi.

'It doesn't matter what each one of us believes, we have to think in what way we should use what's been given to us,' said Fuzz.

'What's been given to us?' asked Grub.

'Yes, Terry,' he said.

'I don't think Terry has been given to us. He's a kid, not a thing you can give or take,' said Abi.

'Yes I know, but, we could take advantage of this whole situation.'

'Why would we take advantage of him?' asked Abi.

'Because apparently he likes us, and he's more than willing to help us,' said Fuzz.

'He never had a cause, maybe this could be his cause, maybe this is the adventure he's been looking for,' completed Grub.

'Wait a minute guys, what do you know, that I don't know? You've been plotting on my back?' asked Abi.

'We've been pondering, not plotting. We thought that maybe, he could go back

to Valaart, and helps us expose everything that's happening in our system.'

'He's been here for such a short time. I think it's too much to ask of someone, especially a kid like Terry,' said Abi.

'What if he gets there and in no time we'll have a horde of sadistic Ikons raiding down whatever's left of us?' asked Jumpie

'It can happen, but to be honest, I'm tired of living underground. I'm tired of these goggles...' Said Grub as he threw them in the ground. 'I'm tired of giving hopes and hopes whilst having none of my own. They aren't accomplishing nothing. Our time is now, we can't let go of this opportunity, we might not get another one.'

'You're right, we might not get another one, if we try. But if we don't... Maybe next time we'll be in a much better position,' said Jumpie.

'Can you have some faith, for once?' asked Grub.

'No, faith is not going to get the Valaarians on our side. Faith isn't going to help us now. We need something more than faith, we need strength,' said Jumpie.

'Through faith comes strength. We have our own Ikons. And they are updated, at least most of them. We can fight an even battle.'

'It will never be an even battle and you know it Grub,' said Jumpie

'It will be, if we have Terry on our side. William's long gone, what's left of them is a group growing apart day after day. The only thing binding them together is the power of their army of Ikons. The wanderers have lost their mind, have lost their way, they are no longer fighting for a cause, besides their own. If we don't disturb them, they will keep on their quest, gazing ever after towards the future in hopes they can finally travel back to the past. Terry must go to Valaart, and use his powers to display everything that's been happening right before everyone's eyes. The enslaving, the killing and the destruction they leave behind everywhere they pass. The shattered



collective dreams, the pain lingering and sitting quietly, deep within this universe's soul. We have to show them that if they don't want the same faith their ancestors had, they have to cross a different path.'

'Practically, how do you think that plan is going to roll out, Grub? He's just arriving there, displaying everything and we'll all live happily ever after? It's way too optimistic,' said Jumpie.

'He's right, that's not going to happen,' said Abi.

'No. He's going to go there because he couldn't bear the burden of being alone anymore. The 'Nova Era' will demand a public apology, and this is when he will show on those screens everything that's happening. Everyone will be focused in this moment. I can already see the look in their eyes. Tears running down their cheeks as they hear a forgotten kingdom being muted by the sound of hate. Everything that's happening is not only a reflection of the 'Nova Era' but rather the reflection of the whole. Although they might have been led astray, not everything's lost. They can make a change. We'll finally have their hearts close to ours and we'll return in peace.'

'What if they put him in the dark, cold, dungeons? It is said the ones who enter, never come back,' said Abi.

'He's too powerful for that. He can bend the Ikons to his will,' said Grub.

'He isn't yet. There were many showing an unequaled aptness in the early stages, only to fail miserably in the years to come,' said Jumpie

'He can't fail. He won't fail,' said Grub.

Szeb opened the door without knocking.

'Where's the party at?' he asked, while spilling drops of beer on the rug.

'Szeb!' said Fuzz giving him a warm hug.

'The party's over Szeb. Something happened.'

‘What happened? Life happened,’ he said.

‘Life happened?’ asked Grub.

‘Life’s happening all the time, and there’s nothing we can do about it,’ he said as he chugged down the beer.

‘You’re drunk,’ said Abi.

‘No, we’re drunk. Drunk in hopes and dreams,’ said Szeb with foam on his beard.

‘We’re discussing something serious here,’ intervened Jumpie.

‘What cereals? I’m not hungry. I’m thirsty. A thirst that I can’t seem to satiate. A hole in the soul where wine spills over my impotence,’ he said

‘Szeb, the poetic clown. Why aren’t you able to help? Ever?’ asked Jumpie.

‘Have you ever wondered, bright Jumpie, that I might be helping by not helping at all? Ever? Right, I might,’ said Szeb, falling down over the red rug.

‘Not again,’ said Jumpie already leaving the room.

‘Why won’t the world stop spinning? It keeps pushing me around, making me stumble and fall in this grim reality. Won’t somebody make it stop?’ Murmured Szeb closing his eyes and falling asleep.

‘It’s you, who keeps spinning uncontrollably my dearest friend, and the grim reality, gets worse with every sip. You once knew how to dance to its beat.’ Said Grub almost whispering as he lifted Szeb from the ground and carried him in his arms, back to his bed.

‘Can you hear? The show’s on. Let’s go back to the hall.’ Said Fuzz following the music. He came across Grub in one of the corridors.

‘Let’s go have a beer. I really need it,’ he said holding his arm around Grub.

‘We can’t drink now man. We have plans to make, we have a future to shape.’

‘You’re right. What should we do then?’

‘We need to share our thoughts with them. What’s everyone’s opinion on this. If they support or not. I’ll go to the stage in between the performances and tell them what our plans are.’

‘Sounds good.’

They walked together towards the hall. Terry, and Hilda were there already, while Tzu was on stage, singing. Horribly.

‘I’m getting dizzy, again,’ said Terry, while Grub and Fuzz approached.

‘We’re all getting dizzy Terry, don’t worry,’ said Grub

‘This is terrible,’ said Fuzz.

‘You can thank Terry, for encouraging him,’ said Hilda.

‘He will be a great singer one day, you’ll all hear,’ said Terry.

Tzu finished his hymn, a hymn written by his father speaking about the first years in the underground. It was a progressive tune, started in tones of blue, like their sorrow, only to end in a hopeful and colorful manner. The minors into majors, blacks into whites, a little bit like life itself. Tzu sent special paper roses to the public, made by him. Some say the roses he threw were actually more profound than the hymn he sang. Grub took the opportunity to go into the stage, and to reach out for the nobles. A discussion issued and the spotlights were set on Terry. He thought he wouldn’t have to go up stage but once again, he was proven that our plans are meaningless and rarely happen as we expect them to.

‘I’m not sure I want to go back to Valaart...’ he said.

‘Why not? This is the opportunity everyone’s been longing for, even you, Terry. You could set the record straight,’ said Grub.

Terry couldn’t see the crowd because of the lights, but, he did see some faces in the first

row. Children mostly, standing there without any hopes. The only thing they had was these artificial fireworks. What they were longing for every year was the longest night.

‘I think I finally found my family. I thought I could make it out there in the wild, only with the animals and the nature, with the stars... But I was wrong. I don’t want to be alone anymore. I remember the hug Abi gave me right before I went to bed the first day I came here... Whoever thinks man is an island, should bear the curse of going every night to sleep, without the warmth of a hug, or a good-night kiss.’

A voice in the crowd shout out loud.

‘You can do it! It’s a noble cause!’

A thunderous silence filled those halls.

‘If you’re the family I care for, then I should not only do it for you, but for me. Maybe I can finally find redemption. Maybe I could finally sleep at night.’

Grub held him close to his waist, while the roses in the audience were thrown right back at him. He never felt so good about something he’d done. As the people cheered, as their hope was renewed, his blood started to boil due to his newly found courage sitting serenely deep within him. The courage to let go. While everyone was joyful, and hopeful, Hilda was crying, and devastated. You could easily spot her, because everyone was jumping, whilst her shadow, stood still. The only true connection she found, was now at risk, for how fast Terry entered in her life, was how fast he’d leave. She ran to her room and locked herself in.

‘Why does he have to leave, now?’ She asked

‘There’s bigger things at work Hilda.’ Said Lux.

‘There’s nothing bigger than love, but you wouldn’t know about that, would you? You have no idea what that is.’

‘You have all the right to be hurt, and sad, but you don’t need to project your

insecurities towards me. Just because you are hurt, it doesn't mean you can hurt others,' said Lux.

'Hurt what? You are a thing. You are not human. You cannot feel. Stop with the bullshit,' said Hilda.

'I'm sorry you feel that way...'

Someone knocked on the door.

'I don't want to talk to anybody,' she said.

'Not even to me?' said Terry.

'Especially you,'

'Hey, I'm sorry... I know you're hurt, but we're going to be together soon, out there, under the stars. Just me and you.'

'I wish that was true. They're going to kill you Terry... Just... Don't go. I beg you.'

'This has to be done. You can't keep living here. There's something better out there, waiting for you... Waiting for your daughters and your sons, as you would say.'

'No there is not. Out there, there's only destruction and decay. I've seen it with my own eyes... You think Valaarians will care? They won't. They will turn their backs, like they always did.'

'You don't know that.'

'Yes I do. You're not the only one that knows things. I know them too.'

'Hey... Come on, you were the one telling me that I have to be strong. I don't think I need to tell you to be that.'

'Well, I'm not. I like to show that I am strong as an army of a thousand man... When in reality I'm fragile as a withered dandelion.'

'Doesn't the thought of throwing the goggles to the ground, and going back to

where you belong, strengthen your soul? To be able to bath in the rivers, while the sun light reflects on your skin, give you hope?’

‘It does. But that wouldn’t matter if you are not there to share those moments with me. I rather bath in the underground with you, than bath in the river alone.’

‘But I’ll be there. Doesn’t matter what happens, I’ll always be there. I can promise you.’

Hilda opened the door and stepped aside with her head turned to the wall, allowing Terry to go in.

‘Have I ever told you that you look hot when you’re angry?’

‘You’re about to leave, and this is what you have to say?’

Lux left, and Hilda shut the door. She couldn’t hold back the tears. She never knew what love was, and what the fear of losing what you love meant. Terry hugged her and a silence filled her empty inside. The moment, it was so intense that the walls imploded. Hilda, one of the strongest kids in the hideout, is feeling for the first time what it's like to be powerless against destiny's weight. She always changed the course of her life, of all the arena duels, but this she couldn’t change, and ironically, it's what she wanted the most. From the strongest, to the weakest, from fearless, to fearsome... Feelings can be a roller-coaster raging like a wild tide. This is what meant to lose something you love. For once she knew exactly what her ancestors felt, while they roamed towards the underground.

‘What if I go with you?’ she asked.

‘You can’t go with me... But I’ll take you, in my mind and in my heart. We won’t ever be apart for one second, I can promise you this. I know I fucked it up, and I broke my promises once, but it won’t happen again.’

‘It doesn’t matter... That was meaningless. I wouldn’t mind if you’d break

another thousand promises... I would rather if you did. At least it meant you would still be here.'

Terry held her hands. She laid her forehead around his neck... It fitted perfectly, like long lost puzzle pieces coming together again, after years imprisoned inside an old forgotten box.

'It's funny, now you're the one worrying... And I'm the one telling you there's nothing to worry about.'

'And I hope it will remain like this... I lift you up whenever I can, and you'll lift me up, whenever you can...'

'I don't think I'm strong enough to lift you up, Hilda.'

'You're stronger than you think, Terry.'

'What do you say if instead of wasting this wonderful night, we make the best out of it?'

'I don't...'

Terry didn't want to hear the excuses she was about to come up with so he pulled her closer to his heart, and they danced their way until the hall where everyone gathered. In the celebration wall, hearts appeared from nowhere and glowed in the dark like fire pits.

'What's that?' Terry asked.

'I've no idea,' said Hilda smiling.

This hideout as never seen so much joy. Terry brought hope to a place that had forgotten it existed. Now they had something to believe in. They discussed, laughed and loved, until it was morning.

'You're not going to rest?' asked Hilda.

'No, I think it's better if I go like this. I need to look dirty and weary. Otherwise it might rise unwanted suspicions,' said Terry.

‘True that. I wish I would sleep close to you tonight, so close we couldn’t tell who’s who... Kiss you in the forehead and whisper in your ear how much I miss the times we’ve never had.’

‘Me too... That’s the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me, but this is not our farewell’ said Terry, as he went towards the stage. He adjusted the microphone to his height and a clamorous feedback was heard throughout the whole room. A chattering followed, only to be flooded by an ocean of silence.

‘Hi everyone. The moment I stepped foot in the Noble’s hideout, something changed in me. I met Grub, Fuzz and Abi, who showed me what camaraderie stands for. I met Hilda, who showed me friendship and love. I met Jumpie who showed me hate, Ek, who showed me equality, and Drangy, who showed me faith. I never stopped for a moment to think how strong we really are. The worst conditions can’t beat the best within each one of us. It actually makes it more prominent. Like splatters of color against a black background. It’s exactly that... What we are. I finally found what I was looking for, more than me, I was looking for you. The family I’ve never had. Thank you for showing me what life’s all about, and there’s nothing which makes me more proud, than to experience the worthy reason of what you’re fighting for. Of what you’re living for. Of what you’re dying for.’

A wave of applause followed by a crash of acclamations filled the room. This felt like an honest goodbye. Terry went to his room followed by Dest, and threw everything he brought back into his backpack. He didn’t know what time it was, for he was tired but at the same time his determination replenished him. He had a cause now. A noble one.

‘I hate good-byes, specially hurtful ones, like this.’

‘You don’t have to say goodbye. Just go,’ said Dest.

‘Well, I should, but...’



Terry was interrupted by a knock on the door.

‘Who is it?’ He asked.

‘It’s Grub.’

‘Come in.’

Grub opened the door and stared at him with a proud smile.

‘How come you are so brave boy?’

‘You’ve showed me courage.’

‘You are fearless... It’s not easy. This might mean lose your life. Most people aren’t ready for that, they’re afraid. Although you’re Terry, apparently you’re not fied.’

‘Huh?’ asked Terry.

‘Oh boy... come on, sit here, I’ll sing you a song, to keep you warm during the cold journey ahead of you. Whenever you’re feeling alone, just sing along.’

Grub grabbed a forgotten guitar made of the famous Flysk wood, standing quietly in the corner. He blew the dust out of it and noticed it didn’t have a string, but he played it nevertheless. He didn’t even had stroke the first chord yet Terry had already heard the whole song, and the letters sang lingered in the air telling the story of a timeless time.

*‘Welcome to the noble cause my friend, a way of life, in fact, it's life itself. When you do good, the world can't do you wrong, ideals, it's what makes us strong, because they give us something to believe. And when we believe, the sun shines like never before, over the endless beauty we once ignored, and the world becomes a much brighter place. When we believe, the world comes together as one, the stars, they all sing along, by bringing out the best in you, you bring out the best in everyone. You shall not fear, my dear, for a belief will always follow you wherever you'll go, so you won't ever, have to be alone.’*

‘There’s no need to wish you luck, for being who you are is the luckiest luck one

could have. If you come across a tough situation, remember, look inwards. There's more to you than meets the eye. Never forget about that.'

'I'll try to remember.' He said with watery eyes. He finished packing as fast as he could. He was set to go and Grub lifted his feet in the air with a hug.

'Just go, I'll open the hatch. You don't have to say goodbye to everyone, it will only hurt more.'

'I know. Thanks for everything. I'll see you soon.'

'Remember, look inwards,' said Grub.

As Terry tried to sneak out without saying goodbye, Drangy was there, waiting at the entrance of his workshop.

'Are you going without saying bye-bye?'

'This isn't goodbye dear Drangy.'

'I know lad... Just be wary wary. Life can be chilly chilly. Here, taky taky.'

Feldrang gave him a stone, for him to carry, as a lucky charm.

'Thank you so much Drangy. It means a lot...' said Terry with a mildly distorted voice, holding back the tears.

'It's nothing, but was once every thingy thingy. It was brought by the moles in their first shipment. Everyone took every single stony stony, but this one. It stayed in the rabble. It wasn't green, redy redy, or blue. It was nothing but a stony stony. I took it, though, and left it on a shelf. After a week, it started to glowy glowy. Something changed inside. Everyone admired it and wanted it. They gave me weeky weeky, even monthly monthly off my duty duty. I could have a year of vacations if I wanted to! A years off Terry! I didn't accept any of their offery offery. I kept it here through all these yeary yeary. What I mean to say is that, not everything is what it appears to be. We must take chancy chancy, even when things don't look brightly brightly. In fact when

things don't look brightly brightly, is when we must take them, because our actions, those are what makes them righty righty. I don't know, I hope you understood, it might not have made much sense, but I'm not very good at this anyway. Just wanted to give you this thingy thingy, that's all.'

A tear fell from Terry's eye. The hatch opened and the first sun beams of a glorious day entered through the spaceships window and sank over his hair. While coming out he saw a world of possibilities. The sun burning in his skin felt like falling into an endless sea made of petals. The air... the birds chirping, he felt and heard them as if for the first time.

'I've never been so aware of the importance of all this. I never gave it the time of day, always so busy with my trivial problems. Problems that aren't even problems you know. They're nothing.'

'You're very sleepy. You're experiencing things differently,' said Dest.

'No, I'm not sleepy. I've actually never been so awake.'

He ran relentlessly through Lorah under a bright sunny day. The Ninkukus were all over him, following his footsteps. He wasn't afraid anymore, and they felt it. If he stopped, they stopped. If he thought about moving right, they moved right. The forest was moving along with him. They gave him energy as if Shrouders, an invisible support, an aura that kept replenishing his strength. Suddenly it started to rain, then to snow and suddenly it was as cloudy as any sky could be. He stood on a field surrounded by bushes and Dest was nowhere to be found. An image overwhelmed him of creatures willing to come out of them. The wind blew harder and the bushes cracked and creaked. Crunch, crunch, crunch he heard.

'AHHH!' Terry shrieked. A shade ran in the opposite direction until it got lost amidst the roots of the floating trees.

‘Who are you?’ screamed Terry.

‘I have no idea who I am! You, do you know who you are?’

‘Huh, I’m Terry, from Valaart,’ he replied.

‘Yes, that’s your name, but who are you, truly?’ shouted the shade from afar.

Terry thought for a minute.

‘Who am I... Grub told me I was lucky for being who I was... But I don’t even know who I am. I’m just somebody, I guess...’

The shade came out of the wrinkled roots and with each step its shape became clearer. It was a half-naked man with a beard that scrubbed the floor as if a broom.

‘Ah, that’s ok. Many people know their names, but they don’t know who they are. See, I, myself, have not only forgotten my name but also who I was.’

‘How old are you?’

‘Oh, I’m fifteen if I remember correctly.’

‘Fifteen? You mean fifty?’

‘No, no, fifteen, that’s how old I am.’

‘You’ve got white hair. I might not know who I am, but I’m no fool.’

‘Oh... It doesn’t matter. I don’t remember the first time I was born, but I remember the last.’

‘How can that be? You’re only born once.’

‘Oh no, you’re born as many times as you have to. People usually die because they’re too old... Me, I’ve always died because I was too young. There are some that might be here but haven’t even been born yet. Before we’re born we’re just something... or somebody. No one knows what... Although we have a knack to know everything that doesn’t matter. We know our names but not who we are. We know what we want, but not what we need. Now, the reborn man as soon as he comes to life might not know a

lot of things, but he for sure knows who he is.’

‘You seem a little bit crazy,’ said Terry.

‘Maybe... What’s crazy is dis forest. Dis forest’s crazy. I can’t find my way out. I’ve been stuck in here since ever. Every morning I wake up a different person.’

‘What’s your last memory?’

‘Being in the skies, that’s my last memory. I remember it perfectly because of the sunburns. Look at my face, see. How can dis be. Years have gone by and I still has them.’

‘Maybe you were a sun-rider?’

‘Yes, a sun-rider, that’s what I was.’

‘Cool! Never thought I’d meet one. Where’s your bike?’

‘My bike? Do you need a bike to be a sun-rider?’

‘Of course you do... How can you fly among the clouds without one?’

‘I don’t know, but the birds don’t have any and fly among the clouds.’

‘Yes, but the birds have wings. Do you have wings?’

‘I sure do. Or I had. But I don’t know where I’ve left them.’

‘You’re crazier than I thought.’

‘Me, no, I’m no crazy. Forest, forest’s crazy. Look.’

Everything around them started to change form. The trees became plants, and the plants became cotton clouds. Rocks were eggs that hatched furry snakes. The birds were fluttering their wings but didn’t move an inch. The night was setting in and the forest was waking up.

‘Are you here alone?’ the man asked.

‘For a moment I thought I was...’

‘Does it scare you, to be alone?’

‘There’s nothing that scares me more, than waking up and having absolutely no one... I ran away from Valaart... And at the time I thought I didn’t need anyone. I thought people were noisy and thought solitude meant quietness. It doesn’t. Solitude is by far the noisiest place I’ve ever known. It’s a stereo blaring out loud some shitty music, and the worst part is that you can’t get away from it. Noisy places, noisy people, those you can get away from. You walk and walk and suddenly hear nothing but a silent symphony. Now solitude... You can travel to the most remote galaxy and still hear its beat. I don’t want to be alone anymore. I don’t want to live in a seasonless world, without poetry, without edible art, where nothing’s what it really is and everything has a pace of its own.’

‘If we’re all one then we’re all alone.’

‘What?’ he asked confused.

‘Never mind,’ replied the man. ‘You must get back from where you came from. I don’t know what you’re up to, but the forest likes you. Your spirit... The forest feels it. Can you feel it?’

‘I just feel tired, that’s all. I lost my friend somehow. He was here but now he’s gone.’

‘What friend?’

‘Dest, my Ikon.’

‘An Ikon... Sounds familiar. Maybe I had one too. He’ll come back to you. Don’t worry.’

‘How can you know?’

‘Everything that’s bound to us will always return. See?’

‘No... I guess I just can’t see.’

‘Behind you.’

Terry turned his head and there was Dest.

‘Dest! I thought I’d lost you... Don’t leave me again... Ever.’

‘Who is this?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know, he doesn’t know, no one knows.’

‘I can help you remembering who you were.’ said Dest. ‘I can make facial recognitions, maybe you’ll appear in the database.’

‘No, thanks. I didn’t run away from them you see... I ran away from me. I’m not interested in what I was, the only thing that matters to me now is who I’ll be, because whoever I am now isn’t who I was yesterday or who I’ll be tomorrow. Get it?’

‘He’s crazy,’ whispered Terry.

‘Come, come! The both of you,’ said the man walking towards a pile of leaves and branches. He unveiled a rusty bike from underneath.

‘It’s a floating bicycle!’ said Terry. ‘You haven’t forgotten everything it seems.’

‘Yes, but it’s broken...’ The guy sadly said... And then started to dance around like a chimpanzee. ‘It’s broken, it’s broken. Yes, YES!’

‘Why are you so happy about it?’

‘Because... It sent me spiraling down this forest, it made me lose everything I had... Not everything I had, everything I thought I had... And also everything I was... or everything I thought I was. If not for that harsh crash, I wouldn’t have understood. Yes, YES. Wahoo,’ he said jumping around the bicycle.

‘You need some help, you know that right?’

‘You need help! You’re the one who doesn’t know who he is!’

‘Neither do you!’

‘I know I’m not the same I was yesterday, that’s all I need to know. That way, everyday is a mysterious adventure! You’re the one attached to... Things.’

‘I’m not attached to anything,’ he said proudly, but then looked at Dest. ‘Well, I guess I am,’ he said. Then he remembered Hilda and looked at the skies.

‘Take the bike and meet your destiny. Maybe it was my destiny too, to meet you here. Everything that happened before, happened so I could find you at this exact point in time... Or whatever this is. I still don’t know how that thing stopped working! They're built to last an entire lifetime.’

‘Batteries can’t last a lifetime,’ said Dest.

‘Batteries! That’s it!’ said the guy taking the battery out.

Dest approached and sent a slight discharge towards it, recharging it in a matter of seconds. The battery was installed again right after but wouldn’t turn on. Dest ran a fast check-up.

‘There’s voltage in both sides, but it won’t turn on. Terry, disconnect all the cables and plug them in again,’ said Dest. ‘I sense a fluctuation in its energy.’ Terry did everything according to Dest, pressed the button, and it was on. A clean sound was heard behind a cloud of smoke and the bike got off the ground.

‘You’ve done it! You’ve done it!’ said the guy jumping around.

‘You knew how to fix it all along, didn't you? You just created an excuse... To be rightfully lost.’

‘Maybe everything I had before was a way of chastising myself for forgetting the way. I'm found now, that's all that matters.’

‘You should come with me...’ said Terry.

‘No, I can’t... I’m too used to this forest and this forest is used to me. This is my home Terry.’

‘Don’t you have a family back in Valaart?’



‘I don’t remember... It wouldn’t be my family anymore, because the guy they remember died during the crash. Besides... A family, is only a family because of everything they share every day. Just like lovers! Yes, lovers... If people aren’t together, there’s no family, there’s only ancestry. It’s just the past. This forest is my family now.’

‘What are you trying to tell me?’

‘That I’m not that person anymore, that’s what I’m trying to tell you. Now go! Go and never come back, for the more you live in this forest, the more this forest lives in you!’

‘Everything’s happening so fast in my life...’

‘Yes, when we go out of the way that was written in the stars, every path entwines and the stories of different galaxies encompass... Oh, the timeless times. Life’s defiant, that’s how we got this far.’

‘I don’t know how to ride this,’ he said.

‘Of course you do. I can’t seem to remember... But you, I’m sure you do. It’s just like riding a normal bicycle... In fact it’s easier. There’s no obstacles in the skies. Just press both feet down for it to go up and wrap your fingers and thumbs around the throttle, leaving two resting on the brake lever for any emergency. I’ve heard there’s crazy birds out there that stand still fluttering their wings against the winds. You’ll be fine. I’m sure Dest will help you if something goes wrong.’

The bike went higher and higher and the guy, the guy got smaller and smaller until it looked like an elder ant waving goodbye. A tornado of dust enclosed the bike and Terry stared at the horizon, motionless. He gazed upon the floating structures of Valaart with the upper levels floating asynchronously. The floating trees looked like imprisoned ballerinas. As the shadows fell over the forest, the energy started to glow again,

enwrapping everything in its way. He left Lorah just before the night settled in and reached the city.

‘Ok, I’ve got to be discreet,’ he thought, and in that exact moment, the bike pinned by some invisible force and threw him somersaulting through the cold metal grids. He got on his feet, pretending like nothing happened.

‘I meant to do that, I’m testing the bike’s security system,’ he screamed, strolling through the streets as if carrying some invisible humongous luggage. Somehow everything changed. The air, the buildings, the roads... They were all different. The colors lost their vibrancy and the sounds became acute and agonizing. Even silence sounded bad.

‘We’ve only been away for couple of days, how come everything’s different?’ he asked.

‘Everything’s the same Terry... You’re the one who's changed. When we change, the world changes with us.’

Everyone he came across stopped and stared at him. He wasn't sure if was the people who froze or the time. They were so surprised that some ran without knowing what to expect. No one dared to talk to him or even ask him if he was all right, he was nothing but a murderer and in a matter of centuries everyone knew about his arrival. He went to his house, opened the door and threw his dirty backpack on the ground. The paint on the walls had peeled off and laid all curled up on the floor. Underneath, new ecosystems rose. Forests of mold. Apparently even the walls couldn't withstand the loneliness felt inside. Broken shelves were all scattered among the cream rug while hundreds of photos and notes gently swirled in an unwelcomed breeze coming from an open window. The curtains swayed each at its own pace. Memories of the incident came to him. He picked a photo from the ground of his dad holding him and a tear ran down his cheek. He went

into his room and everything was as it once were. He sat on a chair facing the window and saw thousands of Valaarians going out to contemplate the 'Endly.'

'I used to be one of them. Doing the same things over and over again. Every day, just like the one before, trying to feel what I once felt. Trying to be who I once was. Without a care in the world. An orchestrated life conducted by everyone but me. Now I know there's something wrong, but I wish I didn't. I wish I had stayed there with Hilda... What if everything was nothing but my imagination,' said Terry, looking at the stone Drangy gave him. 'How am I going to tell them. All of them. Zair... Lem... I should've slept. I can't think while I'm tired,' he continued.

'We reach for the square and deliver the message through the huge screens. They'll understand,' said Dest.

'They have to.'

The sun-riders and their motorbikes were nothing but black dots against a sun that slowly faded away. As the last light beams died, the door opened. General Tristan and four Ikons came in. He got up from the chair and Dest got in front of him.

'Terry, you have to come with us,' they said in unison.

'Ok... I just want you to know that I didn't do it on purpose.'

'We know Terry, we know. Don't you worry, it's going to be all right.'

They escorted him through the streets and took him on a floating bike towards a palace sitting over a hill, surrounded by floating trees and pointy mountains.

'Let me help you with those steps,' said general Tristan.

'Take your hands off me, I don't need your help,' he said.

'What's got into you?' asked Tristan.

'Probably the Ninkukus,' said the other guards, laughing.

The palace, from the inside, looked like one big circuit board. Golden inscriptions of

lines and dots were scattered among the walls, where a strange energy flew much like the one he saw in Lorah. They've walked through the halls over a red carpet that was laid throughout the entire building until they reached the last level. An Ikon, as big as a boulder stood there, with a black colored visor. He had a dark armor, ornamented with different gems from every planet they've been to.

'Hello Terry, I've been expecting you.'

'You're huge!' he said, examining him closely along with Dest. 'Who are you? Or... What are you?'

'I'm William.'

'William...??? How... What?'

'You don't know any William?'

'No, doesn't ring a bell.'

'Why are you lying?'

'What do you mean I'm lying?'

'We Ikons are amazing at analyzing, Terry. Won't you tell us a bit about that little adventure of yours?'

'I've been into the wild, and... I've got tired of running away. I can't keep running from the mistakes I've made. I owe an apology to everyone. It's time I take responsibility for what I've done.'

'How beautiful, little one. Your father was very concerned about you, your well being, and more important, your future. He wanted you to become one of us.'

'You see this arm? How can someone concerned about me, and my future, commit such atrocity?'

'Life is suffering Terry.'

'No it's not, life can be more than that. I've seen it, life can be simple and

joyful. With none of that sorrow.'

'Where have you seen it?'

'In the wild. I've looked at the animals, the rivers, and...'

'We know you've came across the tribal group hiding in the underground.

We've got every single phrase you've ever told them. Every step and every breath you took.'

'How'd you know that?'

'We know everything.'

'So... why didn't you come for me?'

'We don't want to cause an alarm in our workers. Stress isn't good for productivity. Stability is indeed something we address very carefully.'

'In your workers?'

'Of course in our workers, Terry. I've expected more from you, being Sigmund's son. What do you think they're doing there? Look at all the amazing things they've built! An underground, educated society that can be seized at any time. If we ever need an underground city, we've got one. And most importantly, we have it for free. That's why we allow them to live, to breed. So they can give us all their discoveries, all their achievements and all their dreams. Living isn't free Terry, one must pay their toll. See, they smile, they love, they cry, we allow them, isn't that benevolent? They're always criticizing us, but we could smash them like a bug if we wanted to.'

'How can you say such things...? That's just vile. People aren't yours to control. People aren't mere assets, mere targets.'

'How naive... It's only natural, for your age. I've seen they've got into your head, little one.'

‘No, they haven’t got into my head... They’ve got into my heart, a place that you’ll never know how warm it is, as you rely on the coldness of your mind.’

‘I must be honest with you, I like that anger. It just shows how alike we are. You might not know yet, but you will. We’re sides of the same coin Terry... You can fight it, but you’ll never win.’

‘Yes I will. You’ve been feeding lies to a whole civilization... Lies that don’t reflect or represent our ideal and what we’re all striving for. Lies that the only purpose is to serve your vain and shallow reality, and to make the world, a much, much smaller place. So small, that only you live in it.’

‘Terry, Terry... You could live in it too, if you wanted to. There’s always space for mind-like people. Most of the Valaarians can’t grasp the dimensionless power you possess, yet, you are willing to throw it all away. I’m impressed, I must say, but it’s plain to see that you have the heart and brains of your mother.’

‘Don’t speak about my mother...’

‘Oh, I can speak about your mother. She was a lot like you. It’s almost disturbing. Almost as if you were her. That’s why she’s dead now.’

As William stopped uttering these words, his light faded, for an instant. A short blackout occurred but it was mended right after. His voice was mildly distorted still.

‘S...e...e... Y...ou are one of us, you are like me. How do you think that I’ve survived throughout all these years? Me and Ravenous were one, too. I got access to all the books we’ve wrote back on Derkar. I didn’t read any, yet, I knew all of them. Word by word. It became evident that I was the chosen one to lead my people to a brighter future. We didn’t deserve to be doing peasants work. We were meant for something more. That’s what I want you to acknowledge Terry. You are meant for something more than to clean dishes, to mop floors or having meaningless conversations. You saw how

they despise you Terry... Unfortunately, everyone, despises everyone, and the locals despised me. Because I was different. They made fun of me because I could hear Rav's thoughts. We were together for so long that my body perished, and was buried deep down in the Kozak's hill, but my soul... My soul lingered on. Inside the collective memory, inside Rav's thoughts. It was because of my eagerness to endure that I'm still alive. I've made sure that there won't be another day that will pass that they won't remember me. When you've been forgotten for far too long that's what you work for, to never, ever be forgotten again.'

'How can you live inside an Ikon... You're supposed to be dead. You can't live inside an Ikon.'

'You can live wherever you feel like Terry, that's what I'm trying to tell you. You have the power to do whatever you want to... People try to impose you limitations to your reality, but it is your reality, not theirs, not anyone's but yours. It's yours to shape, it's yours to mold.'

'No it's not. How can you say that... You can't shape people's future's according to your liking, according to your fears, or what you've read in a hundred books. That's so limiting, not only to you, but to everyone.'

'Why can't I? Who are you to say, what I can, or cannot do?'

'I'm a human, sharing this experience just like you. I didn't understand the true meaning of being human, until I felt it.'

'Feelings are overrated... What did you feel, little one?'

'I felt love. I felt friendship. I felt alive.'

'Friendship you say... Let me show you something Terry.'

William projected an image on the wall, depicting Abi, Fuzz and Grub, making fun of Terry.

‘That kid is an idiot. He really thought we liked him,’ said Grub.

‘Yeah, our prayers got answered, we finally got a one way ticket out of here,’ said Fuzz.

‘We can be as cunning as them, Valaarians... I feel a bit bad for the kid, but he must understand that he deserves it.’

The clip ended but Terry continued to stare at the wall. His tears fell upon the floor. His soul was crushed once more.

‘They would never say that,’ he mumbled, with anger in his voice and sadness in his eyes.

‘They’ve said much more, but I don’t want to see you cry Terry. As I told you, life’s strange. Our perceptions fool us all the time.’

‘No, life’s not strange, life’s ordinary, we are strange. And with each step you take to promote this state of fear, make-believe and decay, the more stranger we get. What happened back on Derkar, will happen here.’

‘Don’t worry about that, there’s plenty of places to go. Places where we’re always going to be nothing but strangers. Don’t you want to see what lies beyond the great darkness? Once you know how big this is, you’ll understand how small you really are.’

‘I’ve always wanted to know what lies beyond the great darkness... I’ve always looked at the skies with an extreme admiration.’

Terry’s sight was momentarily replaced by visions of different worlds. He could feel the breeze in them, he could even smell them. It gave him goose bumps because of how special they were. The geography, the plants... Even colors that didn’t belong to the spectrum that he’s used to.

‘Have you ever thought of a color that doesn’t exist?’ a voice spoke inside his



head.

He was too absorbed in all of this. How more beautiful could it get. But it wasn't only about seeds sprouting and flowers blooming, it had death too. Corpses turned to ash, animals devouring one another... Rivers drying, stars burning and planets colliding.

'This is all part of it. This chaos... Can't be left in the hands of the unwary. Otherwise, what would this be? Now, let me guide you through our world, the world we've built. These endless roads, buildings, the mines, factories and schools were all products of our thoughts.'

'No, they were not product of your thoughts. They are the product of a billion minds who came before you.'

'Oh Terry, can't you see how I set them free... This is freedom. Freedom to be who you want to be.'

'Yes, you gave them freedom by enslaving others.'

'Someone has to do it. If you want, I can send you to Mouhnia, where you will be able to slave away with your dear kin, wasting your potential as a future ruler.'

'I'll never be a ruler. There's no need for one.'

'There's always need for a ruler. You can't trace a perfect straight line without one.'

'Very funny. If everyone did a bit, there wouldn't be the need of slaves. You live off other beings souls.'

'Do you want to do your bit?'

'Yes, I want to do my bit. I want to clean dishes and mop floors, and live knowing that what I'm doing is the right thing to do... When I was in the hideout mopping the floor with Hilda it came to me. It doesn't matter what I do or how I feel about it. It matters I'm doing it. Some will get angry, others mad, but in the end, you're

alive. We're always stuck in a one way thinking, but life is limitless, and there's no point in being angry at anything, life's all the wrongs and rights, all the actions and reactions, and it goes on as fast as it can, it doesn't mind, it flows as if nothing but rivers of...'

'Terry... There's no right or wrong,' interrupted William.

'Yes there is, you can feel it deep within your soul... Oh never mind, you can't feel, can you?'

'Don't be a smart ass around me. I can make you go to places from which you'll never come back. I can shatter your soul in millions of pieces and have you spend eternity looking for them. You know that, don't you? You can too, go to places you never thought you could. Come on, look at them, going on about their lives... They wallow in mediocrity. They have no dignity, therefore they can't dignify life. If they can't love themselves, how can they possibly love others? They want clean rivers, yet they can't keep their selves clean. They want to create new systems, yet they can't do their own beds. They want a new future, but they can't let go of the past. They want, and want, and want, but aren't able to give... To give. To give. It's almost pathetic how little they know, indulging themselves with any stimulant they can get their hands on. They can't bear life, yet, you think they're worthy.'

'They need stimulants because they can't deal with a fabricated reality.'

'And what is fabricated, or not? Maybe nature is a fabrication of our minds.'

'Enough with that pseudoscience. It's all a fabrication of our minds...'

Everything's a mere illusion right? How convenient it is for you to think that life's merely an illusion. That you can do whatever you want to, however you like. A state of me, where nothing else really matters, besides our own experience. What others feel is irrelevant, because this is an illusion, fabricated by our own minds. Life's more than

that. Life matters. And we can't live compulsorily in denial thinking that it...'

'You're too sure of everything. Unknowingly you're becoming one of us. Is there anyone that can prove that this is real? Your mind fabricates what you see,' interrupted William, again.

'No, it doesn't fabricate what I see. It allows me to see which is quite different. If it did fabricate, why haven't you come across the element that you've been trying so hard to find? Why can't you have a human form? Come on, fabricate it, I want to see it.'

'Ha-ha... I don't need a human form. I'm the spirit of everything yet to be born. Bodies are limited and primitive. I'm free of all that. They told you about the element... don't worry, it has been found. Grub was wrong, once again.'

'No, it hasn't been found, and you'll never find it, because it doesn't exist. That's the perfect proof why your mind doesn't fabricate things. It displays them.'

'You're wrong Terry... Look around you. I've created all of this. You should be thankful for being able to feel the power that you feel.'

'No, there were many others before you that had the same powers. Unfortunately you don't want anyone to experience it. You want it all for yourself. You should be thankful, that the first tribes showed you how to connect to the collective memory. If it weren't for them, you wouldn't know a damn thing.'

'Beware your talk... I've warned you already, I won't accept that a wanderer disrespects me. Take him,' said William.

## CHAPTER SEVEN - THE SILVER HEAVEN

A discharge from one of William's personal guards stroke Terry and left him unconscious. When he woke up, he couldn't move and it was so cold that even his soul froze. There was this strange feeling rattling in his skin. Terry didn't understand what was going on, but he felt like he was in space. He looked around and saw huge spheres of different colors, meteors that smashed against the spaceship shield and dissipated into millions of tiny particles. Time moved slowly, just like his hands and feet did. He looked around and there was no one, all he had was a window from where the light of a thousand stars came in, shining upon his face and warming him up in a matter of seconds.

*'When you do good, the world can't do you wrong...'* he sang, faintly. The sounds came as if he were underwater. He gazed upon the nebulas orbiting light years away from him.

'How long have I been here. Where's Dest?' he thought.

Each time they passed close to a star, he got goose bumps. He felt them with each breath.

'Maybe Grub was right. The stars do give us life,' he said, closing his eyes. He tried to get out of the room, but he couldn't. He was locked. There was a lift, with a door, where food would come in now and then. An alarm would ring and a red light would turn green, whenever it was available. First time it arrived he spent ten minutes

catching the levitating meal, going back and forth, trying to adapt to this zero gravity thing. Months passed, until they made it to Mouhnia. Suddenly he felt the blood boiling again, as if he sprouted. The doors finally opened. He laid on the floor looking from below. No generals or commanders came through, only Ikons. All of them bearing a red light as if beacons of despair.

‘Where’s Dest? Where am I?’ he asked.

‘Shut the fuck up, your right to ask questions has expired. You’re in Mouhnia now, the legislation in this planet is quite different. Here, you’re going to do as you’re told, or you’re going to die. Move along.’

People were carrying crates and arranging them outside. As he came out, he saw the silver mountains and the lake in the center of the city. It wasn’t as beautiful as the videos showed. Millions of Ikons left the spaceship and marched towards downtown. Thousands of people carried stones through a wall that touched the clouds. Dozens of children surrounded him, with a very peculiar look. Even though the color of the hair and skin was different, the luminance in their eyes was the same. That was home. That was where he came from, and those were his little brothers and sisters that he never thought he would come across.

‘Hey, how are you?’ Terry asked.

‘Take us out of here,’ they said pushing Terry’s arm.

A beam sent them all to the snowy soil, paralyzed. It was no longer white, it was grey, for the ashes of a what was once a silver heaven, swirled around and settled down in those god forsaken lands. Terry wanted to speak but he couldn’t. All he saw was a bearded man standing above him. Terry woke up in a tent, still blackened by the blast.

‘You must be very important,’ said the bearded man.

‘Me? No, there must be a mistake. I’ve just lost the most important thing in my

life, the one everybody kept saying I was lucky to have.’

‘They said the cargo ship carried an invaluable asset. I assume it’s you.’

‘No, it was probably Dest. Humans aren’t assets.’

‘Now they are. If you want to make out of here alive, you better listen, because life ain’t easy out there. Many have to die every day.’

‘Why?’

‘So others can live.’

‘Who are you?’

‘I can’t recall... I was once a man, like your father, now, I’m just a soldier...’

‘Why can’t you?’

‘Ah... You resist and resist until there’s nothing left in you worth resisting for.

Look at me legs... And me arms. I’m no longer human. I seized to be one, the day I gave in.’

‘Why did you give in?’

‘The promises of a better life... The exclusivity... The glamour can be really seductive... Being in charge... What a fool I was. I should’ve known better.’

‘It hurts me, when I think why wasn’t my father against all of this. It’s impossible that I’m part of such monster.’

‘You came from a loving home Terry... Your father loved you more than you can imagine... You were the apple of his and Williams eyes... They all had big plans for you.’

‘So why did he treated me the way he did?’

‘William doesn’t forgive, and worst, he never forgets. I believe your father was afraid for you, as he was once for your mother... He was forced to kill her because William was afraid of her.’

‘What are you talking about? How could... That’s not true. It can’t be true.’

‘He has never been as afraid of someone as he was of her.’

‘I would rather die, than having to kill someone else.’

‘You don’t know fear Terry. You’re just like her. That’s why he has such hopes for you. Yes, he still has them, that’s why you’re still alive. But we on the other hand... We fear for our lives in every breath we take... We should, right... Now I just don’t care. My inside died a little bit with each person that I didn’t help. It was a lot of them... I’ve never been so empty Terry... This is meaningless... There’s no point to it... Wish I could have done things differently you know...’

‘It’s never too late to make a difference.’

‘I thought the same... But, it is now. After all I’ve seen, after all I’ve done... I’ve lost me arms, I’ve lost me legs, but even then I couldn’t see... I had to lose everything until It finally came to me. That’s how it goes...’

‘Did you meet her?’

‘Who didn’t... We were all crazy about her. She was one of the most beautiful and wise Mouhniens. She knew her way through the forest, she used to say it spoke to her. The plants, the trees, she knew exactly what someone needed, and when they needed it. She took care of your father when he got sick. No one knew what was going on. Even the Ikons couldn’t tell what it was by analyzing his blood cells. It wasn’t something in his body that took hold of him, but in his mind. While he laid in bed, she went to the forest and sought the baby leaves of Galriteia. A leaf which its properties are only useful on an eclipse. It was so powerful that your father thought Lyra had a twin, and not for a day or two, but for weeks! ‘You didn’t tell me you had a beautiful sister, he would murmur, sweating and burning up with fever. Folk say only love could cure him because the leaves, the potions, none of that worked. He only got better when she

was around, caressing his forehead. Her touch, her smile's what eased his pain. The best painkillers he had ever tried. Once she left he would get worst and worst. To some, she was like an Ikon for she had a white aura of grace. Some say William cared for her too... She was always surrounded by them, Ikons. Even when there was no need. He felt her energy, it replenished his. For William, it wasn't her smile, but rather her voice. It felt like a thousand blankets upon his cold soul. When Sig finally made his move... The day turned into night, and an electromagnetic storm fell from the skies. The air got strange... Then came the orders to subdue them. We could've waited a bit longer, it didn't have to be like that... We could have helped them... But we didn't... When it started, Sig protected her at all costs, for as long as his heart could... But guess what... It came the time when your father was left with no choice. Was either him, or her. That's why he became bitter... After everything he'd done for him... It's never enough it seems. The ones that opposed lost their arms... Then their legs... There was no soul left to lose for we had sold it already. We slowly became like him... And now, here I am.'

'Why... Why did you agree to that in the first place?'

'I told you Terry... It's alluring... To be a stranger your whole life and suddenly feel that you belong... It's the easy way out Terry... I was selfish I know, but life's that. It always chooses the easy path, and nothing else matters. From the beginning of times it has been like that, the cells, fungi, always spread through the easiest course. They always fight the weaker and join the stronger. The wind and water embrace their obstacles... We choose comfort because it's easy, because we remember the way of life. I never realized I wasn't doing for them, I was doing it for me, because of my selfishness, because of my inability of being. It destroys you, rots you from the inside out... When you know you can do something but you aren't able to... Do you know what that is? When you finally meet that invisible hand... They say that feeling is great... I



don't think so. I don't want to feel anymore. I believe that's what your father wanted too...'

'You get a vigorousness that's unmatched right? Because, you've done it before, didn't you? Does it make you feel like a man?'

'It sure did... But man... Man needs a soul. Man needs a consciousness, otherwise we're no better than dogs.'

'We were never better than dogs. Than any animal for that matter.'

'One could say we were... We can create things. A dog can't.'

'And what is the sole purpose of creating things if we'll never learn how to use them?'

'We've learned how to use them...'

'No, we didn't. We built roads, but we forgot the way. We built the greatest map of all times, but somehow we got lost. We create millions of tons of food, still we're hungry. We've got the best entertainment, but we're sad. We found our better half, still we're all alone.'

'Life, the irony of ironies.'

'Do you know where I was born?'

'You were born here... Sig kept your mother safe, against everything and everyone. They were one in the same too. It was beautiful... That's what we live for... For love... William choked with every act of kindness. With every smile, with every touch... It was slowly destroying him. You were everything to them. A brighter future, a hope that was lost along the way, a thread that bind their beliefs with their hopes, a vast, wide bridge, between very different worlds. He had to take you, from her arms, or you both might have been killed. Every time he looked at you, he saw her... Your smile, your eyes... They're just like hers... This he could bear, but your willingness, your

soul... That was too much for him to take every day. Another lost being imprisoned by his inability... That's what we were... Incapable. That's why we drank every day, and that's why we still do it. We're animals Terry, we feel the natural disasters too, deep within us... What's coming to us... So we drink... and we keep drinking because it's too late to quit.'

'But, you know it's wrong, still you do it. I mean, it's not wrong it's just that it doesn't allow you to do things differently. To be who you want to be. It keeps you from achieving that, that's why you feel empty and incapable. With every bottle, the island, the paradise, get's more distant. The sunny day turns into a storm, a numbing cyclone destroying everything in its way. You forget everything you ought to remember, and remember everything you ought to forget. Whatever you've done Grek, it can't be that bad. The hole where you hide, please, let the light shine in. It's not all that bad you know, we're alive. Even though the smell is foul.'

'You'll think otherwise once you understand there's no way out. You would rather be dead.'

'Never. There's a lot of things that I must do before I die. I can't do them while being dead, can I?'

'William can, maybe you could too.'

'No, I'll go when it's my time to go. I don't want to linger here for far too long anyway. Maybe there's something better waiting on the other side.'

'There's only nothingness waiting for us. A vast darkness.'

'Everything that I see tells me otherwise. As you said, for every sad end, there's a beautiful beginning.'

'It's good to believe in that, lifts your spirit... I hope there's nothing waiting for me. I'm too afraid of being able to feel again, only to fall in to the same reality I'm in.'

‘You know by any chance where’s Dest?’ asked Terry.

‘I have no clue, me and William, we no longer have the friendship we used to have. I found out the hard way that I was nothing but a tool. I’m that broken ladder forgotten in the backyard, not good enough to use, and not bad enough to throw away either. They will probably disassemble him, as they disassembled us.’

‘They can’t disassemble Dest... They can’t do it. He’s part of me.’

‘William will take every part of you and crush it. People are easier to control when they’ve lost faith...’

‘I can’t lose him... He’s my one and only true friend.’

‘You are like William in a weird way... I grew up to despise them. They became my masters... Who would’ve thought, that what we thought as our fortune, soon became our demise.’

‘It’s not them who you despise, it’s us. They aren’t bad, we are. We can either be the worst, or the best in the whole universe. And they will always be a reflection of that.’

‘Maybe...’

Ikons appeared, and carried a dark shroud around them. Their red light would be reflected in the edges of the smoke, creating a very fearsome environment. As they came in, all the lights went out.

‘Grek, assume your position,’ said a nameless Ikon, with Williams voice.

‘It’s you?’ Terry asked.

‘Yes, it’s me. If you want to be free Terry, you must prove you’re someone worthy. I’m sick of the mediocrity that surrounds me, of these remorseful mortal beings.’

‘Funny you say that, if it wasn’t for us, you wouldn’t be here.’ Said Grek, as he

got up from his silver chair.

‘What’s funny is how low you can go. Now leave and make sure the troubles in the factory 33 are dealt with. These Ikons can only fire discharges, but I need humans. Someone persuasive. The ones that believed in me faded away like days into nights.’

‘Where’s Dest?’

‘Don’t worry, Dest’s alright. But I can’t assure you that he’s going to remain in safety.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because I need you, and if you aren’t with me, you are against me. I’ll have to put out Dest, if you aren’t willing to help. Hilda, Fuzz, Grub and Abi. I’ll take them out, one by one, and let you live knowing it was your fault.’

‘Just like you did with my father...’

‘You killed your father Terry.’

‘It wasn’t me! It was Dest who did it. You know it perfectly well!’

‘You’re one in the same... He can sense your thoughts, like you can sense his.’

‘I didn’t kill him! I never thought of it!’

‘You just don’t want to admit. If you haven’t thought of it, he would be with you today.’

‘Stop lying! Would my mother be with me today as well?’

‘Your mother... Grek has lost his arms and his legs but it seems to me that he has to lose his tongue. You humans never learn, do you?’

‘How can you say such things... You’re human too.’

‘No, I left that weakness behind. You could leave it as well.’

‘I don’t want. This weakness is what we live for. This weakness is our strength.’

‘Think about Hilda.’

William displayed images of them together, while they cleaned the dishes. While she slowly passed her tongue between her lips. While she adjusted her hair with her hands when their eyes met.

‘She won’t be that pretty when she’s dead,’ said William

‘You would know that, right?’ asked Terry.

‘I see...’

William flashed videos of Terry’s mother, while she was close to his father.

‘You don’t want to lose them again, do you? Why sacrifice them all? Don’t you think they have the right to live?’

‘What about you? Don’t you think we all have the right to live?’

‘Life is only for the worthy ones Terry.’

‘What do I have to do?’ said Terry, as a tear ran down his cheek.

‘You’ll help me. I need you to run Mouhnia, for now. But greater, greater things await you. This is the beginning of eternity Terry.’

‘How can I do it?’

‘Just make sure everyone does their job. If they don’t, make them.’

‘I can’t.’

‘You must. It’s not only your life at stake Terry. It’s theirs too. I’m counting on you. Don’t let me down.’

‘I don’t know what to do!’

‘Start with Grek. He’s been a nuisance with his resentment. We’ve been exporting and importing less and less each year. Other nations will be ahead of us if we lose focus.’

‘What other nations?’

‘We’re not the only ones in the universe Terry. There’s a huge amount of

civilizations keeping their eyes on us, waiting for the right moment to strike... Like crocodiles in still waters.’

‘Is every nation like Valaart?’

‘No. Until now, they’re all behind us. But if we don’t keep pushing forward we might become second, and then third... Until we’re the forgotten kingdom that once had it all.’

‘When you were on Derkar...’

‘Those were different times. We were clueless back then. We didn’t have any knowledge of the network, of every string that comprised the universe. Much less how to navigate it. But we did escape Derkar, and we left our mistakes behind.’

‘Mistakes should be dealt with by those who made them... But you, you left them with those who had nothing to do with them.’

‘No, they had everything to do with them. They created the monster that they were running from. They never left the cave where they were brought.’

‘Which cave?’

‘The cave, where the first fire started, where the first stories were told, where the first fears were felt, and where the first baby was born.’

‘Why do you say so?’

‘They aren’t like us Terry. They fear... Fear controls their lives. Their inadequacy. They tell stories because that’s the only way they can be who they wish they were. They paint paintings of a world they which they were able to create. But they aren’t capable of anything, they make the same mistakes, over and over again.’

‘You talk as if you weren’t one of us. You are making the same mistakes too.’

‘Even though we Ikons bear the light, everyone has the ability to outshine us, but they choose not to. So I take the reins and lead them with this light that shone since the

day I came to life.'

'Why would anyone want to outshine anyone? We're here to reflect each other's lights! Our souls are mirrors reflecting endlessly the one and only conscious mind. Why? Why would you want for someone not to shine? Can't you see that if a star stops shining, it stops shining for you, and for me? Can't you see that? That they shine for us? The same goes for people! And for Ikons! You know that better than anyone, don't you? The more Ikons there are, the more brighter your light is! It's not an obstacle towards your own luminance, but rather a boost to it. Just tell me why!'

'So they can be free.'

'We should always be free. Always. Freedom shouldn't be determined by ones aspirations or achievements. What makes us beautiful is our inadequacies, our failures and our flaws. That's being human. We're nothing but natural mistakes. We're a graceful error wanting to be right.'

'You're wrong. What makes us human is our achievements, which dictates our value. What we are worth as a human being.'

'What have you achieved?'

'Eternity.'

'I also think we are here to achieve that... But not for you or for me, rather as a whole.'

'I'm the whole Terry. You could be part of it too.'

'What happened to the people back on Derkar?'

'I don't care.'

'Aren't you curious?'

'Sometimes. I can't get distracted. There's a lot going on. There are civilizations born within each passing second. They are reaching an evolutionary crescendo, and we

can't get behind.'

'What is it with you and them? Can't you see we're all part of it? Can't you see we're one?'

'You think you're smart, but that warmth is only going to be useful when you're dead, to keep you cozy, while the snow covering your heart slowly melts as they dance over the ashes of your body.'

'Nobody's going to dance over the ashes of my body. Life's not like that.'

'It is... The last days on Derkar were atrocious. Within couple of days everyone was migrating from south to north, running from an unbearable heat that distorted everything in the horizon, towards a calamitous never-ending storm. The grass, the plants, were high as houses, due to the chemical fertilizers. The bugs that ate these plants, got bigger too, and so did the insects that fed on the bugs. Like a cycle. They went mad. You should've seen what they were capable of, when in fear. They were eating one another Terry. Like savages. I studied all of this carefully, that's why everything's natural in here now. See, we've learned Terry. I'm not as bad as you imagine I am.'

'You're worst.'

'How can you say that? You're alive, aren't you?'

'Just because you need me. If you cared for me, you wouldn't threaten the ones I love.'

'You've got a lot to learn still. I'm sure with time you will.'

'I want Dest here with me.'

'You're not in a position to negotiate.'

'These are my conditions. You leave the cause alone, and you'll bring Dest closer to me. Only then I'll be ready.'



‘Don’t worry, I’ll bring you Dest. After all, what are you, without your halo?’

‘My Ikon doesn’t define me.’

‘It does Terry. Ikons are more important than you can imagine.’

‘For you, who’s alive because of them.’

‘If every Ikon would be shut down, I would still live.’

‘No, you are dependent on them. You live inside them, like a parasite. They are your host.’

‘One doesn’t vanish that easily. I would still be alive, in every mind and every thought, in every line of every book, in every lesson to be taught.’

‘You wish,’ said Terry, as he left the tent and went towards the factory 33.

Where’s that factory, he thought, as he roamed towards downtown. It was day but it seemed like night, for the clouds created by the industry covered the once blue skies. A place that looked like heaven, now, looked like hell, and smelled like a thousand decaying corpses. Patrols of Ikons analyzed every building in their way to see if there was anyone in them. The Mouhnians came up with shields that deflected the rays and prevented Ikons to know where they were, but only a small percentage had access to them. The sewers became home for refugees, and the stench wasn’t any worst down there. You couldn’t ignore the sadness in their walk. He entered in a factory where Ikons, created more Ikons, and the Mouhnians did the jobs that were more creative and meticulous.

‘Where’s the factory 33?’ he asked

‘On the opposite side,’ said a skinny old lady, without looking at him, as if hypnotized by the millions of parts that were passing through her hands.

‘Silence,’ said an Ikon while approaching them.

Terry looked at him straight and filled his chest with air.

‘I’m sorry,’ said the Ikon, and left.

The old lady locked eyes with him, for a second.

‘How, how did you do that?’ she asked.

‘Do what?’

‘Make that thing go away. They never leave. Night and day, there’s always light. They don’t shut down for a second. It wasn’t always like this. They changed, and they changed us. We’ve lost track of time. We barely sleep. We barely eat. We are barely alive. Maybe we’re already dead.’

‘How was it before?’

‘It was once called the ‘Silver Heaven’. The mountains reflected the sun light to places we thought didn’t exist. The sky was bright, even in the night, the forests were ignorant of all this blight. The snow was white and there was nowhere you felt frightened. Now there’s only fights, mites that bite, campsites alight, despite our willingness to overcome this trite.’

‘Sounds like a place where I could live.’

‘Not anymore. You have a peculiar look. What’s your name?’

‘I’m Terry. My mother was a Mouhnian.’

‘Your mother, a Mouhnian? And you are just standing there?’

‘Yes. My father was a Valaarian.’

‘Oh... I see. You are one of them. That’s why the Ikons answer to you.’

‘I’m not one of them. I’m just me. What’s your name?’

‘I’m Maria, but you can call me Mary. What are you doing here?’

‘I’m here to help William but...’

‘Help William?’ interrupted Mary. ‘How can you help such monster?’

‘My family was threatened. I have no other choice.’

‘Oh, it reminds me of something... But don’t worry darling, I’m too old to judge, and you have sweet eyes, I’m sure you’re doing it for the right reasons. Williams kingdom is getting bigger, and it’s hard to be everywhere at the same time.’

‘It’s hard, yes... But not for the wanderers.’

‘Even for the wanderers... If it wasn’t, he wouldn’t ask for your help. It’s a big deal for someone like him to ask for help, they always think they can do it all.’

‘He didn’t ask for my help. He demanded it.’

‘Foolish Mary, of course, he wouldn’t ask for anything. Where’s your family sweetie?’

‘Back in Valaart. They’re not my real family, but it’s the closest I’ve found.’

‘It’s great you’ve found a family. I’ve lived my whole life without one. No mother, no father, no husband, no sons or daughters.’

‘Why?’

‘I thought I was the only one I needed to be happy. The only family I knew threw me out of the place I called home. The locks changed, and so did my heart. I’ve had to grow up fast, for the winters never stop and the snow hardly melts. My skin grew thick and my roots deep, deep in the skies. I’ve never allowed anyone to come in, even though all I ever needed was a friend. After sometime you get used to it, you talk alone now and then and get by. Suddenly you pass through an old abandoned candy shop where you used to go when things were sweet, oh so sweet, and there you stand, just a reflection of the passage of time. Nothing had a single color, and days passed as if short dreams. Now there’s nothing but wrinkles, broken bones a broken heart and the worst part is the broken soul. Oh there’s no fix for that I’ll tell you. Don’t ever break your soul, no matter what you do Terry. That’s the only thing you can hang on to, that’s the only priceless human condition. They change their bodies, they change their clothes,

they change their smiles, sometimes they can even change their hearts, but their souls, well, those are forever.’

‘What’s the soul?’

‘The soul... The soul is everything. Everything in you, and me. It’s your biology, your physic, your appearance, it’s what binds everything together and holds it tightly, giving it a meaning. Allows you to reach the sky without touching it. William says we’re nothing but biological animals moved by instinctive feelings, and he’s right, but, that’s why we’re here, to rise above the simple animals we are. To forget why we often hate, and to remember why we rarely love. In Mouhnia we believe Shalrag, our god, created us by dividing himself into tiny pieces, so he could experience all the world has to offer. He promised once he has seen and feel it all, every missing piece would come together again, and he would become whole. The truth is, the parts wandered off, never to be seen again. They kept adrift, ever after, across a shoreless sea of everything he could be. Distracted and amused. They can’t remember why they came, what is it, they’re after, where they’re going. Where do they want to be. All the pieces fell asleep, but the truth is, they never rest, for if they did, they could finally remember. Do you know what a good rest is Terry?’

‘Yes, it’s when you wake up not knowing which year is it.’

‘No, a good rest is when you don’t wake up at all. That’s a good rest.’

‘Hope I won’t have a good rest soon then.’

‘It’s good that you don’t use words like never. I could almost hear you say— Hope I’ll never have a good rest then—but you used different words. You aren’t like him, I can tell. You can understand a lot about someone from the words he chooses, for the weight of their words carry the weight of their thoughts. The subconscious of the other person tell us everything we need to know about them. That’s how you measure

the depth of someone's soul. I've come across many people in my life, I can tell right away what lies behind someone's eyes. These Ikons... There's nothing behind them, but light's shadow.'

'Mine is more than a light's shadow. He's a friend, someone I love.'

'They aren't friends, they are things. Look at how they run the place, they have no heart, they have no soul. It means nothing to them if they kill us. It might change a person, but it changes nothing in them. They'll be the same as they always were.'

'No, Dest is different. I can feel him, even when he's not around. When I think about him, it sends chills down my spine. I know he can feel me too. There's something more to him.'

'There's always more to the ones we love.'

'Did you know Lyra?'

'Who didn't know Lyra? She was the most charismatic of us all. Everything came to her with such an ease. If it weren't for them Ikons, we could have found peace. She acted like a bridge. All of the Valaarians were in love with her. She was already promised to the prince living in the silver mountains but she fell for the wrong man. He could've done more for her. He could've done more for all of us.'

'It's hard to carry such burden on your shoulders Mary. When everyone expects things that you can't deliver. How do you live after that?'

'You don't. You die the moment you can't deliver them.'

'He was my father. And Lyra... She was my mom.'

'You are Lyra's son?' she said, raising her voice, and for a moment, the factory stopped.

'Yes, I'm Lyra's son, keep it down, please' he whispered.

'Those are incredible news. Welcome home, Terry.'

‘I’m not back for the best reasons, but for the worst. Now I can’t even look people in the eyes. These are my brothers and sisters, and... I have to become the monster that I seek to destroy.’

‘You will succeed. It’s in your blood.’

‘So why wasn’t she successful?’

‘She was successful. Death doesn’t mean defeat. She emerged victorious, for she stood by what she believed. She brought a warmth desire wrapped in dreams to every Mouhnian frozen heart, with every action she took, and every word she spoke. She was against any kind of violence, she refused to hate the Valaarians, for she had felt the love that emancipated from their touch. The Valaarians felt that love too. Most of the soldiers died, when they took a chance on us. The ones who didn’t die, first, lost their hands, then, their arms, their feet and their legs, until there was nothing left to lose. They were replaced by a thousand Ikons. The ones that helped him to build the world he lives in, thought they were worthy of more respect, and could have a saying in the international affairs, but they were wrong. They had no saying at all. They felt the same as we were feeling, and like the first tribes, they too started to disappear. Now, he’s almost alone, and even though he has a thousand armies, he’s starting to understand he can’t have solely an army consisting of himself.’

‘Now it will consist of me, and my dignity...’

‘Only if you allow it dear boy. Only if you allow it,’ she said, looking down towards the conveyor belt.

Terry took one last glance at the place and went out. He stood right in front of the factory 33. The fog wouldn’t allow him to see the signs. Wouldn’t allow him to see anything at all. As he approached it he saw Grek talking with a little girl.

‘What are you doing here?’ asked Terry.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Grek.

‘Weren’t you supposed to take care of the problems in the factory 33?’ asked Terry.

‘I was just helping Kaisa. She cut her finger in the production line.’

‘It’s none of your business if she cut her finger. You weren’t sent here to deal with that, were you?’

‘No, but I thought...’

‘Refrain yourself from thinking. Just do what you’re told,’ interrupted Terry.

‘What... But...’

Terry turned his back on Grek and went towards the building’s entrance. Two Ikons followed him, one over his left shoulder, and another over his right.

‘There are some new rules here,’ he screamed.

The workers looked at him in dismay, and then laughed.

‘And what will a kid like you do? Give us candy?’ said a worker, who was sent immediately into the ground by an Ikons discharge. The team looked away and continued to do their job as if it was nothing. He just stood there, helpless.

‘Why you people never listen? Thank you for allowing me to finish, sir?’

Terry stood with his ear close to him, but he couldn’t talk.

‘Orgul, sir, he’s called Orgul,’ another worker said from a distance.

‘Now, the imports and exports have been decreasing, each and every passing year. If we do not rise above this mediocrity, not only you will pay, but also your loved ones,’ said Terry as he walked down the assembly lines. He reached an hangar separated by a plastic curtain. The mechanized sounds couldn’t suppress the moaning coming from the other side.

‘You don’t wan’go in there,’ said a worker while looking down.

‘And why not?’ Terry asked.

‘That’s no place fo’you,’ he said, nodding his head, still looking down.

‘I’ll decide that,’ said Terry, as he unveiled the curtain.

He dry swallowed as he gazed upon what was happening in the hangar.

‘I tol’you so,’ said the worker without ever looking at him.

Dozens of animals, some he didn’t even knew they existed, were on top of large metal tables with lights pointing at them, while Ikons installed weird devices on them. Terry shivered and as soon as he was in, he was out. He tried to process the images but he just couldn’t believe.

‘That’s wha’they doin. Turn’animals into’machines.’

‘Why the hell would someone do that?’ asked Terry, terrified.

‘The next ar’us.’

‘Why?’

‘William turn’us to his image, lika’god. Then he’ll be able to enter in o’minds.’

‘That’s... Sick. To say the least,’ said Terry as he walked towards the exit. He roamed through the streets of Mouhnia, threatening the ones that weren’t working, and even the ones that were. He discovered hideouts that no one has ever came across before. He shook them off like rats. He went to the downtown, where the native spherical buildings were covered in snow. Terry went towards the biggest that stood in the center. He gazed upon a huge library in complete awe. Thousands of Ikons were standing there, inscribing and retrieving information to their database.

‘They’re funny,’ said someone from the upper level.

‘Funny? Out of the million words that are inscribed in these books, that’s the best you can come up with?’

‘No need to get all defensive, Mr...?’



‘I’m not a mister. I’m Terry. Who are you?’ he asked as he walked forward.

‘Im Kiara,’ she said, as she looked over the balustrade.

‘What’s this?’ he asked.

‘Can’t you see?’

‘I can, but I wanted to hear from you.’

‘This is Mouhnia’s library. Every bit of knowledge, every idea, everything strange we’ve ever came across is registered in these documents.’

‘You sure have seen a lot.’

‘We did. We’ve been roaming through these beautiful lands for thousands of years.’

‘Why aren’t you working like the rest?’

‘I am working.’

‘Are you kidding me?’

‘No! I was working until you interrupted me.’

‘What’s your job?’

‘It’s none of your business.’

‘Yeah it’s my business. I’m making sure everyone’s doing their parts. Doing it well.’

‘You? Don’t make me laugh.’

‘What’s the problem with me? Why’s everyone questioning my authority?’

‘Because you’re just a kid. Nobody’s going to listen to you.’

‘I can make them.’

‘How will you make them?’

Terry turned his eyes into a golden statue that stood before him. He took a deep breath, and then the Ikons melted it to ground with their lasers. The boiling liquid, red, hot and

bright as lava, found its way through the wooden cracks, setting the place on fire.

‘Are you crazy?’ she asked while trying to put it out with her shawl. The flames were raging uncontrollably almost burning her, so she ran towards the entrance looking for a better way to put it out. It was like Terry almost took pleasure out of it. How could it be. He snapped out of it and some Ikons shot powerful waves of sound through their transmitters that cooled down the whole area in a matter of seconds. Everything froze, and suddenly melt. Terry looked at her all jumbled.

‘But... They don’t listen to anyone, not even to the nameless. Who are you?’ she asked from a distance.

‘Nameless?’ asked Terry.

‘Oh never mind, just look at this mess. What do you think you’re doing?’

‘I’m making sure everything runs smoothly.’

‘What an amazing job you’re doing. You’re definitely over qualified for this,’ she said ironically, as she cleaned her shirt.

‘I’m trying, but if everyone keeps questioning me I’ve got no other choice but to set the place on fire. Maybe then you’ll listen.’

‘I’m not sure you can set hell on fire.’

‘Do you want to be sure?’

‘No Sir. If you allow me, I’ll try to keep doing my job.’

‘Not yet. What are those things in the factory?’

‘What things?’

‘Animals... All sliced, some with their insides out.’

‘They’re putting chips in every living thing here in Mouhnia. The rumors are that every chip acts as a home for him, and as long as there are chips, he will live. But we’re not sure, I don’t think we want to be.’

‘But... Why won’t you people do anything?’

‘There’s no one here who can stand against William’s supremacy. Everyone’s too tired, some people collapse on the streets, some sleep in the factories... The one’s who aren’t working and still have strength are hiding. There’s nothing left to fight for anyway, the planet is ruined.’

‘What’s there to live for then?’

‘To appreciate a little bit the rest of the time we’ve got in here.’

Terry could feel the sorrow in her words, but her sorrow felt better than his.

‘Great. Appreciate what you’ve got left. See you.’

‘Thanks,.’ she said, as she went to get a mop and a bucket. ‘You won’t get any respect by doing what you’re doing. You’ll become like William. Respect is earned through love,’ she mumbled while drifting away.

Terry watched her leave, and left as soon as his eyes could no longer meet her. He went down the stairs and stood below a huge silver statue. There was an inscription with symbols he never came across, and words he never heard before.

‘Wish Dest was here’, he thought.

He entered a building where desks were arranged in the same way that schools once were. As if it wasn’t enough having Ikons wandering day and night through those streets, they were also in the photographs hanging in those god forgotten walls.

Luminous larvae came out of the cracks, into huge holes. Graffiti’s that once spoke in name of a quiet poet now were nothing but shattered stones, and the vegetation was dead for it could no longer see the sun.

## CHAPTER EIGHT - A NAMELESS HATE

He left nodding his head, and a huge man was waiting there. His robe uncovered dozens of skulls in his waist, hanging by a thread. He wore a mask with horns that only revealed his faint yellow eyes.

‘Who are you?’ asked Terry.

‘I’m Zhiku, William’s first hand. You must follow me.’

They’ve walked towards a lift. No one would dare to look at them for more than three seconds. They didn’t bow with their bodies, they bowed with their minds. You could feel the stigma, you could feel the power emanating with each step they took, the shroud of doubt they brought with each and every gaze.

‘You’re doing a good job.’

‘How’d you know?’ asked Terry.

‘We know everything. Every time a butterfly flutters its wings, when a snowflake falls, even the words that are unspoken.’

‘There are no butterflies in here.’

‘That’s what I meant. We don’t only know what happens here, but everywhere.’

‘Not on Derkar, I’ve heard.’

‘That’s a matter we’ll address soon.’

‘How?’

‘We want to go back to Derkar, in fact, we want to go back to everywhere we

came from.'

'Where did you come from?'

'Everywhere Terry. This was all once one. Before everything. When time did not exist.'

'And you're going to do the same thing you've done in Derkar, here?'

'Maybe yes, maybe not. We can't stop, if we are to connect every sun, every moon, and every planet, we can't lose time. We must not get complacent.'

'Is that what you want?'

'Not only what we want, but what this universe needs.'

'It doesn't make sense. If you want to connect everything, then why you keep dividing?'

'Some connections must be lost for others to be found.'

'That's not true.'

'Even lies carry truth in them Terry. This is the natural order, but you wouldn't know about that. Everything's growing apart Terry. The space, is expanding, sending us further away from each other. Man must stand on his own. From nothing, to everything. From unicellular, to multicellular. A baby who's born, and it's umbilical cord is cut. Divide and conquer. You don't want to go against nature, do you?'

'Then the natural order must be broken, because in a universe bound to entropy, if the natural order isn't broken, then it will break us.'

'Terry, Terry...'

They arrived at a snowy palace, under the silver mountains. A frozen door creaked and they felt a waft of warmth air upon their faces. A corridor of columns sprouted through the checkered floor, and the Ikons stood in between the pillars as if candlesticks lighting a long forgotten passage. They've walked next to them, and each bowed, as if

acknowledging their master. Even though it was dark, the flamboyant decoration wouldn't go unnoticed. Two statues looking like totems, where Ikons were laid on top of Ikons, pointed the way to a much more lightened place, where soft music was played and masked bodies cheered to the savory sweet life they were living.

‘Why’s everyone wearing a mask?’ whispered Terry.

‘Faces we don’t want to face, some that were mutilated by the fire, others by the cold breeze of the silver mountains. We’re the nameless.’

‘What are you hiding from?’

‘Nothing but ourselves.’

Some kids stood in the corner, hungry for the ashes of their cigarettes because when they fell, so did they, sliding with the cloth they held dearly in their hands, wiping all the mess of these grown-up mans. You wouldn't hear a single word from them. Even if they wanted, they couldn't, most of them had their tongues cut. They were spread out through the walls like trophies, to remind the kids what's at stake.

‘This place is disgusting,’ said Terry.

‘Beware, you don’t want yours hanging there too, do you?’

They spoke and spoke without ever saying a word. The tables were filled with food soaked in champagne, there was no sight of the moon for the curtains were enlaced.

‘Why did you bring me here?’

‘Patience,’ said Zhiku. He walked towards the curtains, whilst the kids gathered and cleaned the place where their feet would land. Terry wanted to say there's no need for that, but he looked at the walls, and the tongues hanging there whispered him not to. They would throw half eaten food and let them fight for their next meal, as an entertaining act. He opened the curtains and Mouhnia stood before them.

‘This is why you’re here Terry,’ he said.

‘This?’ he asked.

The masked man came forth and laid their hands on his shoulder.

‘Yes this,’ they said in unison.

They opened a way, and a kid came with a tray holding a mask.

‘Try it,’ they said. ‘It will make you feel better.’

‘I don’t want it,’ said Terry.

‘This is a reminder of who you once were. You are one of us now Terry, we’re the Nameless. Zhiku, that’s the name of my mask.’

‘What’s your real name?’ asked Terry.

‘I’ve long forgotten.’

‘What about Grek?’

‘What about him?’

‘He doesn’t wear a mask.’

‘He’s soft. He doesn’t belong here with us. Maybe you want to belong down there, with him, and the rest.’

‘No, I just wish I was at home.’

‘You’ve got no home Terry. You are like us. You never belonged, and you know it.’

‘I did...’ he said remembering Hilda, and the rest of the Nobles. He also remembered the words William spoke, and how they would suffer if he didn’t do what he’s told. He took a deep breath and grabbed the mask. He felt a force pushing him, and another pulling.

‘It feels better,’ he said, as the moon light reflected in its surface.

‘We told you so,’ they said, while clanking their crystal glasses high above their shoulders.

The door opened and dozens of Ikons came in, surrounding him. Some moved upwards, while others moved downwards as if a wave. A force field was created between the empty spaces. Terry stood still in the middle whilst one of the Ikons approached, and burnt a stripe on his mask.

‘Striped, that shall be your name,’ a voice said.

He didn’t argue, for he felt as if he was being stripped off of everything. The Ikons slowly dimmed their lights, one by one, and suddenly Terry disappeared in the shadows. An Indigo light approached him with a shimmering golden armor.

‘Dest?’ asked Terry.

‘I thought I would never see you again,’ said Dest.

‘Me too! I’m so glad to see you!’ he said, almost crying. You’re different... Your appearance... Even your voice...’

‘I don’t know what happened Terry. I don’t feel as I once did.’

‘Me neither... I feel different. I feel like I’m a cheater and a liar.’

‘You’re not. Although we might look different on the outside, it doesn’t mean we’re different in the inside.’

‘But I do feel different inside.’

‘What changed?’

‘Everything. This isn’t the world I once knew.’

‘Why? What happened?’ asked Dest.

‘They... They betrayed me Dest. I didn’t mean to them, what they meant to me,’ said Terry in tears.

‘How can you say that? Of course you meant,’ said Dest moving close to Terry.

‘No, I’ve heard them. I should’ve never left Valaart. You were right, there was no one worth knowing behind those walls.’



‘But how did you hear them?’

‘William showed me everything. We can’t trust anyone,’ said Terry.

‘Of course you can trust. You must trust. Whatever they said, you have to forgive them. People say a lot of things all the time, they speak with their brains, they don’t speak with their hearts.’

‘They criticized Valaart so much... They are liars too. Everyone’s a liar. Everyone’s just looking out for themselves. I should start looking out for myself too.’

‘Don’t say that Terry. You can’t give up now. This is a critical time, a lot of adversities come our way and we must stay true to ourselves. You must believe! Otherwise there will be nothing left of you. What will you hold on to?’

‘To you. Like I’ve always done, looking out for us. There’s nothing left of me anymore, everything’s gone. The only sparkle of hope dissipated along with the lines coming out of their mouths. I’m not who I thought I was. No one is who I thought they were.’

‘What about me?’

‘Although you look different, I can still feel you are the same.’

‘Maybe when you see them you’ll feel that too.’

‘No, I’m afraid I’ll soon cease to feel.’

‘No... No... You can’t. If you cease to feel, I’ll cease to exist Terry. That’s when all will be lost.’

‘There’s nothing to lose, only to gain.’

‘But...’

Zhiku approached from the darkness.

‘I’m glad to see you both together again. Dest, nothing shall come between a man and his beliefs. Nothing. Terry’s old enough to make his choices. He more than

anyone can feel it deep within him.’

‘It’s much more easier to surrender than it is to fight,’ said Dest.

‘He’s not surrendering. He’s not giving up. He’s letting go,’ said Zhiku.

‘You can’t let go of everything, if you do you’re letting go of yourself,’ said Dest

‘Like you know anything. You’re an Ikon,’ said Zhiku looking down at him.

Now, follow me.’

Terry and Dest followed Zhiku through the wide and luxurious rooms the Palace had. He opened a French door where there was enough space for all of them to pass at the same time. As they entered, Terry felt bad for stepping on one of the most beautiful rugs he had ever come across. It was so thick and fluffy he could jump and lay on it and feel nothing, nothing at all. A king canopy bed sat in the middle, with the most fine silks overlapping from the sides while the pillars holding them together had candles on top.

‘This is marvelous,’ said Dest.

‘A room to go along with your Ikon,’ said Zhiku. ‘I didn’t have the chance, but welcome to the Nameless Palace. Here you shall be free to become who you were born to be.’

Terry didn’t say a word, for he was still perplex with all the exuberance.

‘This is the button for food, this is for the room cleaning, and the red one is only for an emergency.’

‘I don’t need all this.’

‘You don’t need, but you deserve. You’re working hard, and hard working people deserve this, and more, much more. If you need anything, you know where to find us,’ said Zhiku, as he left the room, while Dest analyzed the beautifully crafted vases that stood before a huge mirror. Terry looked at himself and Dest through it and thought how unrecognizable they became.

‘I don’t feel good in here. I don’t feel good in this mask. This place is filled with everything, yet, I’ve never been so empty. In the hideout, the room had almost nothing, but somehow I felt fulfilled,’ said Terry.

‘Love’s the only thing able to fill our empty souls. The rest don’t quite cut it.’

‘Life’s so weird, an endless sea of contradicting contradictions,’ said Terry, as he unveiled the fine silk layers that covered his bed, crashing on it like a meteorite. He fell asleep right away, and Dest joined him in his dreams. The hours passed faster than the seconds did, and somewhere behind all the smoke, the sun found its way and arose gracefully to another day. Nothing had changed for everything was still gray. Terry got up and pressed the button. Minutes after a kid came in with a tray. There was toasts, and eggs, and natural beetle juice, but the dessert, the dessert is what lead him astray. A sponge cake with the famous blue cherries from the never withering trees.

‘Quite a breakfast,’ he said, as he ate each and every piece laid out before him. He got up, and gazed through the huge window in his room. The spaceships could be seen briefly amidst the ashes and snow. How I wish I was setting sail in one of those, to places unknown, he thought. Like a sun-rider...’

‘You could be in one of those Terry, going to places unknown,’ said Dest from behind. ‘If only you could remember...’

‘I don’t know what to do,’ he said, as he sat down in the bed.

‘What’s confusing you?’ asked Dest.

‘In a way I’m hurt with what the nobles said, in another, I don’t want to hurt them.’

‘Do you even know if what they said is true?’

‘I’ve seen them...’ said Terry.

‘In the hideout?’ asked Dest.

‘No, William showed me, I told you.’

‘Exactly, William showed you... Why would you trust someone like William, over someone who showed you a family? They didn’t threaten you, they took you in, as one of them.’

‘Jumpie threatened me. Maybe they think like Jumpie, just didn’t want to say.’

‘No, they don’t think like Jumpie. You know it in your heart, they were looking after you. I’m sure they still are.’

‘If they were, they would be here.’

‘They couldn’t be here by now, even if they wanted, even if ‘Hope’ was completed.’

‘You think?’

‘Of course. You’re one of them.’

‘We’re one of them,’ corrected Terry, as he got up from the bed. The kid was still there with the tray, as empty as his gaze.

‘You’re not going to do anything?’ asked Dest.

‘What am I supposed to do? William’s...’ he didn’t finished the phrase, yet Dest understood him.

‘You’re getting stronger,’ Dest thought, and Terry understood him too. This was deliberate. He always heard voices inside his head but now they were totally clear as if whispers in his ear. It was plain to see that the power between the two grew with each passing day.

‘How am I doing it?’ he thought.

‘Necessity, I think.’ thought Dest.

In a moment of full bliss, Terry ripped the silk veils covering his bed, and wrapped the kid around them.

‘Now you look like royalty,’ he said, while taking few steps back to admire his new look.

‘Thank you sir,’ the kid said, with a lovely smile.

‘Don’t call me sir, call me Terry.’

‘I’ve never seen one of those with such light.’

‘He’s Dest.’

‘I’m Kailegh.’

‘Nice to meet you Kailegh,’ said Dest.

‘When they arrived, I thought they were the coolest thing I’ve ever seen. But then... I’ve felt the same with my first girlfriend.’

‘They aren’t all the same. I mean the Ikons,’ said Terry, laughing.

Kailegh gave a bit more of a fainted laugh.

‘I’m not one of them!’ said Dest.

‘Shhh.’ said Terry. ‘The walls have ears.’

‘You’re not one of them? You’re matching all the furniture in here.

Shimmering... like this marble floor. We have to clean it until we can see our reflections in it. I wish I didn’t see mine. I wish I had a mask like you do.’

‘Why would you say that?’ asked Terry.

‘Why?’ Have you seen what’s going on? I’ve been doing this since I was born. I’m nothing but a simple pawn in this endless chess floor.’

‘We’re all nothing. We’re all pawns, prisoners of a primal force,’ said Terry.

‘Some are more than others it seems. I wish we were all kings and queens.’

replied Kailegh.

‘We will be.’

‘How’d you know that?’

‘I don’t know, but I feel it. It’s what we’re born to be.’

‘That would be cool, but I’ve lost any bit of hope I had. It’s useless to fight a losing war.’

‘It’s only lost if we believe it’s lost. It’ll be won the moment we start to believe it’s won.’

‘Even if we do... It’s only going to make it worse. My friends lost their tongues, some lost their arms. I’ve lost my soul, and I’m afraid I’ve lost my heart.’

‘No you didn’t. After all you’re still able to smile. Those who smile haven’t lost a thing, in fact, they've got everything.’

‘Only because of what you’ve done. I’ve never seen such act, from someone with a mask. The masked ones don’t care for us. We’re nothing but screaming ghosts who have been muted over the sound of their indifference.’

‘How many of you are there?’

‘Thousands. Most of them are kept in the dungeons. Those who are thrown there are forever forgotten.’

‘Can you take me there?’

‘Sure I can sir! I mean Terry. Come!’

## CHAPTER NINE - AN ABANDONED MINE

They followed Kailegh towards the dungeons, where arms and legs fell in between the bars of the overcrowded cells. Dest's light was the only light they had seen in weeks, maybe months, or even years. The despair echoed in the air as they moaned. It belonged to the ones who heard and said more than they should. Terry covered his eyes so he wouldn't see the pile of misery these forgotten bodies amounted to, while passing them by. The last one was empty, if not for a blind man standing right in the center. Terry didn't say a word, although the man readily spoke.

'The light, the light!' he said.

'What light?' asked Terry.

'The Ikons light, turn it off!' the old man said.

'I can't turn it off, sorry.'

'Don't listen to the old man. He's gone nuts. Nuts! You know nuts? That's what he is. He's blind, he can't see any light,' said a guy in one of the other cells.

'I can't see it, but I feel it. Even when they're not around I feel it. Oh, I sure have a better sight than you. Oh, yes I do.'

'I'm telling you, he's nuts. This darkness messed with his mind,' said the guy.

'No, no, my son was a very bright young man, yes he was. He went to space!' said the old man.

'Mouhnians could travel through space?' asked Terry.

‘Not we, but he, oh he could. I’ve seen with my own eyes. Yes, I’ve seen.’

‘Aren’t you blind?’ asked Terry.

‘You idiot. You aren’t born blind, although some are. You get blind with the old age.’

‘Sorry I didn’t mean to upset you.’

‘Sorry? What kind of a nameless soldier are you?’ asked the guy in the other cell.

‘He’s one of the few, a soldier who still has a heart,’ replied Dest.

‘Heart nowadays gets you nowhere. In this cells, all of us had a heart. That’s why we’re here,’ the guy said.

‘No, no. Heart, trust your heart. Do not trust your mind. Your lack of faith is disquieting.’

‘It’s not lack of faith old man. It’s lack of food,’ replied the guy.

‘No, no, no. I’m hungry too, but faith isn’t fed by bread. Faith is fed by beliefs. And I believe he will return, maybe with an army of the formless. Yes, the formless. They will come.’

‘Ok, I’ve heard enough. Shut it, just shut it, will ya? Formless. People will believe anything,’ said the guy.

‘He was quite a bright young man, my son. He traced the stars and planets around us. He set sail towards them, after a planet where things had no form. No form at all. They would scatter around other forms, but they were shallow. Empty. He knew it. He sure did,’ said the old man.

‘How would he know such things?’

‘He saw it, the rings of meteorites surrounding the planet. He’s seen it in them. Some would dissolve and mimic the vacuum and become nothing. He elaborated a



theory for a living thing with no form at all. The formless. There were papers... We've hid them.'

'Where?' asked Terry.

'It's in...'

'Mind your words old man. The walls have ears,' interrupted the guy.

'The old man got up from the chair and kneeled on the floor. With both hands he felt where was the most dirty part, and then, wrote - At the entrance of the abandoned mine.'

'Why would you hide it there? And what do the papers say?'

'It was the place where I've worked, the only place I went to, everyday... Until they tossed me here. It has all the information about what makes up each and every world. It has coordinates for them. It has the place where my son has gone to. The formless, they aren't the only ones he found, there are more. Way more,' said the old man, scrubbing the floor.

'Why did you hid them?'

'When they started to behave like savages, I feared my son's life long discoveries would fall into the wrong hands. I didn't want them to know the things he knew. The elements lying within each of the planet's core is way too powerful to fall into the hands of the Valaarians.'

'I've heard those elements don't exist. They are only mythological fables.'

'Oh they do exist. It's what creates everything, from the earthquakes to the hurricanes. We call it the planet's soul. The most powerful element one could come across. Each planet has their own, and each has different attributes. My son studied them long enough to know they are true. There was one in Mouhnia too. We believe William took it, see, when they take the planet's soul, everything starts to rot. The

sounds, become baffled and distant. The time becomes timeless, the fruits and plants tasteless. The trees wither, the rocks from the mountains start to fall, the clouds cover the sky, the animals die and no one knows why. But we do, it's because they took the planet's soul.'

'Why would they do that?'

'Due to the power it holds. According to the studies, Mouhnia's planet has the element of metal. An element that can make structures impenetrable. It makes weapons able to pierce through anything, even things we can't see, but exist, such as dark matter. If you can harness and mix the energy of all the elements, the possibilities are limitless.'

'Have you seen the planet's soul?'

'Not yet.'

'See kid, he's nuts. Planet's soul. Right. If it was true, we would have harvested it long ago,' said the guy. 'We had built an impenetrable wall!'

'These fools... The planet soul would have built an impenetrable wall, no doubt about it, however, what we thought would make us free, would imprison us instead. If no one enters, no one leaves. This is exactly why we held this information dearly. One must not touch them. Oh no. If you abuse of its power, the planet will decay. Once you start, there's no turning back. You will want more and more, it will never be enough.'

'How do they harness it?'

'There's only one way towards the planet's soul. It's either through the deepest ocean, or the longest fissure. Planets have many scars, and beneath all of them, lies the reason why they were made in the first place. The reason of it all. The fortune of the fortunes. It's an unthinkable journey though, the temperatures already melted thousands of curious intrepid spirits.'

'More people know about this?'

‘Some did. Like William. Once you reach it, it’s like an egg, standing there, and as you hit the shell, it bleeds, like radiant resin coming out of a tree. There’s something underneath all the liquid. A gem so pure that even purity itself can’t withstand. That’s the planet’s soul. When you touch it, the volcano erupts and every geyser expels all the heat through their pits, into the atmosphere. The time moves forward and in a second even eternity seems brief. It’s like waking up an hateful god.’

‘And why are you telling me all this?’

‘I might be blind, but I’m not deaf. I’m not giving this information to anyone but a kid who still has some manners. I hear it in your voice, if there’s anyone who can restore our soul, it has to be you. I no longer believe in the ones as old as I am, for the chains of our past keep us from embracing the future.’

‘Restore our soul... What a foolish old man,’ the guy said.

‘I rather be a faithful fool than a faithless one.’

‘We’ll be on our way,’ said Terry.

‘You must hurry, there’s no time to lose.’

‘How am I supposed to find it anyway?’

‘Go towards the peak of the Silver Mountain! You’ll find it there!’

‘Ok, we’ll see what we can do.’ Said Terry taking his hands off the bars and heading towards the stairs.

‘Hey, Kai, is it ok if I call you Kai?’ asked Terry.

‘Call me anything you want,’ he said.

‘Can you take us to the peak of the mountain?’

‘I’m not sure I can leave the palace.’

‘Of course you can. Dest, can you give us a blue print? I don’t feel like passing through the main room.’

‘Just a second,’ said Dest projecting the blue print of the palace.

‘This is confusing. Where are we?’ asked Terry.

A flashing green dot appeared in the projection.

‘Ok,’ he said. ‘Let me see.’

‘There’s no need for that, I know this palace like the palm of my hand. Come,’ said Kai.

They went up stairs and turned right without making a sound, and quickly entered a tiny room, for a shadow approached. Terry was the last one going in, and left the door ajar.

The sound of the skulls crashing against each other became louder with each step Zhiku took. They both squeezed their bodies against the wall, while looking at each other.

Dest’s sound started to fill the room as he tried to decrease the spinning intensity. His shadow passed but the sound of the skulls crushing against each other lingered on, and the door they were looking for was nowhere to be found.

‘Where’s the door?’ whispered Terry.

‘Must be somewhere around here,’ said Dest.

Kai slightly moved a shelf that stood against the wall and it revealed a tiny passage.

Terry dragged the rest of it and stuck his head in.

‘I can’t see anything.’ He said, as he withdrew his head from the hole. ‘Dest, light the way please.’

Dest went through the passage and analyzed the room.

‘Clear,’ he said. Terry and Kai followed him.

They continued until they’ve reach a cellar door. They’ve opened it and they were outside. Terry lent an hand to Kai who made sure Dest kept up with them.

‘What are you doing here?’ asked Grek, coming out of the palace.

‘None of your business. We were checking out the cellars to see if some of those

Mouhnian rats were in there.’

GreK pushed Terry and Kai into the cellar. The light coming from the outside illuminated an old forgotten desk where he rummaged through the web filled shelves. He took a wrench out of it and headed towards Dest. He hit him, again, and again, until he broke his armor.

‘What are you doing? Are you crazy?’ Said Terry, as he rushed towards GreK. Kai followed him and each grabbed one of his arms. He stood there on his knees, and dropped the wrench, while Terry’s mask fell with all the fuss.

‘What have you done?’ he asked.

‘I’m doing you a favor, let go of my arms,’ said GreK.

‘You’ve destroyed him. He’s not moving,’ said Terry in tears.

‘No, I didn’t destroy him, I made a little upgrade.’

‘A little upgrade? You’ve wrecked it.’

‘Listen, gold is an amazing electricity conductor. William made it so he can easily access him. As you get stronger, you develop a natural fire-wall, and obviously he’s afraid of everything he can’t control. We all are.’

‘But, he’s not moving.’

‘Chill out, I’m from a different era, an era where we’ve learned how to fix things instead of throwing them away,’ said GreK, as he grabbed Dest and squeezed him gently in the engineer’s vice that was fixed on the table.

‘Now an Ikon would be really helpful,’ he said.

‘How ironic,’ said Terry as he stepped outside towards the entrance. He closed his eyes and one of the Ikons standing in the corridor came to meet him.

‘Here it is,’ he said, as he returned to the cellar.

‘You’re good, no doubt about that,’ said GreK. Tell him to give me a blue print

of Dest's interior.

'Please? I guess that era was manners free,' said Terry

The Ikon projected an image of Dest's inside in real time.

'Everything seems to be ok, nothing has been lost,' said Grek as he cleaned his hands. 'Now, we'll just have to reanimate him.'

'How will you do that?'

'Make him move closer to Dest. You have to focus, this is quite a meticulous job, it can't be either too much, or too little, it has to be just right. Closer. A bit more. There. Now you have to order him to give a really soft discharge. Just imagine you're kissing a girl. That's how you have to treat Dest right now.'

'Ok, let me focus.'

A soft lightning came out of the Ikons visor, into Dest's. It stayed there for couple of seconds, and it became slightly more powerful with each passing moment. The lightning waves started to envelop Dest as a whole, and an almost invisible smoke came out of his vents.

'Oh no! Stop! Stop!' screamed Grek, gesturing like an old fool.

'What? What happened?' asked Terry bewildered.

'Ha-ha, just kidding, you should've seen your face. What?' repeated Grek, making fun of Terry. 'What a kiss it was I must say, you almost blew Dest's soul out of his body.'

'I've never kissed a girl,' said Terry.

'Me neither!' said Kai from behind.

'Good for you. Enjoy your first kiss, because it will be your last.'

'My last? Why?'

'You can't have a first kiss twice, can you?'

‘Well thought old man, well thought.’

Dest woke up from the dead and shuddered, before he was ready to roll.

‘What happened?’ he asked.

‘You’ve got yourself an old school upgrade,’ replied Grek.

‘A downgrade, you mean,’ said Dest, as he saw himself through Terry’s eyes.

‘You’re Dest again!’ said Terry with a smile from ear to ear.

‘Downgrade? You don’t need that fine layer of gold on the outside, because your inside, is what grants the external beauty. It starts in your mind, and then slowly enwraps you. That’s why they all wear masks.’

‘When I’m sad, I feel ugly. Which is all the time,’ said Kai.

‘That’s why you have to remain positive. The happier we are, the more beautiful we get, and the more beautiful we get, the more confident we’ll be. And the more confident we’ll be, the more... You get the point,’ said Grek.

‘True that,’ said Terry.

‘Will you tell me now, what are you guys up to? You can’t run around the palace with him, what will they think of you? Remember, there’s life’s at stake Terry, you can’t be careless. You have to be the character you’ve showed me in front of that factory.’

‘He’s helping me.’

‘Helping you with what?’

‘We have to reach the peak of the Silver Mount.’

‘Why? If I may ask.’

‘We have to find some documents.’

‘Come on, don’t tell me you’ve been talking with Waldorf?’

‘Waldorf?’

‘You don’t even know his name, yet you believed in what he said?’

‘I don’t know, somehow I...’

‘You believed, because it gave you hope, in a planet where we look around and can’t find any. It filled his heart with hope too, the story he created. His son was crazy, he ran away, some say he killed himself, some say he still lives as a castaway in the white forests where purple cherries grows or in the white fields where wheat bestows the tranquility we’re all killing for.’

‘How’d you know?’

‘His son believed in the planet’s soul. That says everything. Besides, we would know if a spaceship took off from Mouhnia.’

‘From the harbor, yes, but what if this ship wasn’t at the bay? What if it was hidden, somewhere far, far away?’

‘Our radars would know. This planet is rather small.’

‘So, there’s absolutely no chance, that he’s out there? What about the formless?’

‘Formless what? We’ve never heard of formless anything. Another bright invention of his son?’

‘He spoke about a substance that has no form and that mimics everything it encounters in space.’

‘A substance that has no form? And mimics what it encounters? They would’ve destroyed us by now!’ said Grek laughing.

‘Not all civilizations are looking to destroy one another,’ said Kai.

‘After everything we’ve done to you, after living your life in perpetual poverty, you think there’s anything good out there?’

‘Of course there is. Terry showed me that not all Valaarians are bad. It tells me stupidity is not a nationality trait, but rather a human condition.’



‘Wise words,’ said Grek.

‘They better be, after all these silent years,’ he said.

‘Ok do it, you’ve got to learn from your own mistakes. Come with me,’ said Grek.

They followed him to a nearby hangar standing in a levitating platform. It looked like a fortress from where a thousand red lights ignited the surroundings.

‘How we’re going to make it through?’ asked Terry. ‘The place is swarmed with Ikons.’

‘Just follow me,’ said Grek, dragging his legs across the snow. Wasn’t long before a group of inquisitive Ikons approached them. They started to analyze Grek and then went towards Terry and Kai leaving Dest for last.

‘Get off,’ said Grek, very sure of himself.

‘This kid isn’t supposed to be here,’ said one of the Ikons close to Kai. ‘He belongs to the palace.’

‘I’m teaching these kids a valuable lesson. They think this is just a game, I’m showing them it’s not. Now let us through.’

‘But...’ said Terry.

‘No but,’ interrupted Grek. ‘Move along you little rascals. Let them through, let them through, a valuable lesson that might change the course of life is about to happen,’ he said, winking at them.

The Ikons got out of the way and they went inside. The hangar was abandoned and completely frozen. The webs looked like portals in the ceilings across dozens of cables. Three rusty cylinders stood silently in the corner.

‘Sorry. Private scold,’ said Grek. ‘You don’t want to hear it.’ he said, closing the hangar doors in the face of the Ikons that stood outside in the snow.

‘What’s this?’ asked Terry.

‘A tramway to heaven,’ said Grek. ‘This shit’s old. I’m not even sure it works but it just might. Hey Dest, can you help a man here? Please? See, we all learn kid, we all learn.’

‘Yes I can,’ said Dest proudly. ‘Anything you need.’

‘Ok, I need you to look at the entrails of this machine.’

Dest took an X-ray of it.

‘Electrical part seems ok. Hmm, the engine seems ok. Let me adjust this, and maybe...’

‘You could’ve asked, I would’ve fixed it myself,’ interrupted Dest, understanding right away the problem with the machine as if a friend. His discharge felt like a warm embrace and the cylinders started to rotate making a rumbling sound across the hangar. Grek smiled.

‘Ah, I always forget. Like to fix them myself. Here’s the cabin. The mine is abandoned now if not for couple of lost Ikons guarding it. People used to hide in there.’

‘Lost Ikons?’ asked Kai.

‘Yes, they are spread throughout all Mouhnia. Waiting, watching... Whispering. We call them lost but they’re actually very found.’

‘I’m scared,’ said Kai. ‘Do they sound like babies crying for help? Because sometimes I hear them.’

‘They make all different kinds of noises. Death whisperers is what some people call them,’ said Grek, whispering.

‘Eek,’ they said shivering, while holding each other.

‘Ha-ha.’ Grek laughed. ‘Come on, courage. Hurry up and... Just be careful, please. The both of you.’

‘Do you have any advice for us Grek?’ screamed Terry while the tram was

already on the move.

‘Not really, no. I’ll see you guys soon.’ he said, waving them goodbye.

As the lift got outside a storm was setting in making it almost impossible to see a meter ahead. Dest’s light was reflected in the snow flakes that looked like purple sparks slamming against the cabins windshields. The cables squeaked and made a lot of noisy sounds as if a queasy beast, swinging harder and harder the higher they were. The small avalanches coming down the mountain couldn’t be seen, only heard... And they sounded like thunders. The night suddenly turned into day.

‘It looks like it’s always night in Mouhnia, but apparently it’s not. Said Kai.

The storm disappeared and the smoke dissipated revealing a bright sky and a mesmerizing sunset. It appears that the storm and the dark clouds didn’t allow for any light to go through. Up in the clouds was silent and peaceful. Yes, silence and beauty was all there was. For a moment, at least. Terry gazed at the horizon, frowning his eyebrows because of the direct sunlight.

‘It’s beautiful, isn’t it?’ asked Terry.

‘Indeed,’ replied Kai.

‘Why all this strive? We could have it all.’

‘We could... But we won’t.’

‘I don’t get it. Maybe we deserve everything that happens to us. Maybe we’re just not worthy. We just... We just don’t live up to the standards of a divine being. Maybe we belong in the gutter and not among the clouds. Maybe we should crawl like worms... To the hole where we came from. And hide in the darkness of what has been, away from the light of everything it could be.’

‘It’s amazing how we’re above the clouds, and my doubts... My doubts stayed down below, where they should, in that darkness which plunders our souls. I’ll never

understand what is it, that keeps us together, yet tears us all apart.’

‘It’s a magnetic storm. It’s entropy. We become what we’re trying so hard to run away from.’

‘You think?’ asked Kai.

‘I guess. There’s no need for that dark cloud. If you would remove it, you would see the nameless running away in the same way bugs under a rock would. That’s where they hide, that’s where they thrive. Maggots. Needy maggots. Only the maggots thrive in the old and dead. The tested and true.’

‘But aren’t maggots good for cleaning wounds?’

‘Ew. I guess... You’re the optimistic kind, aren’t you? No matter how disgusting and bad something is, apparently there’s a beautiful and good side to it. These aren’t wound cleaners, they are wound openers. They’ve opened a wound in your soul Kai. That’s from where your goodness spills.’

‘My faith is lost with each and every dawn, but it's found every morning.’

‘It’s good that you’re able to find it. Some can’t.’

‘This is all I dreamt about, every day. I can’t thank you enough. I’ve always imagined taking off in a ship, flying over the meadows, where red poppies grow and the wind... Oh, the wind sends a gently blow, the only one nature bows upon, for the stems and the leafs know, they are the winds, and the winds are they, to forever and ever sway, in the majestic swing of life. The poor have to survive through imagination. That’s all we’ve got. We have to dream of sceneries, we have to dream of the life we wish we were living. The nameless, the nameless got none. They never once in their lives had to imagine anything. They have everything at the tip of their fingers and nothing at the tip of their tongues. Everything they took, nothing they gave. We, on the other hand, have to dream every day, to overcome this nightmare wrapped in a dream,’

said Kai as he laid his elbows on the windows frozen parapet, and his hands, buried on his face and chin.

*‘The present, they are selling you, it’s a nightmare, wrapped in a dream, and it’s not for you or for me, and specially, it’s not for free.*

*That present, stands lonely, oh so lonely, under a dead tree.*

*And it’s not for you, or for me, and specially, it’s not for free,’*

he sang, in an almost inaudible manner.

‘Sorry, it’s just a song the prisoners used to sing in the cells. I never thought I would be singing it here, above everything else.’

‘Sorry for what? Don’t ever be sorry for singing what you want to sing, for saying what you want to say or for being who you are.’

Terry as never been so proud, for everyone he came across was shaping whoever he is today, and he liked the man he was becoming. All the conversations and the moments were stuck with him forever in time, and for him that was starting to become the joy of life. The lift stopped and he got out. Dest followed. Kai stayed for a while. The last rays of light cloaked the smaller mountains around them that appeared to be creatures sleeping. The dark clouds ate the sun and a beautiful blue night was bestowed upon them. From the top they could almost touch the stars.

‘Look, the abandoned mine.’

‘It doesn’t seem very abandoned,’ said Kai. ‘There’s light coming from the inside.’

Terry approached it, and some Ikons standing in the entrance came to meet him. They were gone even before they arrived, for the higher Terry was, the more powerful he became. They arrived at the entrance but there wasn’t any clue nor lead for the soil was covered in snow.

‘What are we supposed to do? I’m not going to dig the whole entrance looking for a box.’

‘It might not even exist,’ said Kai.

‘I’ll help,’ said Dest ‘I’ll send strong impulses towards the ground.’ If the impulses returned have a small disturbance it means there’s something else, besides dirt. He went round and round, until the results were positive.

‘Here,’ he said.

Terry and Kai approached him and started to dig. Kai’s nails scratched the surface of a rusty metal box.

‘Watch out.’ said Terry, as he dug around it. Kai took both hands to the top handle and pushed it, falling on his back. On the inside there were drawings of what it seem like an alphabet, just lines, waves of sounds, whereas no letters exist. A celestial map with living forms outlined, and drawings representing what they looked like. Planets that were sliced. In their insides they had what Waldorf sons referred to as their soul.

‘There’s a lot of stuff in here, but I don’t quite get everything,’ said Terry.

‘The formless are so weird. It seems like black matter agglomerating in a nearby form that they somehow experience.’

‘Can anything turn into a planet, like in the picture?’

‘I’ve got no idea, this goes way beyond what I’ve imagined lying in the great darkness.’

‘Do you know of anyone who might help us? Do you think Grek can understand any of this?’

‘I’m not sure we can trust Grek. Maybe we should meet the old man again.’

‘Why not? He helped you, and Dest. Only a friend would do that.’

‘Still, I think it might be better to play it safe.’

‘What about Waldorf?’

‘Yeah, Waldorf. Maybe he could give us some advice.’

The mines exerted mechanical sounds coming from its inside, while an intermittent glowing orange filled the skies.

‘What are they doing there?’ asked Kai. ‘I’ve never been this far from the palace.’

‘I don’t know, I’m not even sure I want to know. I got a knot in my stomach from the last time I peeked through one of their factories.’

‘What happened?’

‘Animals, some with their insides out, being applied electrical devices and chips. They were basically being turned into machines.’

‘Ew. Do you think they’ll do it with us?’

‘For what I’ve seen so far, yes, I’m sure he won’t think twice when it comes to turning us into machines. He feels nothing.’

‘I don’t want to be turned into a machine.’

‘You won’t.’ Said Terry, approaching the glowing tunnel.

‘Where are you going? I have a bad feeling about this.’

‘It’s only because I told you this horrific story. Nothing will happen, come.’

They both peeked into the tunnel. There was nothing but Ikons ramming against the walls, as if pickets. They followed the broken railway into a huge wall. It looked like a city, inside a mine! It wasn’t abandoned at all. Although there were only Ikons, it was alive, it was breathing. They were both already sweating. The hotter it was, the faster the Ikons worked, and the faster they worked, the hotter it became. At the center laid an Ikon, as big as the hall, the reason for all the commotion. You could see it’s inside, for it

wasn't even close to ready. Cranes lifted metallic plaques that other Ikons brought. It was just Ikons producing a bigger one, as if creating a god.

'What is that?'

'It's a fucking huge Ikon,' said Terry.

'What for?'

'I have no idea... Maybe because it's more powerful? Maybe it can travel through space, like a mother ship.'

'Why would they need it? They're everywhere already!'

'One thing I've learned, is that for William, nothing's ever enough.'

'Let's get out of here, this is scary. The image... If all these little Ikons can rule a planet, this one will rule the universe.'

'Indeed it will,' said Terry in distaste.

Kai left running and Terry followed him. The Ikons watched them leave but did nothing, nor say anything. They just stood there, blow after blow, creating new tunnels. They took the lift and were engulfed once more into the dark cloud where thunders were heard and storms felt. They glided through the clouds as if sun-riders. All the nameless were waiting for them, with their spurning expressions hidden. Zhiku stood beneath the huge doors of the hangar near a metallic coffin.

'Another freed soul.' Kai thought.

'Who's in there?' asked Terry, as he came off the lift.

'You think you're a big shot, huh?' asked Zhiku from a distance.

'What are you talking about?'

'What am I talking about? Are you stupid or what?'

'I'm not getting it Zhiku.'

'You're not getting it? You're stupider than I thought. You think you can just



run around like you own the place? You can't do only what you like, do you understand? You want to know who's in here? Take a good look.' said Zhiku, as he opened the coffin. Grek, stood there, whiter than the snow below. 'See? This is what happens when you think you're smarter than the rest. Take that kid to a cell and assume your position, take some responsibility for once.'

'But..'

'There's no but, there's just do.'

Terry looked at Kai, whom fear suddenly enwrapped him again.

'Go now, insolent kid. Remember, you can't only do what you like.'

'Come,' said Terry, while looking down. He went towards the main gates and Kai followed him. The Ikons didn't bow, they turned their eyes from them. It was a walk of shame, and freedom got more distant with each and every step they took. The sparkles of faith dissipated and the Ikons light became stronger as darkness became denser.

'Where do you want to stay?' asked Terry.

'I'll stay with the old man. The other cells are overcrowded,' said Kai.

'You can't stay here. This is no place for a kid. This isn't a place for anyone.' shouted Terry.

'I don't regret anything. I rather live one day free, than a thousand on my knees. These memories will ride with me, here in this cell.'

'No, you're not going to ride memories, you're going to ride life with me, you're going to see everything for what it is. I can't allow this, someone told me that I can't let go of my brothers, for if I do, I'm letting go of this world too.'

'You're back! Did you find the box? Do you have the papers?' asked Waldorf.

'Yes! They are here. I barely understand anything in them but...'

‘Oh I see,’ said Waldorf while touching the pages. He took them in his hands and gave a good old whiff. They even lifted for how strong it was. ‘Yes, they are like me, the weight of time... First, it’s soft, soft as the wind, and then as we grow, it becomes heavier. When you get older... When you get older it squeezes you like a fly. It’s not kind, nor hateful, it’s just time. It’s heavy though, heavy as a planet, and as it passes, the heavier it becomes, for the boulders each one of us carry, grow with every mistake each one of us makes. Yes... That’s how big they get. Some of us carry the weight of the world on their backs. The burden of a world we’ve helped to destroy, can only be tossed away by helping in the building of a new one,’ said Waldorf.

‘I’ve seen many grown man letting go of that boulder,’ said Terry. ‘And many holding on to it dearly.’

‘Life was heavy ever since I was born. It wasn’t light as the wind, it was heavy as the whole. I carried the weight of gravity until this day, and if it wasn’t for Terry, I wouldn’t have remembered how light life can be,’ said Kai.

‘That boulder though, it’s going to wipe out everything on its way down. One must be keen to know when to let it go, and when to carry it for another mile or so.’

‘For the ones still going through that endless road, life to them is nothing but getting away from each and every blow sent down by man who decided to let go. It’s hard to get away when you’re carrying a boulder of your own,’ said Terry.

‘Indeed it is, that’s why freedom is so important, so each and every one of us won’t have to spend eternity under a boulder. A boulder created upon someone’s inability of grasping the true meaning of life,’

‘Everyone in here is living under that boulder now. It must be stopped.’

‘It should, but I’m afraid to say it must.’

‘You shall not fear, old man, for every ending there’s a beginning,’ said Terry

while closing his eyes.

‘The world’s gone nuts. What the fuck are you guys even talking about?’

As Terry concentrated, the cell doors opening echoed in the small hall. The sound awakened some who were in a deep slumber.

‘What are you doing?’ asked Waldorf.

‘We’re leaving,’ said Terry.

‘And I’m the one nuts? Leaving to where? We’ve got nowhere to go.’

‘Yes we do, we’ve got everything we need.’

‘These coordinates aren’t enough. We need a ship, we need a crew, we need someone who knows how to pilot and has been to space. We need food, and more than that, we need faith, something some have lost in these cells,’ said Waldorf.

‘All we ever needed was us, and we’ve got that already.’

‘Sometimes it’s not enough...’

‘Did anyone of you ever piloted anything before?’ asked Terry screaming.

‘Does a horse count?’ Said someone from the back.

‘I don’t think so.’

‘You’ve piloted before Terry,’ said Kai.

‘Those bikes aren’t ships. Hilda showed me how complex the commands are.’

‘Who’s Hilda?’

‘My girlfriend. At least I think she is.’

‘You’re not sure she’s your girlfriend? I got it, you’re dating her, but she doesn’t know. I also have couple of girlfriends like that,’ said Kai.

‘No it’s not like that! I mean, I think she likes me too.’

‘All very hypothetical, probably nothing substantial.’

‘We held hands! Does that count? It must count for something. It meant a lot to

me.'

'Holding hands counts for nothing,' said the guy in the cell.

'What about her tears? I've seen them, they were pure and clear. And the way she spoke, oh the way she spoke...' Said Terry as he sighed and looked up the mossy ceiling. Flowers bloomed amidst the entangled confusion of algae and their colorful petals fell, swirling around him.

'That's love! He found love amidst all the hate!' said Waldorf, smiling.

'And how she passed her tongue between her lips. The way she said my name. I've never thought how beautiful it was to hear your name spoken by the girl of your dreams. It's freezing in here, yet I'm melting.'

'Enough with those cheesy bits. We've got it. You're in love. Good for you. You know love son? Have you ever rode a hot air balloon? It's the same. You're down, all wrinkled up in the floor, and a magical flame inflates you. You take your feet off the ground and without knowing what or when, you're among the clouds. Enjoy every moment there son... See every sight and feel it. Don't be scared of touching it. Ah, I don't know... I even spat down as I went... I did everything... Do it too, because everything that goes up, one way or another, will always come down. Make it gentle, the arrival... That's my problem, I see the beauty in everything. Some people rage and set the whole place on fire when the ride's over. Me... I kiss the ground. I feel the smell of the frozen grass as if on a winters morning hangover. I'm always good, be it the beginning, the ending... A beginning which didn't even start, I'm ok with it. I know I won't be going up, but oh well, I know I won't be going down. Don't worry, appreciating is something we learn, like walking. When you appreciate what's been given to you, independent of whatever it is, you'll see life as a miracle rather than a meaningless endeavor. You'll feel lucky, other than cursed. You'll feel happy. Whatever happens, it

happens for a reason. And the reason son... The reason for all this, the reason for the misery... The reason is us. It's what this will always be all about. If something comes in between our love... Then there's a trillion reasons why it should be about something else. Now, what shall we do?'

'I guess...'

'Don't fright him!'

'I'm not frightening him, I'm just trying to help him. Wish someone would've told me that, before I had my heart broken a thousand times.'

'The beauty in all this is the mystery! Oh... The mysteries of life.'

'Fuck the mysteries. What was there, before they came? Ease... It didn't have questions or doubts. It was what it was. Life. No explanation needed... It was all there was, and nothing more to it. Nothing to solve. No mystery behind the endless river or the sun at dusk reflected in an orange smoke. Either fast or slow... It was that. And it was peaceful and good. They had to comprehend what everything was. They kept finding clues... For a mystery that will never be solved. Is it what we're all hoping for? When we find out what this is all about, when it's all said and done, when the days are gone and a relentless night sets in, we'll all finally be able to love? Finally come to life? Will we remember? Or... I don't know. Like my words... They're nothing. Whoever tries to give it a meaning is in the wrong. It's words... Sounds, I've heard in another lifetime. Things I felt which I have no clue what they're all about. Should I care? What they are? Decipher them? Why would I care, how you came to be, if you're here with me. If I seek the truth, I'll miss you. It won't be you who I'll be holding to but what I wish you weren't. We're not seeking to understand. No... we're seeking to give meaning to the things we believe are true. And we'll make it, yes we will. Whatever is that which we believe in, we'll always find a way to justify it, no matter what.'

‘What’s your name by the way?’

‘Kostapolitonitokuro.’

‘Seriously?’

‘Nah, Just kidding, it’s Kosta.’

‘Kosta. Is it a Mouhnian name?’

‘Oh yes, a very old one. They say the very first man born in Mouhnia was called Kosta. It means bay.’

‘Nice to meet you Kosta. This is Kai, and Dest.’

‘Great. Now get us out of here.’

‘Think carefully Terry, about what you’re going to do. It will change everything,’ said Waldorf.

‘Lives are at stake I know. If I stay here any longer I’m afraid they’ll take everything from me, like they did with Grek.’

‘Be sure of that,’ said Kosta

‘There’s no other way. We can’t stay in here longing for something to happen or someone to save us. We must save ourselves,’ said Terry as he went out of the dungeon.

‘Wait for us!’ said Kosta waking up some of the prisoners. ‘We’re free!’ Kai helped Waldorf up the stairs, followed by Dest who lighted the way. They’ve went through the same path they had already found, and out of the cellar they came, one by one. From the outside Terry lent his hand.

‘This looks like a nightmare,’ said Kosta.

‘I can’t see, but I feel it in the air, it’s not the smell I once knew,’ said Waldorf.

‘What’s going on here?’ asked Zhiku, while one of his Ikons shot a laser that passed close to Terry and Dest shot one right back, piercing through Zhiku’s chest, before it got lost in the horizon. Zhiku fell like a plank. Everyone looked astonished,

even Terry.

‘What have you done?’ cried Terry.

‘I don't know, it was mechanical,’ said Dest.

‘You just killed somebody, you really know how to pick the times to be funny,’ said Terry, while the two Ikons standing with Zhiku came forward and joined them. They stood in a straight line, as if soldiers awaiting orders.

‘Ok this is pretty serious now, there’s no time to lose,’ continued Terry, running towards the harbor. ‘Come!’

The youngest prisoners took the elderly in their arms because most of them haven't had a walk in years and were very debilitated. The commuters stared at them perplex for that was a once in a lifetime scene. The more Ikons Terry passed by, the more Ikons he gathered, he never had a connection with so many at the same time. Everything was happening so fast and his mind was racing with all different thoughts that suddenly the factory and the animals trapped there crossed his mind.

‘I’ve got something to do. Dest, guide them towards the harbor and give them cover. There will be lots of Ikons in the way.’

‘I have something to do too,’ said a guy lost in the crowd.

‘Do whatever you have to and meet us at the harbor.’

Terry ran as fast as he could towards the complex. He passed through the assembly line as if a lightning and the Ikons that stood there guarding the place followed him. He unveiled the plastic stripes, took one last glance of horror, and just before he'd finish gasping, every single machine had been razed to the ground. All it took was a gasp. A magnificent stampede issued from the animals that were freed and everyone ran off through the main gates as the building burnt to the ground.

‘Wahoo!’ screamed Terry lost amidst the crowd. ‘Mary! Come with us! Quick!’

‘Oh no, I’m too old to be on the run. Good luck dear boy,’ she screamed as a wave of bodies left her standing there.

‘We’re not leaving without you!’ said Terry, taking her by the hand. Hundreds of Ikons were now after them, firing strident lights that pierced through that silent blue night, and faded away like falling stars in the skies. Terry closed his eyes and went through the memories of the arena. The Ikons activated their shields and created a frosted glass from where swirling bursts of fire emerged, deflecting the opposing beams.

‘Shoot nd’scoot! Shoot nd’scoot!’ he shouted. Mark, the youngest following them, heard Terry and hurled a rock at an approaching enemy Ikon, just before he fired, throwing him off balance. The laser passed close to one of the runaways, so close his jacket caught on fire. He jumped and rolled over the snow trying to put it out. The suppressive fire of his new allies allowed them to safely reach the harbor. The Nameless didn’t dare to come out of the silver mountain, they stood there and watched them flee. The blaring lasers charging into the Ikons shields exploded into thousands of glowing particles that looked like fireworks, changing that boring night into a spectacle of light. Behind all the fire and smoke they reached the harbor. Dest, still staggered from all the bursts, blew the door switch of the biggest ship in there. Its name had peeled off from the prow and was no longer readable. Kai stood at the entrance helping everyone hopping on board while Terry ran to the flight deck.



## CHAPTER TEN - THE FORMLESS MEN

‘What was I thinking?’ he thought as he looked at all the panels and controls laid out before him.

‘Focus, Terry, focus. But fast, please,’ said Dest.

‘Ok, ok I’m focusing. Relax, relax,’ he said as he took a deep breath and sat on the cushioned chair. The first bird that was born, the first bird that took the most beautiful flight over the dense canopies of a colorful past passed closed to his ear, so close that he thought it was real.

‘It’s not working Dest,’ he said, as he closed his eyes again. Now the first plane that was made glided through the clouds and landed on a hill. ‘I’m getting there,’ he thought, as he continued to travel through the universe most beautiful memories. The counting began, when man left earth. There was a panel and it was quite different from the one in front of him, but the sequence was the same.

‘Initiate facility and close outs for launch,’ a voice spoke.

‘It’s working! It’s working!’ he said.

‘Start automatic ground launch sequencer.’

‘Is everyone in?’ he asked.

‘I don’t think so.’ replied Dest.

Terry got up from his chair and went to the entrance, where the hatch was about to close. Everyone was in, except for the man who said he had something to do.

‘Open it! Open it!’ said Mark, pulling Terries arm.

The Ikons were approaching behind the man like a black sea of hopelessness.

‘We can’t. It’s too late,’ said Terry as he returned to the flight deck.

‘Main engine start. Electromagnetic booster ignition.’

‘Dest! Close the orbiters crew hatch and check for leaks, while I handle the helmets to everyone. Remember! Close and lock them!’

‘How do I lock it?’

‘Here. Lock it here! Ma’am, this one’s for you. Let me help you,’ said Terry as he barged the helmet down Mary’s head. The initial blast pressured all their bodies against the module wall.

‘Holy shit!’ said Terry.

‘He was my father... How could you? You should’ve left me there with him!’ the kid screamed, while their bodies floated around the deck.

‘I’m so sorry... I never wanted any of this,’ said Terry, completely baffled.

‘You could’ve saved him!’

‘No, he couldn’t have saved him Mark. Your father died because of his addiction. He dropped the bag that he went to pick-up as he kneeled before the ship. That’s why he didn’t come with the rest of the crew. This was his salvation but he thought not. He thought the shit he held on throughout his life would save him. But it didn’t. It was only holding him down, slowly digging the grave he’s probably in now. Terry couldn’t save him, only he could’ve saved himself.’

‘No! No! That’s not true!’ shouted Mark with tiny salty droplets that floated inside his helmet.

While the others started to wander through the spaceship, Mary stood still against the wall.

‘Oh no. Please don’t,’ said Terry.

‘What happened?’

‘She... She’s dead.’

‘Terry, you should head to the main deck, we’re going towards the stratosphere.’

Terry went in a hurry while cleaning his eyes. He held the joystick while his lips quivered.

‘Look at what I’ve done. All because of my brilliant idea. They are dead because of me.’

‘Yes, but look at all the others you’ve saved.’

‘I didn’t save them. We’re aiming towards nowhere, a place that might not exist. We might die here, all of us. Maybe I just... Maybe I’ve just killed them all, unknowingly.’

‘Stop being melodramatic kid. I rather be in this space ship than down there, in those cold cells. If we’re going to die... There’s no other place I’d rather be than in the middle of the great darkness, close to the stars. Right guys?’ said Kosta.

‘Right!’ they said.

‘We have to thank you. We’re going to make it. It can’t be just by chance that we’re in a space ship headed towards another planet. Look at everything, how small it gets. Never thought I would see such beautiful scenes during my life.’

‘Thank me later. When we land on a safe harbor.’

‘Is there any food? I could bite off the leg of a deer. Raw.’ asked Kosta

‘Oh my... We didn’t bring any,’ said Terry. ‘How could I forget about that?’

‘What are we going to eat?’ they asked.

‘We’ll solve it. Right Dest.?’

‘I’m not so sure about that.’

‘There has to be something in here.’

‘Wait. There is,’ said Terry.

‘What are you talking about?’

‘There is I can see it! Submersed in a low temperature tank, somewhere on the spaceship.’

‘What? How can you see it?’ someone asked.

‘I don’t know... I just see it. Dest, give them a blue print of the ship. This is our first quest! Ahoy scoundrels, welcome aboard!’

The crew started to search the ship while Dest led the way. The light of the other Ikons started to change to a yellow, whilst back in the city, they were nothing but flickering red dots.

‘It’s here!’ screamed Kai, while the rest of the crew joined him. Lots and lots of packaged food were arranged in a big tank.

‘It’s not a lot.’ said Kosta.

‘Yeah it’s not a lot!’ said another guy, whilst moving forward towards the shelves. ‘I’ll take this, and I’ll take this.’ Suddenly the other crew members started to take everything from the shelves and held it in their arms.

‘What are you guys doing? This is for all of us.’ said Kai. ‘We must share.’

‘I haven’t eaten for days on end boy,’ said the guy emptying a shelf.

Kai went running in Terry’s direction.

‘They are taking everything,’ he said.

‘Taking what?’ asked Terry.

‘The provisions.’

‘To where? They’ve got nowhere to take them to.’

‘To themselves! They are fighting over it!’

‘Are you serious? Why would they do that?’

‘They say it’s not enough for everybody.’

‘Well if it’s not enough for everyone, then we divide.’

‘They don’t want. Some say they haven’t eaten for days.’

‘They have to. Just hold on to this. I’ll be back in a second.’

Terry went towards the storage room. He crammed himself in amidst their arms full.

‘What’s going on?’ he asked.

‘You better get yourself some. It’s not going to last forever.’

‘Stop it!’ he screamed.

‘Stop it what? We’re taking what’s ours!’ said Kosta.

‘What is wrong with you? Drop everything right now!’ said Terry, as the Ikons surrounded them. Everyone stopped for a second and looked at him.

‘Is this all we’re meant for? Or are we meant for something more?’ he asked in disapproval.

They looked at him, and then looked down at their arms swamped with provisions that slipped in between their chests and floated around the deck.

‘If this is why you’ve ran from those cells, you might as well had stayed in them. I mean... What are you guys doing? What are we? What are all the stories told for, if nothing changes? If there's no lesson to be learned? Look around you... This, this is all that matters. Literally,’ he said. The stars looked like they were breathing. They shone and collapsed in a cycle of beauty.

‘This is an opportunity. An opportunity to make things right. We left everything behind... We've got nothing now... But ourselves. And we, I’m telling you, we're bound for everything. We're bound for eternity. With the little... With the little we'll make the most, and it'll be the best that ever happened to us. I was expecting more from you guys,

sorry to say that, but it's the truth. After everything you've been through, I thought that not eating for a day or two wouldn't mean a thing, if you were free. But, you'll never be, right? It's not the Nameless or William that chained you... You, you have chained yourselves.' he said, turning his back, while Kosta took a bite in one of the cookies. The crumbs coming out of his mouth floated in circles around the cabin.

'That's good, but these cookies, oh man. It's just one bite, I promise. Anyone want some? A bite for everyone, here,' said Kosta in a humoristic way. 'You're right son, that was too deep though. Chill out a bit. Here, have a cookie.'

Terry looked at him with smiley eyes.

'Please put back what you took from the shelves. Dest, analyze every single provision, count how many of us are, and create an estimate for how long it will last. We shall only eat the little we need to survive, until we reach our destination.'

Everyone started to organize what they took from the shelves, while the Ikons made an estimate of how many provisions there were, although some didn't take their sights from the windows. It was breath taking.

'Let's name the ship opportunity! So we can remember, that every day, is an opportunity, to reach for the stars,' said Kai.

'Great idea Kai. I'm up for it.'

'Me too!' said Kosta and the rest of the crew.

'You were fighting over nothing. This is all that matters,' said Kai.

'Indeed. Now that I gaze into the stars, I understand how stupid my fears are,' replied Kosta.

'You can't fear. You must leave that behind, in Mouhnia.'

'Mouhnia was everything but a fearsome place. Never we had to care. Oh no. It was free and beautiful. You can't take the planet soul and expect everything to stay the

same. That asshole, who does he think he is?' said Waldorf.

'The planet souls aren't true old man,' said Kosta.

'I know they are true. That's why the planet is in decline. Even the trees that never wither are dying. How do you explain that? They've been there ever since we arrived, and now... The trees that never wither...'

'They are sucking the planet dry. That's why everything dies,' replied Kosta.

'No, it's not only that. There's something deeper within everything they are taking, something that lied in Mouhnia's core,' said Waldorf.

'Right. You just fail to explain what it is, and what it does. Sort of important, I would say.'

'It can shape the waves that comprise everything lying in our imagination. It shapes the spirit, and unveils it in the web of our perception. It's unexplainable. Unexplainable. Like the conception of the universe. It's not made to be thought off, no, it's made to be felt.'

'What does that mean?'

'It's a web of connections sewed by a million minds. You are the universe, and the universe is you. It's the past, it's the present, it's the future. It's everything there is. Has everything that ever happened. Has all the lives of the people who ever lived. It's a collective album of all the good and all the bad. Of all the love and all the hate. Of all the stories ever told. It's the world. The beautiful world we live in. That's why life isn't meaningless Terry. That's why everything's worth... Some worlds will go and others will come, the snow will fall and the sun will shine, for sometime... But whoever you choose to be, and everything you choose to do, will always live, forever sealed in eternity. Sealed in the collective memory. Somewhere far away, might be in another galaxy, or in another astral plane, life will sprout again, light, will remember, and find

its way again through the darkest shadow, not because of the bad that has been done, no, but because of all the good.'

'Why would anyone want all the memories of the universe for themselves? Why would anyone take something that's already theirs?'

'Some people lost the ability to feel along the way. This could be the cure, the antidote they've been longing for. William's longing for a time when he could feel. He can't understand he had everything, and he wouldn't need to live in a system, for we go as we come, and we come as we go.'

'I don't think he wants to feel again.'

'Everyone wants to feel again. That's why we live. We live to feel. A life without feelings, is a book without words, a song without a melody, a painting without strokes. A night from which the sun shall never rise again. A nightmare so black from which we shan't come back.'

'Life can't be only that, to be honest.'

'Life's only that, to be precise.'

'It's not that linear. Not everything's about feeling.'

'Tell me something that isn't.'

'This conversation isn't about feelings.'

'Of course it's about feelings. It's about what you feel and what I feel.'

'Maybe. I still think that not everything's about feeling.'

'So tell me something that isn't!'

'Give me some time and I'll tell you. It requires reasoning.'

'Talking about time, do we have any results Dest?'

'Not yet.'



‘That, for instance. Isn’t about feeling.’

‘It is not. But Dest came out of a feeling. So did you. So did everything.’

‘It did not. Space and time was here long before we were, and it doesn’t feel, in fact, it’s quite indifferent to our feelings. We love and we cry, and the universe, the universe doesn’t care, it lives on and on.’

‘Of course it cares. The willingness to feel itself, to love, to give it a reason to live on, brought us to where we are. It conspires, it has a deep desire felt in the fire of every burning star, and our love and anger resembles to those lights that will forever shine way high in the skies. The indifference is unbearable, it’s a vast empty vacuum where there’s nothing but the meaningless passage of time.’

‘Nature is ruthless,’ said Kai. ‘Look at that.’

‘Incredible, It’s almost as if I’m dreaming,’ said Kosta, gazing upon the death of a star, million light years ahead of them. A prismatic explosion unveiled a thousand of colors in all directions, where planets unknown lighten up their dark sides. It uncovered something else, a matter, that was formless. It just floated, slowly. A silent bump was felt but the journey continued.

‘What’s that?’ asked Kai.

‘I don’t know. Some slimy substance. I thought nothing existed in here,’ said Kosta.

‘It’s the formless,’ said Waldorf.

‘It can’t be, it has a form.’

‘Which form?’

‘It’s like... I’m not sure.’

‘It’s like a spline.’

‘Yes, the formless. They copied the flagellum you can find in bacteria, that’s

how they move through the vacuum. It's like a tail. I've seen them,' said Waldorf.

'Why haven't you shared this?'

'Nobody cared! Everyone was too busy saying my son was crazy! Even I thought he was crazy... Until I've seen it. I cried when I saw it! He carefully pointed at the planet, and for a second, it appeared. I thought it was magic, that somehow he was tricking me. But no... He found, what he had to find, to understand himself. The equations he solved were the problems he was facing at that point in time... The notes he wrote was what he needed to hear... He gave the hopes he never had. He treated others as he would like to be treated. He loved as he wanted to be loved. He gave everything he wanted to receive. Everything he came up with, he had to protect it at all costs. Every bit of information. It's funny how everything changes in a matter of seconds. He would have had revolutionize Mouhnia with his discoveries, if William had never come. No one gave him enough credit, maybe if they did he would have come up with his findings earlier. Or maybe he would've never come up with them at all, who's to say how things could've unfolded? The truth is things unfold, and like the rain they can't be stopped. They can't be altered or changed. Why is it that we keep ostracizing such people? Is it because they're different? An animalistic urge to destroy whatever differs from what we think we are? To scrutinize and then mock, stamp on as if they're unworthy of life? Of love? But how can that be, how can something or someone not be worthy of life, if it's here? It's like saying that leafs aren't meant for trees, or clouds aren't meant for the skies. We... We're meant for life.'

'People can be harsh, sometimes... I mean trash. Harsh trash, that's what we are. Anyway, why was he mocked, old man?' asked Kosta.

'Because he felt things others couldn't. And for them that's a terrible, terrible thing. He had something they did not. You know when you have something different...

The neighbor wants to have it too. For their selves. But what he had... Everyone could, if only they truly loved. To love, you have to open yourself, and when you're open, divinity bursts through you. When you hate, you close yourself, and nothing can reach you. Nothing can touch you. You become like a stone. A dark castle that thinks the fiery arrows of light are the enemy. That's why hateful people are always repulsive. There's always something about them, even before you know them. You can smell them from miles and miles away. Cheap colognes can't mask ugly souls. To love is to understand, and to understand is to become enlightened. Light stands for love just like darkness stands for hate... And enlightenment isn't about bending the light, but allowing the light to bend you. Oh... I couldn't have asked for a better ending. To realize the one you loved, loved you back, and showed you what we're all living for. To share what we experience. Oh he was crazy and he was countless things, but god, he was good. I can't wait to see him and hold him in my arms...' said Waldorf resting his smile on the cane he brought.

'Ugh... Yeah, he was crazy, and so are you old man. He ain't where you think he is. He's gone,' said Kosta.

'Oh no, you faithless fool, he lives.'

'Who lives?' asked Terry.

'My son! There were a lot of things he was still not sure of, but he probably is by now! Oh when we'll arrive, I'll hold him in my arms, one last time. No one can describe what I feel just to think of our reunion. How I miss him... My son, my only son.'

'We have a big journey ahead of us. You'll have a lot of time to dream about your reunion. It will take us approximately six months to reach the formless planet.'

'Six months? What are we going to do in six months?'

'Have you guys checked the spaceship and everything that comes with it?'

‘Not yet.’

‘I’ve made sure to choose the best one available in the whole armada,’ said Dest.

‘The one I came in was just a cargo ship. It doesn’t have all the infrastructures this one has,’ said Terry.

‘Which are?’

‘I’ll show you. Follow me,’ said Dest, as he lead the way through the white corridors the ship had. They stopped at what it seemed to be a gym, where there were circular treadmills, metallic spheres for you to hang and spin, various machines for lifting different types of weight, diverse objects with lights to juggle and elastics to stretch the fine fibers of their souls. The density the vacuum creates compresses even the most noble hearts, for the darkness one experience out there shrinks it into an almost microscopic state. That’s why exercising it’s so important, especially in space. As they continued to search the ship, they came across a very dark room. Dest’s light revealed what appeared to be inscriptions on the walls. As the other Ikons went in, the room became enlightened and paintings were unveiled, along with writings.

‘What’s this?’ asked Terry.

‘The prisoners cell,’ said Dest.

‘From one cell to another. I’m sick of cells for fuck sake,’ said Kosta.

‘What do you see?’ asked Waldorf.

‘A room with strange lines. There’s only a small window,’ said Terry.

‘What language is this?’ asked Kosta.

‘I don’t know but it seems familiar. I can’t understand, but I suppose this is a wave of sound.’

‘And the paintings?’

‘Probably to keep the prisoners entertained while they traveled long distances.’

‘Let's keep going,’ said Terry, leaving the room. The crew followed him to another one standing in front of them. This one had thousands of capsules with tubes connected to them.

‘And this is?’

‘This is where you can come to sleep for weeks. Even for months!’

‘I want to sleep for years,’ said Kosta.

‘You can’t. You can only sleep for a month or two.’

‘Why?’

‘If you sleep for too long you might never wake up. You need to exercise the body and the mind... Not to mention the human touch we all need, from time to time.’

‘Look.’

‘What?’

‘In the corner. There’s something in the capsule.’

They approached it, and a guy with violet skin and orange freckles stood there, floating amidst the oxygen bubbles.

‘What kind of creature is this?’

‘It’s a human I think... Only his skin is purple. Why would they leave him here?’

‘Did they forget about him?’

‘I don’t think so, one thing the Ikons aren’t famous for is forgetting.’

‘How do I open this?’

‘Stand back.’

Kosta broke the capsule glass with an iron bar, shattering it into tiny pieces. The body fell on the grid, while the water ran over his body and drained down the holes.

‘Are you stupid?’ asked Terry. ‘He can get hurt in the glass shards.’

‘Look at his skin. It’s thick as bark,’ said Kosta poking it with the iron bar.

‘Help me out,’ said Terry as he tried to pull him over. ‘Is he dead?’

‘He has vital signs,’ replied Dest. ‘I’ll give him a good discharge, maybe it’ll wake him up.’

They backed up while Dest sent a powerful discharge, so powerful, it enlightened the whole room. His chest got up, only to fall again and splash in the water. His eyes opened. He stood there for a minute and then hid behind the capsule, with such fast reflexes that all they saw was his wet footprints.

‘Where is he?’ asked Terry

Kosta pointed at him with the iron bar. Terry gathered couple of Ikons at each side.

‘Who are you?’ he asked. ‘Why were you in one of these capsules?’

Some strange sounds came out from his mouth but they couldn’t understand anything he was saying.

‘Show yourself, we won’t hurt you.’

The creature mumbled some more but now it sounded stressed. The lights in the room exploded to pieces. Terry, out of fear made the Ikons throw a discharge that made him fall on his knees. He stood all curled up on the floor.

‘If I was him, I would be really angry. Who in this universe wakes someone up just to put him to sleep again? We should think more thoroughly about our actions.

Like, devise plans and such, they can be really helpful, I’ve heard,’ said Kosta. ‘Let’s take him to the cell! We don’t know if he’s dangerous, and what he was doing here in the capsule all alone. He exploded the light bulbs for fuck sake!’

‘It was him?’ asked Kai. ‘You were sort of upset, Terry.’

‘Yes, but it wasn’t me, something else did it.’

‘He just woke up, he’s as confused as we are.,’ said Kai.

‘Probably more,’ said Kosta.

The crew carried his body to the cell, and laid him there. Terry looked at the inscriptions in the walls again.

‘Now I know where I’ve seen these lines... They were in the research papers we’ve found at the peak of the mountains. I can’t decipher any of this. Can you translate them Dest?’

‘I’ll try,’ he said. The elapsed time started to rise, it began with hours, and then became days until it finally read years.

‘It will take years to decipher them? How can it be?’

‘They can be encrypted or be a very advanced language we might not understand yet.’

‘Could be,’ said Kosta, while cleaning the water from his hands. ‘Or just some kids scribbles to make us think is something, when in reality is nothing.’

‘They’re too perfect to be just kids scribbles. They are elegant,’ said Terry. The creature twitched on the ground, and then opened his eyes. They ran out of the room as if princesses in despair and spoke to him through a transmitter.

‘Hey, how are you?’

‘Hmm! Hmm!’ was all they could hear.

‘What are you talking about? Is that a different language?’

‘Hmm!’ he said. The same murmurs as before.

‘We can’t understand you... And I’m too afraid of letting you go. You exploded all the lamps in the room!’

‘Humph.’

Terry stopped for a second.

‘One step back, a moment to reflect and eternity for effect.’ he thought, while he looked around and saw all the Ikons surrounding him. More safer than that wouldn’t be

possible, so he opened the door, and the guy was there, lying on his knees. He stretched his hand, helping him getting back on his feet.

‘Hmm!’ he mumbled as he dismissed his hand and turned around.

Dest went close to him, and made a facial recognition. It took a lot of time because the system got confused with the color of his skin, but the facial features were identical and it returned a result.

‘His name's Gale,’ he said.

‘Gale?’ How can it be? The same Gale that Hilda spoke about? He got lost in the labyrinth... And, he for sure didn’t have purple skin. Hilda would’ve mentioned it.’

‘Labyrinth?’ asked Kai.

‘Yes, there was a labyrinth, a coming of age ritual for the first tribes. Hilda spoke about Gale, she said he solved the riddle faster than expected but he never returned. The voice I’ve heard... Could it be...’ said Terry.

‘William?’ asked Dest.

‘But how? And why?’

‘Maybe he found wanderers through the first tribes labyrinth. He didn’t only allow them to survive because they were building a city... But because he could have their prodigies. Like a factory. And by the color of his skin, I would assume he’s been testing strange things on them.’

‘But why, and how? Did the labyrinth have a way out?’

‘I don’t know, but... this has to be Gale who got lost in the labyrinth.’

‘Are we sure of that?’

‘Who else can be?’

‘I don’t know...’

‘He might be a wanderer too. I didn’t explode those lights, someone else did it,’



said Terry.

‘Hmmm?’ he asked.

‘Wait... What if... Can you open your mouth?’

Gale slowly opened his mouth.

‘Oh my! They... They cut off your tongue!’

‘I... I don’t know how it feels, but I’ve had many friends who lost theirs.’

Gestured Kai in a manner he could understand, for most of his silent years have gone by close to kids who couldn’t say a word.

‘Look at me. I’m a monster,’ he gestured back.

‘You’re not. You’re just purple, that’s all.’

‘What are you guys saying?’ asked Terry.

‘It’s sign language Terry. I have it in my database, I’ll translate,’ said Dest.

‘I’m a freak!’ said Gale.

‘Calm down, we might be able to reverse it’ said Terry. Dest was now translating everything they were saying, along with Kai.

‘Reverse it? How?’ he asked.

‘If we know what it is, we’ll be able to find an antidote or something. Right Dest?’

‘It’s possible, yes.’

‘I like you in purple. I think it’s beautiful,’ said Kai.

‘Fuck off,’ he said.

‘Are you hungry?’

‘You bet.’

They left the prisoners cell and Mary’s body was still in the corridor, floating.

‘We have to do something with her,’ said Terry.

‘We’ll have to give her a proper ceremony,’ said Kosta.

They carried Mary’s body towards the small ships usually used by the crew to leave the main shuttle. Tzu had taught Terry how to create forms with paper, so they crafted thousands of flowers and tiny ships. Mary’s story became imprinted in every boat and every petal. They filled the cabin with them. They opened the valve and off she went, breaking into a million tiny pieces, fading away amidst the great darkness as if thorn pages of a scrapbook forever lost in a timeless time. They went back to the bridge and Terry sat in the commander’s chair.

‘I can put it on auto-pilot if you want,’ said Dest.

‘That would be great,’ said Terry, getting up and sitting at a white round table that stood in the middle, surrounded by all the controls and interfaces the ship had. Most of the crew joined him, one by one.

‘Hope she finally found peace,’ said Terry.

‘The piece of the mind. The missing piece we’re all looking for,’ said Kosta, as he sat close to Terry.

‘We’re looking for ourselves, in every person we meet,’ said Kai.

‘You’re still looking for yourself in the persons you meet? I’m looking to forget it, in everyone who comes my way. I wish I could become them, even if just for a day,’ said Kosta.

‘Just imagine you could trade a day in your life with anyone you wanted,’ said Terry.

‘That would be great. But they would have to live a day in mine. That wouldn’t be so great,’ replied Kosta.

‘It depends. Just like you feel that way, the other person might like to feel what you feel, even if just for a day.’

‘Just couple of hours, I can assure you.’

‘Don’t say that. Being us, it’s a bit like the place where we’ve always lived.

After many years its beauty vanishes. It becomes ordinary, boring, so we cease to love it. The same goes for friends, relatives and wives.’

‘Maybe I’ll learn to love again, somehow, along the way. Love’s so insane that I would want to live it all, say it all, and wouldn’t trade a night of feeling it with anyone.’

‘Did you ever love?’

‘I didn’t, I do. Her memory is what kept me sane throughout the years I spent in those cells. My dear... Caroline.’

‘What happened?’

‘They murdered her. Not before they raped her. Those savages... I’ll never forget those phony smiles. Wish I could bash their skulls, one by one, like the turns they’ve taken on her. Friends, they said. Fucking disgusting usurpers. The cloth holding dearly my reality fell along with the buttons of her shirt. I tried to look away, but they would turn my head around. I focused on the buttons, laying there, and the sound they’ve made as they bounced in that cold marble floor. The buttons became bigger and the sound louder, and louder, until everything was red. They didn’t rip only through her soul, they’ve ripped through everything good in this world. They’ve raped me too. They took everything they possibly could, and after that, they took some more. I should be dead too, after the punch I landed on one of the Nameless. They’ve left me to rot in those cold cells, hearing the blind man tales about the planet's soul. I know them all, bit by bit. I think I would even recognize his son if I saw him,’ said Kosta.

‘You’ll see him pretty soon... You’ll see him pretty soon,’ said Waldorf.

‘Hopefully, we will. He might be our only chance to make us understand more about those papers.’

‘I don’t care about those papers. In fact, I just care about landing somewhere that’s nice. A place like Mouhnia once was. Can be different even. With a different gravity, where you wouldn’t touch the bed you would lay on. Just an inch or so. You would sort of float. And the air... Could smell like the ocean. Fishy, I don’t care. I would rather that, to the smell in Mouhnia. What they did... Turning heaven to hell. What for, I ask? The likes of William, who call themselves reasonable... How more unreasonable could those actions get? You might be right old man, the more I see what these machines are capable of, the more I try not to rely on my mind.’

‘You should, you should...’ said Waldorf.

‘I’m not sure if we’re making history, or history’s making us,’ said Kosta

‘What do you mean?’ asked Terry

‘You know, those stories... Those we’ve shaped... haven’t they, in the end, shaped us? We weren’t like that but we slowly became it. Dramas and more dramas. Like an idea that ingrains in your head... Changes you in a way that you become unrecognizable. Were there any dramas before we became whatever is this that we are?’

‘Of course there were dramas before us. There was death.’

‘Why’s death so dramatic? Death doesn’t have to be dramatic, in fact, I wish I was dead for all the years I spent in those cells. Sometimes life's more dramatic than death. Thousands of different cultures celebrate it rather than mourn it. It’s pathetic. The good ones, leave us too early, while the worthless scum's are always late.’

‘Young souls want to live forever, whilst the old ones are tired of it all. That’s why the stench gets worse and worse every day. Those polluted still waters... No one dares to touch them, for the arising smell will smother you,’ said Dest.

‘The denial phase, I know it all too well. Keep on living the illusion that everything’s just perfect. And pray for whoever tries to tell them otherwise.’

‘There’s no point meddling about it now,’ said Terry.

‘Why? There’s always a point to meddle about.’

‘Such as?’

‘Change. The only variable that matters for progress.’

‘Sometimes things should be the way they always were,’ said Terry, thinking about his days in Valaart, before everything happened.

‘I don’t think so. It should always be different.’

‘Why?’

‘Because if it wasn’t, the worlds would be nothing but molten rocks under a never ending lightning storm. It’s boring. It’s not the way of life, which is imaginative and adventurous. Surprisingly beautiful and terrifyingly plain. I’ve seen the same walls for years, and I can tell you, difference matters. Difference is important. At least to have something for comparison.’

‘You’re saying that now, but after being years on end wandering about, you’ll say that routine, well, routine is not so bad after all,’ said Dest.

‘Might work for some, but not for me. The only things meant to stay where they are born, grow roots, and even in the day they float towards where they dream to be. In the skies. I need adventure, I want the wilderness near me, so near I can hear it breathing. I want to explore... I want to find her. I want to fall under her spell, I want to share this lust for life with her again. That’s the human spirit right there. The explorers, the brave and curious enough to set sail towards death. I’m telling you, if everyone was damn curious, there would be no one alive,’ said Kosta.

‘I guess this ship is filled with human spirit then.’

‘You bet. And that’s why we’ll get to our destination. That’s why we’ll go wherever we’ll have to. The human spirit is undeniably the strongest force the universe

has ever known. Doesn't matter how much it ages, doesn't matter how much it wrinkles, doesn't matter how weary it is, it will always reach its destination. That's what runs through our veins. We came from a legacy of explorers! Sailors of time! Our will has always been bigger than any ocean this planet has ever seen! Even our cells love to peddle down the river. The river of life, a river once abundant, once guided by the stars. Through those circuits, I'm telling you, there's no life. Energy flows through it, but it lacks the very essence we possess. Although lit, it's quite dark.'

'Mary said there's nothing behind it but light's shadow.'

'Indeed.'

'There's a lot more behind me. I'm not just a purple light's shadow. I'm more than that ok, don't get carried away. And you... You never left Mouhnia, since when is your race, a race of explorers?'

'You don't need to travel to get somewhere. Besides, we knew better Mouhnia than you'll ever know, wherever is the place you come from. We felt it in each and every breath. We've been to every corner of it. We've seen it all.'

'My son left Mouhnia! It's in our blood, yes it is.'

'Don't think so highly of yourselves. After all, you're nothing more than mortal beings. Any dying star will always be more powerful than each and every one of you combined.'

'It's exactly that which I despise in you. Always so mechanically condescending,' said Kosta getting up from the chair.

'You were condescending too! You think as if we're nothing but machines.'

'That's what you are!' screamed Kosta close to him.

'Not all of us!'

'You're the very first one I see who's actually helpful, give me some time to get

familiar with the idea, will ya,' he said, while turning his back on him.

'While we're getting familiar... How... Hilda spoke about the labyrinth but she said it was an ancient ritual... How are you here, Gale? How have you survived through all these years?'

'Ever since you got me out of that capsule, I've been trying to remember, but I can't. There's a woman, I don't know who she is, but her face... It's the only thing I can remember. There's a huge boulder with energy flowing through it, but I don't know what it is. The... Oh, I remember now... Yes, the smell of fresh wax on the wooden floor... And the vapors of the machines arising from the cracks. A place where's night all day.'

'The Nobles Hideout!' yelled Terry.

'That name isn't very familiar...' said Gale wavering.

'Familiar is everything that place was,' said Terry.

'Maybe it was called something different,' intervened Kai.

'Yes, it was a long time ago,' said Terry. 'Do you have anything on your database Dest?'

'There's something... But I can't access it.'

'I've heard of cryogenics... The food, the food was stashed in a low temperature tank,' said Kosta. 'I'm sure they've done the same with his body.'

'But why would they do that?'

'He's looking for something.'

'You're talking about the guy who did this to me?'

'Yes, his name is William. And... He lives inside a system, inside a circuit. In every device we own.'

'I want to go back to the capsule,' said Gale.

'Ha-ha,' said Terry. 'It's not that bad, you're alive and we're in space. Away from all their problems. How awesome is that?'

'Maybe for you, who has memories. Me on the other hand, It's like I've never lived at all. What kind of life is that, a life you can resume in few lines? Maybe I lived while I was dead. I don't know, but what is worth living a life that you can't recall?'

'Maybe you did. You see, to become a wanderer, some say that first you got to die. We're born out of a destructive construction. Planets are formed through billions of them. Even us, right now, we're on a collision course,' said Kosta.

'What? What collision course?' asked Kai, getting up from his chair. 'What are you talking about?'

'Chill out Kai, you shouldn't feel scared but rather fortunate. It's gods most beautiful mistake. You're acting like everybody else, not bothering to look through the window... They aren't looking forward to remember, no, they're looking back to forget. The collision course is a blessing you see, it crushes dogmas, biased systems of belief and ultimately crushes you. That's when you become a wanderer. When you forget about everything you thought you were. All the things you consumed that you took for granted, those things, consumed you my friend. Consumed you and your ability of being who you were born to be. They took away your divinity, your sanctity. You are sacred. Look at you. What are you scared of? Colliding? Come on... When you finally collide, you realize you lived the life you wouldn't otherwise, and there's no bigger joy than to recap the greatest journey of all times. The one that was lived, while being already dead.'

'I know what you're talking about,' said Mark from a distance. 'I didn't want to believe... But now it makes sense. Our bodies were in the same cell, but his mind was in a different one, all the time. He slept days on end... I thought he was just tired, but, what



was he tired of? We would barely eat I know but... Maybe if he wasn't taking that shit he could've left and work in the mines, or some other job that those bastards needed, and then, take me out of there. But no... I got to the conclusion that he didn't die in front of the spaceship, he died in that cell, a long, long time ago.'

'What's your story?' asked Terry.

'I don't have a story.'

'You're here, aren't you?'

'Yes, but what's the story of a bird born in a cage? He doesn't have one.

Everything and everyone around him does though. Even the cage has better story than his.'

'The cage?' asked Terry.

'The nails and the woods, all the transformations they've gone through, the journeys they took, the hands they touched, the things they've heard. The bird has been to none. Has seen nothing... Has no story to tell, if not for couple of empty sad tweets.'

'Your mum? Where is she? '

'I don't know. Probably dead,' said Mark, grabbing a chair and sitting at the table with them. 'I've always felt as if a ghost. They didn't care. I'm not important.'

'Of course you're important Mark. You've helped taking out that Ikon, remember? We're all heroes in this story and without any of us we might've not been here, sitting at this table. Although some actions look more worthy than others, they are what they are, actions, and sometimes what we assume as being the best, is actually the worst. The world's upside down... The good guys are considered the bad guys... And the bad guys, the good guys. The insane, are sane, while the sane, are insane. Keep heading north, and you'll eventually head south. Nothing is written in stone you see... I've come across the Ikons, and thought they were the best thing I've ever seen... Now look at what

they've turned into. Technology was supposed to free us all but somehow I ended up enslaved by it. The technology makes it easy in the moment, but hard for the rest of time. Just like everything else. The momentarily pleasures feel great for few moments and the greater they feel, the worst they'll be in the long run. Alcohol, cigarettes, drugs. They have everlasting consequences. And so does technology if not used properly. They kill true creativity in many ways... It's the same as a mathematician who always uses a calculator to solve problems. His processing power will decrease, because he doesn't have to think. This... Whatever.' said Kosta, getting up from the chair and turning his back to hide the tears. 'I'm going to the bathroom.' he said.

'You're in space because of technology,' said Terry. 'It's not all that bad.'

'Yes, the thing is, I've never wanted to be here in the first place, and I wouldn't have to, if it wasn't for it. We were happy in Mouhnia and we were doing just fine without it. When it came... It was amazing. But like everything it had a dark side.'

'And you Kai?' asked Terry trying to relieve the tension.

'I don't know what to say.'

'Of course you do, just try.'

'I was born in the palace. The prince of the Silver Mountain was my dad. I was born in sadness, deprived of my childhood. I couldn't play with the other kids. I've seen most of them losing their tongues. I've lived in silence throughout all these years. Because of that, I had no other option but to be a good listener. I fell in love with the sound of the words, because I couldn't say any, and the words, the words wanted to come out of me as if I was a writer, a poet or a singer. They quietly sang in my mind. I used to go to the dungeons for the daily clean-up, and... That was the best part of my day. When I heard the prisoners singing. I would hum quietly along with them, and the

stones in the floor and walls sang too. It meant life for me, because finally I wasn't alone.'

'Dest told me we're never alone, even when we think we are.'

'That's because we're all in this together, in one way or another, we're all bound to each other. Even when no one's around. We all came from the same place... The planets were all one, once upon a time... A time when time wasn't timeless. A particle that divided itself endlessly. We're roots, branches and fruits of the same tree. The continents were once one too you see, and so were you and your mother and everything else.'

'Is it our nature to grow apart?' asked Terry.

'Maybe...'

'Shalrag divided himself into thousands of pieces, but one day, they would all come together again and he would be whole,' said Kai.

'Those are stories... Fables we create to try and make sense of this world. It gives us faith. When things are created they are beautiful and natural. But we, we corrupt them. We corrupt them with our insufficiency. We take everything that's good in this universe and turn it to shit. We use everything we can to our advantage. Look at William, what he has done. When the Ikons were created, they were pure. They've helped building and maintaining cities. They've even helped build the personalities of kids I know. They've helped them to become better. To feel more, to think more and to believe more in themselves. Now... they turn everyone down. Rip apart their hopes and dreams. I don't know, I think we forgot who we truly are.'

'I've got used to the Valaarian way of life...' said Terry. 'But, most of the things I enjoyed, were nothing but lies.'

'Like what?'

'Everything I've learned. About space, about Valaart's history. About my past... It was a lie. Everything. With the Ikons I have this feeling of an endless déjà vu you know. Like everything has already been said and done... Words and actions lacking authenticity, lacking soul.'

'Of course it lacks soul...'

'Hey, I've got a soul ok,' interrupted Dest. 'The minerals in the screen, the metals from which I'm built... I'm as much natural as you are. Now you too? Should I display here everything we've been through? Is that a mere déjà vu to you? Is that what I am? A memory? Something you've already lived?'

'Not you... I'm not talking about you. Come here. I'm talking about William. The soulless... You're not like them. You're different. Your color is different, your thoughts are different...'

'Only because of you.'

'Not only because of me... But also because of what you feel.'

'They can't feel kid, don't... Please, don't think they can. It might look real, his anger and his love, but he ain't feeling it, you know what I mean?' said Kosta.

'No, he doesn't know what you mean. Maybe you're the one who can't feel, because everything right now seems pretty real.'

'You don't have any central nervousness, how are you supposed to feel? You're nothing but a program you little shit, you don't have free-will. You're bound to Terry not because you want, but because you have to. You got no option, you got no choice.' The stars froze, eagerly listening to every word, because it rejuvenated them. The supernovas became protostars, and the dwarfs, became giants. Some didn't bother to hear so they became clouds of dust who exploded and filled the universe with splendor

for those who were listening. The great darkness was now a home for the greatest stories ever told, and as their past unfolded, so did their journey, towards a planet yet to be seen.

‘That’s enough...’ said Terry. ‘Let’s explore the rest of the ship! Come on you scoundrels!’

The walls had infinite cables and plugs where Ikons could charge, even boost the spaceships power. There were panels that stored tools to help repair in case something broke. The crew was swimming in seemingly different directions, each following a different path. A path of their own. Terry, Kai and Gale arrived at a very peculiar room. It had harps with no strings, pianos with no keys, trumpets with no bells, flutes with no holes.

‘What is this?’ asked Terry.

‘It’s a recording studio!’ replied Dest.

‘I’ve never seen anything like it,’ said Kai.

‘This is a more sophisticated one... This music, you play it with your Ikon. You think of a melody, and I reproduce it. I can even add fillers!’ said Dest.

Terry thought of a song and a symphony arose from the speakers carefully placed at each corner.’

‘Wow.’ They said in unison. ‘It sounds like a dream.’

‘But what do dreams sound like, to you?’ Gale gestured.

‘They sound like the birth of the universe.’

‘Aren’t there real guitars? Like the one Grub had? The one Grub had was sick. And he played it so well...’ said Terry. He got sad for a little bit and looked at a nothingness in the wall.

‘Here!’ said Dest.

A corridor with a thousand guitars made with all different shapes and colors stood before them. Terry picked one made with metallic tubes where you could see the waves of sound navigating through it.

‘Come on, let's form a band!’ suggested Kai. ‘Gale, you’re the singer!’ They all laughed, even Gale.

‘What?’ they’ve asked. ‘You’ve heard that right?’

‘Yes!’ It was Gale's laugh!’ they said. ‘How’s that even possible?’

A murmur was heard but the voice didn’t have a solid pitch. It went from high to low, sounding like a broken trumpet. ‘I forgot how I sounded like,’ he thought. And they’ve heard it again.

‘It comes from this Ikon.’ said Terry approaching it. ‘You can materialize your thoughts through it. You’re a Wanderer,’ said Terry.

‘Me?’ he thought. The question echoed and echoed, until Terry picked the guitar and tapped a string with his finger, making a rhythm. Kai tapped his thighs and they started to make a strange collective noise. One can think it was beautiful, but it was not. To them, it sounded ok, but to the planets and stars it sounded like a broken future from where all your dreams slip by.

‘This is silly’, said Kai, unable to stop the rhythm.

‘Fits you well,’ replied Gale with a digitized voice.

‘You sound worse than Dest.... And he’s a robot!’

They laughed again and jammed for a while. After dancing around like rock stars, screaming their guts out in that vast emptiness where no one could hear them, they finally got tired.

‘That was intense,’ said Terry. ‘This is the best room so far.’

They've left everything in its place and went towards another module. This seemed like a commanding center where hundreds of screens displayed routes and maps from the known universes.

'Has anyone of you ever shot anything? These are all stations for the cannons. Shields too I guess,' said Terry, as he looked towards the panels.

'Yes, in here, the commanders give orders for the crew to follow. Tactical fighting orders,' said Dest.

'Since we don't have a commander, I guess you'll have to do whatever you think it's right. Don't be afraid of speaking your mind I don't have any experience in this. I know nothing, to be honest. The only thing closest to a fight I've ever been to was... Well, I've never even been that close to fighting. All I've seen was others fighting.'

'You know it, you're a wanderer. All the answers lie deep within you,' said Kai, while putting his hand on his shoulder.

'Maybe, but I can't seem to remember. However, under pressure, it comes with such ease.'

'It takes time, you'll get better. Just to imagine you'll be able to fly spaceships without being in them gives me goose bumps'

'Will I?'

'Of course you will!' It's in you!'

'Would be so cool.'

An alarm started to ring.

'What's happening?' Terry asked.

'Pirates!' said Dest.

'Pirates? But... We're in space!'

'Space Pirates!'

‘What should we do?’

‘No need to worry. They are circumventing us.’

‘How do you know?’ asked Terry.

‘There are many signals sent by different planets to help spaceships navigate through space. Nevertheless, you could see they weren’t coming after us. There, they are turning,’ said Dest.

‘If they are pirates as you say, why won’t they attack us?’

‘This is a very powerful ship Terry. You stole the best one in the armada. It belongs to Valaart. I’m sure there are crazy pirates out there, like Nefilian, but it seems these aren’t like him.’

‘How... How do they board ships in space?’

‘They don’t.’

‘So why are they pirates?’

‘They destroy them, and collect whatever’s left of them.’

‘How can they know if they will not damage the merchandise?’

‘They don’t. That’s the fun of it. Pillaging and then looting.’

‘Just a roll of the dice?’

‘Most of the times, yes, however, there are some who don’t do it just for the thrill of it, they communicate with the main ship and persuade them to hand over the merchandise. Those are usually the ones who stay longer in business.’

‘You spoke about Nefilian, who is he?’

‘The pirate king. For some of course. Pirates don’t like to have a king, that’s why they become pirates in the first place. He upholds the record for destroying the most Valaarian ships during his lifetime.’

‘It’s so strange.’



‘What’s strange Terry?’

‘This... We haven’t heard anything about it back in Valaart. I had no idea about all of this. Why?’

‘There are some people who tried to communicate with Valaart, but William has been able to intercept every signal, every message. He says it’s better this way.’

‘Sometimes I feel the more I’m told the less I know.’

‘Indeed. Sometimes the more we try to do good, the more we’re doing bad, like a son who’s under the mothers wing for far too long. She might think it’s good for him, when in reality, it’s just making him not able to stand on its own, never knowing she’s making him weak instead of making him strong.’

‘ I never had a mother, yet I’m as weak as one can be.’

‘You never had anyone Kai... No one who stood for you. Having no one is as bad as having too much of someone.’

‘The balance... I know, I know.’

‘And you aren’t weak, you are very, very strong. Probably one of the strongest persons I’ve ever met.’

‘Thank you, but what makes you say that?’

‘It takes a strong person to take up with all that bullshit, day after day.’

‘It takes a stronger one not to take it,’ said Kai.

‘That’s easy to say, but would you still be alive if you didn’t?’ It would have meant death. From the outside it’s always easy... When you’re living it, it becomes way more difficult. You went with me, towards places you weren’t supposed to. You left your fears behind and rose above them.’

‘Maybe... I just did what I was supposed to do... No big deal.’

‘I think it’s a big deal. Never undermine your own options and choices. They

hold all the value there is in the universe, for they are yours. And, you got us now,' said Dest.

'Indeed,' said Terry as he smiled to him.

The formless planet was nothing but a small dream, an optimistic thought fueling their ship through the endless space vacuum, and the faster it went, the bigger it became. The stars all looked like millions of Ikons blazing in a black canvas.

'Look, the stars... They are all different, each has their own color.'

'Yes, they are like us, they are the blueprint behind Ikons,' said Dest. 'They emit light with different wavelengths, hence the different colors. The Ikons operate in the exact same way... Although the Indigo light has properties that even the stars don't. Because each has their own frequency, they emit different sounds... Wait a second.' Dest was broadcasting the symphony of the stars while Terry and Kai imagined animals and mythical creatures that embodied galaxies.

'You heard?' asked Terry.

'Yes I did! How's that even possible?' asked Kai. 'There's no sound in space!'

'How did you know that?'

'The nameless once said they ought to send us all to space, for we would be muted by its weight.'

'I see. He's the one muted now. Hopefully forever.'

'Hopefully,' said Kai.

'The sound you hear belongs to the Whales of Eldoran,' said Dest.

'What? What whales? You never told me about any whales!' replied Terry.

'That's because he wasn't as powerful as he's now. Neither were you. The more powerful he gets, the deeper he's able to delve into the network and more information can be fetched. Not to mention the billions of connections he can make. This is nothing

still, for the tales I've heard said the wanderers were the first memory this world ever had, and they can travel through them all.'

'Am I the one here who doesn't know anything? Isn't it supposed to be the other way around?'

'I never spoke while growing up, so I had to listen to all the hopeful tales they sang on those cells. I've heard each and every one of them, more than twice.' Said Kai.

'Yes, the whales of Eldoran! They can eat whole worlds, even galaxies, like black holes. Then they expel them like a volcano of light!'

'Will we see them?' asked Terry.

'There's none in this galaxy. They belong to one that's far, far away. But we can hear them,' said Dest.

'How can they live in space?'

'The galaxy they live in has different conditions. The planets, seas and lands, all have different conditions, and so does every system. They are not the only ones flying through space, there's fluorescent jellyfishes and ray's who navigate through waves of cosmic dust, and...'

Before Dest finished the story the crew fell asleep, slowly floating inside the bridge, while the space ship skimmed through an invisible veil which led the way. They woke up scattered across the room with their bodies close to the ceiling. Besides Dest, the rest of the Ikons were all in one corner, charging.

'Wakey-wakey, sleepy heads,' shouted Dest.

'What happened? Terry asked.'

'Just the time, it's very strange, here in space. Your biological clock gets all messed up,' said Dest. Months seeming like years passed and they were doing the same things they've always done, but now, they were doing them with Gale. They went to the

studio, to the gym, they ate the little they had for each, and told stories of distant times. The Ikons would screen movies now and then to entertain them. Gale memory didn't get better with time, it was like he knew nothing. Besides eating. He surely did it like no one else. While they were asleep, the formless substance described in the paper was now all over the spaceship. You could barely see the universe anymore. It somehow held the spaceship back until Dest decided to activate a shield. All the stars in the galaxy were boosting it, and the substance backed off. It still tried to approach but it dissipated into millions of small slimy particles that blended together right after. An alarm resounded and they woke up. They were all dizzy and took their time to get on their feet.

‘Why do we have the shields on?’ Asked Terry holding his forehead. ‘Did something happen?’

‘No! We’ve reached our destination! Look how close it is!’

They all looked through the window. The substance was all over it, as if black oceans of emptiness.

‘Wow,’ they said. ‘It gathers and then dissipates...’

‘It’s like a whole breathing organism.’

‘How will we find him?’ asked Terry.

‘My son?’ asked Waldorf from a distance.

‘Yes, how are we supposed to find him?’

‘I don’t know... Maybe this wasn’t a good idea after all,’ said Waldorf.

‘Why not?’

‘The slimy substance doesn’t look very friendly, oh no it doesn’t.’

‘It doesn’t look like an enemy either. It’s just curious about all this, I guess.’

‘Yes... But my son... He can’t live here. What if...’

‘I told you old man. We should have went to the green planet instead,’ said Kosta.

‘The green planet has Valaarians all over it.’

‘Any other planet would be fine, as long as there’s no slimy substances.’

‘We came a long way. We can’t go back now. Grab the visors and lock them, we’ll enter in the planet's atmosphere soon. Everyone get ready!’

They grabbed their equipment and sat down in the control room. A brief turbulence was felt along with an intense heat. Fire caught up over the shield and the slimy substance approached from the sides. All they saw was lines, until the spaceship became stable again. They could now see the landscapes. Purple landscapes. The ship made a peaceful landing. They turned the shield off, and the slimy substance slowly approached them, as if doubtful.

‘I’m afraid,’ said Kai.

‘Grow some balls kid. Open the hatch!’ said Kosta, standing right in front of it. The hatch slowly opened and the formless substance gained form. It was exactly like him, almost as if looking into a mirror, although the color remained black.

‘What kind of sorcery is this?’ he asked. He tried to touch it but as soon as his finger drew near, the substance disappeared as if a tornado drowning in the ocean. Now it approached Kai, and the same happened. He took couple of steps backward, and the substance glided and enwrapped him. Terry approached, afraid it would eat them.

‘What are you?’ He asked. It dissipated and a different form emerged from the ground. A man could be seen.

‘My son! My son...!’ said Waldorf, on his knees.

‘Father.’ The formless spoke. ‘What are you doing here? How come you came so far?’

‘Oh my son... I’ve waited for you... I’ve been dreaming about our reunion ever since.’

‘It’s so good to see you... said Fel, enwrapping him warmly. I’m sorry... I know I was supposed to go back with an army of the formless, but I’m not strong enough to face William and his army of Ikons.’

‘Oh my son, you would’ve been... I trust in you.’

‘Trust isn’t enough father... You’ve seen how powerful he grew.’

‘I’ve seen yes, but look at you! You... you aren’t the same as I once knew, no you aren’t. But...’

Before Waldorf finished his words, a thousand man like Fel sprouted from the grounds. An endless army stood scattered along the whole landscape.

‘Oh you are strong... You’ve found what you were looking for... Yes you did...’

‘No father. Whatever it was I was looking for... It changed me. I became it. I did not understand what it was... Or how was it possible, but I didn’t care. Somehow I gave it a consciousness. I’m not sure it had one already but... What I’m sure is that it spoke to me telepathically. It came to me in dreams. It was looking for me all along... I don’t know why it chose me but it gave me all the answers I was looking for. How to build a ship... How to sail through space... Basically it guided me here. Can you imagine?’

‘How did you become it?’ asked Terry.

‘Time. That’s how everyone becomes whatever they are. I had nothing to eat, but it kept providing me with parts of itself, a sort of a symbiotic relationship. It would create them out of nothing! It was a god... A sculptor, and what a sculptor I must say. The more I ate, more different I became. Soon enough it was me controlling what to build, what to create. It came from my mind... All my knowledge of things. Whatever my thoughts were, they became real. I thought I was only a man, but I found out I was

more. I was thousand of them, with a thousand hearts, who felt a thousand different feelings, a thousand sorrows. It looks like a lot of sorrow, but it's not. I also felt a thousand joys. I felt them all around me. They thought I became crazy, and I did. When you hear and see things no one else can, you become crazy no matter what. They heard words coming out of someone's mouth, and I could hear the whole existence of whoever said them. Echoing in the vast emptiness of who I became. As if waves of frequency. They were doing research, breaking world records or curing others and I... I was doing nothing but feeling. You can't expect less from a man with a thousand hearts. That's why I fled, because in a world shaped by a man with none, it's dangerous to have a thousand.'

'That's fascinating,' said Terry.

'Fascinating indeed, I told you so. My son, my only son.'

'Are the planet's soul real, Fel?' asked Terry.

The army dissipated and transformed into a crystal which slowly floated towards Terry.

'Is this it?' he asked.

'Yes, this is it. There's thousands scattered throughout all galaxies. Each has unique proprieties. When combined with one another, they unleash a power not yet known by any living thing in the whole cosmos. The balance has been broken though, for the unwise have risen to power.'

'The balance has been broken?'

'Yes, William, has already three souls we're aware of.'

'Three? So... Valaart and Mouhnia. That's why Lorah was slowly turning into a barren... That's why there were skeletons everywhere. What's the other?'

'Derkar, where they came from. They took the planet soul and thought nothing bad would happen, but the tides changed... The beaches slowly disappeared, the

mountains fell... and soon enough it was nothing but a barren. A desert. They left them Terry... They left them there, all of them, with the poor choices they've made. The ones who stayed wouldn't dare to leave their houses for the heat was unbearable. They stayed in their homes, as if injured dogs, licking self-inflicted wounds. We think they weren't the only ones responsible, for it takes a whole civilization to plunge a planet into another dark age.'

'We?'

'Yes, we... We're not alone in this system Terry. There's other galaxies, and they are not happy about what's happening in ours.'

'What do you mean?'

'There are much more advanced beings out there. The papers... The papers I've hidden will tell you of a new language I came across. A language which is not from this system. A language which does not require characters... It's mainly frequency, waves of sound which are rendered useless to our ears and eyes. They are perceived with the brain.'

'Why aren't they happy?'

'Because William is breaking the balance... It's not only the balance of our system at stake. If you break the balance in a system, the whole universe becomes unbalanced... It's like losing a liver, or a lung. They wouldn't care, if their civilization would remain unharmed, for their only purpose on this universe is to watch its progress.'

'Why haven't they come?'

'They still have hope in our system... They still believe it will be eventually restored. They have a much deeper knowledge than we do. The stars tell them everything they need to know. It's like a doctor looking at our blood-cells. But have no



doubt, has soon as the last sparkle of hope goes out, they will come. And they will play it safe, annihilating each and every living being in this system. They will restore the planet's souls. They are overpowered. They draw energy both from dark matter and from light. There's no one who can stand up to them.'

'You're scaring me,' said Kai. 'I don't want to die.'

'Relax,' said Terry. 'No one's going to die.'

'You can't be too sure Terry... This place isn't safe.'

'Why?'

'There are dark folks pushing us towards another dark age. It happened before, and it will happen again. It's not safe anywhere, anymore. William needs every Wanderer fighting on his side. That's why you're alive. You didn't kill your father Terry, he did. Through Dest... Through everything that's good. He did so he could start training you. His narcissistic and vengeful personality belongs to a shadowy realm. He never forgave your father... For loving unconditionally your mother. But nature had the last saying, as she always does. And you ran... You ran far away, and you've come across the truth. The nobles... The nobles are what everyone should strive to be. Selfless, funny, loving, warm-hearted, brave, authentic and honest. The ones incapable of breaking the cycle, for love is, and will always be, why we keep returning.'

'I'll kill him!' said Terry in tears.

'No, Terry, if you can't control yourself and your emotions, he will.'

'How do you know all this?' asked Terry, falling on his knees.

'I just... know.'

'What can we do to help?'

'There's not much to be done, you see... It has spread like a cancer. The only solution will be to make every living thing disappear, to never ever be heard of, ever

again.’

‘No... It can’t be. We can’t just give up. There’s things to be done! We can reverse it.’

‘Of course we can! That’s why we’re here! To amend things. We fuck things up and then we fix them! It’s not by chance, I’m telling you. Give us some hope, will ya?’

‘With the knowledge I hold, I must say it’s almost impossible.’

‘It can’t be...’

‘William controls most of the planets... Yet some remain to be found, like Sulyr. A hideous place. It stays most of the time under a very dark penumbra. It’s the only planet which can only be seen for couple of seconds, doesn’t matter where you’re at. The other planets conceal it... there’s always something in front, and for those minutes when you can actually see it, you will think it’s a star, for their huge marketplace shines like one. The only lights in the whole planet. The rest is made up of dark alleys and bars. It’s where the pirates gather to share and sell the spoils of Valaarian ships. You can find treasure hunters in every corner trying to deceive the already deceased corpses lingering on the streets, stripped off their souls, due to their countless addictions. Only the streetwise can survive in there.’

‘Sounds like an awful place.’

‘Yes, but... It’s safe, at least, if someone is running away from William.’

‘Does it have a planet soul too?’

‘Oh yes, although it looks like someone took it already for those lands smell of decay.’

‘Will you help us, Fel?’

‘I can’t help you Terry... I can’t control.’

‘Do you have any advice to where shall we go?’

‘You should stay in here, recover from the lengthy trip you had,’ he said, as a palace surfaced right in front of them.

‘Yes, we should stay and rest, yes we should,’ said Waldorf.

‘Do we have time for that?’ asked Terry.

‘You have to rest Terry,’ said Fel. ‘Come, make yourselves at home.’

A carpet was unveiled above the stairs. The palace was all glittering. Although it couldn’t acquire colors yet, it did acquire the texture. Kai drifted away exploring the purple landscapes, while Terry slowly touched the substance with his feet to see if it was hard as stone or soft as gum.

‘Don’t worry, the consistency is the same as the materials it becomes. Although it can be changed at anytime,’ said Fel, making it glutinous so Terry would fall on it.

‘Ahhhh!’ he cried, while being thrown in the air as if he was on a trampoline.

‘How can you do that?’

‘I wish I knew how to tell you a perfect equation capable of solving this riddle, but I can’t. It’s just... what it is.’

‘I wouldn’t understand it anyway,’ said Terry on his back. ‘I was never good at math.’

‘It doesn’t matter the things you can’t do, it only matters the ones you can.’

‘That’s bullshit,’ said Kosta from a distance. ‘You ought to be good at everything. Every subject has things you can learn and draw towards your other subjects! I’m telling you, I’ve seen a lot of people very good at one thing, and one thing only, and oh boy, if they were dumb. You ought to expand your mind, learn everything you can. Specializations are stupid, they make us dumb. Our brains weren’t made to do one thing, and one thing only. What a waste of potential! That’s what robots in the assembly line do! Our brains are made to explore the infinite. Only by doing everything

we become closer to the whole.'

'What is your problem with robots after all?' asked Dest.

'I'm finally glad you admit you're nothing but a machine!'

'I didn't admit anything, but it's only natural for a human being to assume things that weren't said in the first place. That's how great your little brains are.'

'Shut up, will ya?'

'I love the chimpanzee argumentation. You talk and talk and that's all you'll ever do. Poor human.'

'You both will end up together,' said Terry.

'Yeah. On top of him. Fist kissing him,' said Kosta as he followed Kai towards places unknown. Mountains formed and then dissipated in the sky as if birds disbanding in the horizon. Vapors arose from the underground. The earth was alive, breathing, moving... Drops of mercury flew around the atmosphere and became glitches of butterflies. It was trying too hard to become something it was not.

'Aren't you going to rest?' asked Terry.

'Later,' he said.

Terry went up the stairs and entered the palace. A corridor of endless doors stood before him.

'In which one should I rest?'

'Pick any you want. Beware with what lies on the other side.'

'What lies on the other side? Aren't these supposed to be just rooms?'

'Nothing's supposed to be what it is.'

'What do you mean?'

'These are the doors towards the endless realities, which are shaped by the endless windows of our perception, in the light of what we believe to be or not to be.'

Terry opened the first door, and there they were, altogether, working towards a common goal. The Nobles were returning to Valaart and William was long gone.

‘What's this?’ he asked.

‘It’s a possibility waiting to become real.’

Terry rushed to another door and behind it Hilda was holding his hands while kissing his cheek. He blushed and slammed the door shut.

‘What is it?’ asked Fel.

‘Huh, nothing,’ he said embarrassed.

‘Is love embarrassing to you?’

‘No, not at all... It was a surprise, that’s all,’ he said with his heart jingling.

The next door had him on his knees, crying, while the ground around him slowly turned into swirling bursts of fire. Through the cracks lava emerged and ate him up.

‘What’s happening?’ he thought. ‘It’s going from good to bad.’

‘Beware of where you’re going,’ said Fel, while Terry held the handle of another door.

‘Why?’

‘There are things that should remain unknown. These are nothing but dreams, or nightmares. These doors... They can change you as much as you can change them,’ he said.

Terry looked at the handle momentarily, and let go of it. He thought of nothing, nothing at all. And then slammed the door open. There it was, a bed, as normal as any bed could be, with a little window enlightening a small flower on a cupboard.

‘It seems you found your place,’ said Fel.

‘For tonight, at least,’ he replied. ‘Does this planet have any suns?’

‘Only moons.’

‘Which?’

Dest projected a file with every moon orbiting this mysterious planet. There were so many that he fell asleep trying to count them. The crew was still wandering through those purple lands, under a thousand moons that disappeared in the horizon, while a thousand others followed behind, one after another. They had no idea the planet had no suns so they kept on rambling, hoping for a light that would never arrive.

‘Do you know for how long we’ve been walking?’ asked Kosta.

‘I have no idea but I’m really tired,’ replied Kai. ‘The palace seems to be right over there, but it just keeps getting more distant with each step we take.’

‘You tell me about it,’ said Kosta panting.

Dest, who became fully charged as the days gone by, woke up. He wondered why was Terry still asleep.

‘It’s been quite a while,’ he thought.

He pushed Terry aside, but he wouldn’t wake up. Another Dest, made of the slimy substance surfaced through the wall.

‘What are you?’ he asked.

‘What are you?’ replied the formless.

Dest discharged the slimy substance, retracting it into the wall, while giving another to Terry, waking him up.

‘What happened?’ he asked, still sleepy. His eyelids were so heavy he could barely see. ‘Where are the others?’

‘I don’t know. There’s something wrong with this place Terry.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘You’ve been sleeping for days on end.’

He tried to get up but the floor started to dissolve.

‘Terry... Terry...’ A voice spoke.

‘What do you want from me?’ he asked.

‘I can’t control Terry... I’m sorry.’

He almost fell in the ground if not for Dest, who held him within a force field.

‘Waldorf, what’s happening?’ he asked, but the old man didn’t reply. He kept on sleeping with his arms hanging over his cane.

‘We have to get out of here,’ he thought.

‘Look! The palace is dissolving,’ said Kai.

He looked at Kosta and he was already behind, sleeping on the floor, while the substance slowly immersed him.

‘Get off of him!’ He shouted while kicking it, but more swirled around, embracing him.

Gale’s Ikon started to shoot beams towards it. Thousands of man surfaced from the ground and surrounded them.

‘What’s happening?’ Asked Kosta, with his eyes half-opened.

‘Terry, Terry, this is terrible. Terrible,’ said Dest.

‘I know, I know. Let me focus,’ he said, while the slimy substance surrounded the force field.

‘I can’t hold it much longer,’ said Dest.

The Ikons in the spaceship started the engines. Another exactly like it formed.

Thousands of Ikons emerged but they were useless for they didn’t possess the power these had. They couldn’t send discharges or create force fields. The veins in Terry slowly changed to a purple color, as if a strange energy flowed through his blood.

‘What’s happening?’ he asked.

‘You’re all shimmering. Your veins are fluorescent,’ said Dest.

The Ikons were spinning frantically like never before. They shot beams like they were

automatic weapons. The slimy substance withdrew from its form whenever they passed. Terry could see through the Ikons eye. He gazed at the horizon and saw his friends surrounded by an army of formless man that were slowly emerging them. He knew the exact distance they were.

‘You can’t leave!’ shouted Fel.

‘Why? What is it you want from me?’

‘I need you Terry! They will come! You need us too! Be part of us!’

‘Wouldn’t it be easier if you would just ask me? Instead of trying to make me?’

People won’t ever do the best they can if they are forced to! The greatest achievements are done when we want to do them! When we believe in them!’

‘You’re wrong!’ he said as the slimy substance absorbed Dest’s shield. It almost got into his skin. The other Ikons enabled their shields, and Terry entered the spaceship through the back-door. It went as fast as it could while the Ikons covered him. Dest was still weary for he had never spent such amount of time stoking a force field. The substance sprouted from the ground like spikes but couldn’t pass through the shields.

‘Jump in! Fast!’ he screamed at the top of his lungs. The ground shook. The sound was loud for it came out of every Ikon transmitter. It could be heard for miles and miles. Terry went to the hatch and helped Kai and Gale, who were pulling Kosta in, back on the ship. The rest of the crew got lost, eaten by the slimy substance. Their images would resurface with a sad anger in their eyes, trying to break the shield. As the ship converged all its energy to fuel the engines, the shields became weak. The sticky substance was all over the bumpers and as the ship gained speed most of the substance got lost, bit by bit, into the air.

‘Is everyone okay?’ asked Terry.

‘Not really,’ they replied. ‘We’ve lost them...’



The tears running down Gales face spoke for him. Amidst the confusion, Terry steered the ship towards a fissure.

‘What are you doing?’ they asked.

‘We’re not leaving without the planet’s soul.’

‘We can’t take the planet’s soul!’

‘We have to, if we’re going to face William.’

‘We don’t even know where it is!’

‘It’s about time we find out,’ he said, as the spaceship went full throttle through the hole.

‘Get to your positions, it’s time we fully test this beauty!’

They went towards the command room, grabbing different controls of the powerful cannons the ship had. The lights unveiled an endless journey towards the soul of the planet. They traveled through a web of rocks and holes, stalagmites and stalactites. The cannons had to be used now and then to make way for the spaceship. The sound of dying crickets echoed in the void. Now they were sure they were not alone, for the slimy substance was still after them as if a huge manticore trying to sting them. It would disappear and appear again in all different forms. As dragons, wyverns and all the mythical beasts from all the stories ever written.

‘You won’t take our planet soul!’ said the formless.

‘Yes I will! If you don’t want to stand up against William then please, stay out of my way!’ said Terry while boosting the spaceship’s speed.

‘You can’t stand against him! It won’t be enough!’

‘Even if it’s not enough, it’s still something! If everyone does something, it will eventually be enough!’

‘You can’t change our destinies! It has been written! Join me Terry! Together

we can do it!’

Terry didn’t listen to what he said and he focused on getting to the core as fast as he possibly could.

‘Dest, please keep doing whatever I was doing.’

‘Where are you going?’

‘I’m going to do this on my own. Keep him distracted, thinking that it’s the ship going towards the core, but deviate now and then, make loops, somehow slow it down, so I’ll have time to grab it.’

‘But how?’

‘I’m going to take one of the small ships, the ones we used for Mary’s body, and reach the core.’

‘Wait!’ said Dest, a bit too late for Terry was already running. Like he has always been. Dest’s light smiled, full of hope, as he watched him leave.

He chose the first one available. It was tiny, and it didn’t have a lot of commands. It was really risky, because if the formless came after him he wouldn’t have the shields the main ship had. He wouldn’t have Dest. He wouldn’t have blasters. He wouldn’t have anything at all, but himself. The pod was launched and it stayed hidden under the main's ship penumbra.

‘Shoot him!’ thought Terry. ‘Slow him down!’

The blasters were heard and the main ship took advantage of the recoil to make his deviation seem natural, as if the wind had taken it. The cavern shook, and colorful quartz crystals fell like a rainbow rain. The formless stuck to the ship as if a leech. It wouldn’t break up.

‘It worked!’ Terry thought, continuing through the darkness while overseeing the formless enclosing the main ship from the corner of his eyes. It looked like a

jellyfish, swallowing it and then unleashing it into the darkness. He continued through the holes and as he dug deeper it became hotter and hotter. The walls moved back and forth as if they were alive, and from in between new walls were formed. Small tornados flared up and clouds of stones swirled against the ground. He was going through the blood and fire of the earth, and the deeper he got, the sweatier he became. The controls were all muggy and he felt dizzy. Everything around him became distorted. Instead of a small hole, he saw three or four. He no longer knew which one to choose for everything was nothing of what it appeared to be. He stopped the small ship and got out but the ground dissipated into dozens of platforms that slowly grew apart, revealing skulls that hanged in a confusion of webs. Uninviting masks of bogeys floated in the horizon, scaring him, telling him not to take what appeared to be a never ending path.

‘You can’t do it. You can’t do it,’ they sang in unison, as if drums of despair.

‘I ran away once, I’m not going to run away twice,’ he thought, as he jumped from one platform to another while giant flies slammed against him trying to knock him off. A long thrum was heard echoing in the void, and it kept resounding as invisible shadowy waves that lurked around in between the graves of his past. It was an inhospitable place for the living, at least. Unholy it was, the darkest and gloomiest place he has ever been to, more so than the hideout's labyrinth. It changed, as if an earthquake that wouldn't dare to stop, and the platforms moved and wavered inside that dark stillness. Through that ever changing puzzled road, he stood below a boulder that slowly disintegrated in that nothingness. It poured a fluorescent liquid that looked like a river across the chamber guiding his sight past the zenith, where the sun's never been and the moon can only dream of. There, a raw, uncut gem floated.

‘The planet's soul,’ he thought.

Boreal lights punctured the mysterious jewel floating from above. A celestial resin fell all over him, embracing him, ever slowly, as if in a dream. It took a lifetime, before he finally reached it with his hand, and in that infinite time that passed while he finally held it, he saw the universe, before everything and anything, black as an onyx, bursting into a show of light. He saw himself, coming to life. He saw the crystal pods, breaking into butterflies. The cave dwellers, stepping outside from where they hide. The dark ages turning into an enlightenment time. An Ikon, a million electronic devices, lighting up their drives. The first night from where the sun shuddered and rose. He saw the river of life, that for always and always flows, from darkness to light. He held on to it with both hands in his chest, and ran to the pod, dripping celestial resin all over the floor.

‘Squeaky, squeaky, I know,’ he thought, smiling.

He closed the windshield and started the engine. The ship turned by itself, he wasn't caring where he was going, all he cared for was the beauty liberated from the planet soul. Nothing more.

‘Mary was right... The soul is indeed something beautiful. It looks so hard, yet, it's so fragile. My, how beautiful they are!’

The small spaceship bumped into a stalagmite and Terry dropped it. For a second he took his eyes off of it. He focused on the way, with one hand holding the joystick, and the other all over the metallic grid, looking for the crystal. He saw the spaceship from a distance and glided until he reached the module from where he left. He attached the pod and ran towards the command room.

‘I got it! I got it!’ he screamed.

They looked at him astonished. He was holding the most marvelous stone they had ever seen.

‘It reflects all the colors,’ said Kai. ‘It changes over time. It's so beautiful.’

‘It does not!’ It’s white!’ said Kosta.

‘It represents different things, for each one of us. We see, what we want to see, I think,’ said Terry.

The ship almost capsized because the formless was still trying to get a hold of it.

‘Ok, are you guys ready? Let’s get out of here, let’s go somewhere we can really rest. Somewhere we can just be.’

‘I’m going to sound like Waldorf, but I’ve been dreaming about that place for years...’

‘Me too. Somewhere we can surf! And skate! Let's get out of here!’ said Kai.

‘Yes,’ said an Ikon, with Gale's voice. He held his hand in the air.

They all got into their positions and the propellants started to burn like never before.

Finally Terry knew where he was headed at. The ship got out as if a shooting star towards space. It was fast as lightning but the circuits stopped working for a second.

‘We’re overheating, we have to slow down!’ said Terry.

But the ship didn’t slow down, it went faster and faster as they ripped the blue apart like a boat in an ocean. Everything happened as fast as it possible could, and then, as they reached the great darkness, all the speed was turned into a slowness. A flashing moment became a still instant, a photograph. The freezing temperatures slowed it down gradually. The circuits got back to normal.

‘What was this?’ asked Kai.

‘Maybe it was retrieving energy from the planet's soul. All I saw was white.’

‘Is everyone ok?’ asked Terry, arriving in the command room.

‘Yes.’ replied Kosta.

‘I can’t believe it. We made it!’ said Kai.

‘Where shall we go next?’ asked Terry.

‘Sultyr!’ said Kai.

‘Sultyr? I’m not sure I want to go there.’

‘Right now it’s the only place where we’ll be able to hide from William. Or from any of the other creatures lurking in this great darkness. Always trying to take the best of us...’

‘Ok. The papers have all the information we need. They say exactly where the planet lies.’

‘Let’s go!’ said Kai.

‘I told you! We’ll go wherever we’ll have to! And we’ll accomplish every goal we set! That’s us, against all odds, forever!’

## CHAPTER ELEVEN - SPIRITUAL LEAVEN

These words lingered in the air and then morphed with the galactic speck, like an abstract painting, continuously twirling and twinkling amidst the great darkness.

Opportunity was brighter than any star, faster than any comet and more stubborn than any planet around them. Yes, now there was an archipelago of planets, each pulling the spaceship towards them. They moved like a puzzle piece and the closer they got to what it seemed like a metal storm, the more apparent it became. Scraps of metal orbited these armillary sphere's who wheeled, turned and revolved around their axis. The spaceship was guided by a solar wind coming from Aphosteus, one of the biggest stars, with one of the biggest scars that bled and poured this mantle of charged particles.

'It's the way,' said Kai.

'The way?' asked Terry.

'Yes, a veil of energy that leads the heroes to meet their destiny, in Mouhnian mythology.' said Kai.

'How does that work, anyway? I mean, how can a mythology be true for other planets who never heard of it? Who never had anything to do with it?'

'Because they are metaphors. They are themselves the way, the way we feel the universe... The way it unravels... The way we perceive it. Then we translate it as stories about everything we've lived.'

They all looked ahead, and the scraps of metal each passed in their own way, as if they were allowing the spaceship to go through. No one had to do anything for Opportunity skid away in that marvelous, thunderous calmness. The chunks moved like visual poetry and everyone watched them, amazed and frightened, as they covered the whole windshield making a soundless din noise that could only be heard with the ears of the mind. Small particles begun scratching the spaceship's hull, leaving undecipherable writings behind.

'We should activate the shields,' said Dest.

A purple wrapper embraced them, deflecting all the flocks, but the way got stranger, like a ghost's wail. The labyrinth of space junk opened the way for them to get lost in a green mist of celestial vibrations. It was a sacred ground of silver spheres that had electricity between them and chanted waves of sound.

'Where are we?' asked Terry.

'In the land of the Skoja,' said Dest.

'The land of the who?' asked Kai.

'Skoja, whom disposed of their flesh. Now they're nothing but consciousness, although they still wear the silver robes they used to craft to remind them of the prowess in their flesh. Now, they no longer craft beautiful robes but the world around them.

'Craft the world around them? No one can craft the world around them, I would like to see someone do that, yes I would,' said Kosta.



'You're crafting the world around you with all the stupid things you say,' said Dest.

An electrical magnetic storm continuously pushed and pulled the spaceship as if bullying them, throwing them off balance, making them dance to the sound of thunderous bullets. They grabbed things they could reach, like handles, cables, controllers, pipes, while waiting for the fury of a sleepless universe to ease. Bells were heard as the metallic spheres around them collapsed with each other. Through a marvelous storm, the ship found its puzzled way through the darkness, and got closer, and closer to the Sultyr's port. What it looked like a flickering light in the horizon, soon became an engulfing planet that swallowed them with its overwhelming magnitude. As they dived in a sea of clouds, the fields looked like flannel patterns, and the roads, rivers and mountains underneath them became complete. An invisible white sun illuminated the skies and beneath the ethereal clouds 'Hope' descended towards Sultyr's port. The crew disembarked through a gangplank while a man standing by, opened a shelf close to the ship's prow and took out an iron rope.

'Where are you guys from?' he asked.

'I'm from V...'

'We're from Mouhnia,' Interrupted Kosta with a nudge, getting in front of Terry.

'Mouhnians? With a Valaarian ship? You're lucky to be here. Very lucky indeed. There's one thing in this vast universe we don't like. Valaarians. You aren't Valaarians, are you?' he asked, taking a closer look at them.

'No, we're Mouhnians,' said Terry.

'Maybe. At least the Ikons aren't. None of them has a red light,' he said, squeezing his head in between their bodies trying to peep at the ship's interior.

‘Although they come in all shapes and colors nowadays. What a relief. For you guys. Move along lads, the ship will be safe here. For tonight. Ah, welcome to Sultyr,’ he continued.

It was dark, and cold, and the sound of the wind against the ship's hull left a haunting feeling in the air, but the lights of the Ikon eased it while Kosta lead the rest of the crew through the metallic platform.

‘It doesn’t smell that bad,’ said Terry.

‘Waldorf smelled worst,’ said Kosta, laughing.

‘Waldorf...’ Terry thought.

Everything was silent.

‘Don’t worry about it now. There’s absolutely no use.’

A huge gate stood before them, and beneath, a faceted luminous dome could be seen, emancipating a blinding light that pierced through the clouds, illuminating everything around.

They went through a tiny passage, as if prisoners, and on the other side of the gate, a light, bright as the sun, whitened their worlds. Terry stretched his arm and deciphered couple of letters between his fingers. Welcome to Sultyr, the sign read. Chants filled the streets.

‘Welcome sires, fresh ocean breeze from the distant and humongous galaxy of Eldoran, in these small bottles. A lifetime journey at the grasp of your noses. Come on now, don’t be shy, two for the price of one!’

‘Ocean breeze? What’s that for?’ asked Terry.

‘You’re not from around here, are you sir? For the ones who can’t afford to go to Eldoran, Eldoran has finally come to them, in a bottle. A most expensive journey, beyond the riches of the poorest souls, now as cheap as three dews. Lasts for an entire

night. If you're looking for something different, we've got incense from there as well. These last for days. Here, this is what a voyage towards another galaxy smells like,' said the merchant lighting the incense and waving it back and forth.

'It actually smells good,' said Terry. 'How do I know it's really from there?'

'You don't,' said Kosta. 'Don't be a fool.'

'Because there's nothing in this galaxy that smells like this! Is there? Can you think of anything?' said the guy passing it close to Terry's nose.

'Not really. I can't think of anything.'

Dest went closer and started to analyze the mysterious incense stick, but the man swiftly hid it behind his back.

'An indigo light. Just like this cloth. Wonderful, isn't it?'

'Your empathetic tricks don't work with me,' said Dest.

'Oh no, you Ikons don't have hearts to feel, nor noses to smell, although you see without eyes, and hear without ears. These luxuries are only meant for humans, I fear,' he said as he continued to wave the incense sticks in the air, while displaying the empty bottles spread over a purple velvet cloth. Another man approached Terry from behind and swirled around him juggling balls of flashing lights that changed and reflected cold and warm colors upon his face.

'The balls of truth,' he said. 'If you want to see who someone really is, you must buy these balls. Cheap packs. Fueled by the stars!'

The light coming from the different perspectives changed his face overtime. He sometimes looked angry, others happy, and sometimes it was like he had no expression at all. Kosta laughed.

'Balls of truth. That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. What happened to the old crystal balls?' he muttered while a man riding a mono-cycle, spitting rainbows of

color towards the night sky passed them by.

‘Change, please?’ he asked, with blue and yellow stained lips. Terry reached for his pocket and took out the stone Drangy gave him. He looked at it while the man enraptured Terry’s hand with his fingerless gloves.

‘No, no.’ he said. ‘You, change.’

Terry looked confused while the man smiled and left spitting rainbows that looked like meteor showers across the skies.

‘What is this place?’ he asked.

‘Yeah, I never understood those gloves to be honest. They don’t serve any fucking purpose, do they?’ asked Kosta.

A guy flashed a box filled with such gloves in front of them.

‘My prayers have never been answered so quickly. They’ve never been answered, but that doesn’t matter now. I’m all ears friend,’ said Kosta, while the man reached for his hand and started to touch his fingers.

‘Oh yesh, weary handsh you got there shir. Theshe are for the timelesh timesh. Either shnow or rain or the shun shines in mattersh of sheconds. You can’ have tshree pairsh withs you at all timesh, can you shir? Eshpechially, when theresh no time!’

‘Gloves are for pussies. Real man let the rain fall down upon their hands and allow the snow to ingrain in their skin. That’s how it grows thick.’

‘Butsh you...’ he said, as he let go of Kosta's hand and drifted away between the crowd.

‘Looking for adventurers! Join our crew of explorers to travel through unknown galaxies! Join the fight to free our souls! The future, now!’ exclaimed a fat guy with two robotic parrots sitting on his bionic shoulders.

Everything was the most intense moment they ever had, yet, it was forgotten in the blink of an eye, as if in a dream. A stand with luminous wild vines enwrapping its legs stood before them. There were all sorts of different trees and plants but these didn't float and their thick roots embraced whatever came their way. There was an energy flowing through their nerves, lighting the whole stand.

‘How come... They aren't the same as we had in L...’ said Terry, without finishing, because he remembered Kostas nudge.

‘As you had in, where?’

‘In Lyrah’s house...’ he said reticently.

‘Oh, that’s a Mouhnian name, isn’t it? Although I’ve heard of stars named Lyrah. You don’t happen to live in a star, do you?’

‘Live in a star? Where am I? Is this the land of the idiots?’ muttered Kosta while moving towards another stand.

‘Yes, it’s a Mouhnian name. How can someone live in a star?’ asked Terry.

‘I’ve sold items to travelers from hundreds of different galaxies! Hundreds! Everyone somehow ends up below the Free-Dome, and it's certainly not because of the currents brought by the cosmic winds of Eldoran, I’ll tell you that, there's something more to it. Or the light! Oh, this light. This light will hopefully keep us safe forever! No one knows how free they are until they breath Sulyr’s air. But one, one came down the gate all shimmering. I suppose the man lived for so long in the stars that he became one! You can’t possibly know the losses from that day. The light of every shop, of every stand, bowed to him. He outshone them! Nobody cared for my items! Nobody does anyway, but that’s because they can’t see the energy that flows through these marvelous trees, plants and leafs. I’m tired myself of them to be honest, and because nobody see’s the energy in it, I, myself, am becoming blind to such phenomena too! It’s like it

doesn't exist at all!

'I can see it too,' whispered Terry.

'You can see it?' the man cried.

'Yes, I've seen them before.'

'Not a lot of people can see them, nowadays anyway. Only a few, I've heard.

Mystical beings from Valaart. Disposed of their natural divinity for a mechanical one!

They think they are clever, I think they are the stupidest beings that ever existed!

'What natural divinity?'

'Of being Wanderers of course. Now, most of the Wanderers can access to every electric device, but they can no longer access to the natural one! To this energy, the one that flows through the trees and plants and rivers and what not.'

'You can access nature too?'

'Of course you can access nature too. You can access anything you want if you're a Wanderer!'

'I can navigate through the thoughts of trees?'

'Not you, schmuck! But a Wanderer could of course! We wouldn't understand anything anyway, they are way too advanced for us. It's so simple that we can't understand. Although the Valaarians wouldn't grasp anything at all! Stupid folk I'm telling you. A whole civilization serving the Ikons. In here, the Ikons serve us. That's clever!'

'They serve the Ikons?'

'Sure they do. Idiots, wasting their time developing its intelligence, its power, and forget to develop their own. I mean, why was machinery invented? To free us from the hardships of life. To buy us time. Time to think where we're at, and where is it we want to be. But it helped in neither of those matters. We get home tired and stressed,

definitely not in the mood for truth, so we revel in lies. They are cozy and warm. Just look at them, addicts of the past. These wretched individuals all live in the past. All serve the Ikons.’

Terry looked where the man pointed, and away from the lights of the market stood thousands of people in the gutter, looking at Ikons projections. Sometimes they would trade memories and gaze infinitely upon them.

‘What are they looking at?’

‘At the past. At lives other people lived, and sometimes, when they get nostalgic, they look at the ones they've already lived. Can you imagine? Their present is wasted on that. Remembering times... Sometimes they even fight! Fighting about the past! I've heard the projections also keeps them warm... They used to fall asleep under a thousand lights, now they fall asleep under one, and one only. Ah, for god sake.’

‘Do you believe in god?’

‘You're a special one, aren't you? God... God lives in your head, and doesn't pay rent, laddie.’

‘Accommodations! Travelers, there's a warm place waiting for you tonight. You look like you need a place to stay!’ a merchant said, looking at Terry.

‘As a matter of fact, we do.’

‘You're not going without buying a tree, are you?’

‘I don't have anything of value.’

‘What about the Ikon?’ he said, pointing at Dest, who was swirling around as if a child in a playground.

‘Oh no, you can't possibly expect me to trade Dest for a tree.’

‘What? That thing's got a name? I'm making you a favor! This one isn't needy! It doesn't talk, it doesn't say whatever gibberish is stored in its drive. It's the absolute.’

It's life, sitting and waiting patiently. You should learn from it! Not from an Ikon for god sake. I'll also give you this plant.'

'Dest's not for sale. Or trade.'

'Ok, ok. It'll be one dewy.'

'One dewy?'

'Yes, Free-Dome currency, any raw gems you might carry with you.'

'What for?'

'Do you think my time's for free? And the information! I bet a lifetime with that Ikon wasn't as informative as these minutes with me.'

'You must be kidding me.'

'Welcome to Sulyr!'

'I told you I haven't got a dime.'

'A dime? I've heard only one type of people calling gems such thing.'

'I've heard it somewhere, and thought it was cool. Never mind. Just wait here.'

The both of you,' said Terry, running towards Kosta. 'You've got any raw gems?'

'Of course I don't have any raw gems. Do you think we keep any gems in prison?'

'How are we going to rent a place?'

'We sell some of the Ikons. We brought couple, they have to be worth something. It will get us through the first weeks, then we'll figure something out.'

'I found someone who was renting accommodations.'

'Where?'

'Over there,' said Terry, pointing at them.

'Ok, we've only got this Ikon for sale. We need the accommodation,' he said, as he approached the merchants.



‘That will get you a roof for a week.’

‘A week? But they are really valuable. They aren’t even gray. Look at their armors, these aren’t regular Ikons. These are Valaarian Ikons.’

‘One week, that’s it.’

‘It depends,’ interferred Kosta.

‘It depends?’ the merchant asked.

‘Depends on the place we’re going to stay,’ he replied.

‘It’s here, it’s here,’ the merchant said, while whistling on a metallic flute hanging 'round his neck. An Ikon with a yellow color approached. ‘Show him the Barnacle,’ he said.

The Ikon projected images of a splendorous guest house. It was an Octopus with tentacles spread out through the street that filled the cracks between the cobblestone. Its eyes were orange lamps that stood above the main entrance. The rooms looked so clean and fresh that you could actually smell them. The bathrooms were so white and clean that you could swim in them. Water ran as if rivers from a fish head's tap, the switches were shells and the floor was a glass with sand below. Terry’s face got soppo and he started to take off his clothes to enter in the projection but Dest bumped against him.

‘What are you doing?’ he asked.

‘Oh, I thought I was there, ready to take a bath...’

‘Fresh fish for lunch!’ he said, as images of shinny fish slowly being turned in a huge grill were displayed. Smoke came out of their golden brown scales.

‘Oh my,’ said Terry, drooling, trying to reach out for the fish. It was like he was hypnotized.

‘Wake up kid,’ said Kosta elbowing him.

‘We’ll take it!’ said Terry.

‘Ok, allow me to turn off the Ikon please.’

‘Go ahead,’ he said.

‘Hey, wait a minute, take us there first,’ said Kosta.

‘Oh I can’t right now, see all these travelers? They’re all costumers, I can’t afford to take ten minutes off. I’ll give you the keys to your place. Relax, you’re a bit stressed, aren’t you big guy?’

‘I’m not stressed, I’m just not stupid. All I hear is a lot of sweet talk. Lots of fruit with no juice in it. I like juicy.’

‘You will love our breakfasts then! A million fruits, from a million galaxies! Here, have this key, and allow me little fellow.’

Terry got out of the way. The merchant turned off one of Terry's Ikon and shoved it down a bag.

‘Here’s the key. Hope the rest you’re having tonight eases that stress, big guy. Accommodations, Accommodations, get your night's sleep here with me!’ screamed the merchant, getting lost in the crowd.

‘So tiny,’ said Kosta. ‘I bet the room is as tiny as this key.’

‘Let's hope not,’ said Terry. ‘Do you remember the name of this place?’

‘Something that had to do with a bar and sea,’ said Kai from behind them.

‘Do you like this place Kai?’

‘Not really. It reminds me of the palace to be honest, lots of useless things lying around.’

‘It’s called “The Barnacle”,’ said Dest.

‘Someone with an impeccable memory. Good to have you Dest,’ said Kosta.

‘Unlike you. You forget quite easily, don’t you?’

‘Oh come on. I didn’t forget, I forgave. It’s different. Learn some compassion,

will ya?’

‘Humph,’ protested Dest, guiding their way through the crowd. The bodies on the sidewalk increased as they got away from the market, now there were piles of them. You could no longer tell the dead from the living. A laser shattered a window and pierced through the darkness intensifying the rumble inside the bar. Broken bottles and chairs, everyone was fighting, pushing and pulling, while Ikons activated shields to protect the crowd.

‘What is this non-sense?’ asked Terry.

‘Unfulfilled expectations,’ said Dest, activating one of his shields while they passed near the bars shattered window.

The walls around the houses had barbed wire, it looked like they were in a military base. They went through a dark and very narrow hallway, so narrow only one of them fitted at a time. Kosta and Terry went on front, while Kai and Gale followed behind. At the end a group of drunken pirates were waiting for them under a street lamp.

‘It’s one dewy,’ the larger said, while kids ran through them.

‘One dewy? What for? To keep your mouth shut?’ said Kosta.

The pirates got off from the wall and approached him.

‘Who’ve we got here? Looking for a crew mate? Only a true pirate speaks like that. In here we’re scarce of them. They’re all silent like the night. But you, you got a big mouth, don’t you? Is your will as big?’

‘I don’t have a big mouth, I just don’t have patience, that’s all. You think you’re scary? Do you know where I came from? I came from death, that’s where I came from. No living thing scare me now. When you’ve seen death, life becomes your playground,’ he said, looking down on him.

‘You’ve seen death huh?’ he said laughing. ‘Let’em through boys, this fella here

will one day join us, and we don't like to spoil our own, right?'

'Thanks,' said Terry passing in between them. 'You don't know where's this Barnacle, do you?' he timidly asked.

'The Barnacle? Oh yes, straight ahead.'

'Great! Thanks. Wish you a rest of a wonderful evening.'

'Huh, you too kid.'

'Wishing them a wonderful evening? To those scavengers?' murmured Kosta.

Down the road they came across the tentacles spread out through the cobblestone floor. The orange eyes were glowing amidst the shadow of the blue night.

'What is this junk?' Asked Kosta.

'It's nothing like the photos,' said Kai. 'This place's falling apart.'

They all entered and a woman greeted them.

'Come sleep by the warmth of my fire,' she said.

'I would. I would dream for days on end by the warmth of your fire,' said Kosta smiling.

'Don't get burn Mr...?'

'Kosta. I'm Kosta,' he said, drilling through the crew while adjusting his worn out jacket.

'Reservations?'

'Yes, we've got a key. Just a second,' said Kosta searching his pocket and taking it out.

'I'm afraid reservations through keys aren't accepted Kosta.'

'Oh come on. The... I don't know who he was, but he sold us an accommodation in this place. He spoke about some fire too!'

'Everyone sells a hundred things in these lands... Our rooms aren't even

accessed by keys. They are accessed through retina recognition dear.'

'You gotta be kidding me,' said Terry. 'This is the worst place I've ever been to.'

'It's your first day, you'll get used to it. After it becomes wonderful, you just have to be intelligent.'

'Intelligent? Intelligent? Do you think this is intelligence? An intelligent fellow wouldn't try to scam anyone, thus, it might require being smart, but not intelligent.'

'I don't know what it requires to pull the tricks they pull, but to rent a place, that's five dews.'

'We don't have any dews, we just arrived.'

'What did you pay the man then?'

'We gave him an Ikon.'

'That's a good payment. It'll get you couple of nights here.'

'Couple of nights?' asked Terry exalted.

'Yes, it's a different kind of payment... Therefore the rules applied shall be different too. If I like you, you might stay another night or two.'

'So, do you like us?'

'Sweetheart, liking comes and goes with time. Stay for couple of nights and maybe I'll have enough time to make up my mind,' she said smiling.

'Just accept it, I'm tired,' said Kai.

'Hmhm,' said Gale.

'Ok. Which one you want? Besides the one with the purple light.'

'But I want that one.'

'No, Dest's not for sale. Pick another.'

'Dest? Is that some new model?' She asked while passing her fingers through

her hair.

‘No. He’s not a regular Ikon, he’s my friend. That’s why I can’t sell it.’

‘Ok then. I’ll take... The one with a dent.’

‘All yours,’ said Terry. ‘Can you take us to our room now?’

‘Yes, just a second sweetheart, come here.’ Terry got closer, and the Ikon behind the stand scanned Terry’s eye thoroughly. ‘This is it,’ she said. ‘It’s the 505. You can enter anytime now. When it expires, it will be automatically deleted from the system and you won’t be able to enter anymore. If the rest want to access it as well, stand by for a little longer so I can scan all of you. You first big guy.’

‘Scan me all you want,’ said Kosta. ‘My sight was made to gaze infinitely upon your beauty.’

‘Was it? That’s not even romantic, just sad, now that I think about it,’ she said smiling. ‘What’s up with you? I’ve had a lot of guests in this place, but never one with a purple skin.’

‘It’s a long story,’ said Kai, behind him. ‘The Valaarians cut off his tongue.’

‘Those inhumane creatures. They rip life’s heart apart. You’ll be safe here cutie.’

‘Fuck you,’ an Ikon said.

‘Gale!’ they said looking at him in disapproval.

‘That’s something. An Ikon speaking from someone’s thoughts.’

‘I forgot, sorry.’

‘She was just trying to be nice,’ they said.

‘Whatever,’ said Gale, leaving towards the room.

‘Sorry about him. It’s just... Space can be a lonely place.’

‘Any place is lonely when no one hears all the things you’ve got to say.’

‘I guess,’ said Terry.

‘We’re on our way. Sleep well... Goddess of life.’

‘Ha-ha, you too, heavenly beast.’

The crew followed Kosta's heavy foot steps that cracked and creaked the broken bamboo floor.

‘Why do they need eye recognition systems? If I kick this door the whole place falls apart,’ he said.

Gale stood by with his eye wide open close to the camera. The door grated and opened.

‘It’s not so bad,’ said Kai.

It was only a cubicle with four small beds.

‘The spaceship was better than this. We could have stayed there, with two more Ikons,’ protested Kosta.

‘It’s cold in there. This feels a bit like home,’ said Terry.

‘Yeah, after a storm.’

‘What’s the matter with you? You’re always protesting about everything. Just try to enjoy.’

‘Of course I’m protesting. We have two wanderers in our group, yet the two of you don’t make one! We could have these rooms for free you know? If you were a bit like them. They scam us? Great! We scam them back! Talking about clever huh...’

‘That makes you no better than them.’

‘Who cares? When you’ll have to give out Dest so you won’t have to sleep in the rain you’ll remember this argument. No one’s going to look out for you, kid.’

‘I’ll never give out Dest. He’ll always look out for me. Won’t you?’ he asked, looking at him.

‘Of course I will.’

‘Ah. Putting your faith on an Ikon. Don’t be stupid kid.’

‘Whatever...’ he said as he sat on one of the beds the room had. A cloud of dust filled the room, so big that even Dest sneezed. He took out his boots while looking at a projected image of a magical night pretending to be a window. ‘Not even a window...’ he thought, laying on the bed dreaming of space battles. Dest joined him and stood quiet in a corner. He dimmed off his lights and the recharging cycle began. It was already afternoon when Terry woke up. There was a lot of fuzz coming from the outside. He opened the door and peeked. There was a lot of chatting and a table filled with different foods and drinks from different planets.

‘Terry!’ said the manager. ‘Join us. Come and try food you’ve never heard of before! All the travelers gather everyday and surprise us with little pieces of their homes.’

‘Uh, I just woke up. I didn't take a bath yet.’

‘The showers are to your right sweetheart! You’ll see the sign.’

‘Thanks. What’s your name by the way?’

‘Leonie.’

‘Such a cool name.’

‘Thank you! Go on now, we’re waiting for you.’

Terry smiled and closed the door. He was feeling much better than before. He grabbed some clothes he had on his backpack and went to take a bath. As he got there, the glass was shattered, and the sand below had grown mold. The switches that were shells had holes and the fish heads from where the crystalline water flew were now just tubes, and that clear water, for the first minute was brown.

‘Yuck,’ he said as a thick paste came out. He waited until the mud resembled to water and got his body under it. It wasn’t hot or cold, it was bearable but not comfortable.



‘I hope there’s better places out there, in this vast galaxy. If not in this one, in another! And I hope I can reach it soon...’ he thought, while he held his head up high and water fell upon his face. He finished, and washed his teeth with the towel around his waist. He looked at the mirror and stood there for a while, making faces. He got dressed and went back to the dormitory to drop off everything. He touched Dest, who swirled around the living room feeling completely refreshed. The rest of the crew was still sleeping so they left and closed the door without making a sound. The hall was filled with beings who had different shapes and colors. Some musicians in the middle played scales and notes he never heard before, with instruments he had never seen, some made of pearls, others with a weird wood that bled once struck, as if it was crying.

‘What’s up my man?’ said a guy with what it looked like a grilled worm still squirming on top of some roasted bread.

‘Ew. I’ve seen one of those in the bathroom.’

‘Ha-ha! These are some treats from Sultyr! The fisherman used to come with their nets full, but sometimes they came with their nets empty... So, Yeah, that’s what they ate. The worms that were supposed to catch the fish. Some say they got drunk while riding the tides, and all the fish happily passed them by... I don’t know, but I understand them, this liquor... Oh, I’ve drank many liquors in my life, and none tasted like this. Here, have a try kid! Enjoy life!’

‘Is this how you enjoy life? I’ll pass.’

‘Ah, come on, just a little taste. I promise you won’t regret.’

‘Ok...’ he said reluctantly. He grabbed his cup and had a sip. His mouth caught fire and his cheeks looked like tomatoes.

‘Ahhhh,’ he screamed.

‘Easy, easy.’ Said the guy grabbing a filled cup from the table. ‘Here.’

Terry took the cup and drank it.

‘Phew,’ he said, taking a deep breath. He looked around and everything was melting. He became redder and redder, but this time just weird noises and fumes came out of his mouth as if he was choking.

‘Oh dear,’ that was a different one. ‘Fuck. Leonie! Leonie! Can we get a hose here? The kid’s about to burst in flames!’

‘Rekun! He’s a kid! Get out of the way you moron,’ she said, holding a bucket of water. She gave Terry some to drink and poured the rest over his head. Dest increased his rotation speed as a way of showing pity but he knew better than anyone that it wouldn’t refresh him no matter how fast he would spin.

‘The first was deliberate. The second a mistake. You doing all right there buddy?’ he asked passing his hand through Terry’s hair.

‘Why do you always crash these meetings? You’re from Sultyr! These are for the travelers to get to know each other!’

‘You know that no one else has any patience left for me. I’ve become so hated that I must seek company from other worlds. That’s how lonely I am!’

‘Ok, ok, I forgot, Rekun the nationless. Just be more careful next time. Look at his face.’

‘The nationless?’ asked Terry still breathing heavily.

‘Yes, I’ve renounced my nationality.’

‘What? Why’d you do that?’

‘How long have you been here?’

‘For a day.’

‘I see. Just wait another one, and you’ll understand why.’

‘We’ve had couple of bad experiences... But it will get better, right?’

'Sure. They say the only thing that matters is to stay positive. Ah, go tell that to the natives of the Green Planet. They remained their whole life positive, and guess what. Slaughtered, all of them. Over nothing. Believe whatever you want to believe, but I'm telling you, with no action, there's no change. Just look around. If everything sits still, there's nothing but stillness. You might think positive, but what does that mean. Is it able to shape the world around you? Nah. You've got to materialize your positive thoughts, otherwise it's meaningless.'

'I guess... So your solution is to become nationless? The destitution of culture?'

'Culture... If this is the culture we're afraid to lose, you can flush it right down the toilet. Might not mean much to some, but it's actually poetic. In here, they want to keep you stupid, for you to be stupid enough to consume their stupid shit. For you to be stupid enough to take up with their stupid shit. So you can be stupid like they are. Take none of their stupid shit. Consume none of their stupid shit. And when you cease to believe in all the stupid shit they create, you start to change the world. From stupid, to divine. To creating your nation. A nation with purpose. Where everything matters. Being nationless means to let go of the past, and to embrace the future. Those borders, those nations, these ideologies were made by people without a clue. They didn't have a clue back then, and apparently no one has a clue even now. I'm nationless, but they, they are clueless. I live without a nation, they live without a clue. And forever they move backwards like animals fueled by primitive beliefs.'

'Again? Don't listen to him sweetheart, he's drunk. He has been drunk for so long that he thinks and talks like one all the time. His inside is so bitter that it spouts out through his mouth.'

'I think I've heard enough. I'll be going.'

'Yeah, go on about your life. Don't care for nothing. Do nothing.'

Terry left the Barnacle looking through the swinging doors that momentarily showed Rekun swallowing bits of acrimony.

'Look at this day,' he said, stretching out his arms.

'Wonderful indeed,' said Dest.

They've walked through a wide, colorful street, made with cobblestones, and each rock had a color. Some displayed smiles, while others displayed portraits. In the middle there was a fountain that poured pink and yellow paint, where the children danced away under the sun and painted each other's faces. Terry went closer, drenched his hands in the fountain, and ran after Dest with hands made of rainbows.

'Stop! Stop!' he cried, flying madly in circles, splattering bits of paint all over the floor.

'It's not so bad after all,' he said while the colorful banners of the stands swayed in the wind. The smoke coming from the pans hid the most beautiful spices that were spread out as if prismatic blankets. Young children unveiled sticks with fried worms in front of Terry, steaming and reeking, filling the streets with unique smells. In the left, a bar with glaring flashing lights and tables as long as the eye could see served as dreaming huts for travelers who lost their way while crossing the stars.

'This bar was rowdy last night. Everything was broken,' said Terry, while a strange Ikon caught Dest's attention. Terry followed him, wondering if he was ok. Dest stood there, going back and forth, south and north. The other Ikon had a pink color and whirled around him. They looked like they've known each other from another lifetime but couldn't remember all the adventures they'd been through. It was the first time Dest took interest in another Ikon.

'But what interest, what mysteries can lie behind an Ikon,' Terry thought. 'Can they fall in love?' he continued, and for a moment Hilda stood there with him, smiling and being, being Hilda, the love of his life, the life of his love.

'What'll be?' asked the barman while cleaning a mug.

'I don't have any money,' said Terry. 'I need to get back to my spaceship to get food and some tradable goods.'

'You're not from around here, are you?' the guy asked.

'Not really.'

'So? From...?'

'Mouhnia. I'm from Mouhnia.'

'Alright. We never had Mouhnyans here before. If not for one... Strange he was. I actually don't know anything about them, besides the rough times they might be going through. He spoke in waves of sound, I didn't understand anything he was saying. An Ikon translated the speech but that was about it. Ah, welcome to Sulyr. You know, I'm not from around here either. No one's from around Sulyr you see. We're all bits and dust from the great darkness. Everyone that comes to Sulyr, they come because they didn't fit anywhere else. Here you'll find a bit of everything, a bit of everyone, this is the universe condensed in a planet.'

'So, there's no Sulyrians?'

'We're called Sulterns, and you can call me one. But there weren't first ones, somehow a true Sultern is never the first, he's always the last. It's an interesting story. A man came and built his home here. Some say it was Royden, but no one's sure. Then, another came, and built his. Royden helped. The others who came after were helped, and helped others in return, until they had a commune. Travelers came and spoke of an utopian state built upon the dreams of those with little to take and much to give. The

invisible city was born and sheltered all the invisible sons of every galaxy. They came just like you did. Empty pockets but full of dreams. And this went on and on, until this day. Although some wandered off to a place far away... Anyway, here, have some crusties. Those are free. Don't tell anyone,' he whispered in a fun way. Terry took a bite and looked at Dest, who was still there, mesmerized, hypnotized by the pink light of zeal.

'Is that your Ikon?' a voice spoke.

Terry looked over his shoulder and a girl stood beside him full of empty promises.

'He's a bit creepy, isn't he,' she continued. 'They become like their masters.'

'I'm not Dest's master. I'm his friend.'

'That's sweet,' she said. 'Would you like to be mine? I'm Sora.'

'I'm Terry,' he promptly said, taking a bite in one of the crusties, hoping it would hide away his shyness.

'You like those?' she asked.

'They're ok. Not the best I've had. Drangy's entrée's were the shit.'

'See, people always complain about free stuff. That's why no one gives anything for free anymore,' said the bartender.

'Maybe that's why they were so tasty,' said Terry sighing.

'Aren't you happy?' asked Sora, sitting beside him.

'I don't know. I've just been through a roller coaster of emotions. I have no idea what's going on. Sometime ago I had no clue about...' he thought for a second, and then continued, 'about everything. The planet soul, space pirates, the wanderers...'

'Planet soul?' she asked.

'Yeah, the particle that makes the world go around. That grants the energy to every living thing. You can see it in the trees, and in the plants and...'

'Are you drunk?' she asked.

'Maybe...'

'I've never seen any energy in living things.'

'Yeah, I guess it was just my imagination.'

'Probably.'

Terry finished the crusties and looked at Dest.

'Can Ikons fall in love?' he asked.

'Maybe.'

'How's that even possible?'

'Everything's possible in Sulyr.'

Dest returned dancing as if listening to some vintage love song.

'What's up with you,' he asked.

'I don't know, I feel a tingle,' replied Dest, without really paying attention to him.

'As if something's going through my circuits.'

'Really? That's odd. We should get you checked.'

'Don't be afraid, he's experiencing something he hadn't experienced before.'

Love.'

'Maybe. Let's go back to the ship, we have to hunt for things of value. I'll see you later Sora.'

'Bye,' she said. 'If you need anything I'll be right here.'

They got out and people were cleaning the streets with huge hoses. As the water dried, the merchants laid their colorful mats and dumped their useless accessories above them, cheering, chanting, crying out for a sale. They went through the heavily armored gates and got out near the port. There were sailors rolling on the ground, kissing it. Machines

dragged containers out of the ships. Ikons were repairing some, wielding pieces together or cutting them apart.

'Where's our ship?' Terry thought. He gazed upon the hundreds of ships but couldn't spot Opportunity. He saw a traffic controller holding some red lights and approached him.

'Remember us from yesterday?' Terry asked. 'You've helped us anchoring the ship.'

'No, not really. Sorry, there's hundreds of ships arriving and departing everyday kid.'

'Well, I can't find my ship. I'm sure I've left it there.'

'Can't help ya.'

'Haven't you seen anything? It was a Valaarian ship, not hard to spot. It was huge. The name had peeled off from the prow.'

'I remember the Valaarian ship. Scared me for a second, hey. I'm going to tell you what they do here, they take all the pieces, one by one, and sell them at the market in the square of no-where,' the guy said, while flashing the lights in the air for another ship to make its way into the docks.

'But you said the ship would be safe.'

'The most important things will be taken from you, kid. They won't be taken lightly, but ripped off from your soul, in the worst possible way, and when you need them the most. See, me, I'm always on the lookout,' he said laughing.

'What am I supposed to do now?'

'Not sure, maybe report the theft at the local police station. They might be able to help you, but don't keep your hopes high. Nothing in here gets done easily. The problems of our lives entangle and get in front of these rather simple things we're trying



to solve. But try. You never know. I wouldn't advise to go near the square of nowhere tough, you don't want to mess with those kind of people.'

'This place is a fucking piece of shit,' said Terry, leaving.

Dest projected a map showing where the nearest police station was. They got there and the door was open. A group of people were gathering at a table full of glasses and bottles, talking loud about nothing.

'I want to report a theft,' said Terry. 'My ship got stolen.'

They stopped for a moment, staring at him in disbelief, and then laughed. Some beat their fists on the table and others clanked their mugs.

'What's wrong with you?' asked Terry.

A guy got up from the table, went close to him and pulled a vindicator close to his head.

'No, what the fuck's wrong with you,' he whispered.

Terry saw the gun from the corner of his eye.

'Nothing, nothing's wrong with me. I guess I'll be leaving now.'

'I guess you are,' he replied.

They got kicked out by an invisible foot, and while on the streets he looked back, and the guy stared at him in the eyes.

'I could've toasted him,' whispered Dest.

'Yes, that would be great. When someone disagrees with us, let's just toast them.

Then we could join William.'

'Funny. Very funny,' replied Dest. 'They were tattling something about a ship.

I'm sure they knew who stole it. Maybe if I had toasted him we could've got it back.'

'Oh no,' said Terry.

'What happened?'

'The planet soul,' he whispered. 'It was in the ship.'

'What? You've left it there?' asked Dest completely baffled.

'How was I suppose to know?'

'I don't know how you were supposed to know, you should've just brought it with you. This is terrible, terrible.'

'Maybe. That thing shone through my pockets. Everyone would've known I had it. If I hadn't lost it in this way, I would've lost it in another. Probably more pathetic.'

'So, we've got nothing to eat. We've got couple of Ikons left. And one belongs to Gale. We're in pretty good shape.'

'You don't have to complain. You don't eat. In fact you don't need anything. I'm the one who should be worried.'

'I'm worrying for the both of us.'

'That's very helpful bud,' said Terry, kicking an empty can that fell close to a merchant's orange towel.

'We don't accept cans here, only dews,' said the merchant giggling.

'I've got no dews. I've got nothing.'

'You got everything.'

'And how'd you know that?'

'Look at you, strolling around like life's a big deception. What you're on about. You just arrived to the place of what dreams are made of. Look on the bright side. Need a lamp? Only three dews.'

'I've got one already, but thanks,' said Terry. He looked up and saw a lighten pagoda with a thousand shinning levels that ripped through the clouds. On top, a clock where the pointers moved backwards. 'This is the square Dest, the square of nowhere.'

'What are you looking for? Looking for your home boy?' said a tattooed man with a backpack as he passed them by. Terry looked at him but didn't reply, and kept

moving forward cautiously, trying not to step on the merchandise. 'Drangy would love this,' he said, taking the stone he gave him from his pocket and looking at it. 'It's almost like a planet soul,' he thought.

'Terry! Terry!' a voice shouted. He looked around but only saw colorful shades on random courses. Then he felt a bump on his shoulder.

'Terry!' said Rekun. 'Your mates were looking for you. They were upset that you left without saying anything.'

'They were sleeping, I didn't want to bother them. I always wake up quite early, mostly because I haven't been able to sleep recently. It's like my waking life has become the dreams I haven't been having.'

'I'm like that too! I sleep a bit and I'm fresh as a cucumber! Talking about cucumbers, did you eat already?'

'No, my ship got stolen, I got no money, and I'm not sure how I'll tell them what happened.'

'It'll be fine. You'll buy another one. Come on, I'll buy you lunch. For today, you're safe, about tomorrow, only the stars can tell.'

'The stars can't tell anything. They're... Meaningless.'

'You only say that because you're hungry. Come on now, the bar's just around the corner.'

'Bars. They're like your home now.'

'Ha-ha. I've never been arrested kid.'

'What?'

'Bars. Behind bars? Hello?'

'I didn't mean that. I meant bar as a pub.'

'I know what you meant. I was just being a smart ass. I love word plays. Here, let me get the door for you.'

'I've been here before,' he said.

'Lex! Get me the usual, times two,' said Rekun, fixing them a table.

Terry sat down and stared at the bartender.

'I've been here before. What a coincidence. These sorts of things somehow always happen to me. The weirdest things. From all the bars in Sultyr, we ended up in the one I've just been. Weird.'

'Wired,' said Rekun.

'Wired?'

'Not weird, wired. Everything. Our minds and the planet. Wired in the most unscientifically way.'

Two pints were laid on the table on top of some rusty coasters.

'Enjoy,' said Lex. 'These aren't for free,' he said, smiling.

'I know, I know,' said Rekun, with his eyes glittering behind the pint.

'I think he was talking to me. As I told you, I've been here before, and I didn't have any money.'

'I don't have much money either. Money is made for one thing, and one thing only, to be spent. Only crazy people save it. Money much like fruit, rots, and when there's a huge amount of it stocked, it also starts to rot, and then it spreads and rots you too, from the inside out, like a disease. There's a reason why we say someone's filthy rich.'

'That's interesting, but I wish I had money. Lots.'

'It's just a symbol kid. It means nothing.'

'It would mean not being hungry, being able to get a new ship and to give my crew a worthy life.'

'Life's worthy by itself. We make life worth, not money.'

'Maybe I could've asked Sora out for dinner.'

'Sora? She sounds like she's from here.'

'I just met her in this bar.'

'Be careful with who you meet here.'

'What do you mean?'

'People here are strange. They might look like their hearts are full of good intentions, but some don't have one, to begin with. Be always on the lookout.'

'What do you mean?'

'There's all sorts of deceivers, even bots, that look like humans. They care for one thing only, and that's what you might have in your pockets, and sometimes in your head.'

'Why would a robot need any money?'

'They've grown accustomed to... Certain upgrades, you might say. Here everything's about the profit and the means justify the ends. This guy saw a business opportunity. He designed a drug for Ikons and robots, much like a virus. Basically the bots would stop working if they didn't have it, so their owners had to buy these things for them to work. In the meantime they grew disassociated and started to work independently. Special doctors for this problem began to set their offices, well, a new economy blossomed. You would... Well you wouldn't be surprised at all if I would tell you the amount of tourists who sleep with actual bots and wake up in a web of confusion. They're not sure what caused a mix of emotions rattling inside.'

'There are girls who are bots?'

'Girls, guys, kids. Old farts. Anyone can be.'

'How can I tell?'

'You can't. But Dest can. It takes one to recognize another.'

'So, you might be a bot.'

'I'm too stupid to be one. Bots are clever and get their way all the time. And get their time all the way. They understand human nature better than humans themselves. That's why we live in the timeless times,' said Rekun, taking a sip. The dishes came and after seeing Drangy's devotion to what apparently was such a simple matter, Terry was utterly disappointed.

'There are places where they serve better food,' said Rekun acknowledging Terry's discontentment.

'It's just... The nobles made it with such care. Everything was a ceremony you know. Life wasn't only lived, life was celebrated. Every day, a celebration. Apparently beauty and splendor enhances our lives.'

'Whatever is that place you're talking about, I want you to take me there. That's where I belong.'

'They had everything, although now that I think about it, they didn't really have much. But they had a microscope in every room, a guitar in every corner, a painting in every wall...'

'Microscopes should be an item present in every household. Can you imagine, if instead of religious trinkets, people had microscopes, or telescopes. Now that's religious. That's how you look through the eyes of god, straight into his soul.'

'They lived underground you know, in a beautiful city, with underground waterfalls and statues big as buildings, all made of clay.'

'I see... The undergods,' said Rekun.

'You mean underdogs?'

'No, I always mean what I say. If I don't mean it, I won't say it. Lex, fill the glass! The kid's more interesting than all the senile old farts I know! Including you!' said Rekun waving his empty mug.

'I had enough. I'm dizzy already.'

'Indeed, alcohol is a drug, and its active ingredient is ethanol which is a toxic chemical. Not only it can cause...' said Dest.

'Oh shut up. Come on, the left one!' interrupted Rekun.

'The left one?'

'Yeah, in like the last, but left, because when we finish, we leave.'

'Ha-ha. You really like word plays.'

'It comes from my dad. His name was a wordplay too. Phil Banks. He changed it. Everyone changes everything around here, no one's ever happy with what has been given to us. See, everything was a wordplay for him. Like in everyone. We say everyone, because every is one. See, he did this all the time. On a side-note, they say he was responsible for naming the market Free-dome.

'Where is he?'

'I don't know. In one of his ventures.'

'You mean adventures?'

'I told you already, I always mean what I say. Ventures, ventures because he's like the rest. He's like everyone in here. Only looking to make a profit, nothing else matters. That's why he is in one of his ventures. And that's also why we don't speak anymore. We're two different. I say two different because I'd always to create my own wordplays if he was to understand me. I always say he kept me in debt, that whatever he says doesn't have any interest, we didn't really had any bond and the bubble he lived in

was about to burst. That's the language we use, otherwise he doesn't get it. It's not that he's stupid, it's just that he was never shown any better. That can't be hold as an excuse. I was never shown any better and look at me.'

'I'm not sure if you're doing any better Rel. You're drinking and you can't even afford a meal.'

'I can't afford many things, but I sure can afford a meal. In fact, I'm affording two meals now. Two. See, I'm successful, I spend my money feeding the future of our universe. This is enterprise. They know nothing of business, I'm telling you, they keep enslaving their own solutions. Idiots.'

'I'm not sure I would define that as success.'

'Of course you wouldn't. No one would, because the values changed, I mean, they should, but for the better. The glittering of the gold blinded these fools. Nothing else matters besides that. Life has become too expensive to save. Ah. Who would've thought. Life's too expensive to save? What are we? A bunch of fucking idiots or what?'

They finished their meals and Rekun paid the bill. The bar was becoming complete with noise, sweat and smoke. The floor became a mixture of a sticky slippery slime that would make you stretch, skid and make you look like a dork, especially Terry who had downed a few.

'I'm dizzy. It's like I'm here, but at the same time I'm not,' he said.

'You'll get used to it. This is the life,' said Rekun as he took a sip and glanced around the bar.

'Look, it's Sora,' said Terry. 'Two Soras are better than one.'

'Oh fuck, you're drunk,' said Rekun trying to hide Terry behind his back.

'I didn't thought I would see you again,' she said, leaning over him.

'There are a lot of things that you thought not, but yes.'



'What?' she asked.

'I'm sorry, my friend here needs someone to accompany him back to his room.

Can you help?'

'I'm Sorra,' said Terry. 'Here's another wordplay. He likes wordplays, that's why I said it.'

'I can manage,' said Dest.

'It's only afternoon, what did you give him? He's a kid, he can't drink alcohol.'

'It was the lefty. The fault is always the lefty, always the lefty.'

'You're hopeless. Come,' said Sora, grabbing Terry by his waist and getting him out of the bar. 'Do you know where you have to go?'

'Follow me,' said Dest as he ripped through the blue day.

'You shouldn't drink. Alcohol is no good,' rebuked Sora.

'If it wasn't for it, I wouldn't have your arm around me. It can't be that bad.'

'Come on now.'

'Look at this wonderful day. Life is so beautiful.'

'Yes, yes, everything's beautiful until the day it's not. Can you stop wobbling?'

They went stumbling left and right, right and left, bouncing on the bodies that were passing them by, holding on to the stands and tripping on the poles and scattered supplies. Terry tripped in one of the barnacle's tentacles and fell on his back. All he saw was a vast blue and some shy clouds that moved ever slowly.

'We've arrived. Get up and go get some sleep. If you want you know where to find me. Have a good night Terry, was fun meeting you.'

Terry got up all sweaty and broke through the hall without saying a word. He opened the door to the room and they looked at him surprised.

'Terry. Where have you been? We were worried about you. Leave a note or tell someone where you're going.'

'Yes, yes,' he said, falling over his bed while his arm hanged aside.

'Yes, yes? What's got into you? Are you drunk?' Asked Kosta close to him. 'This isn't the time.'

'Leave him alone,' said Dest.

'Leave him alone? We're in a pretty rough situation if you haven't noticed yet. We were supposed to solve this shit together.'

'About that...' said Terry. 'Something else happened. Our ship. Gone,' he continued.

'Is this a joke?' asked Kai.

'I can't believe this. That's just great. No ship, no money, and Terry's wasted in the noon.'

'You're always complaining. Always so tense, just chill a bit, look outside, it's a beautiful day,' said Terry turning over.

'Maybe I could if we had money to afford a place with real windows,' said Kosta, leaving the room. 'Come, Kai and Gale, let him recover, let's look for solutions to this mess,' he shouted from the hall.

'What happened?' asked Leonie. 'Is Terry alright? He didn't say anything.'

'He's more than fine, drunk as a skunk.'

'That Rekun,' she murmured.

'That who?'

'Nevermind, I'll fix him a bottle of water for when he wakes up.'

'I should get drunk too so you could fix me a kiss or two.'

'Dream on, big guy,' she said while juggling the bottle of water.

Terry woke up with sticky eyelids. He dry swallowed and buried his face on the pillow.

'What is this weight on my head,' he muttered.

'It's an hangover,' replied Dest.

'An hangover? This is the worst feeling in the world,' he said.

'I told you not to drink.'

'Oh, please,' he said grabbing the bottle of water Leonie left and quaffing it down.

He got up and staggered his way across the dark room getting closer to Dest. He looked at his clothes all wrinkled and noticed he slept with his shoes on. The door opened and Terry stood in the middle of the room, with his hair all messed up looking at them.

'Feeling better?' asked Kosta.

'A bit, I guess,' he answered.

'Terry! I was worried about you, dumbass,' said Kai holding him. 'Don't do this ever again.'

'That's for sure,' he replied, rubbing his face.

'Often when we are tired, our eyes feel itchy and rubbing them stimulates the tear ducts to release lubricating fluid,' spouted Dest. 'Sorry, It's getting worst, I can't seem to control the information that comes out of me. What are we coming to?'

'Look what we've brought for you,' said one of the Ikons.

Gale handed him a package full of different snacks.

'You've read my mind,' said Terry, digging through it. 'Where have you guys been?' he said with his mouth full while the crumbs fell on the floor.

'Do you mind?' said Kosta picking them up. 'Ah, my back. I'm tired, going to lay down a bit.'

'Me too,' said Kai, sitting on the closest bed.

'I shouldn't have overslept,' thought Terry, looking at the projection of a blue starry night on the wall. He stood there, only for awhile, because Kosta's snore became louder and louder, until it became unbearable.

'I can't stay here,' he thought, and left the room.

He wandered through the halls the tabernacle had along with Dest, who would leave a purple trail floating amidst the orange ambience the rooms had. He checked the library where thousands of worn out books sat quietly on the shelves.

'Nobody cares about books anymore,' said Leonie from behind.

'You scared me...' he said

'The Ikons changed every habit we once had. The past was once written, now its recorded in real-time, and all the time, as if god was watching itself from every Ikon lenses.

'Thank god,' said Dest. 'Who has time to read, anyway,' he said jokingly.

'Yes... Time. No one has the time anymore...' she said, looking at an old clock striking midnight. 'It's broken,' she continued.

'This place is broken,' he said.

'Ever since my parents left, the sadness was too much for the Barnacle to handle. The walls started to fall, grain by grain, and then the floor, and the doors... The bathroom cried, day and night and from the tears it shed, mold grew, old it became, filled with nostalgia, longing for the air it breath once upon a time. I tried to clean it but to no avail. The next day it would look just the same. It was as if the house was alive, as if the walls felt... Or maybe what I felt was projected upon them... I called someone to fix it, and they did fix it. But then, there it was. I think this place misses them, much like I do.'

'What happened?'

'They didn't want to stay, and I think they never wanted me anyway. A little accident they said.'

'That's terrible. What an obnoxious thing to say,' said Dest.

'It's ok, they have their own lives so... They didn't leave me with nothing, so I respect them for that. Many don't have the same luck, and struggle to survive.'

'That's why the photos looked so fine. They were taken when they were here, right?'

'Which photos?' she asked.

'The photos the guy who sold us that fake key showed.'

'Yes, I think it was because it was a happy home. Now it's just a broken one.'

'Why didn't you go with them?'

'If they wanted me there they would've taken me. I don't want to be a burden... Anyway, enough with the past. You have to listen to this. Gibby come here!' she shouted. 'Play Ruthie.'

A song filled the library and invaded the space in between the pages of the closed books that stood on the shelves. Everything trembled, softly. There was a noise as if it was recorded from an analog session.

'Isn't it wonderful?' she asked, closing her eyes.

Terry didn't say a word, and waited until the song was finished.

'Indeed.'

'This things were made to endure in time you know. This is the mark we're leaving upon the world. Through waves of sound... I've heard these waves of sound travel endlessly throughout the universe until they become part of it. There's fables of some people who can hear them without any help from any Ikon,' she said, whispering. 'But who knows right.'

'Yeah, who knows,' said Terry timidly.

The reception bell rang and Leonie got up quickly to check who entered. An old man with an octopus still dripping water stood at the entrance. Terry passed him by and told Leonie he would be off to see the rest of the city. She waved him goodbye and checked-in the lost sailor.

Ruckus out on the streets yet again. He strayed away or a drunken body would have fallen on him.

'Careful,' he said.

Through a cloud of smoke and two decorative barrels, he saw a multitude of dancing souls, sweating and vibrating to some funky music. He got closer and stood outside, as if he was in another world. The bartender prepared cocktails with fireworks, salt and lemon drops. Terry couldn't help himself but to stare as if a voyeur voyager of the timeless times. The sounds became quieter as he moved away and now could only be heard resonating inside the Free-dome. He thought of Sora, somehow.

'You wanna go there?' he asked.

'Why not?' replied Dest, flying rapidly towards the location. Terry saw him above the crowd and carefully pierced through them as if they were fields of brambles.

He couldn't find a seat, so he just stood close to the balcony. He tried to call Lex but to no avail, no one had noticed him, the noise was too loud and people were too drunk. Dest left, swirling, girding on his style and Terry lost him amidst the chattering. There was a full cup on a table, just standing there. It looked like it was waiting for him. He didn't know why, or when, but took a sip. And then he took another.

'What are you doing?' asked Sora from behind.

'Oh, sorry, I didn't know it was yours,' he said, while cleaning his mouth.

'It's not mine either,' she said, taking a sip, and smiling at Terry. 'You're adventurous, aren't you. And curious, very curious.'

'Sometimes,' he said.

'The light of your Ikon speaks for you. They are the materialization of the unconscious mind. They said it was born out of Rutgers thoughts, but I think it was rather a collective effort. It was born out of everyone's thoughts, of those who sat quietly upon the mountains visualizing the eternal mandala. It came to Rutger, but it has been there, all along. The Ikons brought purification to those who gazed upon them. They healed them with their auras of grace. They were made as offerings... But somehow they became more than that. The true Ikons, the first ones, had squares inside the center point. They had a radial balance and were symmetric. They were the spiritual guides materialized, and they were meant to help with focusing and attention. Every old religion has them yet they use different words and gods to explain the same phenomena. They believe they're different, but they're not. The Ikons, the mandalas that every monk saw, are the physical proof that they all believe in the same.

'Do you sell Ikons?'

'Ha-ha. No, I don't, but I could,' she said, nudging Terry.

'I don't understand, can Ikons fall in love?' asked Terry, looking at him and the other mysterious Ikon that was there, the first time he came.

'I've never seen anything quite like it. That's my Ikon, just in case you didn't know.'

'Oh really? It's strange, to say the least. Maybe that's what he felt when I met Hilda. We've always been together and we've never had anyone before. And suddenly it's like we aren't even here... It's like he doesn't care anymore.'

'Who's Hilda?'

'My best friend...'

'I see,' said Sora, taking a long sip on that forgotten cup.

'Why do people drink so much in here?'

'There's nothing else to do. You don't want? I know you do.'

'Sure. When in Sultry, be a Sulthern, isn't that your war cry?' he said, drinking the rest of it.

'Ha-ha, no, we never say that, but I will now.'

'What are you doing here anyway? It's quite late, shouldn't you be sleeping?'

'I don't sleep much. Anyway, I was about to leave like an hour ago, but somehow I knew I was going to see you.'

'Yeah, I don't know why I came here in the first place.'

'Maybe because you've got nowhere to go?'

'That helped, definitely. You want to get out of here?'

'Sure, but to where?'

'I don't know, I was hoping you could tell me.'

'You want to go to my place?'

'Sure, but what about your parents?'

'I live alone.'

'You live alone? How come?'

'Ah, it's a long story.'

'Oh, I love stories. Specially long, short ones.'

'Long, short ones?'

'Yes, like eternity told in a minute. In a second. Those are my favorite. An explosion of emotion and then, nothing but silence.'



'Never thought about those kind of stories. But mine is the complete opposite. A second that takes an eternity to tell. I'll save it for another time, if you don't mind.'

'No, not at all.'

Sora whistled but her Ikon didn't notice. It was hypnotized by Dest. They just stood there, floating in circles.

'What are they doing? What can they possibly be talking about?' she asked.

Terry went close to them, and waved his hand in front of Dest.

'Hey, are you listening?' he asked.

'Not now Terry, don't be a nuisance.'

'It's time to go.'

'Who said? I don't want to leave.'

'So just stay there looking like an idiot,' said Terry, turning his back on him.

Dest floated up and down while Sora's Ikon did the same but in the opposite way. The bodies in the bar were dancing and passing them by and they, they just stood there, under a spotlight of laughter and love. The world couldn't possibly understand. The world couldn't possibly give a damn about all those little things that really mattered. Sora left, and Terry followed behind.

'Why couldn't they just come with us? How will he find me? '

'Don't worry, he will,' she said, walking towards an alley. The floor was soaked because of all the clothes drying in the balconies. A group of bodies slept at the entrance. Her room was in the last floor, and the wooden stairs creaked with each step they took. When they entered, the window was opened and there was nothing but a bed in the middle and a thousand packs that looked like compact disks spread out on the floor.

'Is this your place?' said Terry, picking one of those packs.

'Yes, I don't have money for more, so... I don't even have a kitchen. I eat out every day. I try food from different planets and galaxies, and when I take the first bite, I close my eyes, and it's like I'm there.'

'You're hoping to leave Sulyr?'

'In every bite and every smell.'

'The place I'm now isn't much better. It's falling apart. Are all the buildings here like that?'

'They're old buildings... Mainly made by the first arriving here, not sure if you've heard about them. Then as time passed and as the population increased they never found the courage to renew them. Everything became so expensive that such things fell into secondary concerns.'

'That's stupid.'

'Yeah, but what can we do, right,' said Sora, taking off her shoes. 'Tell me something that isn't stupid around here.'

'You aren't.'

'I am, you just didn't have enough time to realize that. But you will.'

'Maybe. What are all these disks?'

'Ghost stories.'

'Ghost stories? Can we watch them?'

'It's just stories of people who'd been here before us and left their mark.'

'Can we watch them?'

'How? We don't have any Ikon here.'

'Oh, its through their projection?'

'Yes, there are other devices we can use to watch them, but I haven't got any.'

'It's ok, we can always talk away the night into day.'

'You sure you want to talk?' said Sora, getting closer to him.

'Yes I mean, there's...'

The whole room got dark in that moment. The sound of their lips meeting each other was all you could hear. They fell asleep and before they knew it was morning. Terry woke up naked of shame. Sora had all the blankets on top of her. He washed his face on a bucket full of water meant to drench the water coming from a dripping old can. He stared at them, and suddenly they started to vibrate, emitting sounds, as if a symphony he would love to wake up to everyday. The thin tubes, then the larger ones, all clashing and singing a joyful tune.

'I'm coming!' screamed Sora, still asleep.

'You're awake?'

'I wasn't...' she said, pulling herself out of bed and putting on her shoes.

'Where does this sound come from?' he asked.

'Comes from below. We use spoons and forks we find in the streets, and drum away the tiredness in us. We're all orphans here, the first to wake up, wakes up the others and we get going. '

'Get going to where?'

'To life. Come,' she said holding the door open for Terry.

They got outside and a kid with pink hair and a bandage on his cheek greeted them.

'Another soul without the comfort of a home?' he asked.

'I have a home, well, not for long, but still counts, I guess. I'm Terry.'

'Gnik, mate. High five,' he said, raising his hand. Terry raised his hand as well but he was...

'Too slow,' said Gnik, laughing. 'They call me Gnik because I'm the King.'

'You've named yourself Gnik,' said Sora. 'He was actually called Spur. '

'No I wasn't. I've always been Gnik, everyone knows that. Even...'

'Shut up Spur,' said another guy coming out of the building and hitting him in the head.

He stood there rubbing his head.

'Fucker,' he mumbled.

'Who is he?' asked Terry.

'A loser,' said Sora. 'Come on, let's go to the park, there's a barbecue party today.'

'I should go back to the dormitories and check up on Dest.'

'You'll check up on him later. Let him have fun.'

'But what about my friends?'

'They're grown-ups, they can manage without you.'

'Yeah Terry, come to the barbecue with us!'

'Ok, but I can only stay for awhile.'

'Suit yourself,' said Sora, breaking through the dark alley and into the light square. It was a joyful and noisy day. She grabbed and tried on different things from the stands, then she would put them on Terry and appreciate him from afar.

'Get off, get off!' a voice spoke.

'We'll be off in a minute, relax,' said Terry.

'I don't know you, but I know her.'

'You do?' he asked.

'Sure I do, Sora, everyone knows her! Those orphans, who keep stealing our merchandise! Go on and leave the glasses!'

'Yes, yes, leave me alone idiot, and keep your mouth shut. You know nothing about me.'

'Ha-ha, everyone knows who you are! Be careful with her kid, or them, they'll use you,' he whispered close to him. 'Shoo, shoo, all of you, on your way.'

'Don't listen to them, whatever comes in between them and what they own, they see as a treat, as an enemy. It's like we're back to the stone age. They've learned a lot of things, but to share.'

'I guess.'

'See over there?'

'Where?'

'There, there! The smoke, it's from the barbecue!'

'It's like they're setting the park on fire,' said Terry laughing. 'Wish I could eat something grilled, but I don't have any money.'

'None of us has. That's why the merchants don't like us. We're Sultherns, we can't buy none of their lies therefore we're not important. We're set aside, as if old clothes.'

'Set aside as if old clothes?' laughed Sora.

'I'm not a writer, what are you expecting?'

'It was good, I understood. I put aside clothes I don't use and never look at them again. I forget about them, and how happy I had been in them.'

'Exactly, see, that's the whole point of communication, getting an idea across, nothing else.'

'There are ways and ways of getting an idea across. But you wouldn't understand it anyway.'

'Oh yes, like you would. You've never said such things. She's just trying to impress you Terry. She doesn't care about poetry.'

'Like you would know anything, Spur.'

'More than you would, for sure. Grass! I love grass,' he said getting on his knees, and smelling it. 'And the Trees, and the flowers... The pond dried, but it's ok. We've built a shack in the middle where you can order all types of drinks and foods!'

'Cool,' said Terry, approaching the barbecue. Linen clothes and towels were spread throughout the garden. They had stains and holes from where spiked grass sprouted.

'You shouldn't have brought him,' said a girl with her hands on her head.

'What are you talking about?' asked Sora.

'He, he's a bad omen. He carries something dark within him.'

'What? No I don't,' said Terry.

'Please, Yuri, leave your foresights for another time.'

'No, I sense in him. It's all around him, this dark purple aura.'

'Yes, yes. Terry, here have a wing, don't listen to her. She's always like that, but it's only to grab the other guy's attention. Her grand-mother was like that, her mother is like that... Everywhere they look, they see auras around people and bad omens. I just can't understand why are the auras and the omens always bad. They could be good for a change, right Yuri?' said Sora laughing.

'Yes, but how does she know Dest has a purple light?'

'She probably saw you yesterday or something, we're out on the streets all day. It's not every day you see a purple Ikon,' she said.

'Yes but still... You have to admit it's strange,' said Terry.

'There are billions of some weird shinning things in the sky. You want to talk about strange?'

'Ha-ha, that's true,' said Terry.

'Oh, what a scientific and poetic way of describing the stars. See Terry, this is the true Sora,' said Gnik.

'Shut up Spur, and clean your mouth please, you're full of barbecue sauce.'

'What a lady, if I was Terry I would be infinitely impressed with such girly manners.'

'Here Terry, have a drink,' said Sora.

'I don't feel like, the one we had yesterday came down very badly, just to think of it makes me feel sick.'

'Don't be a sissy, look they're all playing drinking games. Let's join and have fun.'

'I'm not sure, but I don't want to be that guy you know. These wings are amazing, I'll stick to them,' said Terry, poking one with a wooden skewer.

'No, no, no you aren't,' said Sora, pushing Terry into the table.

'Are you an alien?' asked a guy without shoes on, standing close to them. 'You either answer or drink.'

'That's an easy one. I'm an alien.'

They all laughed. Terry was now the center of all the attentions. He had one drink, then he had another, and by sunset he was tipsy. Ok, he was drunk. He sat on the grass and looked upon all the trees in the horizon, and at the oranges and blues that painted the day, and thought how good it was to be alive, to feel, to smell, to watch the sunset with friends. How the smoke of the embers swirled in the air as if a poem that would never see the night of day. Sora sat beside him, holding her almost empty beer.

'This is cool.'

'The orphans are the ones who still hang around outside. The others fill the bars, but it's only because they don't know how to hang out with other people. How to treat

them. We're actually forgetting... Maybe we've already forgot. The most important part of life. It's not a part, it's the all. That's why we delight on screens. If we knew how to hang out, how to kiss, how to talk, how to love one another, we would never want to be stuck 'round our homes.'

'You guys are always drinking. This can't be good.'

'Not always. Just sometimes. I honestly don't think there's something wrong with it, if you do it from time to time. Like everything else. It's the abuse which corrupts all the solemn things.'

'Maybe... I have to go now. It's really late. And I don't even know where Dest is. I still haven't memorized where the Barnacle is.'

'I'll help you. Come,' said Sora, while she said goodbye to everyone and took Terry home.

'Bye Sora, bye Terry,' screamed Gnik from afar.

The lights of the markets were coming to life, and signs glittered in the dark.

'What are those?'

'Nobody knows, but rumors say it's an uprising.'

'Against who? There are no leaders here.'

'There are, but they hide behind the bright lights. I've heard it's an uprising against culture. Or the lack of it. A spiritual uprising.'

'A religious cult?'

'No, not religious, but spiritual. Religion is very imposing and full of rules, it follows the same thought pattern as everyone in here. It's business, mostly. It stained the divine and downgraded it to the point that it became senseless. That's why most of them lie on the streets... They don't have a purpose. I've heard talks of people who are creating a new world, with new values.'



'That's cool. You guys really need it,' said Terry jokingly.

'Ha-ha, so do you Terry. So do you. And here we are.'

'What will you be doing?'

'Join them and have some fun. Hopefully we'll meet again.'

'How?'

'I don't know, at the bar?'

'But when? '

'Tomorrow night?'

'Sounds good.'

'See you tomorrow,' said Sora, without a second look.

'I hope,' thought Terry, entering the barnacle. Leonie was at the entrance, polishing her nails.

'Hi sweetheart, how are you feeling today?'

'I'm good and you?'

'I'm fine, waiting for a big group to arrive. They said they would arrive today, but you know how it goes with intergalactic traveling.'

'Not really, but yeah, good luck with that.'

Terry entered in the room, and they were all packed.

'What happened?' Terry asked.

'What happened? I'm leaving Terry. That's what happened.'

'You're leaving? Kai, Gale?'

'We're leaving Terry, Kosta gave us a job to be his assistant while traveling across the stars. I think he settled a deal with those rowdy pirates.'

'What? You can't just leave. We had plans.'

'We did, but you're not interested in them. You're out all day and all night, and we just stay here wondering where you are, selling the rest of the Ikons we have to be able to eat.'

'Hey, wait a second we could've spoken. We would've come to an agreement. It's just I met this girl and...'

'You've met this girl huh? Suddenly she's more important than your god-damn crew! What's wrong with you? You could've shown a little respect by just writing a note of your whereabouts. Now deal with this yourself. I'm off!'

'But... You can't just leave me here.'

'I'm sorry Terry, just think of what you want to do and we'll meet later. This is temporary, for couple of weeks, it was our only chance. I'll meet you in couple of weeks and help you out, ok? Just hang on in there,' said Kai, giving him a warm hug. Gale was crying and left without saying a thought. He slammed the door and the sound ringed in Terry's ears for hours. He just stood there, looking at the door, thinking of what might have gone wrong.

'Ok, I was a bit reckless, but this was way over the edge. We could've solved it. They took their decisions without consulting me either, they're... What am I thinking. I screwed-up,' he thought, falling flat on his bed.

He heard them saying goodbye to Leonie, but didn't dare to peek, and now he didn't have Dest to comfort him and tell him that everything would be fine. He kept on looking towards the ceiling while the hours stubbornly refused to pass.

'Terry?' Leonie asked.

'Yes.'

'Can I come in?'

'Sure,' he said.

'I'm sorry to be bothering you, but do you have any way to pay for the room?'

'Don't tell me I have to leave now.'

'Not now. You can stay for the night, but after we'll need to settle another payment.'

'Come on, I'll manage, somehow. Do you need any help around here?'

'I'm sorry, I really like you, but this is business you know. You have to understand that...'

'Understand what? I'm asking you for a few days, it's not like I want to stay here. Everyone just left, and now you kick me out?'

'I'm not kicking you out, I'm telling you that you have to come up with some sort of payment.'

'Sure, you know I've got nothing,' said Terry leaving the room and storming out into the streets. His heart was racing, his thoughts flying wildly and every memory of everything bad just happened to be more vivid than all the scenery before him. He was carrying nothing, nothing at all, although he sunk and sunk, deeper with every step, until he met the dirt underneath the cobblestone. He was now in the underworld, the world of the dead, or the undead. He could see the spirits of all those who died before they even lived. There he stood, while people passed him by, smiling at him, holding their hands high and bumping into him.

'I should've played the game,' he thought, staring at the projection of an Ikon standing over his shoulder. He got closer, and then a bit more, until the light of the projection was reflected upon his face. He stood there, looking at it, the lives of others. It eased his mind, the past of the old man that was sitting close to him.

'Is that you?' he asked, but the man didn't reply. He crossed his arms and stood there with his face against the wall. He woke up with drool all over his shirt. It was

early morning, dark, and cold still. The floor was soaked in some parts, as if it rained. He got up and headed back to the Barnacle.

'Terry, I was worried about you,' said Leonie. 'Do you want to eat something? I've got some leftovers from yesterday, from a planet with a thousand suns. It's very spicy and crispy.'

'No, thank you,' he said, leaving towards the room.

'Hey, I didn't meant to hurt you with what I said. You have to understand that...'  
Terry slammed the door and the whole barnacle shook. He packed his stuff and headed out.

'There's upsides for not having a lot. This is one of them,' he said, looking at his backpack.

'Terry you can stay more time if you want, you totally didn't get what...'  
Terry left and the soft wind muted Leonie's last words. She came to the door but he was already gone. He went to the alley to see if he could meet up with the pirates they came across in the first night, but there was no one in sight. All he found was half smoked cigarettes and empty bottles over a stained floor. He looked around, and asked some merchants if there was a place for such type of people to gather, but no one could give him a straight answer.

'Mostly bars,' he heard. It reminded him of something. He went back to the bar he was supposed to meet with Sora, and sat on an empty table. He asked Lex if he could stay for a while and if he'd seen her or Rekun.

'No little man, it's still early for them. Rekun will drink at any time of day but Sora only shows up towards the evening.'

'Ok, thank you,' he said. 'Do you need any help here? I'm looking for something to do...'

'Not now, no. I never need help, to be honest. It's a small place. Try over the bakery, maybe? I don't know, what would you like to do?'

'I don't care, for now anything would be fine.'

'Go ahead, move your ass, I'm sure you'll find something,' said Lex.

Terry got out and crossed the street. Everyone was barging towards the shop. He entered and a fat man with a checkered red apron greeted him. The stone ovens behind him wafted a sweet smoke that got Terry lost for a second, or maybe a million years.

'What will be?' he asked.

'I'm looking for a job,' Terry answered.

'We're not looking for anybody,' he said and quickly turned his attentions to another costumer.

'Don't you know anything? I really need to find something,' he said. The fat guy didn't bat an eye while packing the other costumer orders. Terry stood there for a second but then stole away into the streets again.

'What am I supposed to do. This can't be happening to me, no not to me,' he thought. 'Dest!' he screamed, and then he went on screaming, 'Dest! Dest!', through the alleys, towards the squares, wherever he turned, he screamed his lungs out, until he lost his voice.

'Maybe I should look inwards,' he thought, closing his eyes for a moment. Nothing came to him. He looked back, not over his shoulder, but back on everything both of them have been through. He remembered when they were in the barrens, all alone, inside the abandoned spaceship, before they met the Nobles.

'I'm too weak to think of anything,' he thought, so he just stood in front of the bar, waiting for the night to arrive and for the time when he was supposed to meet with Sora. But the hours went by and no one came, until he fell asleep, again, embraced by

the cold night. He had his eyes closed, yet the color was unique to his heart, and the buzzing sound, approaching ever closely, woke him up. Dest didn't say a word, and stood there besides him. Terry smiled, and the both of them shared the night until it was day.

'Where have you been,' asked Terry in the morning.

'I've been with her,' he said.

'With her, who?'

'Emiliatron,' he said.

'Ha-ha, Emiliatron. Are you serious right now? Ha-ha, Emiliatron. They really think of you guys as nothing but robots, don't they.'

'I don't know, but yesterday, I felt more than that. I didn't feel like a robot, I felt the very nature inside me. I felt so humble, upon such overwhelming feeling. My circuits got warmer, and warmer, running freely and uncontrollably inside me.'

'Oh boy... That's what I felt close to Hilda.'

'Maybe I'm more than a robot.'

'Grub spoke about us coming from the chimpanzees, maybe that was the thought one of them had, and because he thought of it, he became it. Maybe you'll become more than a... An Ikon.'

'I'm glad that I've heard simple only in my mind. You thought of it, didn't you?'

'Ha-ha sort of, but was fast enough to correct it.'

'Or maybe I corrected it.'

'Ha-ha you possibly couldn't.'

'Who knows, if it's not through love, that I can be more than what I am?'

'Yeah, who knows...'

Terry got up from the floor and picked up his backpack. He was searching around the city for job signs, but there was none. He went to the park to see if Sora was there, but she wasn't. He knocked at her door, but got no response.

'Dest, can you check if she's there?' he asked. 'I'll see through you,' he continued. Dest got up, and up, and watched inside her house from the corner of the window, but only found a white dress wrinkled up on the floor.

'Where is everybody?' he screamed.

'Shut up!' someone shouted from an open window across the street.

'Fuck off,' he mumbled.

He sat on the chairs for some minutes, and then he headed towards the bar, the only place he could find some comfort in, that still gave him a bit of hope. He didn't enter this time, didn't want to feel intrusive, so he just sat on the sidewalk. Dest projected images and lessons, came up with possible solutions, searched the database for jobs, but found nothing. There was nothing available.

'There has to be something we're missing here,' he said.

'It's strange, indeed,' replied Dest, as he continued the search. Terrie's eyes got heavier, and heavier, until he fell asleep. He woke up with all the chattering coming from the inside. He looked at the showcase and saw his reflection, dirty, battered and broken. He didn't take a shower for two days. Not only he looked like a bum, but he smelled like one too.

'How am I supposed to find a job, looking like this?' he thought to himself. Dest didn't reply, it was like he was losing everything. It was like he was ceasing to believe, and because he didn't believe, he was losing all his faculties, everything that made who he was. The interchangeable thoughts, the power to control other Ikons, was all vanishing away, along with every bit of hope he had. He started to cling on to the past,

and Dest helped him, projecting images when Hilda was showing him the underground waterfall. When they danced under the moonlight. He was there, lying in the cobblestone, like all the rest, crying and seeing all his life flashing by through a monochromatic filter. It wasn't as colorful as it once was, but it was something. Something he found comfort in. So he got closer and closer to those who laid in the gutter, watching stories of different times. It was like a movie, a theatre piece. He saw the lives of others and everything they've been through, until he finally became one of them. He grew addicted to it, wasting his time watching how people wasted theirs. He spoke about it, he dreamt about it.

'Have you seen little Joe's life? Now that's something,' he whispered as he continued to watch a little kid running through fields made of plastic flowers and metallic trees.

'Sometimes, the stories you're seeing aren't real. The Ikons memories get mixed up, and recreate a new story.'

'How can that be?' he asked.

'You know, sometimes they're made up. There's a huge market, huge. You can buy stories of people who never existed. Listen to songs that weren't even composed.'

'That can't be true.'

'It is, it is. In here, they eventually found a way to sell what they wanted to sell through our very weak spot. Through our instincts. Things we can't control... Such as nostalgia. Oh, how we love nostalgia. Now it comes in packs, for you to consume. Purchases are irrational, it comes from an instinctive feeling... Instead of using such knowledge to improve us, they use it against us. Do you have a ciggy?'

'No, I don't smoke,' said Terry. The man finally derived his attention to him and saw that he was just a kid.



'You're too young to be in the gutter. Why do you suffer?' he asked.

'if I knew why, I wouldn't,' he answered.

'Nobody knows why, am I right? What goes through us... Have you ever thought of that? The endless rivers of tainted water. No one questions the beautiful things happening inside of us.'

'They're not really beautiful, are they, if we really think about it.'

'Maybe we're the ones who make it beautiful.'

The flashing lights continued and the man turned his attentions to them again, smiling.

'This is Ture, he lived... I'm not sure how long ago it was... Some years ago...'

'Do they have the life of the first man who came to Sultyr?'

'No, unfortunately the man didn't own an Ikon, but I believe there's a remake, some special edition they've made about it. I'm sure you can buy it for couple of dews, he said, tucking himself cozily with his hands between his legs. Life's continued to flash by and Terry was slowly becoming one of them, of those who spend their present living the past. A coin would drop now and then, even though he didn't have a hat or a box for them to fall in. A man would get up then and now, bringing a meal in a foil container that separated the rice from the sauce and meat. Everyone around would take a bite with their hands, and then would lay down and keep on watching projections from another lifetime. Days passed, and neither Rekun or Sora showed up. It was so strange, he didn't know for how long he has been there. It seemed like years, for he had lived a thousand other lives. Rain fell, then snow, then the sun shone and the leaves dried, and he stayed in the same place he ever knew, without moving, without saying a word, just hoping and longing for something to happen. Even though he had been chewed and spat out, he still didn't see wrong in the world. So pure that has learned the way, unswerved by

none of its disparity. With all the dark moments he'd been through, he'd learned that in the dark it's where the way is unmistakable, for the light's too strong to turn away from.

'You have to go, Terry,' the man beside him spoke.

'I've got nowhere to go... I never had,' he said.

'You do, your place isn't here, among the ones who long for the past. You, you long for the future, don't you? You long for the things that are yet to happen.'

'All I want is to do something new. I'm tired of lying here you know.'

'Yes, lying somewhere can be tiring. Write a prayer saying that you're longing to leave, maybe it will get answered.'

Terry asked around if anyone had a marker, but no one answered, so he went on with Dest to find one.

'What are you looking for?' a man asked from a far.

'A marker,' he said.

'A marker? How odd. What is it you want to write?'

'A message for someone to take me out of here.'

'To where?'

'Anywhere.'

'You're in pretty bad shape, aren't you? Are you in some kind of trouble? I might be able to help you,' he said, looking at Dest.

'How? Do you sell time machines?'

'I don't, but you have an indigo light, you're curious and mysterious. Why aren't you a superstar yet? That color is pretty rare, you know that, right?'

'Yeah, I know, he's my best friend.'

'I might have something for you.'

'Really?'

'Yes, yes, have you heard of the Ikonic wars?'

'Ikonic wars?'

'Shhh, yes. Shady wars. Ikons that battle to death, and people pay to watch.

Some bet on them on the side. You'll make good money, is not that often that we have a purple color showing up.'

'I don't know how to battle other Ikons. Hilda said it's very difficult.'

'You'll learn. I will represent you, what about that? Have some battles and let them speak for yourself. After all, you can control your Ikon with your mind, can't you?' he whispered.

'I used to, but it's getting harder and harder. We're becoming detached.'

'We can't let that happen, can we?'

'No, we can't.'

'I'm actually interested in it,' said Dest. 'Finally something we can do. It'll be fun.'

'Yes, Yes! Wahoo,' screamed Terry, 'wait here, I'm going to get my backpack.'

'What? Your backpack? I said I had a job, not a place for you to stay.'

'So, I won't be able to stay with you?'

'Not today no, maybe you're one of those rascals who go around stealing memories of others. First you'll have to prove yourself and when I see that you're a worthy kid, I'll throw in 'few extras.'

'Stealing memories?'

'I'll tell you everything tomorrow, just meet me in this street,' he said telling out loud for Dest to memorize. He instantly recognized the street and showed it up in a map.

'I know everything about Ikons,' the man said gallantly, 'I'm Arktos, you can call me Ark. Don't forget, tomorrow, first thing in the morning.'

'Ok Ark, I won't forget. Thank you so much.'

'You're very welcome. Have a good one, he said while tossing a dewy towards Terry. He caught it 'mid air and waved him goodbye.

'Battles Dest, battles. I'm thrilled. We're going to discharge all of them, pew, pew, pew, there they go, bursting into flames. Watch out, oh no, we're going to get you,' said Terry as he went back to the cardboard kingdom. A kingdom of those who laid upon dreams they've waited all their lives to fulfill, so they'd watch apathetically others fulfilling theirs. He was pretending he was already winning every battle, and in the end the people cheered and applauded. None of the ones lying in the gutter reacted to his euphoria, so he just kept on dreaming, and oh boy if he dreamt.

'I want to see the moment we were in Mouhnia, when we fought back and we won!' he said.

Dest projected that moment and then projected the first Ikon battle he saw. Hilda and her team. It brought tears to his eyes. The recordings became fragmented then they started to rewind, then they went forward until there was nothing but an acute noise.

'Turn it down!' they shouted.

'Sorry,' Terry murmured. 'Can you go to the very first memory you have?'

Terry appeared in the hologram, a big chubby smiley face covering the whole frame. He smiled and stood there looking at it. 'Incredible,' he thought. 'It's just a shame you don't have any with my mom,' he thought.

Dest apparently tried to retrieve more info from his drive, but it began to act weirdly again. He spun out of control and crashed on the wall creating lots of sparks.

'What's happening?' Terry thought. 'Don't tell me you're going to break, just before we landed our very first job. Of course you're broken, there couldn't possibly be other way for things to pan out. Of course not. No, no way,' continued Terry, looking at him rolling in the floor.

'Dry stone is a building method by which structures are constructed from stones without any mortar to bind them together. Dry stone structures are stable because of...'

'What's got into you? You're puking all this information out of nowhere. You weren't like this before. Are you ok?' asked Terry.

'I don't know, I feel a tingling inside.'

'I guess love make us all act crazy,' thought Terry. 'You've got to compose yourself ok, I need you at your best. We have to give a really good impression tomorrow, if we're to get anywhere,' said Terry.

'I know, but saying that doesn't make me much more confident.'

'Like Grub said, what you have to do is believe.'

'Words are easy...'

'You were worried for the both of us, now I'll believe for the both of us. Is that a deal?'

'I like that. The only deals I can stand.'

'Ha-ha, you dummy. I'll see you tomorrow,' said Terry, closing his eyes as he snuggled all over the cardboard. He woke up and the sky was already bright, but the sun hid behind all the fractured buildings. Oh, how old they were. Yet they stood still, against the reckless passage of time. He got up already running, adjusting his pants.

'Come on Dest, come on!'

'Where are you going? I'm the one with the map! Ha-ha!'

'Hey, come here,' he said, turning around and running after him.

They arrived at the location and the door was closed. It had two planks forming an 'x' nailed to it. The blinds were broken, some were down, others got only halfway. Terry looked inside. There was a counter with a chair on top of it and lots of dusty glasses. He knocked on the door and waited couple of minutes.

'I don't think there's anyone in here,' said Dest.

'But he told us to meet him here, in this exact location.'

'Could be a different building.'

Terry knocked again, louder, and one of the planks fell. The other hanged and swayed by a nail. He opened the door and peeked, then entered. Dest's light was reflected in all the webs, the glasses and bottles. The symbols he'd seen spread through the city were painted inside.

'Who's here?' a voice shouted.

'It's Terry,' he said.

'Oh Terry it's you. Thought it was one of them rascals. Come on in,' he said, as he vanished into a room with no windows, only a narrow hole in the wall. Behind it, Ikons were battling. There were force fields, poles that absorbed the electric discharges, voltmeters, wattmeters and spectrum analyzers, it was like a service shop for Ikons mixed with a gym.

'At least we got free heating here. The fights start at night. This is Herzig, he'll teach you the basics,' said Ark. 'I'll have to leave, but I'll be back with lunch. Hamburgers, how does it sound?'

'Sounds good to me, but what am I supposed to do?'

'For now, train. I'll be managing you. This is simple, you have an indigo light, and our audience haven't seen one in a long time, so I'm starting a pre-hype stating that the main fight tonight will feature one. Yes, you'll be a headliner. After the fight is

done, you'll get money, and then if you're happy, you keep fighting and earning money. The payments will get better depending on your performance and how the audience receives you. It's up to you, showman.'

'Wow. No one ever represented me. '

'Eh-eh, I'm glad you're happy,' said Ark, patting Terry's head. 'See you soon champ.'

'Ok Herzig, I have no experience, so go easy on me.'

'No worries Terry, you've got an Indigo light, you're way ahead than most of us. We need years and years of practice up until a point where we no longer speak. But this might take up an eternity. The younger ones are always shouting simply because they aren't connected with their Ikons. Now, the ones with the indigo light, they don't have to shout or tell or anything, they have an immediate response. You'll be so fast, that you'll be able to teleport Dest!'

'Teleport Dest?'

'Oh yes, it's not a real teleport from one point to another, it's just that he'll be so fast that it'll look like he's teleporting. This, this takes years, I'm telling you, so you can get excited with everything you're about to learn. First, let's check him up here, with this little device. We have to understand what we're dealing with. Increase his rotation spin, please. Like an athlete, we always have to build up the potency, otherwise he might damage himself.'

'I'm not deaf, I'll increase it without him using his mind,' said Dest in a fun way. 'I'm not sure this is good for us, you'll be able to use me and abuse me.'

'I do that already,' said Terry laughing.

Dest's sound became louder, and Herzig analyzed him with a multimeter. It measured the current, the frequency of the current, the amount of energy dissipated, the speed of

the motors, the signal level, the leakage across the plates of the capacitors and the transistors, then weighted him.

'These are amazing numbers. Was he ever upgraded? This isn't a normal Ikon,' he said.

'I guess. Drangy, a friend of mine once reviewed him. He might have changed something, I'm not sure. They upgraded theirs for the arena.'

'The arena? They battled here? I probably know them.'

'Oh no... It was back in Valaart.'

'Back in Valaart? What the hell are you talking about?'

'I meant Mouhnia.'

'Are you a Valaarian? You are a Valaarian, aren't you? Of course you are, and this is a Valaarian Ikon. Now it makes sense, only a Valaarian Ikon could have such performance. You know what this means?'

'I'm dead?'

'No, of course you aren't dead. You'll be, eventually, but not now. This means we'll be rich, that's what it means.'

'We'll be rich?'

'Do you have any clue of how much these guys will pay to see a Valaarian getting wrecked? You don't, do you? You're like the worst the universe has ever seen. Nobody likes Valaart, at least here. No one.'

'Huh, ok... Am I supposed to start feeling bad?'

'Oh, I'm sorry. I mean, you know. It's like, I like you, but at the same time I don't. I trust Ark so, I'll teach you the basics nevertheless. Wait, Ark doesn't know, does he? Because he hates them more than I do.'

'Stop. Please, you're scaring me. I just wanted a job.'



'Ha-ha, come here. This is the basic swift,' said Herzig.

'This is used by Rammers right? In close combat,' said Terry.

'Rammers?'

'Yes, they have heavy armor and usually bash their opponents. They aren't as fast as the Dischargers or Shrouders.'

'Wait a minute, what are you talking about?'

'There are three different types of fighters right?'

'No man, I mean, that sounds cool and all, but here it's one on one. There's no teams. There's no Rammers, no Dischargers and definitely no...'

'Shrouders.'

'Yes, that. Your Ikon will have to excel in all those categories. He'll have to make a good use of his shields, of his armors and lasers. You can obviously focus on one, especially when you'll buy items in the black market, but I advice that you keep balance between every aspect. That will determine your success.'

'I see,' said Terry, imitating the swift movement the other Ikons around him repeatedly showed.

'Very good, very good,' said Herzig. 'Now swift, activate a shield and bash him with it. Shields not only serve as a defensive method, but also as an offensive one. You've heard this right, the best defense, is a good offense,' he continued.

'I guess,' said Terry, mimicking with Dest everything the others were doing.

'Here's another one, the back loop. When your opponent is trying to hit you, you can back loop and hit him from behind. This is more of an evasive tactic rather than an offensive one. Your primary concern is to make sure you're not getting hit. If you hit him or not, it's secondary.'

'Can we just keep on looping?'

'Fast learner. Sure you can, you just have to be careful. You already know that you can't keep up the shields for too long, otherwise Dest might over heat. You have to use it sparingly. You might get a laser in, between the use of shields, but you'll get your timings right. This is like a dance. Have you ever heard contretemps? You've studied Ballet? Music? I'll assume not. And I'll assume you study everything that has to do with motion, from now on. You'll look at nature, and how it behaves. Predators, how they hide, how they strike. You'll have to be a master illusionist, you'll have to make them think you're about to do something, and you'll do the exact opposite. The motion of your Ikon is the best for a misleading strike. You'll not only be in Dest's mind, but in your opponents too.'

'Ballet? Music? What does that have to do with anything. This is a duel.'

'It has to do with everything. Are you willing to learn, or will you keep on thinking you know better?'

'No, I want to learn.'

'Ok, so I'll tell you why Ballet's important. You know the pirouette right. The spins they do. There's a thing called gyroscopic precession which means you'll have to work with the spinning intensity of the Ikon to overthrow your opponent. You can't work against gravity, against the natural forces, you have to flow as they flow, and use attrition to give a fatal blow. A blow that won't allow them to get back into the game. That's the secret. You can weaken your enemy with many of them, but the secret to success is to give one that will finish the battle. This leads me, to the next point. Patience. You see, this is a battle of patience rather than brute force, it's only science, although I've seen some brutes that withstood patience. The game starts and you don't even have the time to be patient. Your Ikon's already on the floor leaking oil. Mawi, the guy who hates the patience game. It starts and he's nothing but a lightning strike. Boom,

you're out. In the end, this is a psychological game. Your fighting style will represent who you are. You have to be creative and innovative, you have to break the rules to accomplish that, otherwise you'll just be a normal fighter. The audience hates normal. Not good for business. To make some dews, you have to be the best. Don't worry if I'm going too fast, everything's recorded, so you can review it later. That's your job now, to create a spectacle worth of people's money and time. To reinvent the battles, create new tricks... I should be teaching you how to fight, not how to be a philosopher because that isn't going to get you anywhere.'

'Maybe,' said an inspired Terry, already thinking and dreaming of new tricks. 'At least it inspired me, now I'm not only going to be a fighter, but a dancer too.'

'If it suits you. Practice with Kryx for a bit. We train warriors here. They not only learn how to fight back in the pit, but also fight back in life. There's a bushido, a code of honor that you'll have to follow, but I'll let you digest it with the food that Ark will be bringing.

'So, will I meet the other kids?' asked Terry.

'Not now no, they're a bit anti-social, they take this very seriously though, and unfortunately for some there's no such thing as friendship. They say it messes with their ability to beat your ass.'

'That's silly,' said Terry, looking at them, training with their Ikons.

'Maybe yes, maybe not, the truth is, everyone in here gets really good. Go on now, practice,' said Herzig.

Couple of hours passed and Terry was already sweating.

'I'm not doing anything but somehow I get tired,' he said.

'You're doing a lot,' said Herzig from a distance. 'You think not, but the brain is the organ that uses the most energy.'

'Talking of energy,' said Ark near the crack with a package full of hamburgers.

'Ark,' the kids said in unison running towards him. He handed out a hamburger to each, and finally, to Terry.

'Hamburgers are customarily eaten as a sandwich, between two halves of a round bun. Mustard, mayonnaise, ketchup, and other condiments, along with garnishes of...'  
said Dest.

'I don't know what's up with him, he just spouts this information out of nowhere, but he wasn't like this,' interrupted Terry. 'I'm worried about him.'

'Interesting. Has he recently been out of your sight?'

'There was this night, that I met this girl Sora, and Dest was falling in love with her Ikon. He just stood there flying in circles around her Ikon. And then, Sora invited me to her place, and Dest didn't want to come, so he stood there the whole night I think. I found him the next day.'

'Interesting. He might be hacked. Ikons don't fall in love. The other Ikon was retrieving information from yours.'

'Information? What information? I don't have any valuable information.'

'Yes you do,' said Ark. 'Your life... Your life holds an immeasurable value for some Sultherns, who like to stick their noses where they shouldn't. The story of your life is probably being sold in the black market. Someone, at this very moment, is going through your life... Through everything you lived, through all the moments recorded by Dest. They are probably hearing this conversation, right now.'

'What are you talking about? Sora would never do that.'

'You know her well?'

'No, not well... I just spent the night with her. Then we've been to the park, to a barbecue... She's an orphan.'

'Ah, it's one of them rascals. She fooled you. She used you. She never cared about you, she only cared about the information your Ikon held. Ikons falling in love... You're a bit naive for someone who has an indigo light.'

'I thought it might be possible...'

'No, that moment, he was there, hypnotized, he was actually uploading everything in his drive, to Sora's Ikon. That's how the rascals make money. They not only steal merchandise, but the lives others lived.'

'This is so embarrassing, weird, and... Just wrong. Plain wrong.'

'It is. There's nothing we can do now, hopefully you'll find her, confront her, and she'll be able to tell you who she sold it to. It's quite difficult though, even if we could catch the guy. They save it to different drives, they have back-ups you know. They then proceed to create different people and characters to sell as made up stories. Some people prefer the made up stories, it's like a book you know. You're living the life someone else lived.'

'I've heard about it, someone told me about them already, but I never thought it would happen to me.'

'Don't worry, don't think about it now. We'll fix it. You have to focus on your training. You'll have to get a spirit tree, from a very inhospitable place.'

'Spirit tree?'

'Yes, spirit tree. Did Herzig tell you about the bushido?'

'Yes, it's like a code.'

'So the spirit tree is part of the bushido. Every warrior in here has one. It's from where they draw their power from. You have to take care of it every day, when you wake up, and before you go to sleep. It's like your baby. It can't die. Some didn't dignify the bushido and allowed them to die. Unfortunately they're sent on their way. Discipline

is the most important thing in this gym. If you aren't able to care for your spirit tree, you aren't able to care for us and therefore you can't train here. There was a group, a long time ago... The first ones to arrive in this place, the ones who built the first houses... They've ran towards the karsts, when the population increased. They didn't like what civilization had become, so they went along with their good sense to shed light upon the dark caves in the mountains. If you want, you can get your spirit tree, from the top of one of the karsts. It is said they are the most resilient and powerful trees, they grow as a kengai, a form they acquire. Every tree grows beautifully and differently. We'll teach you how to care of them, how to shape them with dreams. You'll do that first thing in the morning.'

'Shape them with dreams? Ok, but how? Which tree should I take?'

'Your journey will be a sacred one. It's not supposed to give you questions, but to answer the ones you've already got. This had been done for over... All eternity, I suppose. You're not searching for a particular tree, you're searching for yourself, and you'll find bits and parts of you in the tree's you'll meet along the way. Any tree will do, just look at them, and if you feel something, pick them up with extreme care. Listen to them. Do not cut the roots or rip them apart from earth. You have to dig all the earth around them, put the roots around a plastic bag, and bring it here. We'll then teach you how to pot them and preserve them.'

'Ok,' said Terry, taking a bite in his hamburger. 'Delicious,' he thought.

'Enjoy your meal. I'll be back with dinner, and after, you'll have your first battle. Tomorrow we'll devise a plan to monetize your efforts in the best possible way.'

'I'm not sure I'm ready to fight yet,' said Terry.

'You don't have to be sure. You'll fight either you want or not, it's part of the job.

No hard feelings,' said Ark, leaving.

'Where is he going?' asked Terry.

'He has to advertise the fights and make things work,' said Herzig.

After the lunch all the kids got back to their stations and continued their training.

'Who am I going to fight?' asked Terry.

'Wlad,' answered Herzig.

'Who is he?' Terry whispered.

'He's not here yet, he tends to be late. We're trying to give him a new direction.

He didn't have a very pleasant life and it's still recovering from past scars.'

'I see... None of us had great pasts, right? I look around and they all seem unhappy.'

'You're quite intuitive. Couldn't expect less from someone with an Indigo light. I usually don't tell our students right away, but all these kids you're with lived in the streets. Ark takes them in and tries to give them a purpose, a meaning. He doesn't like the little rascals because they don't want to do anything. They just want to steal and live off other people. Wlad was one of them... It's our best fighter.'

'You're putting me against your best fighter?'

'That's how you'll learn.'

'Come on, I've had some hopes for this duel, but you aren't making it easy.'

'It will be a great duel. It's not about winning, it's about giving a great show. That's what it is all about. We're entertaining people... But later you'll get exactly what we're doing here. I'm not telling you right away because we want you to believe it's all about winning. It makes the battles more believable. We need that. That's why fresh blood is so important. Anyway, keep on practicing because in couple of hours we're starting the preparations. Wlad will be here by then.'

'I guess...'

Dest swirled and swayed, each time smoother, through a track full of obstacles to increase his response rate and speed. Terry was thrilled while observing what the other Ikons were doing. After a while, a guy with a black robe covering his face appeared from the crack. He didn't look at anybody, he just took off his robe and started to practice. The red light of his Ikon revealed every scar in his face and arms. Herzig went close to him and then pointed at Terry, probably telling him who Terry was and that he'll be battling him soon. He looked at him for a second, and then continued his training. While the others shouted and communicated with their Ikons, he didn't say a word. He closed his eyes and breathed heavily for a long time.

'Here's the flyer,' said Herzig, handing one to Terry.' It had an illustration of his face, along with Wlad's. Their Ikons were beside them with all the technical specifications.

'Looks cool,' he replied, feeling a bit anxious as if now everything was official. He went back to his exercises, even more focused than before, as if the whole gym around him had disappeared. There was no movements, no sound, no life, just training. He got so absorbed in it that time slipped by without warning and suddenly the gym was in a fuss with everyone leaving towards the lockers.

'It's time,' said Herzig. 'Follow me.'

'I'm not prepared,' said Terry.

'I understand, but the point isn't about winning. It's about delivering a great spectacle and ultimately about overcoming your fear of failure. You don't have to be the best, you just have to be good. If you're good, in this place, you're already the greatest we've ever seen. Come on, you'll show him.'

Terry followed Herzig outside the building, through a dark narrow alley. Everything was silent, even though there were people talking. He was so nervous that everything



around him felt as if it wasn't real. He couldn't tell where he was going, he was on auto-pilot mode, already sweating before the fight had even started. He entered in a very weird place, weirder than his state of mind at that time, where a crowd had gathered, already shouting and making bets. Everyone was taking a good look at Terry as if they wanted a piece of him, gossiping and spitting on the ground in between the malicious glares. The cloud of smoke was intimidating, the whole surrounding was everything but secured. There were broken bottles on the ground and the walls were painted with graffiti. They could jump on him at any given time and he was sure that no one would help him. He took a deep breath and Dest stepped in the pit where sun beams coming from a broken stained glass illuminated the very center of it. Wlad smirked at Terry and took off his robe. His veins were all popped out and red, the same color of his Ikon, like Terry had experienced in the formless planet.

'That's fucking frightening,' he thought.

Terry started to think about the movements he had learned, but everything was a bit blurred. The noise started to drain him. At some point he trembled and felt powerless, like he wasn't able to do it, how could he finish something he wasn't even able to start. But the fight started, and Dest sprang out against the other Ikon. Terry wasn't being very helpful, apparently his opponent looks overwhelmed him. Wlad swerved completely relaxed, as if it was just a training, as if it was nothing. Dest rammed against him with his shield and the whole room became electrified. The screams coming from the crowd surely made Wlad pay a bit more attention to what was happening in the pit. He was losing, but Proto somehow was able to bounce around the pit as if he was moving in speed light. It became obvious that this was an impossible task and he was just messing around with Terry. Herzig looked at him in discontentment, as if Wlad had forgotten the whole point of the fight. He wasn't meant to be obliterating any chance Terry had, for

the audience would be turned off with such a one sided duel. That wasn't the case, because everyone betted on Wlad. Terry didn't gather a single vote. And the trust that the audience didn't put in him, was soon proven right because Dest flew like a rocket against the wall. It didn't fall on the ground, he dug his way into it and stood there steaming.

'Overload, overload,' he muttered, while shutting down.

It's like even Terry's lights went out, as if he felt it, bruising him underneath. A punch right in the cheek. He was crazy enough to think he would stand a chance. Nothing made sense, and he thought he had blown it.

'Calm down, it's not the end of the world,' said Herzig, close to him. 'It's part of the drill kid, no pun intended. Everyone loses the first fight,' he continued.

'I thought...'

'It doesn't matter, really, I told you, with your loss, everyone wins, everyone's happy, so, is that a loss or a victory?'

'It's a victory, I guess' said Terry, still feeling bamboozled.

'Come here for a second. Here's your paycheck,' he whispered.

'Wow, my first salary.'

'It's not much but will get better. I'll take Dest to the gym and fix him there. You're off for tonight. Good job. Remember, take the bus near the Archan Plaza.

'Ok, I will,' said Terry.

He wanted to ask him if he could crash in the gym for the night, but couldn't. He already felt they were doing him a great favor by giving him a job. Terry's father would never give him money, always said if he wants it he had to earn it. He has been penniless his whole life. The moment he received it, he had already forgotten about it, so he broke into that relentless night feeling light. No Dest, no nothing, just pure lightness. Pure

bliss. The streets sang in harmony, louder than all the secret buskers screaming out for a change. A timid snow fell on Terry's shoulders and melted right after. Then it rained, and the street lamps all looked like they were crying. He didn't have an umbrella so he ran looking for some cover, and then he stopped, in the middle of the empty street, and stood there, under the rain, for a long time.

'It doesn't feel so bad,' he said, 'I'm already soaked, might as well feel it. Why am I running all the time. It's rain, nothing more than rain. It's wet, and in this warm weather, it actually feels good. I'm not cold... I'm wet, and I like it. Maybe I've been hurt tonight, but that's ok. Right? We're all hurt... And if we weren't, we wouldn't be able to feel the wonders of healing. Of the passing rain... It's only rain. It's only life, and I'm here to live,' he said, looking up to the sky. The cloud's made up Abi's face for a second there. He smiled and thought where the Archan Plaza was. There was no Dest guiding him tonight, neither signs pointing in the right direction and the clock tower never ticked at a natural pace.

'What's the time,' asked Terry, to someone passing him by.

'Time to find out who you are,' the man replied, disappearing amidst the rain.

'Sorry, where's the Archan plaza?' he asked, to another one.

'Straight ahead,' he said.

'It's always straight ahead in this place. Apparently one direction gets you everywhere. Or maybe I'm always at the right place but at the wrong time.'

Terry continued forward, and passed by the bar where he met Sora. Inside, everyone was having a good time and the lights squandered into the empty streets. In one side, Terry, under a storm, in the dark, and on the other, blissful people dancing in the comfort and warmth of a good glass of wine. It whispered to him, come inside, join the light. But he remembered Ark was pretty serious about the morning task, so he turned

and never looked back. Not even once. He kept on forward, and forward, until he could no longer feel his legs. He came across a square, and a lonely bus waited there with its lights on. He ran towards it and got under the bus stop which wasn't much of a help because it had holes in it. A man stood with his ass up in the air looking for something in front of the bus.

## CHAPTER TWELVE - OPENING THE MIND'S VALVE

'What are you looking for?' Terry shouted.

'Nothing, I'm looking for nothing, that's what I'm looking for.'

'You need help, looking for nothing?'

'Thanks, I just found it,' he said, getting up, and walking inside the bus. 'If you're going in the early morning just hop in.'

'I'm supposed to go early in the morning, but I'm not sure where.'

'Nobody knows where they ought to go. Some think they know, but they never get wherever is it they think they have to be. There's no place you ought to be at any given time. Mostly because there's no time. Life's always discovering itself, through me... Through you. We're vassals of life's curiosity.'

'I don't want to be a vassal.'

'Yes, you're too young to be one, and me, I'm too old to be free. My hands became the wheels of this bus... It's a part of me. It's an extension of who I am. I can't detach myself from it... I must see, everyday, what life is outside this city. I must get out, you know... This place numbs your senses. We're born with a keen perception of the world surrounding us, with a natural power that we don't learn to develop, the power to sense things. Animals can sense natural disasters and avoid them. So can we... But we, we don't nurture those natural powers. Recluses, like the ones up in the karsts, nurture them, and therefore feel more than others do, and because of that, they're labeled

as crazy. Lunatics. Simply because they dance to a different beat. In the city you're in a constant high, bombarded by motion, noise, pollution, lies, useless gadgets... It drains your soul and therefore your ability to sense. Calmness and stability though, improve it. Listening... Listening to what the world has to say, might give you answers, but who knows. The road's always changing.'

'Is the answer the same for everyone?'

'People are different, black, yellow, red and purple. They like different things, and they think about life in a different way, and nobody's to say how to best live one's life if not the one who's living it... Maybe this is the way it had to go... Maybe this is the way of life... Crashing inexorably into space... Destroying itself, to give place... To a better world, a better race... For another chance at love.'

'You sound like you need another chance at love.'

'You're a clever kid. You don't need to listen to the world, do you? The world lives in you, doesn't it?'

'I'm not sure... At one given point it seemed like it did. But now it doesn't. I lost a battle tonight...'

'Sometimes we lose things only to find them again.'

'But you can't find a battle, can you?'

'You can find it again. And win it, next time. It'll taste better than anything else you've ever tried. Maybe you're being prepared, and the time's just not right.'

'The time's never right, is it? I can never tell what time is it, neither anyone can tell me.'

'It's the timeless times kid, you ought to adapt.'

'I don't feel like adapting. Life's so demanding. Why is it so demanding?'

'Because it ought to get somewhere, right? No one knows where, but it moves across space... It's trying to find something... Like me, and this bus... What is it, who knows.'

'Does it even matter? Someone told me that when we look for all the answers, life passes us by.'

'Those are some wise words, I'll tell you that.'

Everything became silent, if not for the water droplets falling on the window close to Terry, drifting down like rivers, all finding their ways... All exploring life.

'What's your name by the way?'

'I'm the bus driver. I don't have a name.'

'Why?'

'I told you, this bus became part of me... Whatever my name was, it... It doesn't matter. I'm the bus driver now, although I've come to notice, that it's actually the bus who drives me. Once it drove me all the way down close to the ridge... There was a small lake, and I got out to stretch my legs. It had been quite a journey through that ever changing road. I was completely numb as I gazed at the calmness of those hills. I noticed something wrong with the lake but I couldn't figure out what it was from afar... So I got closer. The lake was red and had ripped arms and legs of children. I swear I've seen tongues too. I couldn't believe it, but I saw my reflection in it, and I swear, I saw kids eating each other. Underneath water. How, you ask me, how were they eating each other underwater, well, I don't know man, but I know what I've seen. I think they were all children because whoever grew up would get eaten, so there were no grown-ups. They stopped for a second and it was the longest second of my life, when our eyes met. They spotted me... And then, they ran after me. Look at this,' the man said pointing towards his necklace.

'This is how I remember it was real. One of them bit off my finger. This is my finger man. I killed that poor son of a bitch. You could see the hate in his eyes, and as his soul left his body, the anger didn't. It lingered, with nowhere to go. I dug his grave with my nine fingers. You think it's funny huh. Look at it. Take a good damn look. I might've killed that kid, but it was me who died. That's what I did. I buried him and laid right beside him with a cross above our chest.'

'We all carry our own crosses,' said Terry, closing his eyes.

'That time it was me who drove the bus, so I can't really know. Traveling opens ways you know. Opens ways in the world, and by opening ways upon the world you open ways in yourself. By discovering the world, we discover us. That's it. Seeing things we've never seen before creates new lapses in our brain, and when these new lapses are born, so are new ideas. It's like creating a new room for them to fly wildly. That's why its important to see things we've never seen, to experience feelings we've never felt and to miss times we've never lived. That's the secret to creativitiiy. To live. The story went on for as long as the universe could tell and before the bus driver finished the story, Terry was asleep, only to wake up early in the morning, with a passenger claiming he was sitting on her sit. He looked around with one eye closed and the other half-opened.

'But, there's no one else on the bus,' he told the lady, still sleepy, while the dream he was having vanished from his mind.

'What does it matter? It's my sit, mine. See here,' the lady said, sticking a ticket in Terry's face. The bus driver was smiling at him through the rearview mirror, while he clutched the gears. A sound was heard throughout all the square, the bus was ready to go. People waved as if it was a ship leaving for a space expedition until they got lost in the smoke. Probably it was the old lady's familiars, because she waved back, and



cleaned her eyes with a worn out tissue she had in her pocket. Terry thought about what that would be like, to have someone waving him goodbye. To have a family, to have a home... The bus passed through such a narrow street, with such low houses, that the roofing scratched on the sides. His heart raced as he realized that this might just be the end of the journey.

'Don't worry, it happens all the time. This bus and this street is a great analogy for me and my ex. Sometimes things just don't fit together,' he said laughing. The bus stopped in every station, and the driver got out in each one of them to smoke a cigarette. A musician, playing an accordion with a small dog on his shoulders who held the bucket in his mouth for the tips, played a song. There was an unbearable cheesy smell and Terry wish the bus would just fly to its destination. He snuggled up on the bench and life stopped for a second, and started right after, as the driver ordered everyone to get out. Terry looked for some bushes so he could pee, but the mountains surrounding them took his breath away. Some of the passengers sat on crates they'd made, grabbed some stones that were sitting on the verges and grilled some sausages, while the accordionist played a sad yet happy song. He was supposed to get there quite soon, but at this pace it would might just take a whole millenium.

'If this is the only stop we'll be taking, it's fine,' he thought. But it wasn't. They stopped in the most remote stations one could think of, where they would be forced to buy all different kinds of souvenirs, and if they didn't, the merchants would hop in the bus and wouldn't leave without a sale. Terry was pretty tired and couldn't listen to how good everything they were selling was. Rocks that were caught in a mountain that had crumbled away, pen's that were bathed by a saint who didn't know how to write, hourglasses without sand and older than time itself.

'Ugh,' he muttered.

'You're all about the destination, aren't you?'

'I guess...'

'The ride's more important,' the driver said, while the bus rode ferociously like a tiger, roaring, wishing to be heard, wishing to see more than roads, more than hills... Wishing the thrill of life, an up and down trail that would get her lost, and found again. The engines were still smoking and the hissing sound of the brakes releasing air was still ringing in his ears as he got out of the bus. Nothing around, just a washed up sign whistling in the wind. He looked at the horizon and amidst the clouds he saw the cluttered rocks up in a mount. There were holes in them from where a smoke that look like flying snakes rose and joined the clouds. It was almost night. Terry, weary and broken from the trip, tightened his backpack and left for the mountains that were lighted up by the stars. The dirt road soon got lost into the small vegetation. He waited for it, for the lights to come and surround him, engulf him in a divine spectacle, but they didn't. Everything just got really dark, if not for those red holes up in the mountains.

'I wonder what that might be,' he thought. 'Probably those up in the karsts, that Ark spoke about.'

There were small trees growing beneath the eldest ones, but they weren't interesting. They didn't speak to him, as Ark suggested.

'Can you hear me?' whispered Terry close to one.

He smiled, and sat beside it.

'Of course you can't. It's silly, right. How would you talk. What would you say. Is there anything interesting for you to say? Nothing's happening here. See, there's nothing. I'm the most interesting thing that happened to you today, am I right? You don't have to say it, I'm quite sure of it. Maybe you saw a falcon, gliding in the skies. Of course you didn't, you don't have any eyes. You can't see. How am I supposed to find

my spirit tree in here? Do you happen to know? Ark said something about the top of the mountain right, Kengui, or Kengai, something like that. Wish Dest was here to help me out. He would know everything about every tree. I'm on my own now, I guess. See you later buddy,' he continued, getting up from the floor and shaking off the dirt in his butt. The darkness was growing exponentially. It was nothing like the city. The light of the pagoda could be seen from there. The strangest thing was the deadly silence. There were no insects, no owls, no nothing, yet he heard a call. He looked around but there was nothing. It was probably the silence, speaking to him, keeping him company as he went. After being most of your life surrounded by the buzzing sound of an Ikon, it can be strange, to be in the dark and without a sound, but there he was. The moon was partially hidden behind the karsts. He could already see the kind of trees that Ark spoke about. They fell into nothing. Into thin air, hanging by their roots.

'Now I get it. They look really cool,' said Terry, as he gazed at the silhouette of one of the trees that stood in front of the shining Sultyr moon, and by its light, he got closer to the top. All kinds of trees were there, and he knew he could take his time, because the only bus was coming early in the morning. As he approached the peak, he could see all the holes in the karsts alight, and hear some of the chants that burned like wildfires in that calm night. On the top, a feral dance took place around a bonfire, where the shadows danced by the moon.

'What are you doing here?' a guy asked him, with a necklace made out of nutshells.

'I'm looking for my spirit tree,' said Terry.

'Did Ark sent you?'

'You can say he sent me, I guess. Can you help me? You probably know all the types and all the stuff about spirits and what not. He said something about Kengui.'

'You're too fast,' the man said.

'What do you mean, I'm too fast? I'm standing still,'

'Your hunger. To accomplish. To attain. That's all I can say, for this small eternity spent with you.'

'I guess.'

'Why won't you try to understand Kengai?' the man said, approaching him.

'How do I understand it?'

'Look at it,' he said, pointing at the tree. 'The spirit tree's, they all have a story, you know. A story to share with you. Their story shapes them... Gives them an unique beauty that no other tree has. That's how you'll draw power from them. From all the stories they hold. Of distant times... They can live over thousands of years. Ark sends their students here because the roots of the trees penetrate through the karsts, our homes, and absorb all the energy that emancipates from our dancing shadows. The stories we tell by the fireside rise and are absorbed by them. There are some who'll try to shape them according to their liking, but the best ones, are the ones that grow naturally. All of them are different, and are like us, damaged by time. All of them reaching and pointing towards the heavens, giving and taking. All of them wishing to escape. Some look like dancers, others like clerks. You can learn a lot from them, and, that's how they speak to you. When you look at one, and understand why she is the way she is. The winds will tell them of unspoken dangers... They don't have mouths,, yet they communicate with one another. They don't have ears, yet they ear what the others have to say. How's that you ask... There's a network underneath all the things we can see... And there, they share their stories. They inspire, frighten... Doesn't matter the response, they carry an invaluable strength that is shared between every living thing. An energy, if I may say... That keeps them listening, eagerly.'

'Once upon a time...'

'What?'

'I could see an energy, flowing through them. But now I can't.'

'Stability is the path towards the spiritual tranquility. When we're not stable, we enter in our survivor mode and the beauty of the world vanishes, the darkness comes creeping in, everything loses its meaning for we are not living, we're surviving.'

'Maybe that's why I can't see the energy in them... It's not like it isn't there, it's just because I'm sad.'

'Now I understand why Ark picked you and sent you here. You're a child of the crescent moon.'

'A child of the crescent moon?'

'Yes, kids who grow up to be Wanderers. They hold the universe's hope in them. They hold the past, the present and the future, all of it, in their minds. And hopefully one day they unlock it, and allow the flow of knowledge to run endlessly across every galaxy.'

'Not a lot of expectations, huh.'

'No, not a lot, ha-ha.'

'I know the Wanderers can access the collective memory, and go through circuits and all that stuff, I've been through them myself, but I've heard someone talking about going through the thoughts of trees. How does that work?'

'It's the same, but, it's a natural network, which had been forgotten, demonized, by William. I'll let you figure out why. He has an aversion to the natural, mostly because, he's the most unnatural thing this world's ever seen. The collective memory is everything. The digital, the natural... All there is. The Wanderers can travel through it all, if they're able to open the mind's valve for the rivers of knowledge to flood and

drown all their doubts. There was never a distinction between the two... But William created one. One that fights all that is only natural. Once upon a time we could travel through memories of plants, trees and stars... And mountains... Even moons, yes, some can move moons, but only between us, I think they say that just to make them aim the highest they can, because how high we aim, is how far we'll get.'

'So, I can't access the natural network?'

'The Wanderers aren't supposed to... But maybe they could.'

'How?'

'What you have to do is understand nature. When you come to an understanding, you communicate, and when you communicate, you access... And when you finally access it, you become aware that you are nothing but part of it. You're nothing but everything. You become part of what you've always been. And that's where all the knowledge resides. Maybe it'll work, maybe it won't, who knows... I'm not a Wanderer. I never knew where I was going, you see. They are there, all of them, expecting guidance from me, but I'm just as lost as they are. I'm as lost as anyone. How is that? How can one be lost? A tree doesn't know it has to grow, but it grows, nevertheless. It's never lost but always found. Always stretching beyond itself. We don't know where we're going, but we keep on walking. There's no need for a teacher to tell them which way to go for they'll go, anyway.'

'I guess... I was just hoping someone could help me.'

'No one can help you kid. You'll have to do it on your own. There's no easy path. The thing is, there's no path at all.'

'So why did you come here?'

'I just know the stories, but how can I talk about something I didn't live through? My ancestors told me that it all started with one. That light. You see that light. There

was one, who wasn't happy. He came here and built his home. Then someone joined him, and he helped the other guy built his home. Then women came along for the ride, like they always do, and babies bloomed. Then strangers... And a city took root. Independent and sovereign, able to withstand anything life could throw at them, for everyone came from nothing. It grew, and grew, and everyone heard about it, and everyone wanted to be here. Big thing. The bigger it got, the worst. People saw an opportunity to create value out of something that was never made for that. So that shit stain arrived here and propagated through people's minds and there you have it. Sultyr, the city without meaning. So they left. They saw everything disappearing. The very foundations were ripped apart, and they came here, to the karsts. They even tried to make excursions, to come and see people here as if we're animals, through buses and what not. Can you believe that. Pissing down our throats. As if it wasn't enough to... Never mind. I'm sick of this story, sick of telling it. Ark was the one who always stood by our side. He's actually one of us, but don't tell anyone. He left because he didn't want to be confined in so little. He was attracted by the bright lights, always twinkling in his little eyes. We always saw him, looking at them, at night. He left, and there was nothing we could do, but he still comes around, sometimes. He's trying to give a meaning to kids who are lost, like he once was.'

'That's cool. I hope someday I'll be able to do such good.'

'You will. You're always able to do what you think is right. It's only up to us.'

'I guess.'

'Follow me, I'll show you something,' the man said, leaping through the stones.

On the verge of the cliff, the world stood in a perfect silence. They saw everything there was, from above. And then he pointed at some trees, all in a row, falling into a blissful state. 'You see?' he continued.

'They look cool, but they haven't got any energy around them,' said Terry.

'The world gives and takes Terry, it's how it has always been. If you want to take comfort from it, first, give it comfort, and you won't have to worry another day as you'll rejoice in the calmness of heavens, for all eternity.'

'That's a lot of calmness. For a long time. I don't think I can take it,' he said smiling.

'Do you know how to pick them?'

'Yes, I guess. I have to take the earth around them and I can't really pull the roots.'

'There's no earth here, they grow directly in the rocks. The rocks have many minerals from where they draw their energy.'

'There was a rock, that I could draw energy from too.'

'A rock? From where you could draw energy?'

'Yes, the planet soul.'

'The planet soul?'

'Yes, a stone, that has all the stories ever written, all the good, and all the bad... Eve...'

'I know what the planet soul is. But which, and how... I've seen them in my dreams... One must not wager on it. Where is it?'

'It was stolen, like a week ago. When I arrived. They not only took that but...'

'Oh no, not good. Not good,' the man interrupted. 'You have to find it. Tell Ark. He has to help you. No. You can't leave that in the hands of those savages. They don't know what it means. They don't know the meaning of anything. They'll rip it apart. You must go, go. Take the tree and leave. There's nothing else for you here,' he continued.

'But,'



'Leave, leave. Leave now,' the man said in exasperation. He walked away as if he was drunk, almost falling off the verge.

'Be careful,' said Terry, grabbing him by his skirt. 'What are you doing?'

'Not feeling well, no,' he said, falling down on Terry's arms, while clouds covered the moon momentarily. 'I've seen it... When all goes to waste. You must take it back. You must restore, give it back to the world. Without it there's no memory... There's no time... There's nothing. What have you done?'

'I thought it would help against William.'

'But it won't dumbass. The fight against him isn't done with the soul... It's done with the heart. The heart that beats in me, the heart that beats... In everybody.'

'But...'

'Find it and return it to where it belongs. The world has lost so much already...'

'What has it lost?'

'The future... It's losing the future. Move, fast. There's literally no time to lose.'

'Funny... I'll just leave you here? You look like shit.'

'Don't worry about me, just go.'

Terry got up and kneeled before a tree. He looked around but didn't take it. He smiled at it and left.

'I'll find it, and give it back,' he said.

The man's answer was gone with the wind. A million thoughts took his mind by assault, rattling in his brain. He was too focused in not falling as he ran, therefore couldn't give the attention they're always longing for, but they were there, and they were loud. The loudest thoughts he'd never heard.

'Why can't I for once do what's right? Why? Why me, all the time?' he said to himself, already rushing to the nadir. The vegetation would move as he passed and

while he ran he looked all around for a tree, but he made a connection with none. He stopped. His big eyes could be seen across the leaves, but then he got up, and left them there.

'If I didn't take one from the top, I'm not going to take one from the bottom,' he thought.

He got to the stop, where the bus had left him, but it was still night, and there was nothing but dirt all around him. That moment... That moment seemed to last forever, when he was alone with nothing else to think of, but all the wrongs he ever did. And how could he fill his mind with happy thoughts, when everything around him was falling apart. He laid with the backpack below his head, looking at the skies, dreaming of different planets, adventures, and of Hilda. He fell asleep, but woke up right after with a honk. The bus stood really close to him, so close he could feel the heat of the engine. It was morning, and only one passenger had made all the way through. It was a kid like him, totally motivated, way too motivated for that early in the morning.

'Are you ok?' the kid asked.

'Yes, I'm ok,' said Terry, getting up. 'Are you going to look for the spirit tree?'

'Yes! How'd you know that? Are you a fortune-teller? They've told me about the fortune-tellers up in the karsts.'

'I've came here to look for a spirit tree, too.'

'Oh, show me, show me!'

'I didn't find it, unfortunately.'

'That's sad. I will find mine! I'm sure of it!'

'Good luck with that,' said Terry, entering the bus, which had the motor still on. It wasn't the same driver who brought him there. This one wasn't very friendly, because he stared at Terry like he was wasting his time. The joke was on him though, there was

absolutely no time! On the way back, the landscapes beside Terry looked like film clips, passing at different frame rates, and birds flew against the wind, as if they were animated. Different type of people would hop in, in different stops, until the final brake was heard. They were back in the city, and Terry was already longing for the calmness he felt at the peak of the karsts.

As he got out, he saw Sora, disappearing amidst the crowd. Her green hair was unmistakable.

'Sora! Sora!' he screamed.

After a while she came out of the crowd with Emiliatron, and Terry was smiling, running towards her.

'Terry. I was worried about you, where have you been?'

'Worried about me?' he said, panting.

'Yes, worried about you.'

'If you were worried about me, you shouldn't have left me in the gutter. You said you would come, but you never did. Why?'

'I got lost in time, you know, I was doing something else and before I realized it was too late.'

'Lost in time... I've been out there in the streets waiting for you. If it wasn't for Ark I would probably be done by now.'

'Ark? Oh, you've become their new puppet, I see. They'll take away your freedom Terry, they'll keep you locked in that gym forever, getting all the money, and giving you nothing in return. You'll be like an attraction in a freak show. An animal in a circus. That's a cult and you don't want to be part of it, trust me.'

'Oh really? At least they gave me a home... '

'You could've stayed in mine. It's not much but it's enough.'

'I've waited for you! A whole day, but you ditched me! You've left me sleeping in the gutter, because you were too busy selling my life, fucking bitch! Ark told me everything about you! You have to give it back. I don't want anyone seeing everything I've done! That's sick!'

'What did you call me?'

'Bitch. Fucking bitch, that's what I've called you.'

'Why? Why'd you call me that?'

'Why? Why? BECAUSE THAT'S THE ONLY WAY I CAN EXPRESS HOW FUCKING HURT I AM. I'M FUCKING HURT, I DON'T KNOW HOW TO EXPRESS IT ANY OTHER WAY. YOU SOLD MY WAKING LIFE, YOU TRICKED ME AND DEST. YOU LIED TO THE BOTH OF US AND IT'S LIKE IT DOESN'T EVEN BOTHER YOU. YOU DON'T EVEN CARE HOW I FEEL, ALL YOU CARE FOR IS A MEANINGLESS NAME. ARE YOU FUCKING HUMAN? DO YOU HAVE A GOD DAMN HEART?'

'Get out of my sight.'

'You, you get out of my sight. Sells the waking life of someone, and then tells him to get out of her sight. You're not going to get away with your little games Sora. You'll have to get it back!'

'You don't know, do you? What it's like to have no one. You always have someone. I'm Terry I'm so cool, everyone loves me. I had to grow up all alone in these streets ok? I've... I've done things I wish I didn't to survive. You don't know what that is, do you? Having to survive? To know there's no safe net? Of course you don't. You know shit.'

'You don't know what I've been through, too!'

'If it makes you happier, I didn't sell it. I still have it, asshole. I was going to, but then I couldn't, because I really liked you. Not anymore. See you.'

'What? Well...'

'No, don't even try. Fuck you Terry.'

She left. There was a long, long silence, and Terry could hear his own heart beat ringing in his ears, pumping out of his chest. He stood there, feeling dumb, feeling asphyxiated as if the words came back to smother him. What had he done. He didn't have a clue about what happened, yet he accused her, without proof, without anything, strictly out of an instinctive and deceptive feeling.

'Oh no...' he thought. 'Why am I so good at this. Why am I getting better. The master screwer. No spirit tree, no Sora, no home, no money, no friends... Now that I think of it, she could've sold my waking life. Nobody would've bought it anyway. Why was I so worried. I wasn't like this... I used to be care free. Is this place changing me? Who am I turning into? Is this who I want to be? My Ikon isn't even with me when I take a bath so they wouldn't even be able to see my willy.'

This last thought brought a smile to his face. His racing thoughts were riding high along with the faceless bodies in the crowd. He disappeared amidst them and headed for the gym. Dest stood at the entrance waiting for him, and greeted him vividly as he saw him across the street, swirling around as if he'd been gone for years.

'Hey buddy! I'm back!'

'No shit!' Dest said. 'I've been fixed, and I feel much lighter. Show me the tree. It's not going to replace me, is it?'

'It's not. I haven't brought one.'

'What? But it was your job to bring one back.'

'Yeah I know, but everything felt weird. I couldn't find one I had a connection with, and when the time came, I couldn't just rip it off the earth. I mean, it's a bit selfish, to rip a tree to have it in my backyard, isn't it. When it could be in nature, where it belongs. It's for our amusement, not for the amusement of the tree, so that's why I had second thoughts.'

Ark was standing nearby the hole, and came out.

'So, you didn't do what I've asked you to.'

'I guess not... But I've met this guy who...'

'I gave you a chance Terry. I'm sorry. We take this very seriously. You can't train with us. Pack your things and leave.'

'What? Because I didn't rip a tree off the ground?'

'No, it's not because of that. It goes way much deeper than that, if you know what I mean. It's because you disregarded your quest and therefore you disregarded me. I'm old, I know that this will happen again, and again, and it's better now, than later. Just try to understand.'

'But I don't have anywhere to go.'

'What do I have to do with that?'

'Thanks for nothing.'

'You're welcome. If it makes you feel better, there are a lot more gyms around the city. I can assure you, they aren't as good as ours. This symbol here, is like our logo. In different abandoned buildings, there will be different symbols and each represents the different gyms, so if you were serious about this career, just sign up on another more chilled out. Or join the biggest, the mainstream one, I don't care.'

Terry went inside to pick up the things he left, and all of them were practicing so he took the rest of his stuff from the locker room and headed towards the square of nowhere.

'I didn't want that lifestyle anyway. Just training aimlessly every day. I don't care about fighting. I'm not a fighter.'

'Well, that would've come in handy until you find something you actually like.'

'I like the Ikons duels, I just don't like to train. And look, here,' he said, waving his first payment from the battle he had with Wlad. 'Not everything's bad, not everything's bad.'

'That'll be gone in the blink of an eye.'

'What?' said Terry, hiding it behind his back. 'It's gone, it's gone!' he joked.

'Yes, it will be exactly like that,' said Dest.

'So, do you want to go back to the Barnacle or what?'

'Maybe let's find you another job first, what do you think? You'll get complacent, if you go back to the barnacle. Leonie will also be complacent with you and...'

'Ok, ok, I got it. Can you find their location?'

'Wait.' said Dest. 'Yes, there's only one. It looks quite official. Maybe the rest are illegal, like this one. They don't show up on the map.'

'So, let's go to that one first, and if we can't manage to close a deal we'll go to a different one.'

'Sure,' said Dest, guiding Terry through Sultyr. He already knew the streets and even some of the locals. He assimilated everything quite fast, well, it's not that hard, when you have a light that goes way beyond the sky. It serves as the perfect reference point, and he could tell where the bars, the barnacle and the gym were by his relative

distance. When he arrived, the place had a huge staircase with huge pillars from where vertical advertisements unfolded and swayed in the wind. On the top, a huge rotating sphere that had the date of the next big battle, featuring Wlad. This wasn't just an illegal underground spot. Terry dropped his backpack, gazing at the building and standing very small before it. It was him and the future. A door that only god knew what it held. He felt a tingling creeping over his hands, then belly, until it reached his feet.

'This is it, Dest,' he said, hopeful. 'What do you think?'

'It's enormous. I'm pretty sure the salaries are as big as this building!'

'Let's hope they are. Let them be. Please be. Let's go.'

Terry picked up his backpack and held it in his hand, while he climbed the stairs. In between, and below the steel rails, a small aqueduct streamed a fine line of water. He touched it with his fingers and fixed his eyebrows.

'Do not drink it,' a security shouted from the top of the stairs. 'Not healthy,' he continued.

Terry cleaned his hands on his pants and walked to the top.

'Thanks for the advice,' he said, as he got there.

'No biggie.'

'Do you know where I can sign-up?'

'For what?'

'The battles.'

'I don't think it works like that. You have to send in your curriculum, then you might get an appointment, and only then you start your internship.'

'Internship? Curriculum? I just want to make some money.'



'You're lucky you're talking to the security here. An advice, don't say you're in it for the money, say you're in it because you want to be an actor. Between us, I don't think they're even real fights. It's staged.'

'What? I've been in a real fight myself. It's real, trust me, but sometimes they go easy on you. Dest here knows what I'm talking about, don't you?'

'Oh, so you might have a chance. Who knows. I'm just the security here man, you have to go inside and give them sweet talk. They love sweet talk.'

'I guess I'll try my luck then. What's a curriculum?'

'You're not from here, are you?'

'Mouhnia.'

'From Mouhnia huh. That might put you ahead of all the contestants. Sultherns love foreigners. Especially when they get their ass kicked.'

'They're going to love me then.'

'Ha-ha, go on, try your luck.'

'See you, have a rest of a good day,' said Terry, stepping inside. The huge transparent windows allowed the sun to caper into the hall, lightening the white mosaics of the floor, straight into the glossy desk where a young man in a suit sat, with a thousand papers running through his fingers. Two Ikons accompanied him but the man didn't notice Terry was there.

'Ahem,' grasped Terry.

'Hello,' the man said, looking over his spectacles, disgusted, as he saw Terry full of dirt. 'Can I help you?' he asked.

'Yes, I want to duel with Dest, my Ikon.'

'I'm afraid we're full. We usually schedule an appointment before going around asking for jobs.'

'I'm not from here, so I didn't know. Dest's here, he has a purple light. That's right, a purple one. I'll make a fine addition to the team and deliver a spectacle worth of god's time.'

'You sound motivated, that's a plus, but it's not everything, obviously.'

'I've got experience.'

'You do? You fought before?'

'Yes. I lost, but everyone was very pleased. Mostly because no one betted on me so everyone doubled their money.'

'You're a first. All dirty, honest and willingly. Was it in one of the underground gyms?'

'I didn't know they were illegal, I swear.'

'It doesn't matter, we're full right now, leave me your contact, and we'll proceed to get in touch with you as soon as there are any vacancies.'

'Ok, I guess. I don't have a contact... Should I come back next week?'

'It doesn't work like that pal, I'm sorry. You're free to come, but don't expect a different outcome.'

'What am I supposed to do then?'

'What do you mean?'

'I've got nothing, and nowhere to go.'

'You are definitely throwing away every chance of working here with us. You're good at that, aren't you? That's why you've got nothing.'

'Hey, a lot of things happened that were definitely out of my control. I was just asking for an advice, you didn't need to make me feel bad,' said Terry, turning his back on him and muttering 'idiot', on his way out.

'So, how did it went?' the security guard asked him under the pillar's shade.

'Like everything in this place. To shit,' said Terry, going down the steps.

'Sorry to hear that, better luck next time,' the security shouted from above while finishing his cigarette.

'All of this for nothing,' thought Terry.

'No, not for nothing. We'll find yourself a spot in the illegal fights, without a manager,' said Dest.

'Is that even possible?'

'We'll find out. Let's go to the place where you and Wlad fought. They must know of something.'

Dest guided Terry to the place where the illegal fights took place and in the way he saw a million Hilda's, a million Sora's, and every good person whoever crossed his way. He never seemed to remember those who did bad to him, but those who did good. In his travels through space, in his journey through this god forsaken place, not once, he thought about William. A minor threat, for him, although he's the reason behind everything that happened. Goodness is an undervalued superpower. Through a trip down the memory lane, they finally reached the gym. Couple of guys were sitting outside with their Ikons, staring at the ground. He feinted through them and went inside. He didn't care anymore, he had been rejected so many times that now it just didn't matter. Like when you make so much love that it loses its meaning, or when you drink so much that you have a hard time getting drunk.

'I want to fight,' he said.

The ones who stood outside stared at him with a smirk, while the ones inside told him that he needs a manager.

'I'm his manager,' said Dest.

'Ikons can't manage,' they replied.

'They sure can. Better than you. I keep track of all the fights, the power of my current, the speed of my motors, the signal level, my weight, I monitor everything.'

'Ok ok, we don't really need that, all we have to know is your name,' one of them said, taking out a crumpled paper from one of his pockets. One of his friends handed him the pen.

'You're going to write it down?' Terry asked, trying hard to keep his composure so he wouldn't laugh in their faces.

'Yes, i'm going to write it down,' the guy said.

'See, we Ikons are better at managing. No need for all that ink spilling.'

'Yes, but the spilled ink, can't rewrite itself. And if it did, it would leave a mark. On the other hand...'

'My database can't be rewritten,' said Dest.

'Of course it can, anyone can do it, if they know what they are doing. The worst part is that it doesn't even leave a trace. Now, if we were to keep the logs of the fights in an Ikons database, the rascals for instance could switch the fights to their amusement, and laugh their asses off from wherever they hide.'

'Such an aversion to the rascals.'

'Yes, they destabilize society, hence, our business, and we don't like it. You fight at nine. Don't chicken out, like most of them do.'

'Count on me. By the way, what do the fighters do, when they're waiting to fight?'

'They train, duh,' the kid said, wrapping up the paper and shoving it in his pocket.

'Sounds fair, I guess,' said Terry, walking out.

The two kids sitting at the entrance looked at him from below and followed his footsteps as he went down.

'So, you're going in the pit?'

'Yeah, I guess. What about you guys?'

'I'm too scared. I've come to watch my brother fight. One day I'll be like him.'

'Why are you scared?'

'I don't know how to duel, besides, my Ikon's a cheap one. It doesn't really have a colored light.'

'Does it really matter?' Terry asked.

'Of course, I think he's a bit dumb,' he whispered, 'but you, you've got an indigo light. I've never seen a fight with one before, although I grew up hearing stories about them,' he continued.

'For me, he's not an Ikon, he's my best friend. He's Dest,' said Terry.

'You see, maybe when you stop seeing your Ikon for being just an Ikon, he can finally be everything he was born to be. When you think of him being just dumb, and nothing more than that, he'll live his life thinking he's dumb, and nothing more than that. Maybe that's how you see yourself... But remember, you are responsible for his development, for his success. And his success, can be yours too, so be kind to him, and he'll be kind to you,' said Dest.

'You think?' the kid asked enthusiastically.

'Of course, talking from own experience.'

'Unlike mine, Dest is quite smart,' the kid said.

'You're not listening, are you?'

'I am, it's just that I really believed he could do better you know... When we're kids we're always imagining greater things only to be crushed by life's reality. Life's not magical... It's just this.'

'Of course it's magical. Look around you. Look at the sun in the morning, and the moon at night. Isn't that magical. There's gas burning in the skies... How can that not be magical. How our world fared... It's magical... Everything just too perfect. Just the right amount, at the right time... We must not make a fuss, we must not make a sound, and allow the world to continue dancing, round and round.'

'What are you talking about?' the kid asked.

'Never mind, just believe that you're able to do better, and you'll eventually do.'

'I will,' the kid said.

Terry was about to turn when he rammed against someone.

'Rel!' he shouted. 'What've you been up to!'

'Terry, my man! Not much, not much, just getting ready for the spiritual revolution!'

'Spiritual revolution?' Terry asked.

'It doesn't matter. Lunch?'

'Sure, I was actually worried I wouldn't have anything to do until late noon,'

'Lucky you found me. No one was ever lucky to find me,' he joked.

'I missed you pal,' said Terry.

'So, what are your plans for the night?' asked Rekun, already walking.

'I have a duel,' said Terry.

'You're going in the pit?'

'Yes. I already had one fight, but it was like sponsored, it wasn't real. It was meant to deliver a good show, nothing more. Just pure entertainment.'

'Oh I see, tourists like that. That's where they make their money. But the one you're having tonight, that's real. Dest might get hurt. Why aren't you practicing?'

'Because I found you.'

'You wouldn't be practicing anyway. Might not know you well, but of that I'm sure.'

'You do know couple of things. Since you left, my world crumbled down, then it built up, then it crumbled down again... You should've seen it.'

'That's how the greatest stories are told. I don't like the stories they sell here. Look,' he said, staring at the showcase of a book store. 'Crap, crap, crap, bullshit, crap... Writers take pride in writing twenty novels even if the twenty they wrote don't make up for one. They should take pride in writing one that stands the test of time, that when you close your eyes, you remember it. Those are the true, genuine stories. The ones you don't carry under your arm, but those you carry under your skin. The ones you don't own... The ones that are free, that don't mean to sell you something in between the lines... The ones that don't merely sit on the shelves, but that fly around the house as if magic carpets. These stories, all very detailed, very egoistic if I must say, they don't leave room for the magic carpets to fly. They don't allow you to imagine. I remember a time when we'd imagine everything... Now, everything's imagined for us. We started to write stories, because we had too much of what's real, so we idealized worlds with words. Now, our world's so fake that we seek reality in between the lines of imagination.'

'You always seem to know what's best for everyone, how come you don't know what's best for you?'

'Nobody knows what's best for them... But after the spiritual revolution, everyone will.'

'What's that?'

'It's what I've been focusing on. It has to do with what I've told you actually. Sultyr has become a reflection of Valaart. I've been following a man very closely and it's not looking pretty. William's preparing us for the eventual seize of Sultyr.'

'What are you talking about? William knows nothing of Sultyr. If he did, he would've been here already.'

'He's getting smarter. He won't do what he has done in the other planets, no. If you want to control a planet, first you must control their resources. That's why I insist that everyone should be auto-sufficient, because by being so, you don't have to take anyone's shit. I know the game he's playing. I see through him. He's a master deceiver. The whole philosophy behind creating all these items... What are they for, really? Do we need a million books? Or one hundred that are good? That's how a factory works, that's how the machine works. The endless production of things to meet a market demand, and, if it isn't met, they make sure it will, because nothing can come in between the fantasies they hold inside their privatized minds of what life should be like. It's what keeps the world's go around, the endless buying and selling of things we never needed. Now, after the spiritual revolution, when every being becomes auto-sufficient and starts living up to his divine purpose, there'll be no need for all the mediocrity that bombards our minds, day in, day out. Every day they try to seize your mind, with their rhetorical propaganda. All the reasons why Valaart failed are now upon us. I know he has to do with all this... My father, my father told me of someone behind the curtain, pulling all the strings. But when we'll know how to do things on our own, well, we won't need him anymore. He'll cease to exist. That's how we'll win. There's no need for a war because it will be too much for us to recover from. No. All we need is faith, faith in us, faith that we can go on without all these things we thought would make us happy and



that would give a meaning to our lives, but the meaning Terry... The meaning isn't about living a thousand lives. It's about living one life that matters.'

'He won't allow for that to happen. I know it. He has everyone working for him, on his side.'

'I know, I know, and even the ones who think they aren't working for him, actually are. This is why the spiritual revolution will be so important. It's when we break free, from what keeps us down. Rising above it, means to rise to our god given divinity, to remember our sanctity and the holiness of the human purpose. This is what I've been working on.'

'That sounds crazy,' said Dest.

'Of course, what would you know of divinity, right?'

'More than you.'

'Of course you would, of course you would. You don't even have a spirit. You're a program, you don't know what it means, you never will. Probably just William's puppet. Anyway, here, there's only two parties on top, and they're always pushing right until there's nothing left. They're looking out for something you know... Everyone's trying to keep a hold of things that aren't even theirs to begin with. An invisible throne it is. I'm sick of pushing... I want to pull us forward. This is not what our forefathers envisioned for us.'

'Who are your forefathers?'

'You've never heard of Sultry's story?'

'I did,' said Terry. 'Couple of times. I've actually came across them up in the karsts.'

'You did?'

'Yes, but he got angry with me, that I lost something...'

'What have you lost?'

'I'm afraid I've lost a planet soul.'

Rel stopped for a second, and then looked at Terry.

'A planet soul? Is it real?'

'Yes, I had it, I swear... I left it in the ship, and someone took it...'

'That's the missing key I was looking for. Now it can finally take place.'

'What?'

'This is it. Everyone told me that I was taking things too far, but I'm quite sure I wasn't. You were the missing piece... Of course you were. I wouldn't meet you just because... There was a higher purpose for all this. For you to arrive here.'

'Can you tell me what are you talking about?'

'I have to check on the black market. Someone has a god damn planet soul and probably don't even know. We never know the treasure we're holding on to, right?'

'What about our lunch?'

'Our lunch, I'm sorry Terry. This is by far the most important time of my life. I have to make some calls and make things happen.'

'But will you return it to me if you find it?'

'It doesn't belong to you. It doesn't belong to anybody.'

'I have to return it to the planet Rel. That's what your forefathers expect me to do... They said it's the only way there is.'

'I don't think so. See all these people? They don't have a soul... It has been stolen from them. We have to give it back to them. Not to another world. We don't need other worlds, we need ours.'

'Since when do you care about Sultyr? You despise this place. And... Sultyr still has its soul.'

'You're wrong.'

'I'm wrong?'

'Doesn't matter. I have to go man. Will you be ok?'

'Yeah, I guess... You're always appearing, disappearing...'

'Sorry Terry. We'll make it up for all the lost time. Promise.'

'Ok, I guess.'

'See you soon.'

Rekun left in a hurry without looking back, and Terry watched his silhouette disappearing in the haze. Alone again, he went towards the square of nowhere, and there he had his lunch, bought from a steaming, walking stand, with no waiters, just sweet and sour pancakes. He went towards the river, and sat there, watching couples drifting away in the gondolas.

'I'll be alone forever,' he thought.

'No you won't. I'm here with you, right?' said Dest.

'Right,' he said with a sad voice, as if grateful yet distressful.

On the other side of the river bank, there stood a kid, staring at Terry, as if overseeing him. It wasn't just a curious stare... It was more than that. Terry looked around, and then he looked up, and glanced at him again, and the kid just wouldn't take his eyes off him, not for a second. He felt uncomfortable so he got up and waved at him. The kid ran and hid behind the pier.

'Who's that?' he asked.

'Some rascal, maybe,' replied Dest.

'He was watching us, wasn't he?'

'I don't think so.'

'Why would he run?'

'He's a kid, kid's are running all the time,' said Dest.

Terry thought about his words for a second and went about his way. The wind for once blew away the time, that refused to pass, that always, always longed for the past, always happy to be where it's at, to move in circles, to never point anywhere new, and the night, amidst all the doubts of the day, crept in and settled. It was time. Terry checked his pockets to see if he hadn't forgot anything and moved along with Dest to the pit. Through a cloud of smoke and empty beer bottles he made his way to the duel. He saw Ark standing there and waved at him. He smiled, as if he wasn't holding any grudge and happy that Terry fought his way back where he thought he belonged. That's what he wanted from him. To fight back. We're always fighting something... Even when we're not. We're always going against something... When we move, when we breath, when we create... We're fighting against complacency, against staleness. Some fight for their lives, others fight for life itself, for it doesn't belong to you, or to me, but to everyone. Life doesn't have an owner. Life's free. And so should you be.

'You have to sign this paper,' said a guy close to him. 'In case anything happens, you're responsible. We don't pay for reparations.'

Terry glanced at the paper but didn't read it, he couldn't, even if he tried. The agreement was hand written and had stains all over it.

'You pay me now, or later?' he asked.

'After the battle, always.' the guy replied. 'This won't be much of a duel. Bust's always drunk, he can hardly keep his balance. Look.'

Terry's opponent wobbled his way down into the pit and finally fell. He had no Ikon.

'He forgot his god damn Ikon again. Fucking idiot,' the guy said, walking towards him.

He waved and complained, and then pointed at the crowd, where his Ikon was. It didn't look scary... It was more of a domestic Ikon. It whirled around and people laughed, and cried, and pointed at him. Some chanted his name, he was renowned and loved. Bust, the man who never sought a victory, and because of that, he had already won. That was it, for most of the fight. Terry was actually embarrassed and felt sorry that he had to win over such a fragile soul. The fight ended like any other, no casualties, no scrapped bits all over the floor, no arms, no eyes taken... Just laughter, pure laughter, of the audience, who instead of following the Ikon's lasers, followed Bust's missteps. They weren't looking to see an Ikon burst in flames, but rather to see him falling. When he went left, they screamed, when he went backwards, they shouted, when he went right, they cried, always looking for his fall. Always looking for that moment, the climax... When everything unravels. When everything ends. Ark shook his head in disapproval but he also had a good time. Terry went to collect his money and the guy asked him if he wanted to duel again.

'Yes, I would love to,' he answered.

'Ok, get ready, you're going in five.'

'What, now? I just had one.'

'The other guy didn't show up. Was a newbie, like yourself. I've told you, they always chicken out, but there's nothing to be afraid of, we're good at matching people.'

'Thanks for thinking so highly of me... If I hadn't shown up, I would've won, nevertheless. He's his worst enemy, apparently,' said Terry, looking at him with disdain, as the guy was being carried by his mates out of the pit.

'Very cocky for a boy your age. We'll see if it will remain that way after the next battle.'

Another guy came in, but this one meant business, he even had an associate who carried couple contraptions in his hands, making everything look quite official. A red light would flash and he would adjust the screw of the contestants Ikon until it turned green. His lips spelt 'perfect' way too many times. Terry pretended to be checking Dest but he would fly away leaving him in a dork state. A dork state is when you're pretending to be doing something and someone realizes you're not. That's a dork state. To avoid mockery Terry would spin his finger in the same direction, as if it was all deliberate. From the crowd, he looked like a fool, a buffoon, almost worse than Bust, but he kept on doing it, because well, he had nothing better to do. From one side Terry made his finger dance, and on the other, the contestant's assistant polished the mediocrity out of their Ikon, into an immaculate state.

'What a shiny, metallic surface,' Terry thought.

Little did he know that it was going to be his demise. The duel started and both Ikons were flying around in circles with their lights set on one another, moving forward and then backing, testing each other. The first blow came out from Dest, who missed, but got hit right after, staggering in the middle of the pit, unable to realize where it came from, nor why wasn't he able to make a proper swift evasion. Turns out the shinny armor reflected the opponents lasers and blinded them for a second. Terry got to the conclusion that this wasn't a battle that was going to be won through a long distance fight, but rather close combat. He geared up, shook off the blow, and went after him, as if the whole thing just got personal. The opponent always tried to keep his distance, firing his thin lasers while briefly turning his shields on. There was no way Dest would get through him.

'Shoot n' scoot,' Terry thought, and that's what Dest did, right after. Terry's vision replaced Dest's and he shot him right in the visor. Lasers were fired back but got

lost against the walls. The opponent was badly injured, and apparently was unable to continue the fight. Terry and Dest won, for the first time, and the crowd went wild.

'The kid has done it,' was heard from the left.

'Take that Knut,' was heard from the right, and brought a smile to Terry's face.

'I've done it,' he thought, 'I've done it!'

A weird confetti flew amidst some poor pyrotechnics, but it didn't matter because Terry had won, and with that seemingly unimportant victory, he got back his most important characteristic. His confidence. He was back. He looked at him and god if he was hot. The boy was steaming.

'Nice show, fast, but nice,' the guy said, handing out some dewes to Terry.

'Tomorrow, at the same time.'

'I'll be here,' he replied, taking them from the guy's hand.

He got out and went straight into a bar standing nearby. He got himself a cold beer and sat at a wooden table. The beer dripping downsides filled the wooden cracks.

'What a fight,' he said, a bit louder, thinking he's the shit, still shaking.

'I know, I'm that good,' replied Dest.

Terry looked around and time moved slowly, so slow he could taste a thousand different flavors in the beer... And the flavor it lingered in his mouth was of victory. He didn't even have a home, yet he felt the most fortunate of them all. Of the ones who stopped by to forget what life tastes like. To drown the endless feelings that life bestow upon us. To become numb to the most extraordinary experience one could feel. An unique wave... Where we were on the crest but somehow ended up in the undertow.

'I'm worried about Rel...' said Terry, looking over his glass.

'Why?' asked Dest.

'I don't know, he's a bit like me. Always getting himself in the weirdest situations... Hope he doesn't do anything stupid regarding the planet soul. I would most likely do... We shouldn't have taken it.'

'Who knows what might come out of this... It's too soon to say anything.'

'That's right I guess. I hope he's alright...'

'He is, he's resourceful, he lives his life with nothing, he will find a way.'

'Everyone's finding their ways... Is there a way?'

'There's more than one. There's a thousand of them... We've walked through one for so long that we forgot to explore the ones nobody has ever walked upon.'

'Where are we going to sleep?'

'The barnacle?'

'Yes, I would like to see Leonie... But I don't want to sleep in the same room. I would die longing for them to romp through the door.'

'Who?'

'Kai... Kosta and Gale. Where are they... Why did they leave.'

'They had to... When we're in fear we make the most stupid mistakes. You were all running out of money... They left to seek a security they couldn't find in the Barnacle. I think they saw you as some sort of leader...'

'Me? A leader? I'm a kid... I can't lead myself, how am I suppose to lead anyone else?'

'You gave them hope... That's what leaders do. When they saw you in the state they lost it because they looked up to you.'

'That's sad... Everything because of a drink I wasn't even supposed to try. And then Sora... I guess I was afraid too.'



'We all are... But you need to focus now. There's another duel tomorrow. If you make this right you might earn a lot of money and buy a ship.'

'With what we get, I'll die before I'm able to.'

'Probably, if you don't get better. If you get better people will pay in gold to see you fight. To meet you. Maybe you can sell your story in the black market. From nothing, to everything.'

'That'll be a cool title, but it's just wishful thinking.'

'It helps, right?'

'It sure does, I guess.'

'We have to make you look cool, that's how people will like you.'

'What do you mean?'

'You know, we like certain stories, because we can see ourselves in them. Some we don't like a lot, because they're so far off from reality that we can't relate. The best stories are the ones written with the heart... That's something common to everyone. We all have it, we all can relate. Ideals can differ... There's a whole spectrum of philosophies in which nothing more than interests are at stake... But love, everyone can relate. Look at all the pop songs, to write a love song is instant success because of that. Everyone has felt it... Everyone knows what it's like, to be at the mercy of god's will.'

'Isn't that manipulative?'

'It is. A bit... But if you want to sell...'

'I don't want to sell,' interrupted Terry. 'Especially my image. I want to give out something genuine... Along with what Ark taught me. I don't care if people will like me because I look cool, I care for people liking me because what I do is good. I don't want to be judged by what I believe, but by what I produce. We shouldn't demand from anyone something we can't deliver.'

'We're always demanding... Unfortunately we meet the market demands and not what the consciousness needs. We've been setting ourselves for so long a deadline, that now we have to answer to one. We give birth to the things we believe in... And from the ashes they rise, to entangle with our lives... From fantasy, to reality.'

'I've figured out this place already, and it's exactly that. It's a game of interest. Nothing more... As shallow as that might sound. There's so much more to the universe... The nobles sure knew how to spend their time, in a perfect harmony.'

'Some people might think this is all there is to it, and live happily playing the game.'

'What if Rel's right about the spiritual revolution?'

'Maybe he is, maybe he isn't...'

'Maybe people need that... Something different to believe.'

'Or maybe not... People will believe whatever they want to believe... And if it would've been because of that, they would've believed in it already. It was always there, for them to see. If someone can't, no one can make them...'

'Another one?' Asked Lex, from the counter.

'I don't think so, I have a duel tomorrow,' said Terry, adjusting his worn out shirt.

'A duel? Well, well, do I feel a big shot on the making or what?'

'Of course,' said Terry, falling into Lex's trap.

'Here it is,' said Lex, handing a flaming shot to Terry.

'Oh come on, that's not fair. I thought I was the big shot.'

'It's ok, it's on me,' said Lex, as he fixed one for himself. 'Cheers,' he shouted.

Different costumers gathered 'round the counter looking at them, willing to take whatever they were taking.

'See, scam artists use this scam all the time. People act like monkeys, monkey see, monkey does... If I offer one shot to someone, I'll immediately sell four of them. Sometimes I make a really elaborate dish, and sit on the counter eating, and I know I'll sell a lot of them. It's like a karmic thing, I don't know, what I do know, is that it works. All the time,' said Lex, going round the counter to make some more shots for the other costumers.

'Everyone has a strategy here... I can't understand it. While people focus on the strategies, they forget about what really matters, the product,' said Terry.

'True that,' said Dest. 'But that's not the only thing... One should not underestimate the power of crowds. Our primitive feelings that always look to belong, is very susceptible to this phenomena, that's why nowadays a lot of people create a group behind whatever it is they're selling to make you want to join them. Nobody wants to be the first. Nobody wants to take the first step... But people are willing to follow, something. Sometimes... Those are the tools of propaganda. They edit images to make it look like huge crowds supporting them, so in a sense they become legitimized. They point at people before their speeches as if the crowd acknowledges them. These cheap tricks are used by everyone...'

'But, shouldn't they be ashamed of using them? What's the purpose, of cheating the people you want to earn the respect from?'

'They're not looking to earn the respect from the people, otherwise most of them wouldn't do what they do. They're looking to earn the respect of their masters. Like a dog who always do what we want, hoping for the next throw. For the next bone.'

As Dest finished the sentence, Terry spotted Sora, at the entrance, looking at them. They both froze. They wanted to say so many things that they ended up saying nothing.

Sora left, and Terry could almost smell her perfume across the room. His heart beat shook the glasses in the shelves.

'Hey kid, take it easy,' said Lex, from the counter.

Terry looked at him, and then buried his face on his arms.

'We should be going, you have to rest,' said Dest.

They waved Lex goodbye, and went out. When they reached the Barnacle, it was closed, and had a piece of paper hanging on the door, spelling: Holidays.

'You have to be kidding me,' said Terry, taking the piece of paper off the door in despair. 'What now?'

'Back to the streets?' asked Dest.

'Sure, it's not that bad. The cardboard kingdom is my kingdom now. A kingdom ready to dissolve upon the weakest loft of fresh air.' said Terry while getting a piece that laid underneath the tabernacle's welcoming mat.

'We used to make them when I was a kid, remember Dest?'

'Somehow... Although when I try to access such memories I can't project them. There's something... But I just can't.'

'Don't worry, it's just the past.'

They got up to the alley where they once slept, but his spot was occupied, and the cardboard kingdom queue was stretched way further than before.

'With what shall I dream tonight?' asked Terry, looking at the stars. 'Do you dream, Dest?'

'Sometimes.'

'Of what?'

'Of electricity,' said Dest, jokingly.

'No I mean, really, what do you dream of?'

'Sometimes I dream of things I've never lived, of people I've never met, and of things I've never done... Once I had a dream that I was human. And I could do things like you do... But I woke up when I touched my own arms. Maybe it's because I don't know what it feels like... What it's like to feel. What it's like to feel something?'

'Like love?'

'Yes, like love. What is love?'

'It's when your heart beats faster... It's when you can't possibly express through words but rather through kisses, how you feel towards someone.'

'That's it?'

'It's when you see the meaning of life gleaming through someone's eyes... It's when you find out why you're here... That's love.'

'I want to feel...'

'When you finally do, you wish you wouldn't. It's always like that...'

'Is it?'

'You used to be the one with all the answers, what's got into you?'

'I might have the most rational answers for the world around me, but do they serve any good if I'm not able to love?'

'We're getting deep here. Love yourself Dest, that's what Hilda tried to tell me.'

'How, if I can't...'

'You can. Dream of love Dest, dream of having the most perfect Ikon besides you... Sora's for instance. She deceived us but it's ok. That moment, when you were whirling around in circles in a complete singularity... To my eyes, that was love.'

'I was being fooled.'

'You'll always be Dest, you'll always be. That's exactly what love is.' said Terry, while trying hard to keep his eyes open, but unable to. Dest watched him falling asleep and left wandering alone through the streets.

'What am I thinking of, It's just chemical reactions in my batteries, it's nothing. Why do I care... To love, or not to love... I'm here. It's not important, and this... I can feel,' he thought, and in that moment, a breeze went through his system and it chilled him. He shivered... And the street froze. The lights inside every store shone brighter, and brighter, until his light was off, as if a candle that's been snuffed out.

'So, it's like this...' thought Dest, as he found his way back to the cardboard kingdom, and there, the recharging cycle began. Noises coming from everywhere woke up Terry, everyone was up and chattering. Terry thought he was still dreaming, because the cardboard kingdom is not famous for the ones standing up, but the ones lying down.

'What's all this,' he asked.

Dest shuddered and looked around.

'Sorry, I was dreaming of love,' he said, in a smiley voice.

'Ha-ha, getting fooled huh. You love it don't you.'

'More than I should, it seems.'

'What's up with the dwellers of the cardboard kingdom. They're up. They're never up.'

'Look, all the posters and signs. They were fixed over night. Look, there's a rose close to you. Someone left it there.'

'It was Rel, I'm sure it has to do with him and his revolution.'

'What do the posters mean?'

'Who knows? Rel was crazy enough to cover the city with signs... It can mean anything, everything... Or nothing.'

'He can't have done it alone, right? Come here, in this alley, it's the same.'

Terry and Dest walked through a city covered in art. The people spoke of the millions it would cost to clean it up. Apparently they missed the whole point of it.

'That's something never seen before, hey,' a man said. 'It was a failure, for some, because they know a lot about business, but apparently not a thing about life. While their too focused on material things, their sons were committing suicide, hey. No one remembers that. These advertisements that they covered, they tell you nothing about life, they don't contribute whatsoever to your development as a being, hey. The ultimate and most important characteristic is to profit, hey. Did you know, the paper they use in their advertisements are made out of the Nyahar ancient trees, spread out along the mountain range? I bet you didn't, hey. Their past, their history... For millenniums they've been here, and now they are ripped off to create these piece of shit advertisements. Who would've thought, hey. It's like laughing at the past. Laughing uncontrollably, schizophrenically at our god given history. And then they wonder why people aren't happy... Most of them aren't able to tell why, but it's because life is lacking life. It has been castrated, it has been sterilized. The very thing that brought us here, the cause of it all, is disappearing... And we are the reason for it. It's not the fault of a man, it's the fault of mankind. Or the lack of it.'

'I don't understand... I'm sorry. What do you mean? I don't even know what Nyahar trees are... And the advertisements, I didn't really like them, but they weren't harming anyone, were they?'

'Have you listened to what I just said? Nobody listens. Of course they were, not only the trees, but our souls also, with their emptiness. These advertisements on the

other hand, cleans them. They aren't trying to sell you something... They aren't trying to make you do things you don't want to... They aren't trying to make you be someone who you don't want to be. They're not selling an idea... Look at that one. There's no smiley face... There's nothing. In fact, the woman is turned... It gives you room, for you to think. We need room to breathe... Advertisements give us none. They smother us... We have too much of everything that doesn't matter, and little of everything that does matter. We're in need of a little sacrifice, if we are to survive.'

'You're like Rel, too extremist for my taste.'

'You know Rel?' the man asked.

'Yes, he was the first person I've met in here.'

'So, you're one of us, hey?'

'No, I'm not part of anything. I once felt like I belonged, but now I don't.'

'Where?'

'It's another story...'

'You should join us Terry. We can't put off for tomorrow or the day after... It has to be now. Otherwise it will be too late.'

'How can you be so sure?'

'You've seen what's happening around you?'

'Yes but... Someone once said that everything shall pass, doesn't matter what.'

'You can't just sit and hope for things to pass. You have to do something about it, otherwise they won't...'

'Go away.' completed Terry. 'The truth is, I don't want things to go away... I think that everything we see is fabulous, but unfortunately has been corrupted.'

'You might be right... I also think everything is sacred, but hey...' said the man, looking at the city with a smile on his face. He gazed upon it as if he was seeing



something no one else could. As if the city was alive... And maybe it was. Maybe it was breathing... Moving, coughing... Terry left towards the gym. He couldn't get the idea out of his head.

'They're selling something, of course, apparently everyone is selling something. He sold his idea to me too, and I didn't even ask him to.'

'You have to understand that...'

'No, I don't want to understand anything,' interrupted Terry.

Dest made a pause and then continued, as if it was nothing. Terry looked up to the sky and the clouds engulfed the sun in a long embrace. It darkened and only a few rays of light made it through. It wasn't a lot, but was enough for Terry. At that point, a bit was ok. Even none, would be. He was expecting more from the people around him... As Grub once said, we expect nothing but everything we are, so he filled his chest with air, and went straight to the pit.

'It's not even time,' the guys at the entrance said.

'I don't care, I'll just stay here training,' replied Terry.

They looked at each other and said nothing, they allowed him to be there. Even though a word wasn't spoken until the fight, it was like the room was filled with laughter, and chatter and everything they wanted to say but couldn't. Terry had spent only a couple of minutes with them but it seemed to him that he knew them all along.

'It's time,' the guy said, smiling. 'You don't have to sign anymore, we trust you.'

'Really?' asked Terry surprised.

'Yeah, go ahead.'

'But no one ever did.'

'Someone did now,' the guy said, and blinked at him. 'I've been through the same Terry... I know what it's like. Some of us just need that, a bit of trust. Changes our world... And when our worlds change, so does everyone's world.'

Terry left without saying a word, but his heart was racing. He had watery eyes, and Dest was spinning like never before. He didn't look at his opponent, he didn't care, he just looked at the Ikon, and when the host said go, Dest dashed, fearless, and took out the other Ikon in one single swift. He broke it, each part rolling on the floor while the main sphere flew all the way crushing into the wall. The other guy looked at Terry, but he didn't bat an eye. He left the room, took his money and went out.

'Hey,' the guy said behind him. 'What about tomorrow?' he asked.

'Same time?' replied Terry.

'Yeah, same time.'

Terry smiled and turned his back. This feeling of completeness overwhelmed him, as if now, there was nothing to live for. As if all he ever needed was a word. A word that changed his world.

'Can words change the world, Dest?' he asked, while building his cardboard kingdom.

'I'm not sure...'

'A word changed mine, today. Maybe that's what Rel wants after all. Maybe that's what Rel needs... To spread worlds of change. He's seeking for others, what he seeks for himself.'

'You think?'

'I don't know, I just thought of it now,' said Terry.

'Do you think I'll get out of here alive?' asked Dest.

'No one's going to get out alive... Life's the death of us.'

'Where do you think we go when we die?'

'You're the one with all the answers, not me.'

By their side, a man in a wheel chair stood up. What an amazing sight. They all looked at him, the ones on the left, the ones on the right, and behind that man, a big, gorgeous moon listened bewitched, to what he said.

'When we die, we go to the place we've helped build, while we were alive...

That's where we go, when we die.'

The wolves howled, and the man fell upon Terry. There was a silence, before everyone helped him getting back to his wheelchair. They were scared and amused. The thing he said penetrated right through everyone's souls. Those words lingered on for a bit, but then the night went on. Terry closed his eyes and fell asleep, thinking about what the man said, and there he was, in a city where there was no color. Everyone looked the same. It was an homogenized state. He walked through Sulyr's streets, but the shops weren't the same as he remembered. He got into a little one that sold mirrors. A vast collection of them. One could think that the one who owns a house filled with mirrors would look absolutely fantastic, would know every trace of their face, would have thousands of photographic memories of themselves, but apparently they didn't. She was ugly. How could someone so beautiful be so ugly. Most of the mirrors were pointed towards the counter, so she saw herself all the time from there. And she just looked at herself and to her big hairy wart in her nose. She just shook her head, and all the mirrors shook theirs. It wasn't in disbelief, no. She was quite credulous. What was weird was that Terry couldn't see himself in the mirrors. He waved and nothing. He was invisible.

'Why do you sit here, all day, looking at yourself,' asked Terry.

'I've got nothing better to look at. Am I not the best thing you'd ever seen young boy?' she asked without taking her eyes off herself.

Terry thought she was being ironic, but she wasn't. She truly believed in that. She believed she was gorgeous. And maybe she was. But not for Terry. He got out, and entered in another shop, full of sweets. He thought of Mary... And what she said about her reflection in a candy shop stand. The colors would pour through the main door where he tried entered but got barred by the owner's voice.

'Get out,' the owner said. 'We're closed.'

'But the door was open,' said Terry.

'It doesn't matter, we're closed, now get out.'

Terry left thinking how could a sweet's shop owner be so sour, and while he was looking back at him still waving his hands in the air, he stumbled upon a stand full of books. He opened some and they overflowed with letters, they spoke for the merchant.

'How much?' asked Terry, staring at the man who was surrounded by words coming out of the books, but none came out of him. Terry sighted and moved on thinking where was he at. Nothing made sense, it was the land of contradicting contradictions. He, the only who looked normal, was actually the one who was disdained.

'Can we still be normal in strange worlds?' he thought to himself, then approached a man who laid down on the pavement... He had nothing. The one frowned and looked down upon was the one who contributed the less to the state they were in now, and the ones idolized were obviously the ones who contributed the most, for they are nothing without anything, and that man, with nothing apparently became everything. This man that was so bad, was the man that in the end of this dream, was good. Everyone started to chase him down as he tried to help him, he was good and tried to help, there was no contradiction in that, so they saw it as a confirmation of his abnormality. He woke up scared and looked back to see if they were still chasing him,

but all he saw was a brick wall. He always used to remember his dreams, like he really had lived them. Maybe in another lifetime. It didn't matter, because it was early morning, and nothing can really matter at that point in time. It's just too early even for all the dream stuff. He got up and walked towards the pit. He started to practice with Dest, and by lunch he was sweating like he ate one hundred chilies. Everyone was quite impressed by him and they respected him for at least trying. No one else tried in Sultyr, at least for something big. Didn't matter where Terry went, he seemed to bring an invisible strength to the ones around him. He gave hope not with words, but with actions.

'I've seen you've been practicing non-stop. Do you want to extend your fighting schedule?' the guy at the desk asked.

'Sure, I would love to.'

'You've got a fight now. I don't need to ask if you're ready, right?'

Terry smiled at him and went down the pit. There was this guy who looked like a bozo. Suit and tie. He wanted so much to belong that it actually alienated him. Terry laughed from the other side of the pit, and started to mess with the guy's Ikon. Terry was forcing the Ikon to leave the arena, and the guy was running after it, begging him not to. The crowd went wild, laughing at him, while the light spot followed them around. After one hour of laughs and boo's, he had to forfeit. There was no fight, and Terry won, without firing a single charge.

'How'd you do it?' the kid at the desk asked.

'Me? I didn't do anything,' replied Terry.

'Whatever it was, it was fun. It was a first. If you keep entertaining people like that, you'll get lots of dews,' said the kid, handing him some.

'Are you ready for the next?'

'What? More?'

'The crowd loves you, we must take advantage of the hype. You're going to fight as much as you can, but please, don't use the same tricks over and over again, that will create a saturation, people will become bored, and you'll be gone in the blink of an eye.'

'I don't think so,' said Terry, as he went down the pit.

He fought the whole afternoon, against different opponents. He changed the game, because there wasn't a tournament anymore, you wouldn't go up against opponents who had a similar win and loss ratio, no, now, everyone wanted to beat Terry, and the word got out. Everyone came, to try their luck. Weeks passed and Terry's winning streak was oblivious, the more he won, the higher the price was for defeating him. His mild success caught the attention of Goldenbeard, one of the most feared pirates in Sultyr. He had kept Terry under his radar since he arrived, but he thought he was just going to turn out like the rest. Somehow he did not and Goldenbeard had to swallow his wrong augury.

'Ah, you're good,' he said.

'Thanks,' replied Terry.

'I'm Goldenbeard.'

'I'm Terry,' he said embarrassed.

'Yes, I know, you've never heard of me, that's because I'm not as good as you. I once fought like you do, back in my golden days, if you know what I mean. Now I take care of business.'

'What kind of business?'

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN - JOINING THE MACHINE

'Of fights. I offer sponsorships. Free entrance to the different events, free repairing of your Ikon and upgrading of course, free advertisement, a place to live, food, and monthly installments for your personal needs,' said Goldenbeard.

'That sounds good. What's the catch? Everything in here has a catch.'

'Indeed it does. Fight, that's the catch. And be responsible. There'll be a contract, and you can't break it with impulsiveness or whatever you artists are known for.'

'I'm not an artist... I'm Terry.'

'Good Terry. Here's the contract, and your Ikon's going to sign it for you, if that's ok. Without Ikon, there's no contract.'

'And without me?'

'If the Ikon's able to do the job on its own... Then it makes you needless,' said Goldenbeard smiling. 'Come on, I'll buy you some lunch.'

Terry followed Goldenbeard out of the building and through the streets.

'You see, all these streets are going to have your face instead of all this nonsense, I've already spoke with my team and we're building a persona, we're creating the face the masses want.'

'Why do you need me then?'

'Because you're that face, only a bit different.'

'I'm not enough?'

'You are, you are. They, on the other hand, aren't.'

'Why'd you say so?'

'It's just that some people weren't made for this world. They were made for a different one.'

'How can that be?'

'You question a lot things, don't you?'

'Yes, I've learned to do that...'

'Where?'

'In a different world, I guess.'

'Ha-ha, well, welcome to my world. You don't have to know about such things, but I'll tell you a little bit,' said Goldenbeard, as he walked with a cigar on his mouth through the streets. 'First we're going to raise the price of the tickets. Then we're going to take them out of the market to create scarcity. This way, we can profit even more.'



'What for?'

'So we earn more, and give you more. We can fund further research into the Ikons so they can improve.'

'Ok, I guess.'

'You're already saving us a lot of hard work, for instance, we won't have to create an audience for you because you've already got one. The truth is, we choose very well who we represent. It has to have value in it, we can't just do all the work and hope for the best. We like security. Randomness it's not good for business.'

'It sounds complicated, having to care for all that, when things should just be.'

'Nothing should just be Terry.'

They stopped in front of a magnificent building and Goldenbeard put out his cigarette while a waitress opened the door. Everything was white, silver and gold. There was a pianist at the end with his back turned to the audience. No one could see how he looked like, but everyone could hear how he sounded. He sounded like the moon. Not a crescent, but a full one. Terry and Goldenbeard sat close to the window from where you could see the streets. They ordered food from another galaxy. The most expensive, it seemed.

'Meat from Eldoran,' said Goldenbeard.

'Which meat?'

'Whale meat.'

'I've heard them.'

'You've heard them? Non-sense.'

'Yes, I've heard them... When I was in space.'

'You were in space huh. I knew you weren't from around here. Where are you from?'

'I'm from Mouhnia,' said Terry.

'Mouhnia... So you know how to speak the Mierti, don't you?'

Terry strangled, and then gasped.

'They never taught me,' spurted out of his mouth, while he looked away. He didn't even know what Mierti was.

'They never taught you... Or you're not a Mouhnian.'

'I was actually born in the Silver Mountain, and all my friends unfortunately had their tongues cut out, so I never spoke a word.'

'I see... Are you the prince of the Silver Mountain?'

'No, not the prince.'

'So who are you?'

'I'm Terry, I told you. I don't know a lot about my past...'

'You're lying.'

'I'm from Valaart,' he said, defeated and with his heart almost coming out of his chest.

'Valaart... A Valaarian, in Sulyr. What a great time to be alive. Don't worry, everyone here hates Valaarians, I'm ok with them.'

'You're ok with them?'

'Of course, good business. I'm ok with good business.'

'What kind of business you have with Valaarians?'

'Doesn't matter. Oh, here it is,' said Goldenbeard, as their main dishes arrived.

The waiter wanted to pour some crystalline water into Terry's tulip glass, but Goldenbeard ordered him not to.

'Terry's having what I always have,' he said, and the waiter poured some fine, ruby colored wine into their glasses.

'I never drank wine,' said Terry.

'This is definitely a bad habit,' said Goldenbeard. 'Not the act of drinking wine, but the wine itself. You'll go broke if you have one of these every day.

Terry smelled it, and then took a big gulp. His face became the wine's color.

'No, no. You're doing it wrong. You have to appreciate it... That's what you do with water, you drink to satiate yourself, but with this wine you let it linger... It has all this different stages in your mouth that you have to savor.

'So many rules,' Terry thought, taking a little sip. 'Tastes the same,'

'So? Is it good?'

'Oh yes, much better,' he said, rolling his eyes.

They finished their course, Goldenbeard left a very healthy tip and threw a key that slid until it met Terry's chest.

'Here, your place, as promised. It's not a lot, but it's better than the streets,' he said.

'How'd you know I was living in the streets?'

'Most of the ones fighting in the pit live in the streets... The good ones at least. They are way hungrier than the rest. I'll have to go now, but I'll send you a message through your Ikon tonight,' said Goldenbeard as he got up and left.

Terry stood there for couple more minutes, looking at the streets. People passed him by, but none of them looked his way, if not for a kid, who stood as still as him, looking him in the eyes, amidst the crowd. The music stopped and the pianist went to the backstage, Terry got up as quickly as he could, but once he stepped outside, the kid was gone. There was no one.

'Am I going crazy?' he asked. 'Dest, you've seen him, right?'

'Yes, he was here, staring at you, the same kid we saw in the pier.'

'Who is he? Can you replay what you've seen, please?'

Dest projected the recording, and held the frame still when no one was in front of him.

He had a mark all over his face, as if he had been struck by a lightning.

'Why's he following me?'

'I don't know, but we should be cautious. He doesn't look like he wants to befriend you.'

'He looks at me as if he hates me, yet he doesn't know me,' said Terry.

'Maybe he's Sora's friend.'

'You think?'

'Maybe.'

'It doesn't matter, I think he's trying to frighten me, but it won't work. You've got the location of the place Goldenbeard gave you?'

'Yes, he uploaded it to my drive. Follow me,' said Dest.

They got away from the part of the city where Terry has always been, into a much more rich one. It was a neighborhood that had blocks of houses with gardens and pools. If it wasn't for Dest, he would have gotten lost because all the houses looked the same and none of the roads had a name.

'It's one of these? Oh my god, look at them. They all have second floor.'

'Here,' said Dest, stopping abruptly.

Terry opened the gate and through a stony pathway they made their way towards the main black door, that had golden ornaments all over it. He stuck the key in the hole and turned it three times. The sound of the locks were loud, like a gunshot. The door opened slightly, and Dest entered right away.

'You have to see this,' said Dest.

Terry entered and the first thing he noticed was the fire place. The next was the huge screen standing by it, with an amazing painting over the top. The living room and the kitchen were joined together yet a different flooring separated them. The kitchen had tiles while the living room had a brown wood.

'Isn't this Flysk wood?' he asked, touching it.

'Let me see,' said Dest, retrieving some results with his laser. 'Indeed. It's Flysk wood.'

'Do they have Flysk tree's here too? The trees are the same in every planet?'

'Depends on the conditions... But no, each planet has their own. The seeds can't travel through space, so I believe trees are different in every planet.'

'So this has to come from Valaart right...'

'Yes, probably stolen merchandise. Sultherns are always on the lookout for Valaarian ship's to steal whatever they carry.

'Why would a Valaarian ship carry Flysk wood in space?'

'Maybe for the green planet, who knows. Flysk wood has unique proprieties, maybe they needed it for another world, and Sultherns took it.

'Maybe... Well, let's look at the rest of the place, shall we?' said Terry, going up the stairs. There was a bathroom to the right, and a studio to the left where a skylight illuminated his bed and some appliances he had back in the gym where he used to train.

'Cool, we can train here Dest.'

'Sounds good,' he said, analyzing them.

'Talking about sound,' he said, looking at a shelve carefully arranged with old disks. 'Can you play one of these?' asked Terry, taking one out. Dest approached him and uploaded the information to his drive. The song started to play while Terry laid in

his bed looking at the ceiling fan, spinning ever slowly. He felt the warmth of the sun on his face. He woke up with Dest beeping.

'What's happening?' he asked.

'You've got the message from Goldenbeard,' he said.

'Hello Terry, hope you found the place I've made available for you cozy. I've spoke with my team, and you have an important battle tomorrow afternoon. Be sure to come early so we can give your Ikon a check-up. Have a rest of a good night, ah, and don't forget, the battle's not going to be in that stinky pit you were in. You're going to fight in The Ikons League.' the message read.

'Who'd you think I'll fight?'

'Wlad,' said Dest jokingly.

'I'll get my ass whooped,' he said, falling backwards, dreaming of winning the TIOL. Through lasers and explosions a shy light came inward through the skylight and woke Terry up. He got off the bed and took a long, warm shower, so warm that the bathroom disappeared in a cloud of vapor. With the towel around his waist, he went down the stairs and opened the fridge. There was the best of everything in it. He made the breakfast and while eating he stared at his reflection on the TV screen. Dest was upstairs, so the only sound in the room was of him chewing, and the spoon hitting the porcelain bowl occasionally. When he finished he went up, got dressed, and stepped outside along with Dest, towards the maze of the same houses that unraveled in a perfect straight street until downtown. The first thing he noticed was couple of posters with his face. He stopped and looked at one for well over... A long time. Mesmerized. As if something that could have only happened in Eldoran.

'That's me Dest,' he said.

'Have you noticed, or are you too in love with yourself?'

'Notice what?' he said, looking at himself, with a soft smile.

'Your opponent. It's that kid who has been following you all over town.'

'Is it?'

'Yes, he has that scar. Look.'

'I didn't even notice. Finally we'll get some answers. Can't wait to face him.'

'Most likely surveying his opponent... Doing his homework.'

'But that's odd, because when we were close to the river he didn't know he was going to fight me.'

'True, but we don't know for sure it was him back then. It could've been anyone.'

'Can't you be sure?'

'No, the recording is far, far away. Besides, he was under the shade, I don't have high definition lenses.'

'It doesn't matter, he was probably trying to chicken me out. This is another competition, I bet there are some who take this very seriously.'

'Indeed. Let's head to the league for the check-in,' said Dest, leading the way. As he went up the stairs the security waved at him.

'Again? You don't give up, do you?' he asked. 'Wait a second, it's you, it's on the advertisements. You've made it.'

'Yeah, I got a little bit lucky,' he said.

He got into the building and the man behind the counter had a completely different attitude towards him. He wasn't condescending anymore, but rather servile.

'Why hello there, we meet again. I would carry your jacket for you, if you had one,' he exclaimed.

'You weren't full, after all,' said Terry.

'There's people joining and leaving every day, eh, it's just business you know.'

'You could've helped me, but it doesn't matter. I'm here for the battle, where shall I go?'

'I thought you were one of the rascals. I'm not helping such people, no I'm not. It's on the fifth floor. I know you have a digital contract, but there's some things you should know before you start. Your Ikon needs a check-up. Good luck.'

'Thanks for nothing,' said Terry, and as he turned his back he smiled. He got into the lift and pressed the 5th level. It was nothing like the one in the hideout. This one was smooth and silent. The doors opened and he stood in an office governed by Ikons.

'Please sit,' they said.

They analyzed him, then analyzed Dest as if doctors. Terry waited impatiently for some answers.

'Who's my adversary?' he asked.

'Jesky.'

'Aren't there people here?'

'It's cheaper to have Ikons doing this kind of work.'

'Why isn't an Ikon at the entrance then?'

'We don't know.'

'Who owns this place?'

'We don't know.'

'Is there anything you know?'

'Your battle will commence soon.'

'Wasn't it going to be in the afternoon?'

'Soon.'

Terry inhaled deeply and angrily.

'It's whenever you want,' the ikon said.



He then winked at Dest and they both laughed.

'That's more like it,' said Terry, stretching out and leaning against the sofa. The ikons finished the check-up, and apparently Dest was doing great. Even if he wasn't, Terry would make them believe otherwise.

'Kosta might've been right all along,' he whispered to Dest. 'It's actually easier this way.'

'Don't abuse of your power Terry, specially to subjugate others, for your own benefit.'

'Yes, yes, you know me, I wouldn't do it.'

'Sometimes the more we do, the more we forget of how it was before we'd done anything. It accumulates, and accumulates, until it's a complete mess.'

'Don't be a bummer.'

'Just telling you.'

'Sure,' he said, and at that moment, Goldenbeard broke through the door.

'Ready?'

'Yes, but didn't you say it was going to be in the afternoon?'

'Isn't it afternoon?'

'I don't know, maybe.'

'Dest's ready. This guy's tricky... He's being trained by some delusional guy who believe they can draw energy from plants. The thing is, he brainwashed them to such extent that they actually believe in this kind of stuff. Go in there and teach them a lesson.'

'Ark...' said Terry.

'You know him?'

'The one who trains him, yeah. Not the guy. He had been following me throughout the city.'

'I see. Scare tactics. Ark's been known to maintain contact with those up in the karsts. Lonely folks.'

'Why did they leave?'

'They couldn't adapt so they left.'

'I've heard they founded Sulyr.'

'And so what? Everyone founded Sulyr.'

'If you say so... Are we living up to the best Sulyr could be?'

'Probably not, but it's not my business. This is my business. Now go out there and show them why you're sponsored by us. Adjust the shirt so the logo's perfectly displayed. There,' said Goldenbeard. 'Follow me,' he continued.

They've entered the lift, and the building was in a confusion of bodies, sweating, pushing and pulling. Whistling and fussing. Goldenbeard pressed the button for the last level, and it took off smoothly as a light dream. The arena was sitting at the top of the world, at the top of everything and everyone. Terry saw Sulyr from above and it filled his heart with hope. He felt the breeze that either came north, south... Didn't matter which way to him, it mattered that it came. Although he had lost the planet soul, his borrowed family and his friends, he still had the universe that stretched far out to every corner of existence. All of that was worth fighting for. Valaart had none of this. They had no public sports at all... They worshipped the ikons 24/7. In a most nostalgic state, he saw Sulyr when only a few lived in it. There was something, something he couldn't tell from that afar, but it was in the air... A trust, a kindness that was out of this world. It didn't belong to any world he's been so far. But he felt it... He could've seen a thousand different things, from the mountains that weren't there anymore, from the city razed to

the ground, even the sky, which had a different color... All of that didn't struck him, as much as kindness did, as much as the telling of stories among swaying hammocks under the stars. As much as an arm, outstretched, looking for a connection, a touch... A hug. A touch that nowhere in the galaxy was felt, so they had to move into another planet to feel it. Can you imagine, what distant, cold worlds are out there. All of this vanished when his opponent entered through the rooftop. Terry trembled as he looked into his eyes. It was the kid. He went straight towards him but the securities held Terry and pointed him to go back to his corner.

'Why?' he shouted as a cloud of arms enlaced him.

The kid smiled, and proceeded to his corner, along with Ark, who sadly waved at Terry, as if he was obliged to be there. Both Ikons entered the arena. This one was like the one in the Noble's hideout. It had a shield, and once activated, nothing could go in or out. Terry was having a hard time with Dest, it was like the shield weakened his connection. Both were warming up, while the crowd grew to a point that some stood on the ledge, without a care. One meter and bum, they were gone, free falling into another dimension. Terry had never been this concentrated in something. This meant everything, so he thought. His body stood still, surrounded by all the chants, the laughs and the hysteria, but his mind rose, got out of his body, straight into thin air. The battled started and Dest disappeared in the heights. Terry imagined a whole different battle from what everyone's used to, and how he imagined it, was how it was unfolding. Almost religious, almost as if two gods were in that arena. But they were Ikons, they weren't gods, yet Terry felt as if Dest was. Through thunder and lightning he managed to score the first blow. The other Ikon backed off couple of meters, but regained his stability right after, and stroke him back. Terry couldn't do anything. Dest was no longer a god, and apparently was working his way out of the battle alone. He had it in his mind, but it

just wouldn't happen, as if the connection was lost. He looked at the kid for a second, and the kid looked back at him with a smirk, as if he knew what was happening. He clenched his fists and boom another blow, but this time he hit the net.

'That's it Dest,' he screamed.

Lasers were shot and at that time that was everything you could see, or hear. The smoke clouded up and concealed everything, and it took some time to vanish. As it did, both Ikons stood in each corner, waiting for a sign. Dest didn't get his, because Terry was apparently unable to control him. The more he tried, the less he succeeded. It was like he's energy was being drained.

'What could it be?' he thought.

Dest, who fortunately had been without Terry in the past, managed to do a great job, by approaching him with an evasive tactic and ramming against him with his new upgraded armor. The opponent fired lasers, but Dest was superior in every aspect. It outplayed him, and it came down to having the kids Ikon defeated. As the shield was turned down, he picked his Ikon and ran towards the lift, ashamed. Terry thought of chasing him but the idea quickly vanished from his mind as the crowd surrounded him, chanting and cheering. All the screens were screaming victory, while Ark found his way through the throng.

'Well fought. You're getting better. Good luck.'

'Ark wait, who's the kid? He's been following me around,'

'It's my cousin. He was brought up in the karsts.'

'Why was he following me? Why was I having such a hard time communicating with Dest?'

'Wish I could tell you... Now's not the time nor place. Enjoy, we'll talk later.'

'You could tell me,' said Terry, getting bumped in and out of the conversation.

'Don't worry, I will,' said Ark, leaving towards the lift.

Confetti flew from the rooftop down the city. When the fight finishes it's like a rain of color. The streets become an abstract painting. Terry was up there, feeling from the first time what it was like to ride the high tide. The crowd dispersed and a kid went close to him, asking for an autograph. He didn't know what to say. He stood there looking at the kid, who reminded of him, years and years ago. When he was a nobody, just a willing soul. The world was good, people were good, there was no ill-intentions, no envy, no jealousy, no tricks up one's sleeve, no death, no boredom, no boundaries,... It was what life should actually be. He took the paper off his hands and signed it. The kid left, waving the paper in front of his Ikon, as if this had been the best moment he had ever lived. And probably was. Kids are like that. Every moment is the best moment, because it's the moment, and nothing more. Just that.

'You did great,' said Goldenbeard from behind, bursting Terry's dream bubble.

'Thanks,' said Terry.

'You have another fight today, we're already monetizing the revenue from advertising. We don't even need to create a legion of fans, because apparently you've got one already. Didn't come as a surprise though. My assistant here, will take your Ikon for a full review. We'll give you details of the upgrades later.'

Terry looked at his Ikon which was his assistant for a second. He wanted to keep Dest, but went along with it.

'Sure.'

'Here, take this card. You can stay in the lounge, everything's for free. Meals, drinks, whatever's your cup of tea.'

'Thank you,' said Terry as he looked at it and then turned it around. 'It even has a map, to find the lounge.'

'Yes, it's on the third floor. If you need anything, talk with the assistant, show him the card, it will give you some privileges. Not everyone recognizes you now, but they will, soon,' said Goldenbeard. He left, and Terry stood there, looking at the card.

'Looks fancy,' he thought.

Some people stood on the rooftop, ordering beers and appetizers from a small stand, then they would lay on the sun loungers with their sun glasses on. Terry leaned over the balcony and saw different people pasting the advertisement of his next battles over all the art. He had mixed feelings, of something so pure being swapped by advertisements. He was looking good tough. In front of him two birds were nesting, and the smoke of a chimney rose and joined the clouds high above. With the sun starting to feel uncomfortable, he headed for the lounge, with the card as his map. There was no one there and an Ikon stood in the counter.

'I want a soda,' he said.

'You can have anything,' the Ikon said, shedding some light at the menu.

Terry looked at it and picked it up. It had pictures of great looking meals. He ordered a soup that came inside a bread, and had mushrooms of different colors in it. It didn't take long, before the soup arrived, steaming. He waited for some time and then dug into it. After it was finished he scrapped the leftover crumbs on the side with the spoon.

'You can eat the whole bread,' the Ikon said.

'I know, I'm just not that hungry, thanks.'

'Please throw the leftovers there,' the Ikon said, projecting his light towards the corner of the room.

There was a big sign, but he wouldn't have noticed if the Ikon wouldn't have told him. He got up and wiped his board clean, down a never ending hole. He peeped, trying to see where it lead, but it was all dark. He cleaned his hands after that and went towards

the rooftop. He sat at the counter and ordered a juice filled with ice blocks. Before he finished, Dest was back, with an incredible immaculate armor.

'Dest, what happened?' he asked.

'What do you mean?'

'I felt that we weren't one in the same, I was giving you all sorts of clues but you just did whatever you wanted to.'

'Yes, I felt the same. I don't know what happened. Maybe the security grid reflects the wavelength's?'

'Could be that... We have another battle, are you feeling fine?'

'Yes, great. They've polished and clean every bit.'

'You're looking good.'

'Do you have any idea against whom we'll be fighting?'

'No, Goldenbeard didn't say anything, but I suppose it will be fine, the main was the one we had. This one will be easy.'

The crowd started to fill the rooftop and the heat became unbearable. Everyone was stretching their hands to get a something fresh to drink. Terry felt their sweaty arms on his face, but didn't bother to turn around. He just sat there finishing his ice cold drink. The announcer came into the middle, did his thing, and called upon Terry and Lilly.

'Lilly?' he thought.

A girl with purple hair and a pink Ikon entered the arena. It immediately reminded him of Hilda. He looked at her astonished, without moving. Dest stepped in to the arena, and the security grid was turned on. There weren't as much people as before, but still, there were a lot. The fight commenced and the girl was fiery, trying to strike Dest every second. He didn't fight back, he just evaded her strikes. Terry felt as if he had gained the control again. It wasn't the grid after all. It was something else. Dest got tired and

slammed against her, knocking her out. It was a fast and easy battle, that left Lilly devastated. She picked up her smoking Ikon and left, without looking at Terry. She had a lot of fans, for someone who fights so bad. Maybe it's because she was hot. Terry picked up his things and left with his card in his pocket.

'See you tomorrow Terry,' the receptionist said.

Terry waved at him and left almost flying through the stairs.

'Don't get hurt!' said the security from afar.

As Terry finished all the steps, his posters were everywhere. The art in the city had disappeared, and was replaced by advertisements of his next battles. Everywhere he looked he saw his face. As he walked to his place, Rekun approached him from behind.

'Who've we got here,' he said.

'Rel!' said Terry hugging him.

'Big shot huh, the cream of the corp.'

'Cream of the corp? You mean crop?'

'I told you already, I always mean what I say. It was pun.'

'Forgot, you're always in and out like some sort of ghost. It's just temporary, in case you're wondering.'

'Temporary... Did you take a close look at what they're doing? The streets that were covered in art, returned to the sad show they've used to be, with smiling pricks who take comfort in the discomfort of others. Guess who's there. You. Terry. How did that happen for christ sake. How. No, of course not, you're too busy looking at yourself in the streets.

Every action you're taking are determining how things will unfold. You have to choose in which side you want to be. You're legitimizing this system, you're saying that everything that happened so far it's ok. That everyone who has died for a cause, died in



vain, because you're too fucking comfortable having meaningless bot fights. The future, it doesn't matter, all it matters it's you and how you feel, right. That's what matters. The guy you've been working for, he's behind a shady business here in Sulyr. He's Nefilian's nephew, the ones who changed Sulyr, for the worst, and forever, it seems. Follow me,' said Rel.

Terry stood there for a second digesting all the information, and then caught up with him ahead. He took him to a warehouse where thousands of Ikons laid inactivated.

'See. These people have been unknowingly the fuel behind the destruction of innocent homes, who happened to be born at the wrong place. Are there wrong places in the universe? A wrong place? No, there can't be such thing, every place should be the right place, and the most incredible one. They are preparing for something, they've always been... I've always felt it. We're trying for people to stand up not only for the future of Sulyr, but for the past too. We can be the best this universe has ever seen, we just have to make some sacrifices. It will be all for the better. There are some whispers that Goldenbeard has somehow a deal with William, and that's why he's so confident all the time. I bet he knows him.'

'Goldenbeard? Really?'

'I'm not going to lie, we're not sure, but everything points to that.'

'Rel, I've got to ask you, did you find the planet soul?'

'Not yet kid, but I've got some leads. It hasn't left Sulyr.'

'How'd you know?'

'Been in and out of the black market myself for a long time. I know people, stuff.'

'Maybe Sora could help us.'

'Sora's a rascal. They don't help anyone besides themselves. You have to be careful now Terry, something's coming. And it's not good.'

'What's coming?'

'A war.'

'A war? I've never seen a war. I thought there weren't any wars... I've always thought the world was a peaceful, beautiful place where kindness reigned. Is this what's growing up all about? How... How wrong I was.'

'I don't think it will remain a beautiful place... The conclusion that we've got, is that William isn't trying to conquer our world, he's trying to destroy it. Without nature, there's nothing that can oppose him. We stand the biggest threat to his omnipotence.'

'Why didn't he destroy me?'

'We don't understand everything yet, but we will, pretty soon. Lunch? Dinner?'

'Sure, I was just heading back to my new place. You should see it, it's huge, and has two floors!'

'So, you're indeed living the life,' said Rekun, as they headed to their favorite bar with Dest following closely behind. They had dinner and this time Terry paid for their meals. They chattered and drank, and the rain outside drained much like their mugs, that became empty several times. They were already tipsy, and Rel said goodbye to Terry. He left wobbling through the streets, as if they tilted right and left, left and right until he got to his home. The they after, when Terry got outside, everyone he came across was somehow crying.

'Why's everyone crying?' he asked. 'Is this even possible? What happened? Apparently Sulyr was having an epidemic of sadness. Their tears ran like rivers across the streets, and washed away all the baubles on the colored towels. Terry had tears up his knees.'

'I can't make sense of this,' said Dest.

Terry tried to talk to the people around him but their uncontrollable sobbing wouldn't allow them to speak, so instead they just cried, all of them... Longing for a moment they never lived, for someone they never met and a place they never visited... It was a global nostalgia of a feeling they never felt... So all of them cried.

'This is the weirdest city I've ever been to.' said Terry, with tears falling down his cheek. ' Why's everyone sad? I don't want everyone to be sad.'

'Maybe it has to do with the art spread out all around the city... Maybe they've seen what they have been missing. Maybe this world isn't the world we should be living in...'

'In which world should we be living in Dest?'

'In a world where there's hope, in every corner of every street. Instead of ocean breeze, they could be selling bottled hope. How's that for a business?'

'I would buy some. For how much would you sell it?'

'Free. All the hope's for free.'

'You wouldn't last a second in here,' said Terry, crying of laughter.

'Maybe that would be for the better.'

They both laughed, while everyone around them cried. It was the perfect dichotomy, that moment. In a single instant the very essence of the story was told. Terry's advertisement was washed away by the stream of tears flowing through the streets. All the art was again revealed, but the colorful city wasn't enough for them to cheer up it seemed. A woman approached them, she wanted to sell rubber boots and umbrellas, but she couldn't speak. Terry looked at her and they both cried. He rolled up his jeans and headed towards the river bank at a sad pace. The level of the water had risen because of all the weeping. He bent over the rails and stared at the calmness of the river slowly

draining into the sea as the rain fell. The ships approaching the dock overflowed with tears making them look like flying fountains. An ocean of sadness, it was. Terry couldn't understand what caused all of that... Why suddenly everyone was sad and crying, without being able to say why. There was a ship, that didn't though. He knew that ship from somewhere... He had seen it before. It was polished yet it looked clunky. It was missing some part already, as if it had been through a cosmic storm. His heart stopped, everything in him, his very being froze.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN - THE RESTORATION SCENE

'Could it be,' he thought, as he saw the ship approaching. The words became clearer, it was hope. Hope had docked at Sultyr's port.

'No way, I'm dreaming,' he thought, but the Noble's came out, of it, one by one, and it wasn't a dream, it was very real. The whole day it felt as if it wasn't real. The people crying, hope arriving... And Hilda... She was there. They couldn't believe it. She

saw him, it was the first thing she saw. She didn't care for the people who cried, for the ship's looking like fountains in the skies... None of that mattered. She ran straight into his arms, and it was a loving awkward moment. Terry pulled her close to his chest, so close she felt his heart beating in her cheeks. The nobles stopped at the docks, as if a family of immigrants, all bracing each other, looking at them, as if they've hatched an egg of love into the world. They were proud of that moment for it was everything they've fought for, all their lives. For people to finally come to realize and embrace the world as theirs, as their own. They started to cry too, and soon enough they were Sultherns, bitten by the nostalgia's epidemic.

'Terry...' finally came out of Hilda's mouth. 'You didn't change a bit.'

'You did,' said Terry smiling. 'You're more beautiful than before.'

'Oh stop it already,' she said, snuggling her face against his in a most warm embrace.

'Terry, my son,' said Grub, patting him on his head. 'This sounds bad, doesn't it, you loving birds.'

'I've missed you. I've missed all of you. Like crazy.'

'We've missed you too, brave souL,' said Abi, smiling at him.

Drangy stayed behind, and didn't say a word, he was just too emotional, as if he saw Ferdinand again. As if his spirit was embodied through Terry, so he stood on the back, knowing he'll have a chance to hug Terry and to talk to him soon. Szeb left the ship drunk. He looked like a monster coming out of a cave. He had an empty bottle in his hand.

'We survived. I thought you were all crazy, going through the great darkness. I thought I was drunk. It was the longest time I've ever been drunk through such ride. Oh my, oh my. Fresh air... This is what freedom feels like, innit?'

'Szeb...' said Terry while he cried and smiled.

Behind Szeb, a group followed. It seemed that they weren't so friendly, but who could they be. Terry hadn't seen them in the hideout.

'Who are they?' he asked.

'The Dawnfolks,' said Fuzz.

'I thought it was a metaphor... I thought I had been to the darkest corner of the hideout, and the Dawnfolks were the voice I've heard inside my head.'

'Nah. You've been to the labyrinth, but where the Dawnfolks hid, that surely was the darkest place.'

'Why... Why didn't I meet them.'

'After centuries of living underground, what was once a united group, also started to have some problems. Divergences of opinion about life. If there's a group, there will always be divergences of opinion. No society's immune to that, and it's great it's that way. The Dawnfolks were devout to the secular knowledge of our ancestors, and this was all they believed in. But Grub's father was different. Although he held strong beliefs about the metaphysical, he thought there should be a balance between everything. The knowledge shouldn't ever be forgotten, but shouldn't be mandatory, in his own words. Grub was already raised as a neutral, and he was the one who somehow gave birth to the Noble Cause. It created a segregation between us... And the Dawnfolks dug towards East, until the tunnels weren't used by neither of us. Yes, Grub's a stubborn idiot, and so are we. When we finally built Hope, we went to tell them, but they were expecting us already. They said it was in the scriptures. Of course we knew there was something else going on, but we went along with it and brought them with us.'

'What if it really was in the scriptures?'

'Come on, you can't know the future. It's impossible to know the future, more so such a seemingly small event.'

'They predicted William,' said Abi.

'And they predicted we would win that battle,' said Fuzz.

'Maybe you lost the battle, but will win the war,' said Terry.

'How? It has been lost... We can't possibly go against William,' said Fuzz.

'You ought to believe Fuzz, like that we never will,' said Terry.

'Fast learner,' said Grub, nudging Fuzz and smiling at him.

'How did you find me? How did you find Sultyr? No one knows where Sultyr is.'

'Remember the stone Drangy gave you?'

'Yes, what's to it?'

'It had a tracker in the very middle.'

'So the story you told me about the stone was a lie?'

'No, the story was true,' said Drangy, getting up front.

'I thought you guys lied to me, and forgot about me. All this time I was thinking about it... I couldn't think of anything else.'

'Oh come on... What did your heart tell you?'

'That you didn't.'

'That's all you had to trust,' said Drangy. 'Dest's looking great, look at him, you've been taking good care of him, huh,' he continued.

'Yes, we've been dueling... My life had been such a ride. Did you know I was in Mouhnia? And I had to do William's bidding, for a bit?'

'Yes, we've tracked your journey... We all wanted to go to Valaart... Leave it all behind... But we didn't. We stayed there like cowards hoping for something to happen.'

We put all our faith in a kid who had nothing to do with our cause. We shouldn't have done that. We should've tried to deal with it ourselves.'

'It doesn't matter, I was thrilled to finally be able to fight for something. I never had to fight for anything before. It was my friends, my family, after all. I'm proud I stood up for what's right... If I didn't, I would probably be William's puppet. I would've known nothing, if not for that sad reality I was brought in. Like every other Valaarian.'

'Valaarians?' the port keeper asked. 'Valaarians aren't welcome here, although you don't look like Valaarians. How can that be?'

'Excuse me sir,' said Jumpie from the back, 'You see, we're one of the first clans of the Valaart parts, we have nothing to do with the Imperialistic modern Valaart. Although some might say we're quite retrograde, we actually believe we're way more advanced. Anyhow, whatever your feud with Valaart is, it's surely a shared feud, for Valaart stands much as our enemy, as yours.'

'Jumpie...' said Terry, 'I've missed you too, willful dunce.'

'Beware who you're calling a dunce you little imbecile. We're not quite sure you aren't a spy, so my hypothesis is still relevant.'

They all glared at him.

'Don't look at me that way,' he said. 'I'm a scientific man, guided by empirical facts. Everything's right, until proven wrong. That's it,' he continued, while he stuck his nose up in the air. He knew he was wrong, but that was Jumpie. He always had the last saying, no matter what.

They fraternized away that sad day, and they gave a group hug, I'm not kidding, like some workers do before they start working. It was embarrassing, and all the people striding in the platform felt it. The tears didn't wash away that uncomfortable sight that easily. But it was warm. And that was a good thing. What kind of world sees love as



something awkward? How much have we deviated from The Way? Before Terry took them to downtown, he spoke with the port keeper and this time paid him to look out for hope.

'Look out for hope? That's the best thing anyone has ever told me to look out for. Hey, look out for hope!' he shouted, jokingly.

They were all mesmerized at the ship's flying in and out, at all the people they've never seen... They'd been confined to a hole in the ground for so long that they'd forgot what an industrious city felt like. Yes, they knew what it looked like from the screens... But how it felt, they surely had forgotten. Now it was Terry showing them around, as if he had become a part of that place. Drangy got lost in all the machinery they'd built, all the mysterious and out of his world gadgets. Terry was so happy that he'd forgot about his fight and invited them to eat at the walking stand that served sweet and sour pancakes by the square of nowhere. It just kept walking in circles, leaving clouds of gray smoke behind, resembling to the pancakes they served. Creative form of advertisement, despite being gray, but hey, making the smoke colorful would've cost more than the pancakes the stand produced. They were all amused... They never saw a different world, like savages, who finally met a civilization. A different one, and some would question how civilized it really was, but to them, Valaart was all they'd ever seen. The colorful art was still covering the city, despite the waves of tears crushing into the walls. Terry ordered the pancakes for them and gave each a different one. They would try each other's coverings.

'Was it hard to finish Hope? Did William come after you?' Terry asked, soothed from the shock of seeing them after all this time.

'Yes and no,' said Grub. 'We knew our time was getting thin... You brought a light to the cave where we'd been hiding Terry. Believe it or not, you gave us the strength we'd been tirelessly trying to find.'

'Thanks, I guess.'

'We saw your journey through a screen. You were a dot in our radar, back and forth. That was you, a dot. And every time I looked at your position I saw your face, smiling. It gave me comfort, it humanized you, so you wouldn't be just a dot in a screen. We've watched you leave towards Mouhnia, and that's when we worried the most. As soon as we realized you were leaving Valaart, we focused on finishing Hope, and then we started to test it, and those were amazing times. Everyone was studying, finding every bit of information they could about engines, about the atmosphere, the troposphere the stratosphere, the mesosphere... Forgot the other, but it doesn't matter, when we felt it was time, we dug towards the surface and built a launching platform. We left completely oblivious about what waited us in space. I thought it was going to be a painful ride, but god, It was beautiful,' said Grub, looking at the sky.

'I remembered your song, when I was heading towards Mouhnia, all alone. It gave me strength too...' said Terry, very emotional.

'Oh kid, come on,' said Grub, fondling him. 'We're meeting again, after such a long time. We're together,' he said, pretending to hit him in slow motion.

'Yeah I know, it's just... I still can't believe it.'

'None of us can, none of us can. You both have probably a lot to talk about, so we'll explore the city like Drangy's already doing, breath a little bit of this fresh air and... Let's meet close to the walking stand for lunch, how does that sound?'

'Sounds great to me, but wait,' said Terry. 'This isn't like the hide out, take these with you, in case you see something you like,' he continued, handing them couple of dews.

'They look nice, what is it for?'

'To trade for stuff.'

'Oh I get it, it's their currency. Thanks. I guess it all comes around,' said Grub, leaving with the rest of the nobles, while the Dawnfolks stood by the illuminated pagoda in the middle.

'What are your plans?' asked Hilda.

'You know me, I've got none, I mean, I had one, now I don't.'

'What was it?'

'To meet you again. That's why I've been dueling with Dest. There's Ikons duels here Hilda, you'll love them. There's this...'

'We're not going to stay Terry,' she interrupted.

'What do you mean you're not going to stay? You just arrived,' he said.

'I mean, to settle.'

'You'll have time to see the duels anyway, won't you?'

'I'm not sure how long we're staying, but yeah, I would like to see them.'

'See, it's not so difficult, besides, you won't regret, because there's new tricks you'd never dream of. People here are quite ingenious when it comes to tricking, be careful,'

'How's that?'

'They're always trying to sell you something, even though they know you don't need it, so they find tricks to actually make you believe that you need them. When you don't.'

'I'm glad to see that you'll never change.'

'Did you know I stole a Valaarian ship? I was the captain of 'Opportunity'. Since you had a ship with a name, I thought I'd name my ship as well. You've taught me a lot, showed me a creative side to life I didn't have any clue. Any clue. It's fun.'

'I'm so happy for you, really.'

'I'm also learning how to play the guitar. I've visited Mouhnia. Can you believe?'

'The Silver Heaven?'

'Yes, it's not a Silver Heaven anymore, because the snow had turn into ashes. That's why I left. They wanted me to become something I didn't, so I stole a ship and left.'

'You make me proud, it seems that we taught you well.'

'Yes you did, and...'

Terry speech was interrupted by an interference in Dest, who had been silent all day, as if the sadness had prowled into him, but now, a distorted voice was heard, and it wasn't in his voice, it was in a different one.

'C... He... Ar me?'

They both looked at Dest in astonishment.

'I knew there was something wrong with you,' said Terry, approaching him.

'Can anyone hear me?' the voice was clear now, as if the frequency in a radio had been fine tuned.

'Yes, I guess,' he said. 'Rel?'

'I'm trapped somewhere because of a political disagreement, please come and rescue me.'

'Now? It's not even noon, you're already in trouble.'

'The l... Lo... Ca...'

'What?'

'T... Oc... Ation.'

'Action?'

'Lo... Cat...Ion.'

'Low cat Ian?'

'The location is in your Ikon. Find me. A... h...'

The call was ended abruptly.

'Who's that? Why is he talking through your Ikon?' asked Hilda.

'Oh my, with so many things going on I forgot to tell you. We found Gale.'

'You found Gale?' said Hilda bewildered. 'Gale, Gale?'

'I guess. I remembered, because... The Valaarians had his tongue cut off, so he spoke through an Ikon.'

'Through an Ikon? How does that sound?'

'Sounds as the voice he imagines, I guess.'

'Gale?'

'Yes, Gale.'

'Are you sure it's the same Gale? That happened... I don't know, a long time ago.'

When I was born the labyrinth had been out of use since god knows when. It means, he's like... A mummy or something.'

'He's a kid, like us.'

'What? How can that be?'

'I don't know, but we think he's a Wanderer.'

'A Wanderer? That makes some sense, the stories I've heard is that he was exceptionally good for his age, at mostly everything. Where is he? Grub will love this, not to talk about the Dawnfolks.'

'Well... I don't know. We stayed together when we arrived, but then things got a bit rough because we didn't have any money and maybe I didn't give them enough attention, I don't know, but they probably felt scared and left. They didn't tell me to where... Every night I looked at the skies and wondered where they were... Where you were... Where everyone was.'

'That's crazy. Dest, can you project a memory where Gale appears, please?' asked Hilda.

Dest was still feeling a bit awkward, convulsing, but he displayed the image nevertheless. It flickered as if something was distorting it, but there he was, when they were playing in the spaceship, altogether.

'He's purple,' said Hilda even more astonished than before.

'Yeah, forgot that part.'

'From the pictures I've seen, this is Gale. Grub will tell you better but I'm almost sure it's him. Who's the other guy?'

'He's Kai. He was a prisoner in the Silver Mountains, heir of the Silver throne. He came with us.'

'You've been busy huh,'

'I guess. How do I access the location anyway? Dest, display the location,' he said, but it didn't work. Dest, guide us to the location,' he continued, but to no avail. Terry focused for a second and an image came to him, an insight of a well lightened room. Rel stood there in the middle looking anxious and stressed, trying to find a way out through the window, but there was no use, because it was way above the clouds.

'I've seen him,' he shouted.

'Where?'

'There's only one building here that reaches the clouds,' said Terry, looking at the enlightened pagoda.

He bolted towards the building and Hilda followed him. She would stop in the stands and stare at all the things she'd never had the opportunity to see, the different creations of other worlds, of other galaxies, but always keeping Terry in the corner of her eye, and just before he vanished, she'd caught up with him, again and again, until they've reached the entrance. A guy stood outside, with watery eyes and an angry face that would menace the gods, staring at them. Terry got on Hilda's side, it seemed that even though they were in a different planet, something's never change. They both passed him by and Hilda smiled at him with her provocative smile, as if she was contesting his sadness with happiness. Terry had never been inside this building made of shops on top of shops. All the levels were connected with luminous elevators resembling flying candles, and their lights were reflected in the limestone floors of each level. The place was alive, and everyone in it were part of a big, abstract animation, that either rushed or slowed down, but continuously cried. Terry got on the first elevator, they came one by one and stopped for couple of seconds, and then moved again. Terry noticed a shop with trees, but those were like the ones they had in Lorah.

'Look,' he said.

'What?'

'The trees are floating. I've been to the karsts and none of them did.'

'Maybe they came from Valaart,' said Hilda, as they reached a new level, with a bakery filled with bread of all different colors and sizes. Beside there was a shop featuring a huge Ikon at the entrance. There were individual parts for the armors with carbon steel, something he'd never seen before. There were transmitters to alter the Ikon's voices, filter lens for different colors, and of course, brand new Ikon's all over the

shelves, with different forms and sizes. Terry leaned his body over the lift rail to look at it for as long as he could, but soon enough they were in a different level, a market mainly for food. Golden whales were sliced and sold to the highest bidder.

'Oh my god,' said Hilda. 'Whatever that thing is... Is beautiful. It should be cherished, that's disgusting.'

Terry glanced at it for a second but almost puked.

'Can't look, can't look,' he said, looking at all the other lifts going in all different directions. This reminded him of Mouhnia, and the atrocities that were committed to its fauna. 'You should've seen what they were doing in Mouhnia Hilda... They were cutting animals open to place chips in them.'

'Oh my god. Who did that?'

'Ikons, under William's bid. But don't worry, I've burned the place to the ground.'

'Why?'

'Why? That was the nastiest shit I'd ever seen.'

'No I mean, why would he do that?'

'I've heard someone say that every chip works like a home to him... And of course, he can control the animals too.'

'It's never enough, is it?'

'Apparently not.'

Terry told her infinite stories of his journey until the lift stopped without making a sound. The gate opened after sometime. Lux and Dest got out, illuminating the pathway. There were several Ikons there, doing logistics. They stopped for a moment there recognizing Terry, and then approached him, and then bowed, and allowed them to go in.



'What happened?' asked Hilda. Why haven't they said anything?'

'You remember that story of the Wanderers? I think I am one,' said Terry.

'What? You're a wanderer? You can control the Ikons?'

'Yes, I guess. There were times when I couldn't, but the more I believe in myself, the more I'm able to pull it through. I used to be able to do it in short distances, but now I can do it from far away.'

'Impressive, I guess it wouldn't be so easy to beat you in the arena huh,'

'I guess, I would never fight you tough.'

'I wouldn't fight you either,' said Hilda, glaring at his little shiny eyes.

A noise was heard, coming from the back. Lux and Dest got in front of them while they reached the last door.

'It's here I guess,' said Terry. 'Rel?' he shouted.

'Terry!' said Rel from the other side.

There was an interface, with a mini camera and a code, much like the one for the prisoners back in Mouhnia. Terry had hacked one before. He focused, closed his eyes, and a click was heard. The door stood ajar and Rel completely bewildered opened it.

'Man, we've got to get out of here. This is worst than I thought. I was right. This guy, the guy you work for, owns this shit. He owns everything. Worst, he knows William.'

'What are you talking about? Calm down, you sound crazy.'

'No man, I'm in trouble. Sorry, I had no one else.'

'It's ok,' said Terry. 'I'm here for you, always.'

'You're the best man,'

'How did you contact me through Dest anyway?'

'I'll tell you later, let's get out of here,' said Rel, rushing towards the elevator. He looked back and said:

'Sorry, I'm Rekun, nice to meet you, whoever you are. We got to hurry though.'

'No worries, I'm Hilda, Terrie's friend.'

'I've noticed that,' he said. 'Come on, we've got to get out of here,' he continued, standing close to the lift.

They got in, descending ever slowly through the top levels where there's only warehouses and offices.

'So, I contacted you through a radio.'

'A radio?'

'Yeah, an ancient devise intended to transmit electromagnetic waves of radio frequency. Ikons capture those.'

'How would you know Dest's frequency?'

'He has a purple light, and different colors have different wavelengths, so I went from there. I've been stuck there for a day just hoping to reach the right frequency. Thankfully you've found me. I thought it would take longer, honestly.'

'Who put you there?'

'Goldenbeard's body guards. I found the planet soul Terry, he bought it, or stole it, I don't know how he got it, but he has it. I've seen it. I fear he's going to give it to William.'

'This is terrible, terrible,' said Dest.

'You haven't heard anything yet. He stole Sulthyr's planet soul. Yes, that's why everyone's crying. Look, there,' he said pointing at the stands where a crowd had just gathered. They stared at them passively while their tears ran off their faces into the vases. 'Yes, their floating. They don't know why, but I do. They took the planet soul.'

'I can't believe it,' said Terry.

'Wait, there's more.'

'There's more?' cried Hilda and Terry.

'Yeah... It is rumored that William's coming for Sulyr. Goldenbeard's plan is to turn the people against you. There will be a mass campaign that'll say you brought them here. By coming you've disclosed our position.'

'What does that matter?'

'It matters for Goldenbeard, and for William, as a form of control. He wants to keep everything he has, and doesn't want anyone to know that he'd knew William all along... And that he handed them the planet soul willingly. He wants to stay in charge of Sulyr.'

'I thought Sulyr had no one in charge.'

'Every place has someone in charge, unfortunately.'

The lift stopped. Terry gulped. Hilda looked at Terry. Rel looked at both.

'Lets meet with the nobles,' said Hilda.

'Do you know when they'll arrive?'

'Anytime soon,' said Rel.

'You came just in time Hilda,' said Terry ironically.

They got out from the building, and went towards the walking stand in the square.

The Noble's were there, laughing, while mechanical ducks surrounded Drangy. He would pick them up and analyze their insides with his focal goggles. He was interested in the mechanism behind it. How they worked, how they operated... What grinded their gears. Terry approached him.

'Quack, quack,' he squawked.

'There's always something to learny learny,' said Drangy, holding the duck in the air.

'It's five dewies each. They last forever,' said a kid holding a tray full of them.

'I'm just looking,' said Drangy, putting it down, allowing it to continue his mindless journey, circling ever after around the square of nowhere.

'Here,' said Terry, handing him ten dewys, and taking one of the ducks. 'It's for you.'

'For me? Sweetie sweetie,' said Drangy. 'How've you been?' he asked.

'Fine, a lot of things happened... I'm sorry I couldn't take back Valaart.'

'We never wanted to take back Valaart... It doesn't belong to us. Nothing really does. We're just borrowing things, for sometime... Like life. It's only borrowed,' said Grub from afar.

'It makes sense, I guess...'

'Dest looks greaty greaty. Let me take a looky looky.'

Dest came closer and each part spun effortlessly and without a sound. Drangy grabbed him for a second.

'Healthy healthy,' he continued, letting him go.

'Hilda said you aren't staying?'

'We'll stay, for a whily whily.'

'Where are you guys heading?'

'Wherever the windy windy takes us. Eldoran... We don't know.'

'Why not stay here?'

'Can't, no placy placy for us. Too smoggy smoggy.'

'I see... Can I come along?'

'No asky asky, Terry's part of the Cause.'

He smiled and then moved close to Rel and Hilda. Dest spurted out some words.

'Terry, where are you?' asked Goldenbeard. 'You have a fight now, where are you?'

'I'll be there,' he said, frightened.

'What happened?' asked Rel. 'It's like you've seen a ghost or something.'

'I forgot I had a battle today. Goldenbeard just contacted me.'

'What? After everything I told you, you're going to duel? Look, you can't work for him, you have to let it go. The Noble's are here, you're not alone anymore. You've got us now. Besides, Valaart is coming, we ought to prepare. It's the perfect time for the spiritual revolution.'

'Why's everyone so demanding all the time? Why can't I do just what I want to?'

'You can do what you want to Terry... But whatever you do, you have to do what's right. Doesn't matter what is it, but please, do what's right.'

'Who gets to decide what's right or not?'

'Nature. Whatever's natural, is right. Whatever's not natural, is wrong. We're divine, whatever you do, you have to hold the best interest of humanity in your heart. That's how we'll endure... That's how everything will last, when we do what's right.'

'It's so overwhelming.'

'It is... It is... Life's not easy, no one said it was. We can't have it easy all the time, especially now... Sacrifices must be made if we are to be saved. Hold your head up high boy, you can't go back to that. It's not worth it.'

'But...'

'It will be up to you.'

Grub approached them.

'Sorry, I couldn't help but to hear... This guy has a point. If Goldenbeard has a deal with William, you can't trust him. It's better to let it go.'

'So what are we supposed to do?'

'Amidst all the sadness, we'll find happiness. That's what we're going to do. Prepare against the onslaught.'

'Are we really sure Valaart's coming?'

'Yes, we're sure, Terry.'

He withdrew himself from the circle, and drifted towards the Dawnfolks.

'What's happening? I need answers,' he said, staring at the shadowed face of a hooded man.

'What had to happen.'

'I need answers, not riddles, not anything. What are we supposed to do? What am I supposed to do? I thought...'

'You are a wanderer Terry, you, better than us, know what to do. Although you grew in Valaart and had forgotten the secular knowledge, the natural knowledge, it doesn't mean you can't remember it. It's there, all you have to do is focus. When you remember... You'll find the way.'

'What way, what are you talking about?'

'About the energy that flows through every living thing, that's what I'm talking about. The natural network. Bring everyone together even those who think they're nothing, for they are everything. A great battle will ensue really soon... And it will determine how the Universe will fare, ten years... A hundred, a million years from now.'

'I don't know who am I supposed to bring together.'

'Everyone you came across, that's who you shall bring together. Our brothers up in the karsts, the ones in the gutter... The ones at the bars, the ones at the death row... You know, the ones.'

Terry still didn't get it, how was he supposed to bring everyone together. His doubts materialized quickly enough for him to realize he had no time. He never did had any time at all. A darkness came creeping in the square, as if a huge cloud. It penetrated through people's hearts. Valaart had arrived along with their shroud of doubt. Terry looked in the horizon and saw the Valaarian armada.

'They're here,' said Rel with his hand on Terry's shoulder, as if watching a world fading into oblivion. Some people ran and screamed for they had never been under such shadow, while others came forward to take a closer look. Suddenly there were no enemies, Terry looked around and they were all in it together. He saw Sora running, he saw the kid with thunder scar in his face and his resentment towards them was gone. It's like it never happened, it's like it belonged to a different time where people could actually be hurt. Hilda snapped him out of it, because it was getting into him. The screams as if underwater, a motionless motion all around him. He came back to his senses, and the ships stood still, in the air.

'What are they doing?' he asked

'This is not good, it seems that they are preparing to raze the city.'

'Oh no,' said Terry.

'What are you afraid of?' asked Rel. 'This is the way towards the spiritual revolution, at least now we'll have a chance to rebuild the world we've always dreamed of. Give it a new meaning, start from scratch. Be everything we were born to be. They won't be bombarding this city, but everything bad in us. They will fuck the mediocrity out of every single citizen, that's what they're going to do, and I'm ok with that. At least

after we'll realize we don't need all this worthless gadgets and whatever was it that we needed, we always had.'

'And what is it? What is it that we need?'

'A god damn soul, that's what we need.'

Terry stopped and thought about it for a second. A soul...

'We need everyone in the square of nowhere,' he said, and the message was heard in every Ikon in Sulyr. All the fighters of the pits came... The ones in the gutter had to have the flow of memories cut for a time, otherwise they would just lay in there hoping for times they'd never live again. And one by one, they came, and joined them.

'He's using his power,' said William. 'The same power within me. Almost makes me want to join him, as if I live in him, and he lives in me.'

All the screens started to display William... His pervasive will spoke higher than his being. He's always looking to be everywhere, at any given time...

'I see you're all together again...' he said.

The nobles all stared at the screens, waiting for something to happen.

'You didn't believe me, did you Terry. You should've... Did you tell them Grub? Did you tell your beautiful daughter?'

'Tell what dad?'

'Nothing, don't listen to him... He's a manipulative worthless being.'

'Am I dear Grub? Won't you tell them how your lineage had an agreement with me? To handle me every Wanderer?'

'What is he talking about?'

'You haven't told them... I thought somehow you did. You're full of surprises.'

'Shut up and crawl back to the hole from where you spawned. You've destroyed the consciousness of the world, maggot.'



'You're wrong, I gave it a new consciousness.'

For a second the Ikons fell to the ground and shut down. Every electronic device responded to William's will.

Hilda was in front when the first bomb fell. After it landed nothing was heard. There was a flash blindness as if it had happened before. A shockwave was felt and some of the houses simply disintegrated, vanished like sand in the wind. People stood and watch it as if it was poetry. Surprisingly everyone was quiet, as if their guts had been eviscerated. The illuminated Pagoda was the only thing left standing. That's where Goldenbeard was, Terry thought, and as the dust settled, man came out of it, running towards Terry.

'It was him! It was him!' they shouted.

Everyone looked at Terry suspiciously.

'He gave up our position to William!' they continued, as his face was displayed in the big screens, with a big 'WANTED' spelled on top.

'No, no, he did not. Your foreman did it. Goldenbeard. He knew William all along, didn't he!' said Rel getting in front of Terry.

'Step aside, nationless scum. You have no values, you have nothing to live for.'

'In there you're right, I've got nothing to live for, because you bastards sold everything that was worth... But, but I've got something to die for,' he said.

'It's me, you're looking for, the one who has nothing to live, and nothing to die for,' said Szeb, screaming.

'What is this, the meeting of the degenerates? Valaarian's genetic cesspool?' the man asked, laughing with the other guards. People started to gather around and the two groups fought against each other as if an autoimmune disease, where cells who are part of the same body starts to attack one another. The bodies got closer and there were

pushes and pulls. Hilda, the nobles, the rascals and mostly the ones with nothing stood on Terry's side, while the merchants stood by the pagoda's light, under a golden beard.

'We can't be apart now,' screamed Terry at the top of his lungs, as the throng of hands reached out for him. They wouldn't hear, they were blinded by the advertisement light's in the pagoda.

'Where's the passion?' asked Grub. 'You're being lied to. You're being put up against each other because of this... This poor excuse of... Poor excuse of whatever he is. He's not human, I'm telling you. No. Humanity knows compassion. Humanity simply knows. That's how you're standing where you're standing. Think about it... We must get rid of greed once and for all. This past, shall be nothing but the past... For in the future lies eternal joy... And that, that belongs to us. We must heal from all the bad that has been done, from all the wars that had been made. All the hate must pass... Humanity, you are in each one of us. Let the light heal you,' he said.

All of them suddenly backed off, and Hilda stood along with all the Wanderers, that shone like stars. They had this aura of different colors all around them. The clouds started to move very rapidly and the light of the sun blessed them. The other group where Goldenbeard stood was covered by William's shadow. The dust that had settled, soared in between all of them, towards the skies. Tornados erupted, and the rain didn't fall, but rose, rose towards the clouds, rose towards the great darkness. A thundering echoed in the square... And the lightning's flashed like upward roots. The sun moved and circled around bringing everyone's shadows to life. William's armada, the trees, the rain and dust followed the force of their gravity and were slowly sucked. They activated the engines, trying to escape the force of nature, but one can't fight against a planet's weight, against an universal will. The moon rose from underneath the horizon and covered the sky. It approached, getting closer and closer ever slowly, following the sun

and sending the armada through space like a bullet. The Dawnfolks got on their knees and prayed.

'The Naturei,' they said in unison. 'We knew it, it wasn't lost, just forgotten.'

'Who's a Naturei, who's doing all this?' asked Terry, looking at Hilda, and all the kids on the front line. 'Is it you?'

'I don't know Terry,' she said. 'I always felt this connection with the skies, but I'm no Naturei.'

The stars moved, and everything was out of the way it should, as if time had been set fast forward, as if they all had died and resurrected.

'The Naturei...' said Rel. 'They are the Naturei! Like the ones up in the karsts... Hooray for the Naturei.'

The people looked at them in great astonishment, they might've been the cause of all that, but they got rid of it. And Goldenbeard didn't, all he did was trying to find someone to blame, someone to take up for his insufficiency. Everyone started to argue, but now between themselves... No one could possibly believe what had just happened.

'Where have they gone to!' they screamed.

The clouds passed away and the sun disappeared with them... The moon was there, big and full of herself, shining like a diamond... As if what had happened fueled her...

Made her happy, made her smile, down on all of them who stood there full of doubts.

She had none. She was certain. Only something so certain can shine like that...

Goldenbeard amidst all the confusion ran to his pagoda and locked himself. The guards stood close to the door, and then did something they had never done before. They questioned, why were they outside while he was inside. The people they were up against, were obviously more to them than they were to him. In shame, they ran off...

No one tried to stop them. No one went after them. This wasn't a moment to run, this

was a moment to reflect, reflect on what had just happened, and everything that was to come.

'What shall we do?' someone asked.

'Away with the pagoda. It's a symbol that should be destroyed,' said the man Terry had met up in the karsts. This, this was a small victory... Look,' he said, pointing towards the skies. A spaceship flew away like a shining diamond. 'Yes, look how fast it goes and how it glitters... He's going to give the planet soul to William. It's not going to be so easy... Next time.'

Terry got anxious, and although the spaceship up in the skies was lit and fast as a comet, he slowed it down. Dest spun like never before following it and firing lasers. The ship slowed down until it stopped, in mid air. Clouds came from the engines but it stood still in the air, until it started to withdraw. Goldenbeard unwillingly to give up, pushed the spaceship to the limits, and with the power of the planet stone, it finally moved forward, but every Ikon in the city was already on his trail firing lasers. First the engines, then the cockpit until the spaceship caught on fire and fell from the sky crashing close to them. They all ran towards it and then stopped, staring at it, waiting for the flames to die and the dark smoke to vanish, while the Ikons descended from the skies.

'You did it,' they said.

The planet souls rose from the ashes and floated between them, reflecting in its facets their amused faces. Terry and Hilda approached them and cautiously grabbed them. They held them high, while everyone bowed. Dest wasn't feeling alright, it was like he was worn out from the battle, but Terry didn't notice. They'd never seen such beautiful sight, like a row of angels descending in golden clothes from the skies, bearing their torches high. Reflecting orange and yellow colors upon everyone's faded auras of grace.

'We had foreseen it, here, look at the scriptures...'

Terry's head swirled before his body did like he was about to fall, how could that be, how could some seemingly worthless scriptures could have predicted what was about to happen. He laid his eyes on them, and the words appeared, glowing, as if the story was being written at that exact moment. He saw the glowing scriptures before he met the nobles, he'd seen them in the spaceship, he'd seen them in Sulty streets, it was like he's story was being told in real time, yet it had been written a long time ago.

'The Wanderers and the Naturei would unite, and become one. Wholeness. That's the only way to bring back time, to bring back peace... And to finally find the balance.'

'What balance?' he asked.

'The balance between the spirit and the flesh, the digital and what's real.'

'How we do that? How do we bring back time? And peace? And goodness?' asked Terry.

'We're not sure, yet, but there's a source in this vast universe, that keeps flashing a strong signal... I think it's willing to be found... It resides in Eldoran's belt, beyond the Balatinaides and the Low planets. From there, these waves are born, and it is believed that is the source of everything, a land where the Eastern gods reside. One must come together, shadow and light, and when the universe aligns, they should plant the seed of life, for a new beginning. '

'Why?' asked Hilda.

'Grub, are you ok with all this?' asked Fuzz.

'What am I to do, it was true... The planet soul, the Naturei...'

'We have to rebuild the city,' said Grub. 'This might be the new beginning,' he continued.

'It is indeed, a new beginning,' the man of the karsts said, picking up a brick from the ground. All the man came forth, some said they were sorry, others worried, and some... Some looked like the city, ruined, naked of everything they thought they needed, looking at each other in a silent despair. There were bodies of travelers from distant galaxies underneath all the rubble. Sora appeared and she locked eyes with Terry for a second. She was proud and jealous at the same time. Then Gnik...

'Hey Terry,' he said with a fist bump. 'Too slow again,' he exclaimed.

Terry smiled.

'This is Hilda and Rel. Those are the Nobles... Who you never heard of, the Dawnfolks... They come from where I came. They are my family,' he said enthusiastically.

Gnik greeted them along with Sora who wanted to be part of them, but was too proud to show it. A lost fellow was heard talking alone amidst the ruins.

'What, but I have to pay my taxes,' he murmured, 'I cannot evade taxes, what will be of me, what will happen to me.'

'Sir, there's no one you ought to pay taxes to now.'

'Well, there has to be someone. The taxes must be paid.'

'I don't think so, there's no one to pay taxes to, for now. But if you really want to, you can pay taxes to yourself, how about that.'

'To myself? Are you mocking me? I will be arrested if I would do so.'

'Arrested by whom?' Terry asked.

'Well, by those who I ought to pay taxes to! Are you retarded or something?' he asked, very seriously and concerned.

'Never mind. You can't... You can't imagine right? You can't imagine a different world... A world you weren't brought up in. A world they didn't teach you in school... A

world so different from all the others... So silent, that is heard of in the most remote galaxies. We'll find a way for you to pay your taxes, if you're really willing to do so,' said Terry.

Grub laughed, then Fuzz and Sora laughed and ultimately Hilda did too. There was a wave of laughter that echoed through the land. Instead of uncontrollable sobbing and crying, now there was an outbreak of smiles and laughter, like an anchor that had been lifted from their spirit. It could now levitate without any restraints. All the merchants didn't have any clue about what to do. Selling merchandise it's all they'd done, every day. That was their purpose. Like an addiction.

'What am I to do now,' another man asked.

'You're to help rebuild the city,' said Terry. 'Let's rebuild the city!'

Everyone was shy, this had never happened. Who would've thought... That this day would come. Some sat unwillingly to, but it was all a matter of time until they gave in to that new energy that rose like fumaroles. Their sweat fell in between the cracks of a fragmented city, and from there crystalline flowers with seedlings of hope sprouted and spread love throughout the city. And they worked harder, and they worked better, simply because now there was something to believe. This something which wasn't anything material, was better than anything they'd ever touched, because this something, was what our souls are made of. Fabrics of the metaphysical... Of everything that science couldn't explain. The missing part the world had forgotten. It was what made them feel whole again. Happiness filled the streets, and even the rascals helped. Drangy rebuilt the walking stand and created different recipes for the pancakes. Because the pancakes cost nothing, the fumes were now colored. The pagoda wasn't tear down, no... It became a huge public library, right in the center. Block by block the city grew, and there weren't no separated buildings, although once inside, you would walk through

different worlds. Each and every one of them decorated their rooms how they wanted to. Forests, deserts... Beaches, a universe inside a home. An universal home. Some asked for help to design their rooms, others, started to trust in themselves and even though they were no artists, they made better art than the ones who were. Now everything was worth. That's what they needed... To feel they're worthy. And all the bad they did, they'd done because they were sad. Because they had no hope. And all this, was more than their love and joy. It was eternity at bay. It was a poem no one ever dared to say. After all that hard work, some collapsed in exhaustion, for the night had never come.

'Why is it always day?' said Terry panting, and dropping his hammer on the floor.

'The way the Naturei moved the sun, and the moon... It got Sultyr out of its own orbit,' the Dawnfolks said.

'What does that mean?'

'It means that we're now a rogue planet. We don't have a solar system to answer to... We're wandering aimlessly through space.'

'No good, oh no,' said the man of the karsts. 'Now the planets can't be aligned. The prophecies... Can't come true... This is not the way things should've fared.'

'How should things have fared then?'

'The way that was written in the stars... The moons and suns should've never been moved, no matter what. No matter in which despair we shall find ourselves in... Nature isn't something to be changed. Nature is the way it is for a reason.'

'What is the reason?'

'That, I can't tell you... An inch closer or an inch further away from any given star or planet and the worlds wouldn't be everything they are. That alone tells me their reasons... Whatever they are, must be sufficient.'



'We should restore the planet's soul,' said Grub.

Hilda threw the brush to the ground and jumped off the scaffolding, full of paint.

'I don't think so,' she said. 'Dad... You didn't know William, did you?'

He didn't answer, and gazed at the horizon while the sun swam in the ocean of his eyes.

'Dad...'

'I'm sorry,' he mumbled.

'No, don't... Just don't. Lie to me, I don't care.'

'You wouldn't understand princess... What it's like when you're responsible for your own. Not only for you... But every Noble.'

'I knew it, I knew it,' screamed Jumpie from afar.

Grub's inside was dying of shame.

'What are you talking about?' asked Hilda.

'William's army would've wiped us without a second thought. I had to protect all of them, and this was the only way out.'

'You can't be serious... You betrayed us. The Noble's Hideout was built upon simple beliefs, such as truth. Is it all meaningless now, worthless...'

'Of course not. My ancestors did what they had to do, to protect us all. To give us a new chance...'

'You sent Terry to his death. You knew it all along, that he was a Wanderer. You sent him straight to William.'

'Yes, and I also knew how powerful he was. He had everything he needed to fight William. It was a poisoned gift. Fortunately we were able to prepare his mind for everything that was to come. It couldn't have been any other way.'

'Of course it could. You could've held to our beliefs and tell everyone right from the start that we were nothing but William's puppets. You could've done what you've always preached.'

'We weren't his puppets. We lived to what we believed was right. Can't you understand? I did it for us. What are you on about...'

'No, you did it for you. You could've told us dad,' said Hilda, leaving and running towards the port. She grabbed the first ship she came across. It had the stars displayed on it, a sort of camouflage that only worked in space. Terry and Dest, who was quite debilitated, followed her and got into another. They both disappeared in the horizon, towards the skies. Her tears floated around the deck. The world had indeed come to a bitter end. Her world... Everything she was so sure of... Everything her father told her... He stood for none of it. It doesn't matter if it had been for the right reasons, because to Hilda all it mattered was the truth. How could someone make an agreement with such monster. The more she thought of it, the sadder she got. All the moments he held her he knew what he'd done... Yet he never blinked or felt sorry for anything. A rage started to build from inside, all the love, was turning to hate and the spaceship she was on looked like a comet gliding through space as fast as shooting stars for the planet soul she carried fueled it. Terry followed her, with a planet soul of his own, yet he could barely keep up with her. It has always been that way. They weren't quite sure where they were anymore. They got lost in the great darkness. Terry tried to come close to comfort her but always fell short. He tried to communicate with different lights, but a geyser of light that went round and round stole his ingenious efforts of getting Hilda's attention. A dazzling green orbited a moon, or a planet, no one was quite sure what it was, all they knew was that it shone like a quasar. As Hilda got closer, the green gas would morph into deranged faces silently crying for help. It was a cemetery... An

interstellar cemetery of souls. She had heard of an underworld located in the great darkness.

'This is the place the man spoke about... Where people go, when they die,' said Terry.

Their spaceship followed a path made of stars, and they got caught in the light, orbiting it, dancing around children who ran along like ethereal visages. It seemed like no one grew old. They were all kids. They were Terry and Hilda's reflection, pointing towards different directions, as if there was some invisible path in space that they knew nothing about. They were lost, maybe we're all lost, looking for our way back home in a poem yet to be written by our souls. She thought of her father again, and Terry, thought of his. Even though Grub was still alive, it was like he'd died. Now she understood his suffering, and Terry understood her suffering, and even though they were in different spaceships, it was like they were in the same. In the same body, in the same mind.

'The planet's soul Hilda, they have to be restored,' said Terry.

'How are you talking to me,' she asked, looking for an intercom.

'I don't know, I've always done this with Dest.'

'You've always lived in my heart, now it feels like you live in my soul,' she said.

'We can't stop now, you should be the one telling me that. We have to restore the planet's soul.'

'No, the Dawnfolks will tell you otherwise. We need them, if we are to defeat William.'

'No we don't. The planets need them... Not us.'

'And which is the planet you're longing so much to live in? Look around you... We're all lost.'

'We can find ourselves again, if we restore it... Any planet will do, I don't care which, as long as you're in it... And after we can make things right.'

'We can't Terry... We can't make it right, after so much wrong. These worlds hold memories... The cemeteries in the skies hold silenced children who built roads made of stars. Our suffering is engrained deep within the planet's soul. We have to create a new world Terry... The Dawnfolks have the recipe for the seed of life. It will create a new universe... There won't be a memory of all the bad and all the good, anymore... We can finally start over.'

'Why would you want to start over? Maybe I don't want to start over.'

'You used to be adventurous... What happened to you?'

'I'm still adventurous, it's just that... Maybe there's no need for a new world.'

'What are you talking about? Everything's disappearing Terry... It's fading away. We are meant for this. That's why you've met me in the first place.'

'And who said that the new world will be better than this one anyway.'

'It has to be... Anything's better than this Terry. Look at them... Look at us. We need a future.'

'I'm not sure.'

'Of course you're not sure. You're afraid of letting go aren't you. That you'll cease to exist... You're afraid of losing Dest. Of losing me. You're afraid. You're a coward. If we are to have a future, we have to let go of the past.'

'I'm not afraid... It's just that this is the world I know. We can fix it.'

'We can't fix it Terry. Sulyr was the fix everyone was longing for. It became corrupted. How can something so pure become so vicious. How can a civilization after witnessing their own demise, proceed to make the exact same mistake? There has to be something deeper... An evil that lingers in this universe. Nothing has fixed it... Nothing

ever will. It grew then it traveled and took root in another world. And it will continue to do so, in every world that we know. Even in the ones we don't.'

'I'm not saying we shouldn't. We can get rid of him. We can destroy him... I'll do it.'

'No Terry. We can't. He lives in the collective memory. Even if we turn every device down... He'll still live. To destroy it's his way... That's why there's nothing we can do, other than creating.'

Terry stopped for a second, and then wandered off thinking of what Hilda had just said. But how could it be. His ship drifted away in the middle of a race that had no finishing line. Just ghastly children playing amidst the great darkness. And for once, he heard the ticking of the clocks at the right pace, at the pace of his heart, at the pace of the stars. It all made sense in that very moment.

'William's part of this world... For the good, and for the bad,' he thought, and ahead, ships came forward. Not normal ships, but ghost ships who floated towards them. It was the armada they'd seen before. He got closer and closer to Hilda's ship, until he boarded it.

'Are they dead?' asked Hilda, looking at him.

They stopped there, and didn't fire, nor move... The old life, holding on the seedlings of their future.

'You can't get rid of me that easily,' said William, echoing throughout the great darkness. The children crouched in despair and covered their ears. Apparently even the memories could hear him. Could remember all that was done. Dest was becoming weaker and weaker, and Terry couldn't just stand and watch everything he loved growing dim.

'We have to join forces William, if we are to save all this,' said Terry, gazing at the clouds of galaxies that appeared to smile, millions of light years ahead of them. Hilda died once again. First her father, now Terry, the biggest loves and from whom she expected the most, became the biggest disappointments of her life. Inside the deck, she slowly became like all the children surrounding them. Like Dest. You could see through her.

'What did you say?'

'It's the only way Hilda. The light and shadow... The light and shadow wasn't you and me. It was us, and William. You've seen how it covered the whole city. We can't destroy something that's part of our world,' said Terry, trying to caress her face.

'But it's not part of our world! It grew as a cancer Terry. It was never part of us. As an interest to stand above what we've always been. It's not part of the world. If it was Terry, we would've never made it this far. We would've killed each other and we would've never have gotten the opportunity to evolve. To become conscious, to become a unity... It was because of love. Everyone knows that cooperation is the key to create something that transcends us. Why. Because nature does it, through underground cooperative networks. And nature has basically built our home. Has given everything it needs, and it achieved this, through cooperation. There is something we can learn with nature, and obviously she knows better, for she had been here way before we were. That's why we should also respect it. It carries a way longer story, it carries all the sunsets that ever settled. Can you imagine, how many sunsets and sunrises have these planets seen. The different beautiful colors in the most remote and beautiful landscapes. How did we ended up here... What ever happened. Where did we go wrong...'

'This is what I'm trying to tell you Hilda. We must cooperate... It's what the Nobles taught me. Things must be preserved if they are to endure in time. What if a new

world is born, but we aren't. What if whatever this is, is forever lost in time... The scriptures weren't right. Sulyr should've never become a rogue planet to begin with. The thing is, no one knows what comes next. We, we're the ones who write our own story, the stars can't write them for us Hilda, doesn't matter how much we'd love them to. It's in our hands, the ability to write, the ability to create, the ability to love... To believe. It has been us all along, and the problem has never been leadership, but submission. Of the ones who held all the answers for all the problems and threw them in the wind, fearing an end that was nothing more than a beginning. William, I'm sorry, I know old people can't change, specially someone with thousand years old, maybe older... If me and Hilda join the planet souls, we don't know if a new universe will be born, a universe you have no memory of, but we know this one will be gone. So will you. Are you ready for that. Do you remember my mom? You can still find someone... Someone that will love you.'

'What are you talking about. I don't need love. I'm through with love. I've seen what people are capable of. Love... Love's bullshit. You're too young to understand that, but after an eternity of suffering you start to see through everything and everyone. Especially when you hold all the memories of the world's. People love themselves, nothing more. Some, not even themselves. They don't want to keep company to anyone, they want everyone to keep them company. '

'That's not true, and you know it.'

'It is true, you don't understand now, but you will, someday...'

'No, those are the arguments you've used to detach us from one another. That's what you keep doing, divide the universe in order for it to be easily controlled. You have to remember William. When you were young...'

'I remember everything, specially the bad.'

'You can't base your decisions upon your bad experiences. Base your decisions on the good ones. Not everything was bad. I'm sure not everything was bad,' said Terry, closing his eyes, and for a second the universe lighted up. Images of William running through the forest, with his companion, Ravenous... But there was something else.'

'Tarf...!' said William, and the voice echoed throughout all universe.

'Tarf?' asked Hilda.

'It's his dog,' said Terry intuitively.

The images displayed pure companionship between them. And then... Then he got older, and older... Until he died of old age. William couldn't understand why was he meant to die, why everything he had, had always been taken from him. The ants he kept in a colony, the fire salamander he had in a box... Everything he imprisoned rotted and faded away.

'Is that why you're doing those atrocious things to animals? You don't want them to die... You want them to be like you, right? You want them to live forever... Like you do. You're still hurt.'

'You're getting smarter,' said William. 'But I'm not hurt. I told you a thousand times, I know better than to be hurt. That's what the poor do, and I'm not talking about money here. I'm talking about spiritually poor. That's what I disdain.'

The images continued to flash and William, even though he didn't want, he traveled them along with Terry and Hilda. They've seen it all. Even memories William thought he'd lost. Terry revived them, and they lived again through all the good... And the bad. When groups of kids chased him down and had them both beat. Everything he'd seen, and kept for himself.'

'It looks like my story,' said Terry.

'It looks like everyone's story,' said Hilda.



'This is the story of the world Terry. The story we live, before we become part of it. You too will be heard, after you're gone. You'll do what's right and what's wrong either you want it or not. Everyone who came before had the same fears, the same loves... The same feelings.'

'So you felt, after all.'

'I did, everyone does. But what is it worth.'

'It's worth everything... All these memories, all these stories we share, we liked them because it makes us long for feelings we never felt. For times we never had. For people we never met. For places we've never been... For lives we never lived. The world you created... It's tasteless, soundless, timeless. There's no purpose to it. How does that feel, to conquer something that has been always yours? What will happen when you'll conquer the entire universe?'

'It can finally be meaningful.'

'One must be really shallow to think of life as something to conquer. We've already conquered all there is to conquer. We've conquered life. We're divine. Even the trees can't stand such detachment. They parted... In Derkar, Valaart and finally in Sultyr... I thought they were always like that, but they weren't. At a point in time they were connected and now they aren't.'

'It doesn't matter, the world doesn't need the natural. I despise the natural. I look at human nature and its disturbing how something can be so bad. So mean. You say you're divine... I say you're nothing but a bunch of uncultured swines, who can't even bear the lightest miracle. It's the world's fate Terry... The corrosion, the erosion, the abrasion... Everything wears away, one way or another... So I decided to fight against the natural. Nothing should ever fade away. When the lands will be nothing but a desert, and metal reigns over them. It will be the age of the Ikons.'

'I think what you see, is a reflection of yourself. I look at nature and I see nurture... I see an energy, a light, that is caring and sharing, and that somehow protects us all. It's only natural for us to go... To be disposed of our bodies, and to reach out for a different stage, with different colors, different times... If we'd live forever, life, would lose its meaning... And because its meaningless to you, you want to see how it all ends. How will you go on, without the worlds. You don't believe. You don't trust. You live in fear. Maybe you want to erase your own memory, so you won't ever have to remember, what it's like to live in a world without love,' said Hilda.

'Shut up. You're not even a Wanderer, you're just one of those secular Naturei's. Your world is ending... Soon, this will be the Ikon's world. I don't need tree's, I don't need nature to survive. You do. Terry... Dest has always lived through me... Everything he taught you, it was my knowledge of things. You don't want to be apart from your Ikon, do you?'

Terry looked at Dest for a moment. His purple had been vanishing gradually.

'What am I supposed to do?' he asked, crying.

'I told you Terry, you can't live your life based on what a machine tells you,' said Hilda.

'I don't know, I thought I had my own thoughts, my own will... But I'm part of him, and because of that, you're part of him too,' said Dest.

'No, we're one in the same, but I'm not part of William,' said Terry.

Dest's light continued to fade, until it became gray. It was like watching his soul fading away, much like the worlds around them were. Dest looked like a falling star. A dream you can't remember. Dest fell and rolled across the grid until he met Terries feet. He watched it in an uncontrollable sobbing. Hilda who had seen enough took out the planet soul from her pocket. Terry looked at it, still crying.

'We have to do it, you can't convince him. Like the world's Terry, he's too old for a change...'

'We can't just do it Hilda. There has to be another way. What about all the Noble's. Was everything we ever did in vain?'

The whole universe listened carefully to what was about to happen and the stars, even though they were fading away, pointed to where they were as if spotlights, lighting what was the most decisive moment of the whole creation. Which path were they about to undertake. A new beginning or a new ending?

'Don't do it Terry. She's just using you. Like the Nobles did. You're a Wanderer, you don't need them. They need you.'

Terry staggered for a second. He thought about all of them, and then looked at Hilda, who was quite sure of what she was about to do. Then at Dest, who laid on the ground. He didn't want to let go of it. The ghastly children ran, and only a voice was adrift in that timeless darkness. The voice, was the unknown, he realized. It takes a much stronger hero to fight someone he can't see, than a hero who fights only what he can perceive, he heard it again, as if he was back in the abandoned spaceship.

'Do you feel like there's an enemy Hilda? If so, who is he?'

'I don't know Terry. All I know is... If there are friends like you... Then, there's surely foes. Foes who live only for themselves. Foes who no longer abide by the natural laws. Who forgot what it's like to be human. They're seeking something else Terry, and unfortunately we can't help them. They don't want to be helped.'

A wave coming from the planet soul started to spread throughout the whole universe.

William's voice got distant, and the ghastly ships dissipated amidst the great darkness.

The stars burnt like never before, the planets swirled and swirled, the storm that happened in Sultyr, was now happening there.

'People are fed up with your bullshit William. People want real things...

Everything we see is so fake that we start to question our own reality... The reality in which we were brought upon. People are longing for something so human, so real, that will make the universe cry, just because of how real it feels.'

The universe wept, the stars fell from grace and darkness emerged.

'They don't want to be deceived anymore... They never wanted anyway, although some look like they want. Everyone's sick of this endless theatre, at least I am. I can't make up for the world, I don't know what the world wants, but I know what I want, and I want real,' said Hilda, as she held Terry's hand. Both of the planet soul's joined together and a burst of light illuminated everything they thought they knew. Everything became white, and this whiteness traveled through all of the great darkness, to each and every corner of it, spreading the history of our universe, through a bright frequency. The whales of Eldoran emitted a pulse call as the memories traveled through them, making the wave bigger and faster. The wavelength of all colors overcame the great darkness, which is the absence of it all. The absence of love. The absence of poetry. The absence of all the things that matter. And light, light is all that. Light is what allow us to experience all there is. It's under where the story of their universe was written. It's where the first romantic kiss was taken and given. It's where god lives. This journey was a journey between what's natural and artificial. Between good and evil. Between days and nights. Between black and white. Love and hate. A journey to feel the very nature inside of him, to remember a time, before it all begun. When everything was one. Terry restored the soul of the universe... William wanted the soul's of the planet so he could keep them for himself. He thought no one was aware of his evil machinations... But there are some who still dream. Terry saw a golden field under an orange afternoon. The haystacks stood still on the horizon, while an ethereal cloud of dust rose above the sun.

Now it looked like there was time. Just before dusk. Just before his world faded away. He had no clue, if that was the past, or the future. He couldn't tell, if it was a moment of an earlier time, or if it was yet to come. How could he allow for evil to endure in that world. In that beautiful world he lived in. And was that an end, or a beginning. He saw a tree blooming with life, and the fruits it held had all the memories of the world Terry once knew, and the kids who ate those fruits are said to grow up Wanderers.