Pale Blue Scratch

by Jay DiNitto

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Smashwords Edition

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For Lori

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“The ancient dialogue between reason and the senses is almost always more interestingly and passionately resolved in favor of the senses.”

—Kay Redfield Jamison

“My idea is that every specific body strives to become master over all space and to extend its force (its will to power) and to thrust back all that resists its extension. But it continually encounters similar efforts on the part of other bodies and ends by coming to an arrangement (‘union’) with those of them that are sufficiently related to it: thus they then conspire together for power. And the process goes on.”

—Frederich Nietzsche, Will to Power

1. The Herald and the Acolyte

The one-armed man dragged the body by the ankle to the edge of the promontory. Though prickled with hope, he became aware of something like a memory spilling out from him like sands from a broken hourglass.

He stopped to look back and consider his unconscious opponent's dark green uniform and mangled arm. The weight of the uniformed man's certain death now only held dissatisfaction.

The one-armed man was a wild man, the kind that subsisted on the fringes of civilization, gleaning from the runoff of a society's affluence, but not holding himself to the standards of propriety that encumber a normal life. The thick, beastly ropes of his hair and beard swayed around his lumbering Goliath stature as he continued to the outcropping.

At the edge, with the ocean waves rushing and breaking against the rocks below, the wild man lifted the limp man up by the collar and reevaluated the situation. He studied the man's form with tired eyes. The curly hair in disarray, uniform striped with dust, the bright green embroidered shield insignia on the left breast pocket, the bliss of oblivion and the viscera of dried blood written on his face. He imagined the man's body succumbing to gravity and impact, letting the breath of the sea baptize the promontory crags with sprays of blood. Throughout his hair and beard he could feel the freedom of the man's spirit being released from his physical prison. It vibrated like the distant rumble of a galloping army.

Thinking it all vanity, he let go, and the man's body slumped down into an impossible arrangement of boots and cloth and limbs. Killing him now would be indulgent; in his bones the wild man knew his efforts were again wasted on the wrong person.

And so, subjugated by time and circumstance and things that had been foretold to pass, the wild man abandoned the uniformed man's body and thought of his continuing search.

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Elisabeth Reese, or Elisabeth Constantina Reese, as she was now so officially named, stood atop the roof of one of the abandoned buildings on the grounds of St. Christopher's Cathedral. Her hands hovered close to the tops of the hewn rock of one of the crenels, amidst its cool nimbus. To place her palms and fingers would be an indication of acceptance that she was not ready to give.

The poets were wrong, she thought, as she gazed out at the featureless expanse of water. There was no hope in the sea, no life in its gray waters, randomized waves, and mindless assent to the earth's curves. Give her solid ground, bounding hills, young trees that reach closer to the stars with every passing season, spreading cities full of people with their dreams and misunderstandings and frustrations. It was within the profusion of millions where she believed her work lay, not in the distant uncertainty in lands across the world's oceans.

She turned from the crenellated wall and walked on the flat, bailey-style roof, towards the small stone enclosure. Its large oaken door that led down to the building's lower levels loomed high even on the opposite side of the roof. Nearby, the recognition of the slight misalignment of the pumice stones set into the roof stopped her. On a whim she bent down and slid her hand over and underneath one of the stones near the bottom center of the rectangle, and raised the hidden door. Lifting the fixture was no effort, contrary to the conclusions of the more milquetoast of her fellow sisters, who had declined the offer to try to open it.

With a sense of gentle mirth she primped the knot of the pristine-white bandeau that held her mass of hair back. She removed her satchel and firearm belt, and made some motion of girding her loins in the plain gray acolyte's robe. With a playful discretion she stuck one leg down into the hatch. She tapped her foot once, twice, three times, to test the firmness of the stone that slanted down into darkness. It would make a fine rouse, she thought, to slip in and zigzag all the way down and out the tunnels, escaping the notice of Monsignor Gilstone and Wassie, her assistant.

Then, abandoning decorum, she crouched and slid down the side of the vertical passageway until she sat atop that first stone. Her eyes were now level with the roof. Grinning and bending knees and twisting limbs, she slid down and dropped to the second stone. Her skirt had hiked up and exposed the backs of her legs to the cool

dampness. One or two hippy nudges and she would slide down again to the next, third stone and soak in darkness.

"Why not?"

She gave a daring glance at the sky up outside the hatch, then scooted with a little hop. Down she went. Directly above her now was the first stone and only bit of light fell onto the surface of the stone across from her. She had to grunt with happiness at the pointlessness of it.

The distance between the slanted stones was much more apparent now that Elisabeth was looking up, and for a moment she regretted her impulse. She had to make a slight, but dangerous, hop in darkness to grab onto the sides of the second stone. The jump to the first stone was much easier because of the sunlight bathing its surface.

Above floor, she composed herself, gathered her satchel and holster, and brushed away the smudges of dust on her robe. Via the oaken door of the roof's enclosure, she went downstairs, through the series of stone archways that connected the abandoned university building to the convent, and then to the Cathedral building proper. She found Monsignor and a few of the other sisters in the narthex. They were making the most of their time following the impromptu tour of the historic academic buildings on the grounds.

Monsignor spoke a blessing over them and they dispersed, many in pairs or triplets to a common destination. It would be a few months before they would meet again here, and very likely a year before Elisabeth would see them at all. The coming separation weighed like a yoke in ways that the other novices would not know.

Elisabeth found her bicycle and sidecar parked at the far east end of the long convent building, at the end of a short road that led to the old university building with the escape hatch, and then to the LAM-Cathedral trail. There was a Dutch Bull agent, dun clad, keeping casual watch over the area. They exchanged polite nods. She thought she had spotted one or two patrolling the grounds in the last day. She meant to ask Monsignor what kind of invasion into the serene disposition of the grounds he expected, but the situation was too out of sorts to pry.

Wassie would arrive soon, straight from their quarters, with their sparse travel items. With practiced motions Elisabeth fished into one of her satchel pockets and produced a cigarette and matches and relieved herself of her plain espadrilles. She sat

down on a choice patch of thick grass next to the road, and tended to her cigarette and consumed the view from the hill of the Cathedral grounds.

The trail descended straight and gradually. Farther down where the path became obscured by the trees at the start of the trail proper, it would slope down in an extended grade, then release out straightaway like a green wave washing out onto the flat plateau of Lesser Athens-Marina. The few times Elisabeth had come here she didn't think to notice that land below for more than a few seconds as she and Wassie would begin their journey home. The view of the land and Chrysostomo University was always there, in peaceful abeyance, waiting to be seen. Even from her current vantage point the glut of structure and street, and the buzz of activity, were apparent—little dots of humanity finding their way under a clear summer afternoon sky. How different, how much more swollen with miniature life than the tragic, vain repetition of ocean waves was this landscape, so entrenched in vibrant civilization.

She could see the blue-green wash of Marinas Bay wavering up along the land's eastern coast, and the jut of land stabbing eastward into the bay. Issuing from that hook of land was the glittering mint of metal that formed the Waterway Bridge. Connecting across the narrowed bay to a series of overlapping docks and a helio-pad sat the coastline of Al Makaan al Sarf.

Those flat, functionally commercial areas faded to what seemed to be, from her height and distance, the impossible clutter of buildings and streets filled with merchants and men, of countless transactions and pockets of culture.

More eastward still, past the peculiarities of Al Makaan and the small strip of Greater Athens-Marina that bordered to the east, the buildings and artifices were sparse and the outer lands that the Yokuts had retained appeared on the very edge of the horizon. On impulse, ambushed by the reverie of imagination, she entertained various prospects of breaking out of the construct of her life in the Athens settlements, through the mass of culture in Al Makaan, and into the unsure wilderness and the tribes that inhabited them.

There was the sound of grinding gravel behind her, and she was pulled clean from wanderlust. Wassie passed Elisabeth on the path to the bicycle, and her towering form stooped to slide their suitcase onto the rack underneath the sidecar.

"Why was the level-headed bird unable to fly?" Elisabeth asked of her.

Wassie considered it, but Elisabeth knew it was just an air.

“He was unflappable,” Elisabeth said.

Wassie smiled, and Elisabeth slipped her shoes on. The ash held onto her cigarette from a few minutes of smoldering disuse. She snuffed it out on a nearby stone.

“Shall we?” Elisabeth said. She stood and, brushing her backside off, she thought of how Wassie would get the stains out.

After a pair of healthy sneezes aimed over her shoulder, she motioned Wassie to the sidecar. “After you.”

Wassie pedaled off down the steady grade of the trail. Elisabeth saw her intermittently steal longing eyefuls of the eastern horizon, perhaps to glean a different perspective of the natural forest border into Yokut territory. When the grass lining the trail grew into trees and the occasional building, Elisabeth had to rely again on her memory and imagination to fill in what was denied the senses.

The ache to see past the trees and structures was severe enough that she asked Wassie for a story about her childhood. Wassie was willing to provide, but with the gentle, rapid clicking of the wrapping chainwheel and the parallax of trees, Elisabeth’s mind drifted to a dilemma that begged attention. A stream of memories floated by: an outlandish theory, an experiment that went awry, an impossible vision, a career derailed, a young man with hair the color of flames, and a literal, sensual vision that defied deduction. And after all that had passed, she at last made a decision.

She decided she would send a letter.

2. An Invitation Extended

"Goddamnit," Vincent Eriksson said of the situation. "Good, great, gracious goddamnit."

The serene hum inside the greenhouse was cut cruelly by a commotion at the sole entrance at the far end. Someone—his mother, he soon determined—had rushed through the doors. Alan, the guard on morning duty, followed close behind. She had probably, in haste, forgotten to validate herself before entering.

She held up a piece of paper, folded and flapping, at the end of her pudgy arm, the other hand hiking up the hem of her dress at one side. With a level of skill not in parallel with her generous proportions and desperate disposition, she ran and let out intermittent, excited yelps that were the clumsy beginnings of sentences. Alan yelled after her, his words reverberating in battle with his mother.

A single, sharp holler from Alan halted her. They exchanged words and, with exasperated motions, she produced her reputation card from somewhere around her waistband and showed it to him. He checked it, nodded, and walked back to the door, aiming a suspicious glance over his shoulder.

"That's your mom, isn't it?" Juan-Pedro, a co-worker, asked. He scrawled on the clipboard.

"Goddamnit," Vincent repeated, taking his gloves off.

His mother approached, waving the paper in his face, eyes boggling.

"Read," she said with a wheeze of breath. "Look. Read."

She slapped the paper repeatedly on Vincent's chest. He tossed his gloves to the side, opened it, and began reading. It was a letter, not even typewritten, delivered in expert cursive.

"What's this?" he said, dropping his arm and crumpling the paper a little against his thigh. "Is this a joke? It's just a note."

"Read," his mother said again with a rolling flourish of her hand. "Read it."

She bent over with her hands on her knees, sucking in labored breaths. Vincent shook his head and read. His annoyed focus pierced into the tissue-thin paper. The

fabric of the paper, the request the inked words delivered, and the onrushing conflict of thoughts made something snap in his head like an electronal shock behind his eyes.

"This is from de Sales College," he said. He looked at the humbled form of his mother. "They do—what is it, historical analysis? Reporting? That's not what I'm looking for. Look, it says right here on the letterhead. 'Department of History and Currency.' You might as well ask me to colonize the moon. I have no interest or ability concerning this."

"Sweetie, I know," she said. She straightened up tall, on her toes, girding for battle. "But did you read it? To the end? She wants to interview you. For apprenticeship. *Apprenticeship*. Already!"

At the first mention of "apprenticeship," Vincent saw in his peripheral vision the brown of Juan-Pedro's face flip up as he looked up from his clipboard.

"I thought—" Vincent's mother began, interrupted by a severe, wet sounding cough. She held up a pillowy palm "Hah, hah! I'm okay. I thought you might have been passed over for this year's selections since the induction ceremony is soon, but some professors can be late. Like her. You know what that means? She's probably the creative type. You could learn from those. They're always neglecting schedules and trouncing around inside their heads and the like. You could stand to get away from the formulas and instruments and get a different perspective on things, couldn't you?"

Vincent shrugged. "This isn't anything but a roadblock. I *deserved* an Applied Natural Philosophies entrance this year. I have credentials and recommendations. I didn't put in all of these hours the last two years in the lab to get passed over again, and certainly not to be taught grammar lessons from a schoolmarm."

"Honey, sweetie," she said. She took a step closer and held out her hands in supplication. "You were ignored, probably for silly reasons. It happens. This is a chance to get a foot—nay, a leg!—in the door. You know how rare it is for someone without entrance to get picked for apprenticeship. And, I know you hate hearing this honey, but you're only seventeen. Your career has only begun. You have the world ahead of you. It seems like forever and a day to you, doesn't it, if you take this? Two years minimum of service, in a field you're not interested in, with people you're not interested in. But think of how impressive this will look to Applied Natural Philosophies if you take this and

excel. Imagine the recommendation she can give you! And who knows? You might even like it there and decide to switch."

Vincent folded up the letter and stuck it in a back pocket. "I'm not having this. This is high absurdity."

He turned away from her and her pleading, inflated hands, and her face awash in desperation. He put his gloves back on and went back to work, attending to seeds, dirt, and water.

"You need to get back to the apartment," he said. "Father probably needs you. I'm fine here for now and I have a lot to get to today. Next time please don't cause a scene here. You're liable to get yourself shot."

His mother, feigning an obstinate huff, disappeared. Vincent never bothered to look back up to see if she left, instead making sure the row of plants in front of him and his structure of plans for the future were intact.

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It was well into night when Vincent left the greenhouse. He had decided to indulge in the available hours tonight so he could cut tomorrow's work time and get some things in order at the apartment.

Alan was working a double shift which ended a half hour after Vincent's. Vincent asked him to accompany him home. After getting clearance from his supervisor, Alan joined him.

The auto-carts were on the off-peak schedule, so they walked the half mile to the apartment complex. The summer night's balm was heady, pushing against their bodies as they walked through the side streets, and it stifled the mild sounds of a sleeping university-city like a sift of fresh snow on the ground. They didn't speak and they were comfortable in the silence, yet Vincent obligated himself to buy Alan a cup of tea at one of the late night stands outside the complex.

Inside, Vincent pushed through the gauntlet of crying babies behind closed doors on the first floor, and up the stairwell to the third floor. At the fourth door on the right he paused before inserting the key into the doorknob lock, as if assessing the unseen situation in the distance past the door. He imagined an invisible organ sliding through

the solid wood of the door into the kitchen, then into the bedrooms and bathroom, gathering datum and avoiding detection. There was nothing of note in the quiet air of the apartment.

He entered, careful not to knock around and disrupt everyone. The candle on a side table remained lit as it always was when they knew he would be working late. He secured everything according to his mental list: the locked door behind him, the ice chest locks, the bathroom, his mother's bedroom. He assured himself of his sister's sleeping form on the couch near the door.

His father's bedroom was always the last he checked. The door was open per his preference, and the ambient light from somewhere in the apartment spilled onto his white sheets and the pallid features of his father's face. For minutes, with his back against the hallway wall, Vincent stared at him, seeing how his father's head was like a continuation of the white sheets, which started out smooth and taut near his feet, forming curves and deep wrinkles all the way up to his side and chest, where it bunched and folded grotesquely into the finality of head.

Though his father was asleep, his eyes were open, black glassy holes in the dim light, set above the open sliver of shadow of his lips. His breathing was shallow and did not raise and lower the wrinkled blue-whiteness of the sheets. All of these were a symptom of his condition, and it took Vincent many months to become accustomed to the abnormality. Tonight there was a deviation from his sleeping rote: the straight, board-like placement of his father arms at his side would bend of their own accord toward Vincent in a gesture of inquisition and wonder. Wonder, wonder. A wondering why he wouldn't take the interview offer and set his hand to cutting a better path for the family instead of holding out for an uncertainty a year from now.

Vincent turned then to his own bedroom and got ready for bed. It took him longer than usual because he had to stop to consider the phenomenon that, for one of the few times in his young life thus far, he was unsure if he had made the correct decision.

3. Prophecy in Pigment

"Congratulations," Father On-the-Willows said to Elisabeth. There was a hint of mischief dancing in his eyes. "Has the good Dr. Fallace extended adulation to you yet?"

They sat in Father's office, a nut-brown enclave. Though the door remained open in appropriate social fashion, they were far enough away from the department chaos in the open space down the hall. The office was underlaid with a soundless carpet and one grand window facing the east lawns. Father was behind his desk, gunmetal hair pulled into a ponytail, hands folded in front of his mouth as though they aided speech instead of hindered it.

"Not yet. It won't be unexpected, though."

"I'm actually looking forward to whatever he might have planned. I can only hope it involves the rest of us."

"It seems we've become acclimated to his antics. His tomfoolery needs increase."

"Either way, whatever your position is in the Church," he said, raising his intertwined fingers up like a drawbridge, "or if no official position at all, she welcomes you. I'd like to think I'm one of her qualified spokesmen."

Father's assistant knocked quietly and entered, handed him a paper, and left.

"We need to talk shop," he said, after skimming the paper.

"What is it?"

He rose from his chair and Elisabeth, on automatic, stood up instantly. He began pacing around his desk and, though privy to his habit, she became rigid with tension.

"You remember the du Mahdi story we ran just a few months ago?" he asked.

Elisabeth nodded. "The Crazed Herald. I don't remember the details."

He paused in path around his desk to read in more detail. "He was found as the author of a few pamphlets that preached the words of the Deaf Prophet as Christian in origin. He was imprisoned for blasphemy by Al Dera al Akhdar."

Elisabeth made an indelicate noise. "Barbary."

Father began pacing again. "I know. I can't say I'm disappointed that they decommissioned all of their prisons except for that one. Du Mahdi is really the only one who has ever been there unjustly, and *he's* there only because of pressure from anti-Al

Sayf al Ahmar blocs and their sympathizers. If Al Dera had their druthers, those prisons would be ground into dust and thrown into Marinas Bay. The rest of the prisoners were murderers and thieves, so that's some consolation. But it looks now like he's a free man."

"Good." Elisabeth, standing straight, fought the temptation to cross her arms and shift her weight. "Incarceration is a relic of the Old World. It needs—"

Father held up a hand. "Stay with me."

Elisabeth exhaled her frustration slowly. "Why did Al Dera release him?"

"They didn't. He escaped."

"Impossible. How?"

"It says here that Al Sayf operatives, undercover as Al Dera employees, released him." He stopped and set his feet onto the floor like a trap about to spring. "Oh, dear."

"Sir?"

"It says du Mahdi cut off his own arm, his right arm, instead of having Al Sayf operatives remove the last chain. And they administered the ritual deafening on him there."

Elisabeth, heaving a shudder, closed her eyes and crossed herself. "Why would he do that?"

"Doesn't say. Here's what's more: some Al Dera al Akhdar guards spotted him the next day a few miles away from the prison, on the outskirts of Al Makaan al Sarf, near the shore. He gave chase and eventually ended up in a brawl with one of them. Du Mahdi thrashed him thoroughly, and even broke one of his arms. They found his body right near one of those cliffs on the south-western coastline. The victim is still hospitalized, but there's a quote from him here saying it seemed like du Mahdi specifically went after him."

"Is there something special about him? The guard, I mean."

Father read more down the page and grunted. "Nothing here."

"This doesn't make a bit of sense. And he did this all with a fresh self-amputation?"

"He earned his nickname, no? He's an absolute beast of a man, if I recall the story. Tall, built like an iron forge encased in concrete, dreadlocks the size of an octopus." He rubbed at his jaw. "We've got something strange going on here. Du Mahdi is an apostate Muslim, now an outspoken Catholic. Al Sayf are a fairly Westernized sect but would

prefer not to have anything to do with someone *kafir* like du Mahdi. But they invade a prison to free him, even going so far as initiating him into their little cabal, to fulfill a prophecy of the Deaf Prophet, a staunch secularist who stuck in a mention of God in his last writings."

In the beat of silence, she fought off the hypnosis from his pace, and attempted to resolve all the information at once. Something about Father's description of du Mahdi sounded a click above her head, like a scattering of cogs coming together to await prime movement.

"So it looks like," she said, "Rashad el Mufti will be clamping down on all of his hired hands in Al Dera. He doesn't want any more bad publicity from double agency, as it's a sign of organizational instability. I don't envy that man right now."

"Neither do I. I met him once when we were organizing our new archives at the Wadi al Makatib. Solid and dependable, and a rapier-like mind. He's made good on what's been handed to him. He's probably wild running damage control right now, but I think he'll come out of this for the better."

Father sat back down again, and Elisabeth received it as a signal to relax her guard and return to her seat.

"I suppose you'd like me to look into this?" she asked

He frowned and pursed his lips. "Yes, but it's low priority. I already have some of us on the daily of it, but this is something that deserves more investigation. You still have the Wadi visit on your schedule, if I'm not mistaken. You can take a day or two there and see what you can see in a few weeks. I'd like to know how things developed there."

"Of course," she said, with a muster of enthusiasm. "Do I have my leave?"

"I'm sorry to do it to you, but you're the best suited for it. It's just a routine checkup. You'll have a new escort there. Asad is his name. Yes, you are free to leave."

Elisabeth stood. "I understand. I'll do my best not to sabotage the operation," she said, grinning and bowing with a jester's flourish.

"That's our resident Luddite."

Elisabeth began a mild protest, but he moved on.

"I received your request for background files," he said. "Are you sure you have enough time to finish the apprentice screening process? Contracts are due soon, and you haven't interviewed anyone yet. If you can fit someone in this round, that would be

ideal, but I wouldn't want you to rush into something you might have regrets about. Remember, with the nature of our work, you'll need to pick a man."

"I understand. I won't rush into things, of course."

She thought of adding "you have my word," but the guilt of not having full intention behind the phrase prevailed. She gathered up her papers and headed for the office door.

"Elisabeth," Father called out to her, his words sounding as if out of a tunnel.

She stopped, stifled a sigh, and turned around. "Yes, Father?"

"What do you think of my new paintings?" he asked, pointing with one hand to either side of his room.

Conjuring patience, she shot glances, left to right to left, multiple times. The paintings were too far to notice detail, but they bore the same smudges of light and shade.

"I'm willing to bet," Father said, "that you're wondering why I have two of the same paintings."

"It crossed my mind, yes."

"*The Abduction of Europa*," Father said with wonderment. "A close friend of mine, who recently passed on, he was a collector, and he had left these to me. After years and years of collecting and trading he never once hung any of his paintings up. He just couldn't bring himself to do it. Instead they were in unsorted piles and rows in his study. All of them, even the valuable ones. They were everywhere. But one day he finally discovered, or decided, the reason for his mania, when he purchased this one—," he gestured to the version to his right, "—the original painting. He traded a hand-wrought iron stove to a collector in Avignon for it."

"*Abduction of Europa*," Elisabeth repeated. "What was the reason for keeping the copy if he had the original? Or his reason for collecting in general?"

Father nodded, expecting the questions. "He collected paintings in order to play a joke on everyone."

"An expensive prank."

"Of course. You see, he collected to find one true painting. *Why* exactly this was his, I'm not sure. He hung this original in his dining room, but it consistently passed the notice of his guests, week after week. Even when he directed their attention, there was

little enthusiasm for it. Most were interested more in the painting's pedigree than the painting itself.

"It was then that he made this exact replica, this pastiche, of the masterpiece. It was, again, as if he was taken by a force, enraptured by some obscure pagan god, that he did this. He never voiced his reasons." With open hands Father spread his arms, offering both paintings for consideration. "It's all there in both of them, all of the same details. The musculature on the snow-white bull, the dramatic spotlighting, the reactions of the onlookers, the glinting points of the carriage, the detailed rendering of clothing. The copy is its exact twin, except for one small detail. You see on the left side, near the horizon point, a streak of the sky cuts through the gray clouds. Just barely, but it's there.

"He hung the replica in the dining room, and moved the original to his study. Again, the replica passed the notice of his guests until he mentioned that the painting was not the original, and that he had the real one in his study. He said this at the beginning of dinner so that the prospect of viewing the original would fester in his guests' minds.

"Finally, after dinner, he would bring his guests to the study, and all throughout their time there they would not take their eyes off of the original, examining each stroke with the psychosis of the amateur-obsessive. Their enjoyment delighted him, and he finally understood the reason for the replica. Can you guess what that is?"

Elisabeth flicked her eyes at random points on Father's desk. "The replica was there to point to the original," she offered. "To point to it? To patronize or pedestalize?"

"Yes!" Elisabeth flinched at his shout. "That was its purpose, its *raison d'etre*: to bring glory to the thing deserving glory but had not enjoyed the glory due. To apotheosize the humbled but worthy. It was an interesting bit of psychology, his little experiment. And now I've been left with the paintings. I haven't decided yet what to do with them yet. It feels silly to have both here in the same room, at the same time, but it makes for decent conversation."

"Undoubtedly, Father." She paused and gave a nod of her head. "Now, if I may take leave, I have to get some things in order."

Back at her desk, the recent acts of du Mahdi, the Crazed Herald, spurned an extended trail of thought back in time, reaching into what she could remember about the imprisonment article and the Deaf Prophet's mystical writings. Cursing her

unreliable memory, she turned to a binder full of papers on the shelf behind her desk where copies of the world's holy books sat all along the shelf's length.

She shuffled through the binder until she found the exact few papers in mind, flipped the first page, and then scanned down to the last few couplets:

Soon, born from broken time, my crazed herald will arrive
Heavy with strength and stature he will appear, as though from nothing

Then it will come to pass, forty months from this day March the 28th
This one armed wild one will be imprisoned for embracing another

He will rend his chains by his own devices
And receive the gift I have known since the days of the womb

Then, in short time, on the high stones of the settlements
He will wrest against the counterpart—his mirror, his mirror

The survivor will thrive and carry the word of Allah to the Yokuts
The Yokuts will be blessed until the end of the ages.

She reread those lines until she could see them, arrayed in all mystery, painted on the blank wall across her desk. Then she sat back in her chair and sensed about for the invisible cogs hovering near her head to begin grinding.

4. An Offer Rejected

Vincent leaned against the wall of the building, some distance away from the staircase that lay parallel to the facade of the main building entrance, as people trickled past him and up the stairs. The stairs led up to a landing, then a series of stairs led back down. If he would walk up to that landing and turn toward the building, Vincent had noted from afar, he would enter an open porch area that stretched the whole width of the building, leading to its entrance.

He stepped away to see over the crest of the wall bordering the porch area, and re-examine the sign above the main entrance. The grandiose letters etched into the marble overhang above the entrance read: "de Sales College."

He checked the rumpled letter in his hand for a third, then a fourth time, then the timepiece in the front pocket of his waistcoat. Two minutes to go. Two minutes to reverse his decision again and leave, to return to the familiarity of the greenhouse and the open labs at Applied Natural Philosophies, with no one but this nigh-unknown nun wise to his fickle indeterminacy.

"Is this crazy? This is crazy," he said as he clamped the timepiece closed. "Damnable and crazy."

He glanced back up, crossed his arms, puffed his chest out, and absorbed the feel of friction in being a stagnant rock standing immovable against the tide of people flowing past him. Stagnant: standing tall in the chosen path to his proud profession in the midst of so many mincing word-wranglers and dainty dust-blowers. In his better world, the soft arena of history and storytelling would have stationed itself far away from his work. His work, the stuff of the future, of practical use, of the gradual elimination of need that has locked humanity in grinding misery since the caves. The disromance of the natural philosophies, of deduction and energy and conclusions, of the uncaring reality of the universe waiting to be tamed. That was his love, not the indirect, airy idealism of bookish charms or accounts of megalomania nurtured by extinct madmen in power.

Vincent, soaking in frustration, reached saturation, and leaned away to turn his back on the College and the peculiar invitation, when a lone figure glided onto the landing above and halted Vincent's departure. She looked down the stairs on the other side, then

down at Vincent, then made her way down to him. She was the sole visual objection to the fresh flow of walkers now ascending the stairs. Her austere gray dress, contrasting holster, white headscarf, and flat shoes, swept toward him in high contrast to the prominent bustles, concealed weaponry, florid millinery, and heeled boots of her feminine peers. The most startling rebellion was the composure of her gait: she stepped with such conscious appetite and focus toward his person that his hand strayed instinctively to his sidearm in premature defense.

She skidded to a stop right in front of him.

"*Guten Morgen*," she said with an overt Deutsche accent. "You are Master Vincent Eriksson. I am Sister Elisabeth Reese." With a pinch of her skirt's sides, she curtsied and bowed her head.

Vincent removed his derby with his free hand and, holding it close to him, inclined his head deeper than usual. The woman, unrecognizable from the newspaper byline author photo he had sought out, was rather short to begin with—her curtsey made her disappear from his view entirely.

"Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Reese," he said, and caught himself short. "Or Sister? Beg your pardon."

"Millet and marzipan, you really *are* a tall one," she said, stepping back and scanning him up and down. "You look like a cotton swab on fire."

"It's the red hair. Agree?" he asked, re-donning his hat.

"What do a teetotaler and a drunkard with a broken bottle have in common?"

"Beg your pardon?"

"Stop begging so much. It's unbecoming of you." She snapped her fingers repeatedly. "Think of it."

Vincent gave up almost at once with an uncommitted half shrug.

"Time's up! They both can't hold their liquor." With that, she grinned and clapped her hands once, as though confirming the punchline.

"Follow me." She bounded up the stairs as he fumbled his paper and timepiece back into his waistcoat.

"I want to thank you for the invitation," Vincent said, forcing calm into his words as he caught up to her.

"Of course."

They made small talk as she led him across the open-air porch, past two standing Dutch Bull guards, and into a grandiose commons room. The massive area was quartered by four sections of ribbed, vaulted ceilings and stone archways.

They walked to a corner and up a staircase to the second floor, where Elisabeth opened a door and stepped through. Inside, there was a long room that caught Vincent off guard with it narrowness and layout. Leading down the room's length, straightaway from the door, was a type of aisle with a row of tables on either side. At the tables sat two people, one with loose sheets of paper or books, and one at a press-type. They spoke in hushed volumes with their heads close together, the prevalent sound being a scattered mass of *clacks* of the press-types, with an occasional *whirr-snap* of one of their automated parts.

Against the walls were bookcases broken up at random intervals with shelves of piled sheets of paper, spare press-type machines and parts, and small tools and maintenance equipment. Tele-script operators were stationed next to the bookcases, all along the perimeter of the room, perhaps half a dozen at quick glance.

Vincent was motionless, unsure of how to regard the scene before him. Elisabeth walked ahead of him, chattering away about recent weather patterns or similar, unaware that he wasn't following. As she began to pass the first table, one of the men sitting noticed her, and, standing up immediately, shouted sternly, "Professor on!" The others in the room also stopped talking, and arose in silence as she passed. The columns of rising workers and subsequent silence spread like a wave down both rows of tables, before she even reached them. Soon, she was around a quarter of the way down the row, still carrying on about the weather as the entire room was blanketed in silence. She paid little heed to the mass attention.

Vincent shook himself to attention and leaned into a brisk walk to catch up with her, as the people at the first few tables returned to their work quietly.

"—like that back when I was in the outer settlements," Elisabeth said.

"Yes," Vincent agreed. "I've never seen it like that."

At the far end of the floor there was a hallway with enclosed offices on both sides, staggered on the left and right, terminating in a grandiose set of double doors at the very end.

Elisabeth opened the door to the penultimate office and stepped aside so Vincent could enter first.

Her office was spartan, with only a plain thick rug, carpet, desk, with a modest bookcase behind it. Vincent noticed something like a press-type on one corner of the desk, except with separate, larger, different-shaped components. On the left were enormous stacks of unorganized papers and folders leaning against the wall; stacks that would have toppled over if they hadn't been leaning against a mismatched pair of stone pillars bookending them.

She removed the revolver from the holster just beside her navel, and placed it on the edge of her desk, barrel pointed away from her. Vincent likewise drew his out from inside his jacket and set it across from Elisabeth's in an inverse mirror image.

"Thank you for that. Now, would you like something to drink?" Elisabeth asked as she took seat behind her desk. The office door opened and a towering Yokut girl entered with a tray and set it down in front of Elisabeth.

"This is Miss Wa-see-at," Elisabeth said. The girl nodded politely at Vincent as she prepared Elisabeth's tea. "But if you fall in our good favors, she'll go by 'Wassie.' She is my debtor but was released to the College recently due to my vows."

Immediately, Vincent's eyes found the bright yellow band of cloth around Wa-see-at's upper arm, embroidered with an ornate "D," black as pitch.

"We have tea here," Elisabeth said, "but if you'd like something else she can get it for you."

"Thanks all the same," Vincent said.

Wassie quietly left the room.

"Let's not waste time," Elisabeth said. "Before we start, I need some basic information from you, so that my notes this morning match the university's. For verification."

She turned to the press-type-like device on her desk, slid a punch-card into a square slotted box, and next to it, pushed down on a pattern of buttons that dotted a small wooden board. The vacuum tubes against the wall hummed with energy, and a few of the dial readouts sprang to life.

“One of the new tele-types,” Vincent spoke up, as he was now able to examine the curious machine’s components more closely. “I’ve friends working on them, but I haven’t been privy to an operating version.”

Elisabeth rolled her eyes. “Yes. It’s a marvelous piece of prototyping.” As if prompted by her own sarcasm, she reached out and, without looking, knocked the side of her fist into the rack of vacuum tubes and dials. They rattled roundly against the wall.

“Well, damn,” Vincent murmured, and clamped his mouth shut.

“Just as well to forget this thing,” she said. She hadn’t heard him.

Pushing the keying device aside, she raised her hands above her desk and twiddled her fingers as if gorging on the salacious rejection of the machine. She then opened the top drawer of her desk and produced a pen, inkwell, and sheet of paper.

“Aren’t you going to use the—” Vincent began.

“No.”

Vincent, disappointed, then answered all of Elisabeth’s perfunctory questioning, and even at this early point in his career, it was by rote. As with extended interactions that require little conscious effort, Vincent had the privilege of letting his mind wander to other things while Elisabeth tended to writing in between his answers. It was at this time that he examined her gaunt aspect. It was something about the way she sat or the slanted position of her shoulders or bend of arm. Or the jumbling mass of her hair and its indecisive style of some manner of being waved or curled, saturated in gray and red-brown, and barely tamed by her order’s headband and attached slice of cloth. Or the small, sharp nose, that twitched at intervals she wasn’t talking, as though enchanted by unarticulated thought. Or it was, when she glanced up after asking a question, the faculty of her eyes, which alternated focus from Vincent but on an airy object past him, like a ticking dilemma requiring her attention—a decision that could be made at any moment, with no prior warning. Her whole countenance, which he had previously mistaken on the steps of the building as aggression, was in reality an expression of caprice that went much deeper than bodily formations and into, Vincent assumed, her very spirit. Her whole being was poised for escape at any moment. Her body was compact; composted energy, a coil waiting to spring.

Vincent found this conclusion bothersome, grating against his sensibilities. He shifted in his seat.

“Well, now that’s done with,” Elisabeth said as she put aside her papers. “I bet you’re wondering why I requested an interview with you.”

“It did cross my mind, yes.”

She leaned back against her chair and smiled. “De Sales, as you may know already, is the school of history and literature. This is the Department of History and Currency, the main department in the College. We document current events, both in Greater Athens and beyond. We get some revenue from matriculation, but most come from pamphlet, newspaper, and book sales. *The University Intelligencer* is ours. Not largely successful outside of Greater but it keeps our lights on.” She held up one finger. “Please excuse me for a moment.”

Elisabeth opened her top and side drawer and searched for something unsuccessfully. With an annoyed huff she knocked a plain block of wood onto her desktop, three times, rapidly.

Wassie entered, holding out an open tin of cigarettes to Elisabeth.

“You read my mind. *Tausend Dank*,” Elisabeth said, drawing out a cigarette and striking a match. Wassie exited and Elisabeth wordlessly held the tin out to Vincent with eyebrows raised in question. He shook his head.

“I am the department chair,” Elisabeth continued, snapping the tin shut, “more or less second in command to de Sales’ dean.” She jerked a thumb in the general direction of the terminating office at the end of the hall. “Nothing’s that official here but there’s an understanding.”

There was a peculiar rhythmic knock at the door.

“Enter,” Elisabeth said. She looked at her burning cigarette with a measure of distaste. “Maintaining a refined taste is such a chore. I need to find a new brand.”

Wassie entered with a pile of papers and placed them on Elisabeth’s desk, then left again.

“Nothing that gets published doesn’t pass over my desk first. Case in point—” Elisabeth brandished the fresh pile. “I do write some on my own for our department, but not often. They are some of the more mission critical articles or stories that Father On-the-Willows needs a special touch. Which is actually where you come in.”

“Oh?” Vincent sat up. “How is that?”

“I need your knowledge of electronal research. Well, theoretical electronal research, more so. I read those two reports you wrote on the research going on at Applied Natural Philosophies.” She scanned the area of her desk near the rack of vacuum tubes. “Here. *Results Inconclusive on Light Emission Markers*. And *Subordinate*—ah, I won’t even bother with that one. They’re not perfect articles but it gets the job done, especially for your audience. A few times here it looked like you used a thesaurus. Were you stumped?”

Vincent snorted. “I don’t get ‘stumped’. That’s for dabblers and idiots. I know what I’m doing so it’s impossible for me to misstep.”

“I’m sure we could work something out.” A smile spread her face. “Either-or, you seem to know what’s going on. That’s why I need you.”

“Alright,” he said, shuffling with impatience. “What exactly do you need me for?”

“A story.”

“What story?”

“Well, I’m sure you know of *Docteur* Jean Millis-Lestrange’s public demonstration last year. I was there at the demonstration and wrote the article for the *Intelligencer*. I—we have planned an investigative report on what happened to his plans for the machine.”

Vincent suppressed a rumble in his throat. “Well, no need to do a whole story on it. The experiment was a lethal failure and his papers were rejected by the Applied Natural Philosophies review board. Millis-Lestrange went into self-exile. No more damned ‘mechanized temporal displacer’ funny business will be heard of again. End of story.”

“It *was* a failure,” Elisabeth said, “but not completely.”

Vincent gritted his teeth and leaned one elbow on her desk. “How do you figure that?”

Elisabeth, with a hand dangling off the chair’s arm, rubbed her thumb and forefinger together. Agitated, her eyes darted side to side in rapid evaluation of his abandonment of decorum. Smoke curled out of her nostrils and past her furrowed brow.

“That’s confidential.” She snuffed out her cigarette on the top of the tray. “But you will find out if you agree to the apprenticeship. You may consider it a pro bono payment.”

Vincent frowned and opened his mouth to respond when he heard the office door fly open behind him. He turned to see a man with thick, perfect-circle glasses and a healthy white beard plow through the entrance and into the middle of the room.

"Here she is!" he said grandly, and his commanding presence made Vincent stand from his seat in automatic respect. "Our newly minted nun! The heavens part and a rain holy falls gently to baptize thy humble, bent crown and all of those in your vocation's charge. Why, it was only a few days ago that I felt creation groan and tremble gently under my feet for a few moments, then subside contentedly. Would this event, perchance, have anything to do with your recent ordination? What time of day did the event to end all events conclude?"

Behind him, just outside the office, Wassie spread her hands and gave a helpless shrug before closing the door.

"Charming," Elisabeth said. "How long have you been waiting to unleash that? Why don't you come in, John? Unannounced preferably."

"Forgive me. You're good at that, right?"

"I try. *Nein* on the nunning," Elisabeth corrected. "It's 'religious sister.' Were I the former you would not see me here. And I'm a novitiate. Nothing's official yet."

"A trifling matter," John said. He rubbed at the bottom of his nose with his thumb and sniffed loudly.

"Master Vincent," Elisabeth said, rising. "I'd like you to meet the good Dr. John Fallace. One of our lead writers and the smartest man in the office. And somewhat of a friend of mine."

Vincent shook the man's hand. His grip was rough.

"'Somewhat'?" John said, still shaking hands. He turned to Elisabeth. "Sister—and I simply adore that I can call you that now!—I'm the best friend you'll ever have."

"Vincent is working for Applied Natural Philosophies, currently," Elisabeth said. "And you're interrupting an interview for apprenticeship. I think Father might like to hear about that." A cracking noise issued from the tube rack. Under the desk, Elisabeth kicked a foot in its general direction.

"Ah, Applied Natural Philosophies!" John said, and finally let go of Vincent's hand. He beamed at Vincent. "Stellar work you are doing over there. You don't have too many —ah, how should I say this?—people of Elisabeth's similar persuasion over there? I don't

imagine so. Of course, I have contacts there, but I'm not deep into their thought process enough to know which way their cogs spin."

Vincent looked at Elisabeth, who, bemused, rolled her eyes at his goading.

"Thank you, Doctor," Vincent said. "We actually have a few religious people there that I know of."

"Surely for show," John said with a gruff and hoist of his stomach. "They don't last long one way or another in that sort of field."

"John," Elisabeth said. "*Do* you mind? We can continue this some other time. I don't mind the personal ribbing, but please just end this breach of protocol."

"I surrender!" John yelled out. He raised his hands in mock ejaculatory prayer. Vincent backed away. "I surrender to your ministrations! May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely!"

"Goodbye, John," Elisabeth said, returning to her seat. "Vincent, please sit down."

In silence, John lowered his arms, affected a downcast expression, and left Elisabeth's office.

By this time, the slim appeal this College and apprenticeship held for Vincent had waned. John's mention and praise of his current employer sparked a pang of mild homesickness for his preferred career aspirations. If only—

"So, I bet you're wondering what's in this for you," Elisabeth said, drawing another cigarette from her tin.

"Yes, Miss Elisabeth." He sat up a little more straightly, and it took all of his motivation. "You must admit your request is a little unorthodox. I'm not going not to lie to you and say it doesn't hold my interest very strongly."

She nodded and sipped. "Of course. Well, if you sign onto us for one of the standard apprenticeship durations, you will receive formal training in our program, alongside our normal hires. You'll have your name on the Millis-Lestrange story and any other stories I deem acceptable for you to participate in. And I, and Father if he feels you are worthy, will issue our highest recommendations for you to Applied Natural Philosophies for full employment there."

Vincent's eyebrows raised at her last offering. "That is rather generous of you."

"It's not a matter of generosity but due rewards. Believe me when I say," Elisabeth said with a note of sternness, pointing her cigarette at him, "after a year or two of

working with me, a high recommendation will not only be deserved but morally required."

Vincent nodded, but his glance turned sidelong when he thought of something. "Is this without pay?"

Elisabeth, teacup in hand, paused, and with a hint of sheepishness in her wild eyes, she said, "Without pay."

The sense of expectancy died and dissipated in entirety in Vincent's gut. The tube rack made another noise, an angry sort of growl and hiss, a noise to which Elisabeth reacted by kicking in a different part under her desk.

Her violent physicality made Vincent's eyes go flat. Elisabeth's irreligious flippancy toward a burgeoning technology, developed by respected associates of his, the abnormal behavior of Dr. Fallace, the inordinate gestures of deference—or worship?—she received when walking the floor to her office. And the most perilous dagger of all, the proposal to investigate a pariah, a persona non grata, cast out from his own sought-after profession. All of it was an incensing overload that grated against everything he believed in: production, order, equity. No fashion of praise from these people, useful to his career or not, would not be worth submitting himself to this.

"I'm sorry, Miss Elisabeth," Vincent said. He got up and took his gun off the table and re-holstered it. "But I don't think this will be the right opportunity for me. Thank you for your time."

Elisabeth put down her cup and cigarette and struggled to stand up quickly enough, just as Vincent grabbed his sidearm, holstered it, and turned and exited her office. As he turned, he caught a peek at her face, which held a grave expression among the simmering energy of her countenance.

5. Persuasive Remedies

Elisabeth arrived back at her office after leaving an extended department meeting early to perform her Vespers. Wassie was there, standing in front of the open window beside the bookcase, enjoying the gentle breeze and the sun approaching its twilight descent on the eastern horizon.

"Ready to go?" Elisabeth asked when she finished.

"Yes, but Father wanted to let you know he has those profiles you had requested. He left them in his office."

Elisabeth's eyes flashed. "Millet and marzipan! Why didn't you tell me when I came in?" She rushed to the door and gripped the doorknob.

"I didn't want you to rush your prayers. Anxiety is a bad motivator."

"You know me too well," Elisabeth said, softening her grip on the doorknob. "Please accept my apologies."

"I will."

Elisabeth retrieved the files and, ignoring all other prospects, straightaway opened Vincent's. The reputation report read fine; he was double "B" rated.

"Nothing bad here," Elisabeth said to Wassie. "Just needs to prove himself a little more."

She turned then to the miscellaneous report at the end of the folder. Her eager eyes, after a rapid sifting through of uninteresting facts of circumstance, brightened finally after.

"Wassie," she said. With her eyes still affixed on the paper, Elisabeth motioned for her to come closer. "I think we've found a chink in our young Master Vincent's armor. Let me know what you think of this."

"This will be quick," Elisabeth said. She checked the time on her pocket watch and nestled it back into a small pocket on her satchel.

With Wassie in tow, she strode down the plain, hardwood corridor. The risk in what was approaching, how forward and off-putting it may seem, made her deliberate steps like a balancing act on an abstract isthmus—a cautious pilgrimage between two peninsular destinies. There was still time to abandon plans, but each step brought those plans closer to withering away.

"This next one, on the right," Wassie said.

They stopped in front of the door and Elisabeth nodded to Wassie, who left.

Elisabeth waited for an imaginary, unseen cue to continue. She sensed nothing and she took it as an admonishment of fate. Despite the warning, she mustered a polite knock.

There was a gentle commotion behind the door, and a pudgy, bright-eyed woman cracked the door open and stepped through the doorway in greeting.

"Good evening," Elisabeth said, stretching a smile. "You must be Mrs. Eriksson. I am Sister Elisabeth Reese."

The woman's eyes widened and, hit with a sentiment of protocol, she drew one foot back and maneuvered into a half-genuflection and curtsey. The heel of her shoe caught on her skirt, her ankle turned, and with a yelp her generous heft tilted to one side. Elisabeth reached forward and braced the woman before she fell on the doorframe.

"Oh my," Mrs. Eriksson said. With her palms on her knees, bent over, she huffed. "That was a trip. You caught me off guard. Please call me Missy."

"Thank you, Missy. There's no need to show deference."

"Yes, yes." She stood up straight. "As you can see, Miss Elisabeth, we're not a Catholic family. I hope that is okay? We're not Deutsche, either."

"Perfectly fine." Elisabeth crossed her wrists in front of her and laced her fingers. "I apologize for visiting you without notifying first, but I am pressed for time. Is Master Vincent present? I would like to speak with him. Privately, if at all possible. I know your living arrangements require a low level of noise so we will go outside."

Surprise creased Missy's forehead. "Oh," she said. "He is here, yes." She turned her head to her shoulder. "Christine," she called out in a hushed yell, "will you let Vincent know he has a visitor? He's in his room."

Inside the apartment, Elisabeth could see Christine's reddish-blonde haired head pop into view from around a hallway corner. She nodded.

“Won’t you come in?” Missy said. “We have some tea ready. It may take a few minutes for him to be out, and it’s not all the time we have the pleasure.” Missy offered her own smile, gushing, patting her own cheek.

Elisabeth began her readied response when Vincent’s tall frame, drooping from weariness, emerged from around the corner of their apartment’s hallway. He grabbed a dress jacket from the coat rack next to the door and passed her mother and Elisabeth, wordless, into the building’s hallway.

Missy’s face registered aghast at the drama of her son’s rudeness. Elisabeth smiled at Missy, then followed Vincent, who, at a rabbit’s pace, was already somewhere along the staircase to the bottom floor. She stumbled to catch up to him, right at the building’s main entrance.

“I know the formula,” he bellowed as he knocked past a young couple entering the complex. Elisabeth smiled apologetically to them as she stepped outside.

“You’re going to try to convince me,” Vincent continued, “that taking you on as my mentor is the right thing to do, that I have my whole future ahead of me, that it’s important to learn things outside of my expertise. All of that.”

He was well into the small side courtyard of the complex as Elisabeth shuffled down the outside steps, and, throwing off all decorum, she sprinted to catch up to him.

Wassie was at the far end of the courtyard, sitting on a stone bench. There were a few others milling about in private conversation, and a Dutch Bull guard passing through on round who took brief notice of Elisabeth’s speedy steps.

Vincent had stopped at one of the benches, standing with folded arms, bearing down on Elisabeth with a hard stare as she came near.

“I won’t lie to you, Vincent,” Elisabeth said. “I’m here to appeal to your sense of discretion, and to have your word that you’d reconsider my offer. There’s not much more I can say to you. You already know the conditions. I’d be happy just to hear you say you’ll recant your rejection and at least think it over.”

“If it will give you some sense of accomplishment, then I guess it couldn’t hurt,” he said, sitting down on the bench. “Though, if honesty is the manner of course here, I take a bit of offense at all of this. You seem to have it fixed in your head that I’m not secure enough in my decision-making instincts that coming to me in pleading would somehow spark doubt. Would you really want someone who places so little trust in their own

faculties to be under your tutelage? I already told you: I don't get stumped. That also means I don't second guess myself."

"You should also realize, then," Elisabeth said, as non-patronizing as she could, "that part of being a rational agency is that indecision is not indecision if you believe you don't have enough data. Have you considered that you might not know everything there is to know about the situation? People in my profession call that 'prudence', but you may call it 'wisdom' if that suits you better."

"Please, Miss Elisabeth." He held up a hand as if to halt an intended advance. "I've already done my philosophy studies. 'Even if I have no power to avoid error by having a clear perception of everything I have to think about, I can avoid it simply by remembering to withhold judgment on anything that isn't clear to me.'"

"Descartes?"

Vincent nodded. "You won't reveal to me anything I've not already considered." He cocked his head and looked at her. "You already said that you couldn't give me any more information about this than I already had. Agree?"

Elisabeth stepped closer. "I did. Yes, I did. Yet you may not know what I know. And you don't know my intentions that birth out of that."

"You're speaking some damned gibberish," he said.

Wassie was able to pick up on the hostility at her distance, and she shot Elisabeth a questioning look. Elisabeth lifted a steady hand at her hip.

Daylight was waning fast. Dusk cast the courtyard in a sleepy blue tinge, the kind that spurns the busiest to begin tending to the day's final tasks. Elisabeth, in strained times such as these, would seek out the sun as an anchor of certainty, but as it was sinking low on the opposite side of the apartment complex, her unfortunate placement produced a tingle of abandonment.

She took another step toward Vincent, and was now at such a position and proximity to give examination to the details on the back of his head. There was an itching in her fingers to grab the longish red strands at the nape of his neck, yank his head back to show him the dusking sky, and attempt with all the abiding love and feverish hate in the world to shove good sense straight down into his gullet.

Instead, she rested one knee on the bench, slid a gentle hand onto his shoulder, prayed a silent, terse prayer, and with great restraint, spoke softly next to his ear.

“I will tell you what I know, and what my plans are concerning this knowledge. This is what I know: I know about how your sister is eligible for marriage brokerage in a few years, but that is a few years too far away for your family to receive the dowry. I know about your infant futures and how the value decreased significantly because of the state of your father’s health. And yes, I know about your father, Vincent. I know about his disease and the condition of his body. I know that almost every night, before entering his room after a bout of study, you make sure your mother and sister are asleep so they don’t know how late you stay up, wondering if he will ever recover or if you will get enough overtime that week to put food on the table and keep the water running. I know, and can see, the heavy hand of responsibility that was placed so unjustly on your shoulders so early in your life, Vincent, and I know how much faith you and your family are placing in your abilities and the state of the University, and people like me, to help you provide a life for your family. Life has dragooned you into this circumstance, but I believe I can relieve some of the pain of slavery you’re feeling.

“I will tell you what I plan to do about this, Vincent. I am willing, from my own savings, to gift to you two years’ worth of wages of one of de Sales’ entry-level employees. But first I must indulge a secret to you, known only to myself and Wassie, and if you choose to sign the contract, I will provide you with the money before midnight of the day of the signing, and we will not speak of that aspect of the transaction again. This payment, remember, will be a gift, free of any obligations outside of those placed upon you by the mentoring contract. You will not owe me a half penny for it and I will not expect any, monetary or otherwise.

“Please understand me, Vincent. I don’t do this out of pride in my vocation, or a sense of professional duty, or even as an act of noble charity. I’m doing this because I need you, much in the same way a navigator needs a breeze to shift the last bit of cloud away from the stars. I need you because I experienced something a year ago that obliterated everything I understood about the universe in one instant, like a claw ripping into the heart of all that we know. I need you because you *will* help me get answers, and I would disassemble this body of mine and cast it onto the coronal burn of the sun if it means I get answers.”

Elisabeth removed her hand and stood back up, signaling to Wassie, who loped directly over. As Elisabeth turned her back to leave, she took one last look at Vincent’s

face, reciprocating his departing action yesterday in her office. He had not changed expression since he sat down.

Her demeanor, poulticed by the benevolent revenge, healed just a bit more when she saw the whisper of a glimmer in his eye.

6. A Woman of Many Cloths

Vincent arrived at the de Sales College building a few minutes after dawn broke. The yards were empty of anyone except a few maintenance workers. A guard, one who had not recognized Vincent yet, let him into the locked building after alleviating suspicion by checking Vincent's reputation card.

The upstairs offices were unoccupied except for two overnight tele-script operators. Vincent removed his hat, and checked his pocket watch to compare it to the large grandfather clock standing against the wall. Elisabeth was late, and her office door was locked, so he took the time to examine some of the press-type machines lining the shelves with languid discretion.

When he heard footsteps outside the door, he quickly smoothed his hair into place. Wassie entered.

"Good morning," he said, with a slight bow of his head. "Is Miss Elisabeth not with you? She wanted to meet early so we could get a head start on the Wadi."

She offered a curtsey. "She will be along soon with your things. I packed them last night. She wanted me to come early to make breakfast, and asked if you could assist me."

"I suppose I could," he said. He looked down at his rough denim trousers. "I wouldn't say I'm dressed for women's work, though."

"Don't worry. I'll need a hand with some of the supplies. To save time. Please follow me."

She led him down the staircase to the ground floor, through a hallway lined with hanging coats and hats, and into the building's kitchen. There were about a half dozen maids and servants preparing for the morning rush. They paid no heed to the pair as they walked into a small side room where there was a small stove, a sink, and table.

Wassie bent down opened the fuel door on the stove a crack. "Ah, good. They started the coals for us. Right out the outside door there should be a crate. You may bring that in for me, please."

Vincent brought the heavy crate in, just as Wassie was putting a tin coffee maker on the heat shelf.

“This seems to be a lot just for us. Agree?” Vincent asked as he scanned the crate’s contents: a half dozen eggs, a side of bacon, a loaf of bread, vegetables, and coffee grounds.

“It may be more than enough, but that’s preferable, no? ‘Eight wild boars roasted whole at breakfast, but twelve persons there.’”

“Miss Elisabeth’s rubbed off on you.” He fetched a cigarette from his coat pocket and lit it.

“And she on you,” Wassie said.

“This is occasional enough to be exciting.” He leaned on the doorframe and focused at the orange globe of the cigarette. “But you quote Shakespeare with the ease of drawing breath.”

“I’ve been in her charge for years now,” she said. She ran the vegetables under the faucet. “At times I think she’s repaying me more than I her, considering the circumstance of my debt.”

He breathed out a cloud and waved a defensive hand. “No, no,” he said. “Don’t go into that. The impropriety is too much for so early in the morning.”

“I don’t mind it at all.” She began to cut into the vegetables with expert motions. “It’s a salve of sorts.”

“If you insist.”

“My tribe owed Elisabeth’s mother a sizable sum of money from arbitration.” As she spoke, head down, her steady knife work persisted. “There was no malicious intent but the whole ordeal was my fault. We appealed the decision, and Elisabeth and her surviving family agreed to take me as their debtor for a time, along with a greatly reduced reparation amount.”

She tossed the vegetables into the pan, causing an immediate sizzle. Looking up at Vincent with a gentle smile, she whisked the cracked eggs in a bowl, her head listing gently side to side as she labored.

Cigarette smoke wafted up from Vincent’s nostrils as he stood unmoving, as though frozen by revelation.

“You seem to take it well,” he said.

“Considering what happened, I’m relieved that the Reeses had a heart of mercy toward me. They could have bankrupted us, not just with the reparations but with our

trade relations with the Outer Settlement guilds. They could have done a lot more damage to us. Our actions were lethal, but it was all based on a misunderstanding. Besides," she paused to pour the eggs into the pan, "'it would be a tragic thing to speak so gravely of tragic events.'"

"That one doesn't sound familiar."

"It's my own."

Vincent took a cautious step inside, as he felt the moisture preliminary to storms gather on the back of his neck. There was a shout of "Professor on!" from the main kitchen, and there was the loud clang of a metal bowl or pan dropping to the floor. Someone cursed sharply, but their drone of activity ceased.

Elisabeth burst into the door from the main kitchen with a bluster, laden with two large backpacks, and huffed her breath.

"Well, now," she said. "Glad to see you two are moving things along."

She strode into the room and dropped the two packs. She was wearing leather pants and a light buttoned shirt of cotton, with her headscarf as the only outward sign of devotion. It was something of a shock for Vincent to see her in vulgar clothing.

"And you," Elisabeth said, pointing at Vincent's smoking hand. "I see you've finally taken up the cause."

"It's just a vice for now."

"Temporary guilts makes for extended graces. I trust you assisted the master chef?"

He floundered. "In a way. I carried in the crate. I'm honestly not suited for kitchen work."

"As you shouldn't be," she said. "You're a natural philosopher. You tame nature, out there." She pointed outside, where a conspicuous rain began to fall.

Vincent reached across the table and cut a piece of carrot off of a loose stick. He ate it and checked his timepiece. "Aren't we going to miss the first auto-carts of the morning? The next ones to Al Makaan don't happen until nearly noon, as I remember."

"Yes, we will miss them," Elisabeth said, taking a seat at the table. "But we're not taking them. We're going by bicycle."

"That's a twenty mile ride. Can you handle that?" He turned to Wassie. "Can you handle that?"

“It’s more like twenty-five,” Elisabeth said. “Wassie probably could handle it, but she’s not going. It’s just me and you’re in the driver’s seat.”

“Me? I haven’t ridden one of those in years. Not sure I can do twenty-five, either.”

“That’s what all this is for.” Elisabeth opened her arms, presenting Wassie and the stove to him. “You’ll need the energy and Wassie’s bicycle is the one hooked to the sidecar right now. You’ll need some brute strength—you won’t have to worry about balancing with the sidecar. You’ll have to haul these, our belongings, there.” She patted the bags on the floor. “You’re in good hands since I’m an excellent navigator.”

“You’re not eating?”

Elisabeth chuckled. “I’m not one for a big breakfast. Just tea for me. Wassie can finish off what you can’t put down.”

“I’m starting to reconsider,” Vincent said.

“But it’s such a nice day out,” Elisabeth said, looking past Vincent to the falling rain outside. “Well, it soon will be. The rain will stop. I had a triple sneeze this morning, as soon as I woke up. My pneumatics are predictive. The Wadi won’t take very long by itself, but I thought it would be nice to make a day of it. I know you haven’t seen much of Al Makaan or even the Waterway Bridge, and you’ve been a commendable victim of mine non-stop for a good few weeks now.”

Wassie presented Elisabeth with a cup of tea. Elisabeth turned serious. “To that end, Vincent: I have to ask how your journal is coming along.”

With a pert stillness of her head, she locked eyes with Vincent and took a ginger sip of tea.

“I, uh,” he began. “Not that great. I know I need to do more.”

“One needs to step once before one can say he needs to walk a mile.”

“So you know I haven’t written in it yet,” he said, snuffing out the cigarette on the sole of his boot with an emphatic mash. “Why did you ask?”

“I wanted to see how you’d dodge me. Providing excuses on the spot can pull you out of tight situations. I prefer to call it ‘spontaneous reasoning,’ but feel free to label it as you see fit.”

He shrugged. “I’ll just call it ‘lying.’”

“Whatever you need to do to get the story. Remember that.” Elisabeth cocked her head. “Huh,” she said in wonderment. “‘Lying.’ It bears a note of certainty, doesn’t it

Wassie? Not like that one clumsy phrase you wrote the other day, Vincent, on that one practice editorial I had you write. What was it?"

Wassie turned from the stove, armed with a tolerant smile and plates of toasted bread and a mountain of scrambled eggs. Vincent, with misplaced bravado, dug the knife to cut another piece of raw carrot and yelped sharply. He slid back and raised his finger high.

"Cut it," he said with a wince.

Wassie set the plates down on the table and rummaged through one of the backpacks that Elisabeth had just opened. She fished out the medical supply box, dressed Vincent's wound, and gave him pain relief tablets.

"Are you okay?" Elisabeth asked.

"It wasn't deep," Wassie said.

"No," Vincent said. "It wasn't deep. But it smarts. I must've hit it just right. 'Epicurean violence.' That was the phrase."

Elisabeth, in her own uproar, slapped the table with a laugh. "That's it! *Heiliger Bimbam!* What did you even mean by that?"

"I think I just found out." He gazed at his bandaged finger.

"Well now," Elisabeth said. "No more feeling sorry. Eat up and let's go. Our escort to the Wadi is expecting us before noon."

Vincent downed most of his morning meal and after a few more pills, mounted Wassie's bicycle, hitched just outside the de Sales building. With Elisabeth, begoggled, situated low and tight at his side with a small map of Lesser Athens for reference, he agonized to gather momentum at the pedals and settled into a respectable pace out of the rainy College grounds.

It was about an hour when the sun appeared and scattered much of the clouds and humidity with full force. The sometimes-steep downhill streets in the residential areas of the university gave way to a more level riding area. Vincent found the shallow grades more manageable.

They soon came upon one of the main market districts in the Lesser Athens. It was a wide thoroughfare with a dizzying commotion of gliding bikes, sputtering auto-carts, horses in canter, and pedestrians making their way in cross-directional chaos. Tele-script cables, strewn in bulky bunches from one pole to another, arced low to the ground

in the alleyways behind the lines of buildings. It all set Vincent's nerves aflame, but he kept it under control by slowing to a more careful speed.

"You're doing fine," Elisabeth said. "Just keep steady pace here. Everyone's looking out for you as you are for them."

Up until now, Elisabeth only gave the briefest of directions with barely a response from Vincent. Her reassurance calmed him down.

"What exactly are we doing in Al Makaan?" Vincent asked.

"The official story is that we're going to interview the Green Shield guards at the prison where du Mahdi was incarcerated, then we will visit the hospital to which the guard that fought du Mahdi was brought. We're going to try to track him down. Then, tomorrow, we're going to the Wadi and checking up on the copies of all of the University documents into the tele-type system. I think it's called a 'data-base' or the like. It's been going on since the beginning of the year. There's not much to do but make an appearance to satisfy protocol. Father On-the-Willows seems to think it inspires confidence that someone like me is taking an interest. Maybe he is right, but I have my reservations."

"And the unofficial story?"

"All of that, plus more: you and I are going to look into Docteur Millis-Lestrange's MTD."

"I figured as much," he said, letting reservation seep into his words. "What if we don't find anything?"

"We may not, but we will."

Vincent turned to her, set to ignite contention, when there was a loud mechanical bang and hiss. A small plume of white steam wafted up over the heads in front of them.

Elisabeth sat up a little in the sidecar, and pulled her goggles up and away from her eyes. "What's this now?" she asked.

There was a commotion ahead where a commercial auto-cart, unloading its crated cargo of produce, had a misfiring engine. Something within the auto-cart's side crank casing had broken off, as the crank's exposed pipe and handle spun around wildly from its mechanical tension being released without hindrance. Some fruit had spilled out onto the road and prompted some passersby to stop and assist.

Vincent turned off the road and braked to a stop right to the side of a building's main entrance. He stepped off the bicycle to pick up a rolling peach and toss it to one of the workers on the auto-cart.

He felt a light brush on his derby and the back of his neck. He turned around. A woman wearing bright red rouge and a gaudy lavender feather wagging out of her hair brandished her black boa.

"You look like a nice fella," she breathed. "Why don't you stop for a spell?"

"He's spoken for, Miss," Elisabeth said in a stern tone from the sidecar.

Vincent nodded to the woman politely and stepped back onto the bicycle. He started pedaling, and the strumpet walked sideways along with them, pointing her chalk-colored bosom, popping out from her black and white striped corset, straight at his eyes.

Elisabeth sighed and scratched at her cheek. "They're starting so early in the day now."

Vincent was about to engage the woman when Elisabeth flicked at his elbow.

"Eyes ahead, young man," she said. "It's not my business how you spend your spare time but you're on my payroll for the time being. You already injured yourself once today. I don't want you ending up seeing a physician for some mysterious southern disease."

"Yes, Miss Elisabeth."

Elisabeth re-donned her googles and took a quick look at her map. "Take your next right, down...Exeter."

Ten minutes later, they arrived just under the southwestern corner of the Waterway Bridge, right alongside Marinas Bay. They coasted along the bay's edge, among the metallic clangs and steamy machinations of workers installing railroad tracks. A winding path lead under the bright, to its north side, and up to its proper, vehicular entrance.

There was a bit of a crawl of traffic leading onto the bridge, as it was now the meat of the business day. Elisabeth pointed Vincent to the back of the pedestrian and bicycle line, and when they passed the entrance booth, Elisabeth flashed her reputation card to the bridge guard.

They traveled onto the slowest right hand lane, directly next to the waist-high wooden railing. His pedaling became unsure again.

“Have you not been on the bridge before?” Elisabeth asked.

“No, I haven’t. I’m in conflict between not crashing into anything in front of me and looking out over the edge.” He sneaked some rapid sideways glances. “It looks like it’s quite a view.”

“It is. On the way back, we can stop and take in the view. It’s been a while since I’ve been here, so I’d like to get my fill.”

“When were you here last?” He twitched his arms and slowed to keep steady.

“A few years ago, perhaps. It was actually closed for a special demonstration. A dance troupe I helped instruct did a performance.”

Vincent made a surprised lunge forward. “You were a dancer?” he asked, making a half turn toward her.

“Of sorts. Watch out.”

Vincent braked on impulse, just before the bicycle’s front tire would rub up against the back axle of a man’s bicycle.

“Pull off to the right when we get to the end of the bridge,” Elisabeth said. “There will be a fence we can hitch to.”

Where the bridge met the Al Makaan al Sarf side, there was a wide metal plate, spanning the whole length of the bridge that dug into the packed dirt. Veering to the right, careful not to jostle too much when wheeling off the plate into the damp dirt, Vincent found the fence: a long, robust series of posts and logs that circled all around a cluster of buildings.

An assembly of bicycles was hitched already, so Vincent began to circumvent the fence. They passed an opening in the fence, near the entrance of the biggest building in the cluster. A sign, written in green Arabic lettering, was fastened to one of the fence logs.

“Al Dera al Akhdar,” Elisabeth informed him. “The Green Shield. It’s one of Al Makaan’s security and investigation firms.”

They found a space on the fence big enough to accommodate their traveling setup. A short man with a lame leg hobbled up to them as they were gathering their packs. The revolver hanging from a holster off his shoulder had a prominent barrel.

“Ducat to watch bicycle?” he said to Vincent in a thick Arabian accent, stringing his smile out with hope.

Vincent spread his arms, uncertain. The man hacked out a violent cough into his shoulder, then presented the breast of his waistcoat to him. There was an embroidered badge patched onto it.

"See?" the man asked. "You see?"

Elisabeth approached him, coin purse in hand. "Very good, sir. Here are two ducats. We will be back in the afternoon. *Shokran*, *shokran*, Monsieur." Thank you, thank you, sir.

The man granted them a shallow bow and another smile, and hobbled off around the circle of the fence.

"It will take him a whole day to limp around this fence," Vincent remarked. "How can he give chase if someone tries to steal one of these bicycles?"

"He won't need to."

"Why not?"

"Did you see the size of that gun?" She swung one of the bags over her shoulder. "And the badge? He's a sharpshooter, sponsored by Al Dera al Akhdar."

"Can he be trusted?"

"Most likely, yes. He's had that infirmity for quite some time but he was probably born with a revolver in hand. He could hit the narrow side of a half ducat at twenty paces. I wouldn't be the least bit surprised if shooting's the only thing he *can* do. He's not going to risk his livelihood by being a crook."

They watched the man as he dipped up and down with every pair of steps.

"Seems like there's more than just him on watch, anyway," she said.

Vincent felt the acute telltale pressure in his gut. He exhaled slowly. "All that pedaling moved things around. I'm going to need to empty out."

"You have such a way with words."

"That's why I'm your protégé."

Elisabeth lifted the other backpack and handed it to Vincent. "There's a row of outhouses inside the fence, on the far side of the building. I need to partake, myself. Better take this with you. I'd rather not have our things out in the open, even if they are being guarded."

They slipped past the gate and around the Al Dera al Akhdar building. After an uncomfortable length of time, Vincent emerged, refreshed, and returned to the gate. On

approaching the bicycle, he found the limping guard Elisabeth had paid speaking with a figure wearing what looked like a black robe and hood. The person, the size and carriage of an tall child or young teenage girl, held Elisabeth's backpack in the crook of her arm.

Vincent, with his hand on the grip of his holstered revolver, strode over to them.

"What the hell is going on?" he asked the guard.

"*Laa*, Monsieur, *Laa*." No, sir, no. The guard pleaded with a smile, not drawing his gun but presenting Vincent a benign spread of his arms. He interposed himself between the robed person and Vincent.

Vincent stared him down, and the guard hobbled aside. The robed figure, who wore in addition to the hood a sort of cloth mask around the mouth and nose, looked directly at Vincent and seemed to speak.

"You! What are you—?" Vincent broke off and his hand dropped from the grip. The figure sneezed once, then twice, yet Vincent had already recognized who the child really was. He was close enough to see that the pair of eyes blinking at him through the slit in the hood were the guileless eyes of Elisabeth.

7. Deaf to the World

Elisabeth sneezed a third time.

"Sorry. I'm sorry. Misunderstanding," Vincent said to the guard in an elevated volume.

"He speaks broken English, Master Vincent. Being loud won't help." She turned to the guard with a little bow of her head. "*Ana asifa*. Shokran." Forgive me. Thank you.

He returned the bow and hobbled off.

"Now I'm not so sure about him," Vincent said.

Elisabeth unhooked the masking part of her outfit to reveal her full face. "Nonsense. He was actually performing as he should. He saw a strange person hovering near a bicycle that wasn't theirs and immediately investigated. We were doing fine."

"What exactly is all of that for?" Vincent asked, waggling his fingers with some distaste at her clothing change. Looking her up and down, he noticed a patch of white cloth, not unlike Wassie's debtor sign, sewn onto the shoulder of her body-length black robe. It had a black cross printed on it.

"Things are a little more cosmopolitan right near the Bridge, as you can see." She gestured to the bustle of people around them, where the fashion at first glance was not uniform by acculturation. "The Wadi is located deeper inland where it's a little more culturally consistent, so it's best to do as the Romans do. Things are a little different here than at Lesser-Athens, the University in particular."

"But you don't have to wear it, do you?"

She considered it. "No, not exactly. But there's no need to draw undue attention. And this,"—she inclined her head toward the patch on her arm—"is so that we are to be treated with an extra dose of courtesy and forgiveness, since we may not know every nuance of social protocol here. I prefer to be considerate of local customs as a matter of simple respect. You never know when you might need an ally nearby."

Elisabeth fished around her back and drew a wooden stick, folded in half. With a snap of her hand it hinged open and locked into a full size cane.

"Almost all women are armed here, not unlike everywhere else," Elisabeth explained. "But my holster isn't set up for a quick draw while I'm wearing this."

“You think a piece of wood would be an even match in trouble?”

“Of course not. That’s just for your knowledge, in case we get into any trouble.” She waved the cane back and forth in front of her face. “This is for show. Mostly. I want to be as nonthreatening as possible.”

“This is becoming too much of an adventure with each passing moment.”

“Millet and marzipan, Vincent,” she said with a casual tap of her cane on the ground. She hooked her face mask back into place. “You’re well under half my age. This is the sort of thing you should jump into daily, especially if there’s a story involved. We’re simply taking all necessary measures. A closed fist can only hold one thing: itself. An open hand has the potential to hold anything, even another’s closed fist. Think of yourself as open hand, able to do many things when the need arises.”

She peered at him. She didn’t seem convinced that her reassurance had its intended effect. “Vincent, you have to realize in life that most of the suffering we encounter from people is the result of uncertainty, not malice. Most people rarely want to injure another, but injury can still happen without intent behind it. It’s brought about by incomplete information. We can’t make an account of all things; we work our hand in life as best we can with the facts that are presented to us. That situation just now could’ve ended in a number of tragic ways had any of us indulged a sliver of our violent inclinations. The trick is to slow ourselves to reckless action and exhibit prudence in everything. But how refreshing is a drop of sureness on our brow when we’re swimming in an ocean of doubt? This is all something I need to learn, too, so don’t take this as a lecture just for you. Now then, have you sufficiently unburdened yourself? Our contact is a few blocks from here. We’re due to meet him.”

“Ready.”

Elisabeth, with an affected limp and sway of cane, led the way across the wide open road near the bridge, crossing streams of people until reaching a narrower side street. Following Elisabeth allowed him to focus on staving off the creeping uneasiness about the situation, as he noticed the men who shared his style of clothing were becoming scarcer, replaced with more traditional Mohammedan robes and headscarves. To him, the pairing of himself and Elisabeth was the soul of conspicuousness, yet as he scanned the faces of others he could not sense any undue notice at their presence.

Elisabeth turned her head to address him as they walked.

“You’ll have to be in front now,” she said. “The next block. He’ll be at an outdoor cafe. He will pretend to talk to you but he will be addressing me. I will answer him. Just act like you are leading me.”

“No need to act. I know what I’m doing.” With a stifled grumble, Vincent stepped out in front of Elisabeth and strode down the narrow street, easily passing a few dawdling walkers. He didn’t check over his shoulder to assure himself Elisabeth was keeping pace, but he knew she was trailing right behind.

“That’s him, alone at the table,” Elisabeth said, as they came up to the cafe on the opposite side of the street. “With the mustache.”

“Everyone here has a mustache. Or a beard. That doesn’t help.”

“You’re looking, but not seeing. *That* mustache.”

Vincent stopped and looked around at the tables. There was a man sitting alone with a cup, happily taking in the surroundings. His mustache was elaborately twirled on its ends into two large circles.

Vincent, wordless, sat down at the table with him, forcing his brow into a commanding furrow, and a smile to lessen the offense. Elisabeth pulled up a chair and sat behind and to the right of Vincent. He felt her hand dip into his right jacket pocket.

The man returned Vincent’s smile and bowed his head in greeting.

“*As-salāmu `alaykumā*,” he said, staring directly at Vincent. Peace be upon you both.

“*Wa-Alaikum-Salaam*,” Elisabeth replied. And peace upon you. “This is my protégé, Master Vincent Eriksson. I can vouch for him. Vincent, your pocket.”

Vincent felt around his pocket and drew out Elisabeth’s reputation card. He handed it to the man and relaxed his air of dominance.

“Excellent,” the man said after a brief glance. He handed it back to Vincent. “I am Monsieur Asad. If you are anxious to get going, we may leave now.”

“That would be ideal,” Elisabeth said.

Asad finished off his tea in one sweeping pull. “I arranged an auto-cart for us. It’s waiting for us now, a few blocks down.”

Asad, who had Vincent's height with added bravado, led them down the street, where they heard indistinct yet impassioned shouting. The shouting wasn't from physical aggression, but the intent to persuade.

"How's the situation here, Monsieur Asad?" Elisabeth asked.

"You will see for yourself, of course," Asad said. "But the Wadi al Makatib is moving along on schedule. And we have high hopes for the University's helios."

Elisabeth rubbed Vincent's elbow as a show of encouragement. "Not the Wadi, Monsieur Asad," she said. "I meant here, in Al Makaan."

"Ah! Well that may be a different story. Ignoring a few incidents about a month ago, things are quiet. Troublesome, really."

"How so?"

"We are children of Heraclitus here in Al Makaan, Miss Elisabeth." Asad extended an open palm toward the stream of pedestrians, as though offering them for evaluation. "If change doesn't come to pass we become anxious. There needs to be *panta rhei* or we seek to create the movement, to become the flow ourselves. And that doesn't always end well. There was an incident about a month back that cast some light on Al Dera's core threat management processes. Namely, a little bit of incompetence. One of the few people we have incarcerated here escaped and caused problems."

"Du Mahdi," Elisabeth murmured.

"So you've heard?" Asad asked.

"We ran a story on that," Elisabeth said, catching up. "Nothing came of it, but it was a strange series of events nonetheless."

"It *was* strange, yes. Nothing else really happened except for Al Dera al Akhdar's contract ownership being spun into a frenzy to keep Waters Exchanges from downgrading them. As I understand it they were downgraded, but not as predicted. Then it all ended with barely a whisper. It's the furthest reaches of *perplexité*. See this, a Catholic leading a sect of errant Mohammedans? You understand, then, what I mean about catalyzing the static. The rock has sunk to the bottom, but now that the waters are still, I fear something bigger will emerge."

They came upon a congestion in the pedestrian traffic, where the street narrowed down even more. The impassioned shouting came closer to them, and Vincent felt it just around the corner, as though waiting for them to come within a clarifying distance.

“What’s all of this commotion we’re hearing?” Vincent asked.

“Eh!” Asad spat out, his mustache loops animating in distaste. “It’s a Red Sword *commencement*. It’s not for a woman’s sensibilities, nor for anyone of moral decency.”

“Sound like it’s just ahead.”

Elisabeth snapped her fingers. Vincent ignored it, thinking it some kind of religious prayer gesture. She did it again, more pronounced. Then she caught the back of Vincent’s arm in the vice-tight grip of her fingers. He fought against pulling it away, but she pulled down on his shoulder.

“We need see it,” Elisabeth said into Vincent’s. “Story potential.”

She loosed her grip and Vincent noticed stares from some of the surrounding pedestrians, most from women similarly dressed as Elisabeth. “I cannot be touching you like that here. Please try to pay attention to my cues.”

He nodded, but wondered how he should have interpreted a series of random finger snaps.

“Monsieur Asad,” Vincent said. “We’d like to see it. We have a professional interest, you understand.”

The congestion in front of them began to break, and Elisabeth laid a gentle pushing hand on the small of Vincent’s back to prod him forward. Asad lifted both hands to protest their advance, but backpedalled in the direction.

“Please, *jeune homme*,” Asad said. “I advise you in the strongest possible terms to avoid this.” He lowered his hands. “If you insist, however, then I have no choice. It’s not my place in the contract to keep you from going where you wish.”

“Thank you, Monsieur Asad,” Elisabeth said. “I’ve seen plenty. I think I will be able to handle whatever the commencement has.”

Asad’s look was dubious, but he turned and continued forward.

The traffic reached a circular opening of the street, bordered on all sides with windowless, curved walls, punctuated with doors every few feet. There was a gathered crowd filling the area with a steady stream of walking people running through it.

“What are these buildings?” Vincent asked Elisabeth. “They’re not set up as businesses. There are no windows.”

“The building is residential, but since they face each other, there are no windows,” Elisabeth replied. “Home privacy is paramount in Al Makaan al Sarf.”

Elisabeth slid up ahead of Vincent and past Asad, affecting a show of disability with her cane. People took notice and helped to clear a path for her. Vincent and Asad attempted to follow but the people had closed behind Elisabeth, effectively blocking their path.

Asad pointed his chin to the left, and they both sidestepped over to where they could get a side view of the scene. Now closer he could discern about a dozen men, on their knees in a crescent line, wearing strange kind of helmeted earmuffs that Vincent found clumsy and unfashionable.

On each kneeling man hung a small piece of wood around his neck, with a series of numbers and Arabic letters painted on. Vincent scanned the gathered crowd near the scene and satisfied his suspicion: there was an Al Dera al Akhdar guard stationed close by, granting legal blessing on what might result in something grisly.

"They're wearing contract sequences," Vincent said to Asad.

"I did warn you."

Inside the circle of men were two men with sashes made of bright red cloth, embroidered with a large golden cutlass, standing stock still, as though awaiting orders. Walking around the semicircle of humans was the speaker, addressing everyone listening.

"Monsieur Asad," Vincent whispered. "Can you translate? My Franco-Arabic runs shallow."

Asad nodded and spoke directly into Vincent's ear.

"'...as it was when you first knew Allah, who is cognizant of all your thoughts and actions. Hear now of what I speak concerning someone that has caused division among us Mohammedans. Allah, who is all-powerful and works everything out for His own purposes, used the nonbeliever known as the Deaf Prophet to foretell of a time in which the holiest of believers living here in the settlements will spread His word to the native pagans of the Yokut tribes. His disciple, the Maalik du Mahdi, apostate to our faith but in fervent service of his God nonetheless, has claimed to be one half of the prophesied holy "wild ones." We must rejoice! because du Mahdi has fulfilled the Deaf Prophet's prediction. Do not deny Allah his servant! Du Mahdi is an apostate, but Allah uses him nonetheless. Are we to tell Allah He cannot do as He pleases? Are not all things possible with Him? Is He not cognizant of all things and all possibilities?

“‘The selection of du Mahdi’s counterpart from the most blessed of followers of Allah is difficult and requires a difficult sacrifice. Here before you are fourteen of our number upon whom Allah’s favor falls, and they have answered His call to further holiness. These men will soon join those of us who call ourselves the Red Sword who have followed the path of the Deaf Prophet and denied ourselves the corrupting noise of the world. They will join us, with all of you as witnesses, in taking part of this special devotion to hear and know Allah and His mysterious purposes, because it is only when these disciples of Allah and his prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, willfully sacrifice the hearing of the world, will they truly hear the voice of Allah.’”

The preacher turned around and, taking it as a signal, the two men stepped to either end of the line of men and struck either side of their head, on their strange earmuffs. They struck both sides of the men’s heads with precision so that the kneeling men did not lean to either side from the blow. After every one of these administrations, some in the crowd chanted an approving phrase with which Vincent was not familiar.

“What in creation are they doing?” Vincent asked Asad.

“They are being ritually deafened,” Asad said with a disarming mixture of disgust and respect, as though speaking of an honorable enemy, long dead. “Those devices on their heads, over their ears—they drive spikes into the ear.”

“This is madness. Aren’t they in pain?”

“Very much so. But they dare not let on that they are.”

“Why not?”

“Just pray that no one does, jeune homme.”

The men with the Red Sword sashes deafened the remaining men, when one of the kneeling men let out a pained yowl. At once, the Red Sword guards grabbed the man who made the noise and dragged him back away and through one of the doorways behind them. Two other men, right next to each other, fainted simultaneously and fell to the ground, on their sides.

Asad bowed his head and muttered an oath. Vincent spotted Elisabeth, who, from his vantage point, made a prayerful gesture on her person with one of her hands. He thought of what might happen to the man who was dragged out of view, and a burning sensation rose up into his esophagus.

Some of the crowd began to scatter as the ceremony wound down. The deafened men who were able to maintain their silence remained still, with their heads bowed and eyes closed in reverence for their birthed vocation. Vincent shoved his knuckles into his mouth as if their presence in his mouth would calm the rising acid in his gullet.

"As I said, in the stillness we must create movement," Asad said. "Let's continue on."

Vincent stepped down, but stopped when he saw Elisabeth limp up to the pair of unconscious men, who were arrayed near each other in mirror image on the ground; graceful curves like a beached Pisces. She stepped with care between the twin tributaries of blood flowing from their ears, reached down, and extended both of her hands. The standing Red Sword agents shooed her away like she was an errant street dog. She pressed again and the man reached his hands forward but retreated one step, as though reluctant to physically handle her in the open.

Elisabeth, to dissolve the confrontation, relented her advance and instead knelt down, picking up her fallen cane before a crimson rivulet reached its handle. In a rudimentary analogue of the still-kneeling men, she bowed her head in what looked to Vincent to be a petitionary benediction for the two men whose lives slowly drained away from them.

8. The Chains of Escape

"That certainly was a passionate speech, wasn't it?" Vincent said to no one in particular.

The prison was about five miles from where Asad's auto-cart was parked, but the ride so far had been tense with mild trauma. Elisabeth had said her noontime prayers in the auto-cart before the ride began, and since it coincided with a Mohammedan prayer time, Asad tended to his obligation concurrently, but now he was concentrating on navigating the road, which had led them into a much less population-dense area.

Elisabeth's eyes stared off to the side. She was undoubtedly thinking of the commencement but gave no verbal indications as such. That she hadn't verbally denounced the event was something of a surprise to him.

"Passionate, but devoid of sense," Vincent continued. "Agree?"

"In a way, yes," Elisabeth said a little more energized, through her masked hood. "It's not going to register with some people unless they have accepted some things beforehand. He was speaking to his audience. It was hyper-contextual. I could absorb some of it, myself. That's the demon of religious belief: once you accept one set you are able to accept parts of another set. When you are as unsure of things as you are, the speech could only serve to produce confusion."

Vincent crossed his arms.

"Don't take that as a dig into you. It wasn't a value judgment, so long as your doubt is coming from a place of intellectual caution and not fear or misunderstanding the situation."

"It's from caution, I can assure you."

"I'd have to take your word for it."

"You don't trust me?"

"It's not that I don't trust you, Vincent," Elisabeth said, fiddling with the handle of her cane. "It's just that I don't know your complete thoughts on the matter. Despite my calling I've made an effort in the past month to ensure the topic doesn't come up. You have enough on your shoulders already. You don't need the pressure of determining your views on all things metaphysical in your apprenticeship, especially so early on."

“Is it really that difficult?”

“Determining one’s belief concerning the supernatural? In a way, yes, but in other ways, ‘difficulty’ doesn’t apply.”

“Not that, Miss Elisabeth. I meant restraining yourself.”

She considered the question. “At times, but mostly not. You have to realize how consuming a thing like belief is. It grips your very essence and never loosens. It’s a strange form of torture, really, while we’re here in this mode of existence. Full dependency on the supernatural that can only be described in abstractions has no apt analog. I’m very comfortable with the skeptics labeling it as delusion. It certainly feels as such at times, like when things seem as they should be—the Hebrews call it ‘shalom’—I am walking along foreign shores. If one lives with it brimming at the edge it has to spill out once a while.”

“Don’t take this as a patronization,” he said, “but if it ever comes down to the bits and pieces, I give you full permission to induct me into the club. Whatever magic spell you need to cast. If I’m peering down death’s throat I don’t think the agnosticism will serve me well on the other side, whatever might be waiting for me there.”

She smiled as though she had finally received a long-awaited letter from an old friend. “You must’ve learned Pascal in your classes as well. Despite the ill-fitting terminology, you’ve chosen a wiser path. My advice to you would be to be more judicious in your expectations. No one can completely remove doubt from anything. There is plenty of doubt in faith, but I must be careful to explain the extent and degree of this doubt. We must apply it correctly. We must deploy our *logic* correctly. If I explicitly and categorically refuse doubt in one thing, then I am free to doubt everything else. It may even be a philosophical obligation to adhere to this course of action. Think of it as a level of faithlessness in that which I have very little faith, finally put to death into the eternal sleep of uncertainty. I’ve found that the most faithful people are also the most skeptical. If you have confidence in what I’m saying I am sure you’ll find it true as well.

“Now, concerning the more trivial matter of the incident earlier—I am glad you found it fascinating.”

“How so?” Vincent asked.

“You’re writing the piece on it.”

“But I don’t think I’m—”

“We approach!” Asad called out over his shoulder.

With a hiss of steam on either side of the auto-cart, Asad gently braked and steered off to the right edge of the grass-edged road.

As Elisabeth gathered her things, Vincent took the time to look around the area from the elevated seat of the auto-cart. To their right was a field of dry, yellowed grass and shrubbery, which dipped down into a shallow valley. Makeshift, temporary houses dotted the field where robed Mohammedan women were outside to tend to errands on their property.

The only building of marked size in the area was the prison, an unattractive rectangle of bland-colored stone walls and a door made more of steel bars and locks than wooden slats.

“Don’t stare too long, Master Vincent,” Elisabeth advised. “You may grow to lose sight of all the goodness you’ve experienced in this world so far.”

“It’s ugly and harsh, for sure. A building isn’t quite enough to make me melancholy.”

“It’s not the building itself that should concern you. Its reason for existence should.”

“What’s so bad about it?”

Elisabeth merely shook her head and swung her satchel across her shoulder. Though her expression was hidden by her mask, Vincent could clearly read the disgust in her eyes.

“Asad, are you ready?” Elisabeth asked.

He nodded and hopped down from the auto-cart’s driver seat.

“Asad needs to be with me when I interview the guards,” she told Vincent, and twitched her nose as though it was enchanted by professional anticipation. They approached the prison’s barred front door.

“Shouldn’t that be my job here?” Vincent asked. “I mean, to accompany you, not perform the interview. I don’t think I’m ready to do something that important just yet.”

“Asad is here more as an interpreter. I don’t know enough Franco-Arabic, and the guards may not know enough English—or Deutsche, for that matter—for me to be comfortable. I need you to get a feel for the place. ‘Ambient information,’ remember our talk about that? Father wanted this to be an interest piece, not a report. Not many

people are aware of this kind of building or what it's like, so, in a sense, someone's first impressions of this place are more crucial than my interview."

At some point during their conversation, a Green Shield agent had unlocked and opened the door, and spoke with Asad. Now Asad turned around and nodded to Elisabeth and Vincent, and stepped inside.

"So you've been here before?" Vincent asked Elisabeth.

"Yes." Elisabeth allowed Vincent to enter first. She followed him in. "And no."

They followed the guard down a short hallway and around a corner. The path was lit by ensconced wall candles; there were no windows to be seen, and Vincent was sure he hadn't seen any on the outside, either. There was a faint odor of mildew throughout, and the thick breathability of stale, uncirculated air, heavy in the nostrils and lungs, added to his distaste of the atmosphere. That they were entering what amounted to be an artificial cave bothered Vincent's sensibilities about what a building should be.

They entered a well-illuminated room with commonplace administrative furniture. Inside, two other agents stood up respectfully. Asad, with Elisabeth beside him, conversed with one of the agents, who seemed of the superior rank. Asad then muttered something to Elisabeth.

"You are free to roam. This floor is this room, a commons room, and some other functional ones. Down below are the cells."

"Shouldn't one of them come with me?" Vincent asked, gesturing to the Green Shield agents.

She shook her head. "There's no need for that. There are no prisoners here, so you're safe."

"But what if I need to—?" Elisabeth's attention had been diverted by speaking with Asad and the guards.

Vincent left, and continued down the hallway past the function rooms, and came upon a hinged, heavy metal gate that blocked access to a downward spiral staircase. There were only a few lit candles that Vincent could see, on the walls of the staircase.

The gate was closed, yet didn't appear to be locked, and in the pitiful ambient light he glimpsed the gate's oil-shiny latch. He reached for his lantern hooked onto the buckle of his satchel, and ignited a glow. He lifted the metal latch and pushed forward. The gate creaked, but swung open easily.

The only sounds Vincent heard on his descent were his boot steps and a rapid, breathy blubbing from his lantern's flame. There was a breeze wafting up from farther down the staircase, and it felt to Vincent like the warning exhalation from an accursed cave; an unholy christening. The air then became still and leaned into him as he stepped off the staircase. He had to consciously push against this empty space, with his body and resolve, to pass under the crude-hewn archway and enter into the hallway of barred prison cells. His lantern was the only light now.

Vincent walked by the left-side group of cells, about a dozen total. Their gates were open and were unfurnished except for a pattern of four chains bolted into the far wall: two near the ground and two higher up, near the wall's middle. Only a few of the cells had missing chains, or marred stone where the wall mounts once were. Some cells even bore what seemed to Vincent to be growths of mushrooms or other fungus in a wretched huddle in the corners.

Doubling back and viewing the cells on the opposite side yielded similar results, save for the one cell right at the archway entrance. The chains and wall mounts in this one were not rusted like the others. They gleamed a burnished black in the spread of light from Vincent's lantern. He presumed this to be du Mahdi's former cell.

He stepped inside and, with his approach cautioned in expectation of a morbid visual, slid close to the wall where the chains hung. The stones of the cell were too dark and discolored to discern if blood had stained its surfaces. Three of the cuffs on the end of the chains were intact and showed no sign of being pried open or otherwise forced out of their locked position. He expected this—du Mahdi's controversial release was an inside conspiracy, so the guards freeing him had access to the prison keys. The fourth cuff was missing.

Vincent glanced about the floor of the cell and found the missing cuff in a corner. It was in the open and unlocked position, like the others, but there was a bit of bent chain hanging from it. Vincent knew du Mahdi had severed his own arm as the last step of his escape, and there would be no reason to break the chain *after* he had finished the operation, since he would already be free. Could he have broken that last chain by his strength alone, before making the cut?

He came upon another revelation: the broken cuff was on the chain that would've been on du Mahdi's left side, while it was reported he had cut his *right* arm off. This is

assuming he was chained with his back against the wall, but was he chained in the other direction, facing the wall? Perhaps Elisabeth's interview would clarify things, but would it be useful information at all?

He was baffled. The heat of the dank air ran athwart his thinking. He removed his hat and found a protruding metallic complication on the cell gate lock that was the least sanguine area on which to hang it. With his lantern turned up to full brightness, he made a more thorough search of du Mahdi's cell, from corner to wall to corner. He turned up nothing of further interest.

Vincent felt cheated, as though an unnamed muse had not made good on a vague promise to deliver a tailored insight…though he wasn't quite sure for what manner of insight he was searching. Except for du Mahdi's mysterious reputation, there was nothing unknown about the circumstances of his escape; even the guards on duty that were undercover agents for the Red Sword were already found out and captured. To Vincent, there was something unsatisfactory about visiting a rare structure—involved with crime and justice, no less—and failing to uncover a thing hidden. Perhaps it's nothing physical; even a conclusion or unveiled piece of evidence would suit him fine.

Great goddamnit, he thought. *Does it even matter?*

He thought of Elisabeth's interview with the guards, and wondered if she was enjoying more success than he was. Within a few minutes of unsuccessful attempts at organizing a next step in his plan down in the cells, he took his lantern back and headed up the spiral staircase to the ground floor of the prison.

Elisabeth, Asad, and two of the guards were at one of the plain tables in the commons room, adjacent to the office where they had first met upon entering. Asad sat between the two guards, their backs to the doorway, while Elisabeth sat on the opposite side. Though Asad was the one talking, as he was in the midst of translation, Elisabeth's eyes were attentive to one of the guards, presumably the one who had just spoken. Accompanying Asad's quiet fragments of sentence were Elisabeth's nods in the affirmative and rapid scrawling into her travel-worn journal. Her eyes, beaming out from the opening of her Mohammedan head covering, alternated from narrow as she improvised her summary of Asad's words, to blinking, to darting down to her journal, to back up to the guard with an expression of understanding.

Vincent knew Elisabeth's professional process well enough to recognize her particular gestures and tone of voice that indicated the end of an interview. They all stood, Elisabeth first, and she thanked the two guards with nods of appreciation, while Asad exchanged a curious gesture with the guards, in which they brought the palm of a hand in front of their eyes while bending slightly at the waist.

"Did you absorb that scourge of humanity down below?" Elisabeth asked Vincent as they all walked the hallway leading out.

"I did. And you were right: it's not pretty. Some things didn't make sense to me, but they are probably inconsequential."

"None of any of this makes sense."

"The interview was no good?"

"No, the interview was fine."

Asad opened the door and let Elisabeth and Vincent exit first.

"That this building," Elisabeth continued, as she turned around to take in the repellence of the block of stone one last time, "is still here and used recently is the nonsense of which I spoke."

Vincent mimicked her gaze upon the building and was hit with a blast of afternoon sunlight right in his eyes.

"My derby," he said. "I forgot it. It's down below. I left it in du Mahdi's cell. Or what I thought was his cell."

"Fortune favors you," Elisabeth said. "You get to slide into the dark maw once again. Unless you feel your hat isn't worth the extra trip."

"It's a fine hat. I should get it."

As Elisabeth settled their belongings, and Asad rotated the auto-cart's large crank handle in preparation for driving, Vincent re-entered the prison, He didn't think to knock, since it was not even a minute since they had all exited and the door was still unlocked. The guards were not in the office, nor the commons room. Asad was not with him, so communicating his intent to revisit the cell and retrieve his hat would be useless.

A quick ignition of his lantern and down below Vincent went, where he found his hat, unmolested on the cell. At the top of the stairs, he re-donned his hat and, over the rustling fabrics and metal clinking of hooking his lantern back into his satchel, Vincent heard a murmur of Franco-Arabic coming from a room, mere steps down the hall.

He leaned his head and peered into the doorway to find the three Green Shield guards: one at a tele-scripting booth in the operator's chair, another dictating from a piece of paper, while the third lounged with half-closed eyes and balanced on a chair tilted on its back legs.

There was no demand for secrecy on Vincent's part, but he ducked away from the entrance, safely out of view should the guard in the chair become more alert. His earlier frustrations returned, the ones birthed from unanswered questions about du Mahdi's cell and unfulfilled desires for a missing puzzle piece. Vincent listened intently to the guard's murmur of dictation and the faint, rhythmic *tack-tacktack-tack* of the tele-script key lever repeatedly opening and closing the circuit.

The dictating guard became quiet, while the guard manning the booth tapped away the rest of the message. There was a bustle of movement as someone inside the room shifted position or sat down, and Vincent feared he would hear footsteps and one of them would catch him eavesdropping.

No footsteps came, and the taps of the tele-scripting key was the only sound escaping the room. It was then that Vincent, in a fit of disposable curiosity, attempted to recall what he learned of the tele-scripting codes from Juan-Pedro. There were bits of less complex letters he recognized, like the *a*, *o*, and *t*, and a few times he could make guesses good enough to wager upon, as to what word was coded, even though a letter here or there was lost on him. Some transmitted words were too complex, or possibly in Franco-Arabic, for him to recognize, while the ones he did recognize were simple prepositions or articles that gave him no specifics.

But there was one word—two words, really, with their attendant, clarifying spaces—that Vincent deciphered with a great deal of certainty. Straightaway he was caught up, wide-eyed, in a realization, and it wasn't from his high confidence in his decoding abilities, and not solely from the words themselves. His surprise came from what he rapidly inferred, on the spot, and the possibilities that this inference could manifest, just from those two words.

"A nun."

9. The Den of Illusions

Vincent battled with himself on whether to mention his discovery to Elisabeth. One aspect of him thought it foolish to make a fuss about a few questionable, possibly meaningless, words, and produce anxiety where it's not required; another part of him would regret endlessly if he did not mention his suspicions and the whole matter result in an undesirable end. The former option would make him seem skittish or unwise in Elisabeth's eyes, while the latter held its own obvious drawbacks.

He wrestled with the situation while sitting with Elisabeth in the receiving room of the hospital. With a journal and pencil in hand, he scratched the graphite over words he had already written as a useless tracing activity. The time spent freed his mind to explore while erecting a studious front for Elisabeth's satisfaction.

"You do realize," Elisabeth spoke up. "That I know you aren't really committing any new words in your journal. Unless you've been knocked in the *hinterkopf* by a muse, you don't write that fast."

Vincent sighed and closed his journal. "Is it that obvious? It's obvious."

"There's no shame in doing that. Thinking is merely writing inside your brain. I'm just hoping you're keeping a focus on our task at hand or an assignment, and not a girl or your next meal."

"I don't think about girls, Miss Elisabeth," he said in defense, and he felt himself becoming warmer in the ears at being shoved into such a boorish category.

"Come now, Master Vincent. There's no shame, either, in your sex's delicacies, but there is a time and a place for it. Think of this organization of your thought life as the second Confucian step toward wisdom."

To Vincent's relief, the receiving nurse entered. Elisabeth stood up, and he quickly followed suit.

"I apologize," said the nurse, addressing Elisabeth. "But the man you are inquiring about was released about a week ago."

The nun, despite working in Al Makaan, didn't wear the Arabic coverings Elisabeth did, and was of a different order as indicated by her beige robes. She towered over

Elisabeth, and Vincent found the disparity in height gave a comical bent to their exchange.

"I see," Elisabeth said. "I realize you cannot name him directly, but are you able to divulge where he may be? It would save us a trip to the Al Dera offices."

"We're unable to give you his place of residence, so your visit to Al Dera may be required. However, Sister..." Here she bent down to Elisabeth's ear, as though there were others in the room unprivileged to secretive bits information. "You may wish to visit the building across the road. We have a relationship of sorts with them—we know many of their patrons, and they, ours. We found out from his stay here that he frequented there. Ask for one Monsieur Uncroc, the proprietor."

The nun stood back up to full height. Vincent raised his eyebrows and looked at Elisabeth, who pursed her lips in a grim expression.

"I see," Elisabeth repeated, and with a slight bow of her head, said: "Shokran."

Elisabeth slid the Mohammedan hood and facemask into proper position, and they left. Standing in the shade of the hospital's corner, next to Asad's auto-cart, Vincent got into the raised driver's seat to get a better view. Elisabeth rummaged through her satchel and brought out a piece of hardtack and gave half to Vincent.

As he ate, he studied the building to which he granted only rapid glances when they had arrived. Its nature as a facility of iniquity was gainsaid by its baroque, well-kept facade. It was a wood-sided, two-storied stretch of a structure that, compared to surrounding buildings, spanned an extended length, all down the block. Freshly painted, ornamental balconies presented embellished floral arrangements that spilled over their edges, with lush vines that would reach to the ground had they not been pruned. There were solid, burgundy double doors in the center of the building, guarded by two men who were most likely Al Dera deputies—though they dressed official enough to represent core agency.

"Now, as to our game plan," Elisabeth said, after they had finished and crossed the late-afternoon foot traffic. "Do you feel confident with a little role-switching from the prison, now that you've warmed up on your note-taking back there in the receiving room? I'd like you to do the interview. I'll 'take in' the place."

"I'm sure I can handle it." Vincent's jaw clenched with the stress of having to wrangle with a man in the midst of a convalescent reverie.

“Good. Inside is probably one of the safest environments you’ll experience, but there will be some things someone at your stage in life should not experience without supervision. Your task will be rough as it is, but I will be close by.”

Elisabeth flashed her reputation card to one of the guards at the building, who nodded and opened one of the doors.

The inside lobby was as kept and pleasing as its exterior, though far less ornate. Vincent was drawn to the robust, patterned carpeting and the faint odor of flowery incense, but was immediately distracted by women in long, red and gold robes, entering and exiting through one of the three doors on each wall, and traversing the lobby from all directions. Most of them were carrying trays with small pots and plates of a curious function. To Vincent’s surprise, they were all European women.

Within a moment, an empty-handed attendant, wearing a permanent smile, rushed to their side and spoke to Elisabeth, who had again removed her hood and mask once inside. The woman—Vincent didn’t quite hear her name—escorted them to an adjacent room, which was shaped squarely like the lobby, and furnished on one side with a series of freestanding shelves. The women attendants milled about the room in their duties. On the side opposite the shelves were various desks and tables, and, on the side opposite the entrance, a mahogany desk and a high-backed chair.

In the chair sat an Oriental man, seemingly devoid of sentiment, slight of build and very childlike in bearing, shrouded by the overpowering mass of the chair. Vincent had never met an Oriental man before, and although his curiosity was promptly inflamed, he reminded himself of his obligations to stay his attention on the current matter.

Vincent and Elisabeth’s escort spoke to the man in the chair, and then beckoned them over with her smile still firmly in place.

As they drew closer to the man’s desk, Vincent waited for Elisabeth’s cue, which she did give, as a nod, and pulled her revolver out from among the folds of her robe. Vincent did likewise with his firearm, and they both placed the weapons on the man’s desk, right in front of their escort. They stepped back to a respectful distance from the edge of his desk.

“Well,” Elisabeth whispered to Vincent. “I see now where he got his name.”

Vincent noticed Uncroc's jaw was heavily pockmarked on one side. From one corner of his mouth there was a deep scar curving elegantly along the contour of the sides of his chin: an arc of severe disfigurement.

"We've been told, Monsieur Uncroc," Elisabeth began aloud, addressing the man, "that there's a patron of yours, a man, possibly in attendance here at this moment, with whom we'd like to speak, as a matter of course for our assignment."

The escort bent down to Uncroc and whispered a translation. His expression didn't change, and Vincent wasn't sure if that was a favorable sign or not.

Uncroc spoke his response to the attendant, who then translated: "We are very protective of the privacy of our patrons. Do you not know his name?"

"No, we do not," Elisabeth responded.

"How will you find him?" the attendant asked, after translating and listening to Uncroc's response.

"He was hospitalized recently because of an altercation with the leader of a zealous Mohammedan group. He is an Al Dera agent, and neither the agency nor the hospital have released his name to us."

After the attendant translated for Uncroc, he grunted audibly and shifted in his seat, but remained stoic.

"Do you think I will let perfect strangers run around my den on a hunting mission and disturb my well-paying customers? What's your business with this man?" That the attendant delivered these words through her persistent smile disturbed Vincent.

"We're strangers, but trustworthy," Elisabeth said, noticeably irritated. "Our reputation is spotless. We're journalists gathering perspectives for a story. Your customer, if he is indeed here, will remain anonymous in our story, as will any revealing facts about your business."

Elisabeth waited for the attendant to translate before continuing.

"I am also a Dutch Bull deputy," Elisabeth said. "So there is double incentive for me to exercise caution. We have very little reason to collude with Al Dera about things inside their own jurisdiction."

Vincent almost choked on his own breath. As the attendant translated, Vincent turned to Elisabeth with a look of shock. He saw her presenting an open leather wallet to Uncroc. She ignored Vincent's nonverbal invitation for an explanation, and spoke again.

“You know Dutch Bull has more sympathy for your type of business,” she said, while the attendant was in the midst of speaking to Uncroc.

“I know every one of our customers that come in and out of my den,” the attendant said. “However, I cannot reveal to you if he is here or not, or even if I know of whom you speak.”

The attendant listened to further words from Uncroc.

“But I find your forthrightness admirable,” the attendant continued. “If you agree to leave your firearms with me, and verbally promise me you will not bring harm to, or attempt to defraud, any of my customers or staff, you may search for your man in my den.”

Elisabeth raised her right hand, palm forward. “My protégé and I both accept your terms, Monsieur Uncroc. Shokran.”

As the attendant led them out of the condensed bustle of action in the main room, Vincent glared at Elisabeth.

“Are you crazy?” he said. “A Dutch Bull deputy? That’s the exact thing you shouldn’t have mentioned.”

“Nonsense, Master Vincent,” she responded. “If we were here as a matter of judicial investigation into his business, I wouldn’t have bothered to mention ties to Dutch Bull. By being open about my deputyship, it means I harbor no such intentions.”

“But that’s what I don’t understand. He’s going to eventually find out, if he bothers to check your reputation files, that you aren’t a Dutch Bull deputy.”

“He won’t find that out. *Pardon, pardon*, *pardon*…” Elisabeth excused herself with exaggerated French humility as they passed a line of standing attendants, one by one. Elisabeth and Vincent’s escort had commanded the line of women to step aside because they had backed up in a doorway that led further into the den.

“Tend to your manners, Master Vincent,” she continued. “We don’t want to give off a whiff of impropriety here. Monsieur Uncroc’s trust in us is gossamer, and we don’t want to be pulling on those threads. The story’s the thing, and we must do what we can do get it.”

“How would he not find that out? He’s assuredly going to check. Agree?”

“Oh, he’ll check. Agreed. But he’ll find out I really am a deputy.”

“I—“

Vincent decided to not delve further into Elisabeth's professional accreditations and concentrate on the matter at hand.

The floral scent he had picked up inside from the lobby was now in full force in the room they had just entered. It was now so thick and heady he could almost bite down on it. The room held rows of two cots that lay side-by-side, lengthwise. In between the cots were short, clothed panels, to separate the cots and, Vincent presumed, to provide a sense of privacy between the two patrons. On the side of each cot was a small table, a few inches shorter in height, on which lay many of the pots and plates that Vincent had seen the attendants cart around atop their trays. Most of the cots were occupied, with the patrons lying on their sides, and holding a long, thick pipe parallel to their bodies. The pipes held up a covered bowl-like container down on its lower half.

Near the center of the room was a large, multi-level, circular table, holding many of the strange containers carried about by the attendants.

The carpeting from the lobby and Uncroc's room continued on into this cot-room, and here there were separate sections carpeting hung on the walls. All sounds, if there were any, were thus muffled into whispers or complete silence, save for a feminine, ambient hum. There were no musicians in the room that Vincent could see, but the hum —a sound without melody but not quite atonal—was not coming from a phono-revolver, but from the doting attendants themselves.

"We have some work to do," Elisabeth noted.

"That's an understatement," Vincent said. "We have nothing to go on. I doubt he'd be in uniform in here. And the nurse didn't give us any details on his injuries, did she? She didn't."

"No, she didn't."

"However," Vincent said. "I did read up on that curious prophecy the Red Sword is following. The one by the Deaf Prophet. Have you read it?"

"Parts."

"Well then, let's assume du Mahdi has a greater degree of interest in the prophecy. Agree? If he considers himself one of the 'one-armed wild men,' he's going to be looking for his counterpart. He'll have one arm, just like he does. Did any of the reports mention if the man's arm was cut off?"

Elisabeth reflected on his idea. “No mention, as I recall, but we must be careful not to take that prophecy’s turn of phrase so literally. Many Mohammedan groups don’t. The spirit of the letter, formed by their particular usage of language, is what prevails in their understanding. Du Mahdi’s counterpart could have one arm, or it could have just been incapacitated in some way. Like tied back, or broken.”

Vincent shuddered. “If that’s the case, du Mahdi didn’t need to amputate his own arm at all, then. The timetable seems off, though. Seems like it was too soon for that final confrontation to happen. He had just escaped not long before the fight that hospitalized our man here.”

“Du Mahdi could have been thinking to ‘groom’ him, so to speak, for that final confrontation, later.” She shrugged. “It’s hard to say. Your interest in the matter is showing some admirable initiative. It can be hard to settle into the mindset of an alien subject like du Mahdi.” Elisabeth glanced all around the room, seemingly beset by confusion. “It appears we’ve lost our escort.”

“Here she is now,” Vincent said, gesturing at the approaching woman.

“You are free to travel to all the rooms,” the woman advised them both. “My assistance is not required, but if you need anything…”

Vincent frowned. “We weren’t aware there were more rooms.”

“Oh, yes. Allow me to show you.”

Vincent and Elisabeth followed her to the opposite side of the room, and as they walked, Vincent, through the shifting perspective of the layout of the rows of cots, noticed that the rows formed two concentric squares. At certain intervals in the rows, there were extra spans of space in between a pair of cots from the next pair, so that the attendants could more easily service their prone patrons.

They entered into another room, and a cursory glance revealed it to present the same configuration of cots as the first room.

“I think it’s time for us to diverge into our tasks,” Elisabeth said. “I’ll trail you wherever you go, but you are now left to your own devices. Are you ready?”

Elisabeth’s nose twitched and she sniffed, as though picking up on a scent. Vincent nodded and took in the whole room. The prospect of finding his interview target in a building full of stupefied pipe-smokers aroused an imperious level of stress on his nerves.

First thing, he thought. *An injured arm*.

He began his pilgrimage around the room's perimeter, close to the walls, examining the outer square of cot-pairs. He was tall enough to gain a view of the customer on the other side of the partition between the pair of cots, an advantage he figured would cut his search time by almost half.

Vincent ran through the situation should the man have an injured arm. He recalled the prophecy mentioned the wild man's counterpart would be a mirror image. That would mean, if du Mahdi's right arm were removed, his antagonist would necessarily have his *left* arm removed…but as he recalled his search of du Mahdi's cell earlier that day, the ambiguity of what he found threw a question on the official story as to which one of his arms was gone. It's also unlikely that the man would be lying on his injured arm, so that must be accounted for. But what if *both* arms happened to be injured? Uncroc's pipes didn't appear designed to be smoked while on one's back without a great deal of discomfort. Many of the patrons were lying down in the same direction, depending on which row they occupied. Should he look for a man positioned in rebellion to that pattern? Vincent read the English translation of the Dead Prophet's writing, and wasn't acquainted with Franco-Arabic well enough to know its sex-specificity. Would du Mahdi's counterpart necessarily be male?

Vincent's mind reeled from all of the possible variables and combinations. He glanced over at Elisabeth, who had turned her back and was traversing the room with the same purposeless pretext as he. One of her arms had delved deep into her robe. He checked his watch and confirmed it was just about one of her appointed prayer times. He wondered if there was a concurrent Mohammedan devotion.

He moved on to the next room and maintained his leisurely pace in circumvention. Now deeper into the foggy fruit scent and persistent womanly hums, there were more faint noises to add to the atmosphere, though they were much less soothing. The piercing, rhythmic yelps of women, alongside the deeper tones of men, in the pangs and pleasures of sexual congress, seeped through the walls. From Vincent's brief attentiveness to the cacophony, there were uncountable parties involved, and a part of him was grateful that it was located in some other, presumably more cordoned off, room.

The gradual progress of looking and ruling out each customer as a candidate was agonizing to Vincent's faculties, and he was reluctant to become too intimate with the scene by stepping inside, towards the center of the room, to get a better look at those in the inner square.

Upon turning the room's last corner, Vincent heard a quiet sneeze. His stroll was arrested, and, looking around, he spied Elisabeth at the center of the room. She was between the innermost square of tables beside the cots, and the large circular table of odd pots and containers. She was facing him, still and patient, and as he conveyed farther along the wall, her head followed his path.

She gave two almost-imperceptible twitches of her head, sideways, in the direction of one of the cots in the inner square. He couldn't see the exact cot to which she referred, and he believed he didn't need to.

Elisabeth moved along from her station of reconnaissance, and Vincent, at a cautious pace and carriage, swooped into central section of the room. There, a pace away from her former position, was a man with an arm caught in a cloth sling, staring off into nothing, in languid ecstasy.

Vincent knelt down to the man's eye level, and found that the table in the room's center was actually something of a pedestal, with a circular ridge running all around it. It probably served as a type of stepping stool so the attendants could reach the table's higher tiers more comfortably, but Vincent found it a convenient seat for his purpose.

"Good afternoon, Monsieur," Vincent said, in greeting.

Silence. The man—curly-haired, not terribly older than Vincent—lay there, parallel to his elongated pipe, which didn't so much grasp with his hand as he held it tucked in between his slung arm and torso. The mouth of the pipe rested on his chin, just below his unmoving bottom lip. There was a wrapped splint running down the entire length of his leg.

It occurred to Vincent that the man might not know English. That he himself didn't consider this is one thing, but for this important factor to pass by Elisabeth's attention is something else. He glanced around to see if she was nearby. Having to re-engage Uncroc again and convince him to allow Asad into his property in order to translate would be a fool's errand; all of what they had built up so far in would fall to pieces.

"Do you see the dragon?" the man said, in a heavy Arabic accent.

Vincent exhaled in relief. Like the rest of his body, the man's mouth was hardly disturbed from its resting aspect when he spoke, as though his face was masked with an expression of quiet ecstasy. Vincent, uneasy at being so intimate with his condition, perceived a void of human sentiment behind the man's face. It was as though the man's spirit at some point in the past, provoked into passionate turmoil, etched a hard felicity onto his face and then departed from his body, leaving as a parting reminder the permanence of the man's countenance.

"Do you see?" the man asked again.

"A dragon?" Vincent rejoined.

Vincent glanced back over his shoulder at the multitude of the den paraphernalia sitting atop the table's various tiers. Many of them held various designs, but nothing that would appear to be a dragon, nor even a suggestion of one.

"I don't see a dragon anywhere, Monsieur." He waited for the man to respond, then continued: "My name is Vincent Eriksson. My mentor and I are—"

"You and I are in a vast, barren field. You and I. Dusk is falling, and the sky is shot with shades of purples and greens all along the horizon, and above us are stars. The stars fill up the entire sky, so it looks as though there are really black spots of emptiness between enormous pools of light. But the light does not shine down. The land we are on is darkened. You and I are standing there, but we are not the only ones. We are all standing a circle. It's a circle of people stretching far off to the left and the right. We all surround the dragon. We enclose it. The dragon is in the distance and he can be perceived, but if you know not of him you will not see him. We see him because we know of him and are seeking him. Then, everyone—you and I and everyone in the circle—we walk toward the dragon. Our footsteps make footprints and the earth falls away from where we have stepped. Below us, under the earth, where our feet were, is the starry-dark, bright night sky. We are all coming closer and closer to the dragon, and as we walk the circle shrinks and people must be left behind as we continue in. As more and more of us fall out of the circle's favor, the holes from the footprints grow closer together and those people outside of the circle fall through the earth, out of sight forever. The dragon moves and turns all around to look at each one of us. We can see he is lacking an ear and an arm, because he had removed them long ago, by his own hand, with a red sword. A glowing red sword hidden behind a green shield. He looks at all of us. Looks and looks,

and those of us in the circle now know we were never really walking to him, but he was drawing *us* to *him*. He knew us by our names but he didn't know if we were the one he is looking for. He is looking for himself; his self, or something about himself, imprinted onto one of us. It is one of us who follow him. Those of us in the circle come to another conclusion: not only was it the dragon himself drawing us to him, but the dragon, in the center of our circle, was not on his unmoving but gliding across the endless, empty field, under the dark-bright night sky above and the dark-bright sky below, under the ground. And, we were not walking closer to him, drawn to him, but we were following him. He was not inside our circle—we were inside the wake of his path. We follow the dragon. It is becoming darker now. The colors of the dusk on the horizon fade and the time of the prophecy comes to an end. Yes, the dragon knows us by name, and seek his image amongst his followers. He looks at me, tests me, and then dismisses me. Is it you he seeks? Or someone else? The dragon knows who follows him! The dragon is du Mahdi! Du Mahdi knows all who follow him! Du Mahdi knows who seeks him!"

10. An Arabian Standoff

They stood in the atrium of the Wadi, awaiting the arrival of one of the library's administrators. Vincent looked up at the vaulted ceiling, where the intricate, fractalized shapes and colors of the tile pattern caught the daylight streaming in from the arched windows of the receiving room. Along the edges of the vault's circle laid an unseen source of illumination that cast shadows onto the concave ceiling, introducing a new layer of geometry onto the tiles.

"This room was the main prayer hall of one of the first mosques built here," Asad said, with his curly mustache bristling at the view. He stood close by the large double front doors. Though he usually remained by the auto-cart as he performed his transportation duties, Vincent assumed he entered with them in the Wadi as an informal, curatorial courtesy.

Vincent, any other time, may have held slightly more than a passing interest in architectural history and religious art, but yesterday's events had been weighing on his mind. He suffered a restless night at the chartered inn, as though his very body was repulsed at the idea of repose, and he was on edge all during the morning's breakfast. Elisabeth had her customary tea. Asad was the only one to order a full meal in the inn's café floor. Vincent's appetite was sullied; food was the furthest subject from his attention.

"The rest of the mosque," Elisabeth said, her voice sounding clearly through the mask of her head covering. "It had been destroyed in the Early Riots, I hear."

"You heard correctly, Miss Elisabeth," Asad said.

"Miss Elisabeth," Vincent said. "There's a matter I need to speak with you about."

She rolled her eyes. "Ach! Finally! I was about to think you'd melt from the melancholies. If it's going to rebuild a backbone into you, then by all means, speak your mind."

He pulled her off to side of atrium, near the entrance and away from Asad, who paced slowly around the atrium and admired the ceiling.

"I'm getting an awful feeling from all of this," he said.

“Whatever from?” she asked. “From the idea of having to search for the docteur’s research papers?”

“No, not that.” In his stress he had forgotten about the lunacy of her proposed quest, but there was no time to entertain all of that now. “It’s from what I saw yesterday. At the prison, when I went to retrieve my hat, the guards were tele-scripting, and I distinctly heard the code for ‘a nun.’ And when I interviewed our man in the den, before I was able to get anything out of him, he subjected me to this long rant about du Mahdi. He said du Mahdi knows who is following him.”

Though only Elisabeth’s eyes were visible, he could tell her nose twitched from a suppressed smile.

“The prison guards were most likely reporting back to their commanding officer,” she said, “so I think a mention of my vocation is warranted. I’m not entirely sure how they knew that, since it was never mentioned. As far as they were concerned, I was a layman. Perhaps you misunderstood and ‘nun’ was just a part of a word? We don’t know their parlance, either.”

“I don’t think that’s likely. And what of our man in the den?”

Her nose was twitching more now, to his satisfaction; it seemed like he was imposing some sense onto her.

“What of him?” she asked. “He was in the throes of an opiate episode. Nothing much of what he said is trustworthy, if you’re looking for hard facts. He was in reverie. After his rant, was he coherent at all with regards to your questioning?”

“Barely.”

“What were his exact words? The lines about du Mahdi’s knowledge of who is following him?”

“There was some such about how he knows all who follow him. That’s all I really can remember about that. Most of his rant was about du Mahdi as a dragon and we are all walking toward him.”

“So you take ‘follow’ to mean ‘trail’ or ‘walk behind,’ correct? Couldn’t he have meant his faction in the Red Sword, who ‘follow’ him in the non-literal sense of the word? And why would it matter if someone is following him? You and I are harmless journalists.”

Vincent found himself in the midst of a fidgety disposition, as he glanced down at his fingers, which had taken on a startling disfiguration as he scratched and pulled gently at

the bottom edges of his waistcoat. The feeling—a premonition, he might label it—that they were something like interlocutors treading on a forbidden path, was simmering, unshakeable, just below the surface of conscious recognition. It was agonizing: the occasion of not possessing the proper vocabulary, if there indeed was one, to express his intuition to a skeptic who is scarcely open to dissuasion.

"I think the prison guards and the man in the den are Red Sword agents," he said. "I can't say I know how. I just sense it so."

Elisabeth was making strange noises. She held a hand to the mouth area of her Mohammedan mask; she was suppressing a titter.

"Vincent," she began, when she recovered sufficiently. "I'm old enough to know that timeworn saying of one's 'gut feelings' being a reliable apparatus for perceiving truth, a half-truth. I know this from experience, that premonitions and the like have their provenance in our passions and prejudices. Many, *many* years of experience of assuming the wrong facts, going on impulse, deciding too hastily, and having to improvise my way out of it. At times, my life was at stake, right in the middle of the *Sturm und Drang* of physical duress. You may be correct in your conclusion, though your reasoning is faulty. I can't say either way right now since we are of different minds, quite literally. Hence, I can't give you solutions, but I can offer advice. Just wait on it for now. It may go away—let it. If it persists, you may talk again."

Odorous nonsense, coming from you, he thought.

"But," he protested, "there may not *be* time. What if—?"

The door at the far side of the receiving room opened and a large, barrel-chested man in a florid robe entered, with two more plainly-dressed men in tow. He approached Elisabeth and Vincent.

"Good afternoon," the man said. "I am *Ustaz* Nazih al Hawi, the Wadi's rector. I apologize for the wait. We were finishing up our midday prayer."

The two men accompanying al Hawi took up Elisabeth and Vincent's bags. Al Hawi smiled at Elisabeth and Vincent and alternated his gaze between them, as if analyzing their mismatched heights and fashion for hidden information.

"Shokran, Ustaz al Hawi," Elisabeth replied with an inclination of her head. She introduced Vincent using formal Franco-Arabic.

“Please, Miss Elisabeth,” al Hawi said, holding up a hand. “We are comfortable with English-speaking here, and your customs as well. Feel free to remove your *niqab* and *abaya* according to your satisfaction. We seek the comfort of our employers here over anything else.”

“That’s generous of you.”

“Please, follow me. Your personal effects will be in my office. I will send for some tea. But before that I’d like to show you our main operating room. We will need to pass through that way, regardless. The detailed tour will come after you’ve been refreshed, and you can perform your inspections as you see fit afterward.”

He led them out of the receiving room and into the walkway that presented open-air stone arches on both sides. Elisabeth removed the face mask part of her uniform but let the head covering remain.

“Here is the main hall,” al Hawi said, before opening the door at the end of the walkway. “Here is where the bulk of the conversion process takes place.”

The doorway was a secondary entrance onto an entresol, which overlooked the activity on the library’s primary floor. The main hall was like any other library room, and a kind of enlarged copy of the workroom at de Sales. Turbaned, bearded men shuffled between the two rows of tables with stacks of papers while two and sometimes three men, sitting at each table, punched away at tele-type machines, models a few iterations later than Elisabeth’s. The scene was much more chaotic in motion while still retaining a noble civility: a reverent expression of frenzy.

Al Hawi relented to allow Elisabeth and Vincent proper time to absorb the commotion. The number and sheer openness of the use of the tele-types was difficult for Vincent to really apprehend. It was his introductory visit to Elisabeth’s office where he saw his first tele-type, and here were fully functioning models in bare array before him.

“Astonishing,” he said to himself.

On some subtle involuntary physical cue from Elisabeth, al Hawi shifted a step along the entresol.

“There will be time enough for this later. Please come and refresh yourselves. We have tea waiting for you in our lounge, off on the other side.”

They rounded the nearest corner and crossed the shorter side of the entresol. At the second corner, Vincent sparked a conversation with Elisabeth about the situation. When

she didn't answer, he turned. She was leaning against the wooden railing, arms spread, with hands resting on the wooden rail, eyes blanked out.

"Down there," she said. "There's something about the MTD down there. It's tucked away among University accounting sheets and monthly reputation reports. A single sliver-strand of gold among a pile of burnt-out straws of hay."

"There probably is," Vincent said. He fought an impulse to run over to her and shake her into sensibility. "Would it really be wise to spend your time digging around so much? There's no guarantee of anything. You'd have to have a plausible reason for disrupting their whole process down there. Ustaz al Hawi is a little—intimidating, to be frank with you. I wouldn't want to be the one to make him angry."

"You talk as if I'm the only one that's going to be searching. You're in this with me, remember."

"I have to follow you wherever you tell me," he said. "I've already made clear my feelings about Docteur Millis-Lestrange's work, but this is *your* dream and you're putting me in a position to be partially responsible for your unmet expectations. You must understand why this doesn't sit quite right with me. What are the chances we can find anything in half a day?"

She began an answer when al Hawi beckoned them into the lounge. "We have a wonderful tisane this afternoon."

The tea room was a sparse, compact, yet inviting affair of six clothed dining tables, with a seventh near the back that offered half a dozen kettles on portable stoves; an array of metallic warmth pushing back against the breezy coolness wafting in from the arched windows. A pair of workers stood from their seats at one table and bowed their heads in polite greeting. Al Hawi pulled out chairs for Elisabeth and Vincent and glided off to the tea table.

"Why do I feel suspicious?" Vincent said. "I feel suspicious."

"Don't be overwhelmed," Elisabeth told Vincent. "Hospitality is a top virtue in Persia, and it carried over strongly into the French migration, and then here. They're not up to anything underhanded."

"Except for that one man." Vincent, upon entering, had seen third man standing in the shadowy far corner of the room. The man was now speaking with al Hawi as he fixed tea in a pair of cups.

“You noticed him, too? Your eye improves, Vincent. We’ll make a journalist out of you yet. I’m sure it’s nothing, however. Ustaz al Hawi’s job rests on his employees’ performance. They have a unique burden resting on their backs and berating them does not for good morale make.”

Al Hawi served them tea, urged them to partake of some of the light pastries and candied nuts centered on the table, and left with the two men that had stood and greeted them. Vincent took a handful of cinnamon almonds from a dish and downed them.

“You forgot breakfast this morning,” Elisabeth said with a conservative sip of tea. “That doesn’t seem like you.”

“It isn’t me,” Vincent said. “But I’m in the middle of growing. And I’ve seen enough already on this trip to not self-soothe with some sweets.”

Elisabeth’s expression flattened. “Vincent. Yesterday, you saw a dozen men allow themselves to be deafened in the most unsafe way possible, and two or three of them possibly died, all from perhaps fifty feet away? I saw it up close. I saw their humanity evacuate out from their heads. At that moment, any contract they signed and agreed was an irrelevancy, and they saw a wall of darkness fall on top of them. Vincent, that is *never* an episode I will be able to receive lightly.”

She fished her cigarette tin out from some secret pocket in her robe, and filched a small box of courtesy matches from the center of the table. She was about to strike a match when she looked up over Vincent’s head with an alloyed expression of surprise and suspicion.

Elisabeth stood up. Vincent copied. The nameless librarian worker, who had spoken to al Hawi, was approaching their table.

“Ustaz Nazih al Hawi would like to apologize for the extended wait time in our lounge,” the man, as automata, said with a thick French accent. “He promises it will not happen again.”

Vincent lifted his hand. “But he already said—”

“Thank you very much, sir,” Elisabeth said, cutting Vincent off. She introduced herself and Vincent. “Why don’t you join us for a few moments? We’d like to ask you some questions about the operations here.”

Vincent felt the silenced, tense workings of the mind behind the man’s eyes, as it processed the rather forward request from a stranger. The man wordlessly sat down at

the circular table, to Vincent's left. Besides his European ethnic makeup, there was scarcely any other detail in the man's appearance that would separate him from the rest of anyone working in the Wadi. That fact made Vincent suspicious in paradox.

"May I know your name, Monsieur?" Elisabeth asked, locking her eyes hard on him while lighting her cigarette.

"I am—" he said, with a nervy halt. "My name is Mohammed du Rashid."

Du Rashid sat with his back pressed into the woody panels of the chair, as though the intimacy with furniture would relieve social anxiety.

Du Rashid lifted a hand, staid, palm up, like he was entering in a scripted conversation. "I'm a transcriber here, and an assistant professor at the Mazid Cheateau School. Perhaps you've heard of it? It's a small school at the settlements boundary. A niece of mine is a parlour boarder there."

"I have heard," Elisabeth said. "How long have you been here?"

"About three years. For the de Sales initiative I mainly perform a lot of the tele-typing transcriptions, but I am one of the only ones here familiar with tube technology, so by default I'm employed as a technician when individual systems break. I'm more maintenance than operational, lately, it would appear."

"It's a new technology," Vincent offered.

"Perhaps too new," Elisabeth said. "How are the almonds, Master Vincent?" Elisabeth asked, not averting her eyes from du Rashid.

"Exemplary, Miss Elisabeth," Vincent replied.

He searched her face for a decoded flicker of information about the situation. Elisabeth's eyes never left du Rashid's person; she scanned him up and down, as though calculating his size and the bearing of his body's weight on the chair.

Cued by Vincent and Elisabeth's side exchange, du Rashid reached forward and scooped up the last remaining almonds, and left only a brown dusting in the tin.

There must have been a small discrepancy of movement when du Rashid reached for the empty bowl, some small twist of wrist or twitch of finger that Vincent missed, but had signaled a significance to Elisabeth. Her cane, which had been hidden in some fashion underneath the folds of her robe or the tablecloth, rose over the edge of the table with no movement by Elisabeth's person, like an enchanted black totem hooking its

straight, grooved top on the table to rest in serene innocence. Elisabeth stayed her hand atop the handle as though approving its autonomy.

Elisabeth, with her cigarette batoned in her fingers, made a fumbling grasp for her tea cup and spilled its contents. A misshapen cone of tan wet the white cloth in seconds. Du Rashid, eager to redeem his earlier social misstep, made reaching motions across the table to assist.

In a split-second maneuver born from trained assassinry or dance, Elisabeth tossed her still-lit cigarette up in the air, stood up, and jumped back—all while du Rashid watched the cigarette rise up and start to fall back down.

With her cane held horizontally in both hands, Elisabeth dipped down onto the floor.

"Great goddamnit!" Vincent shouted, as he fell off sideways onto his backside, and knocked his chair over.

Vincent rose to one knee and his hand flew to the revolver's grip at his side. Du Rashid, appearing more confused than threatened, began to turn to where Elisabeth ducked down. From over the edge of the table, Vincent saw Elisabeth's legs shoot up and kick du Rashid soundly in the shoulder. There wasn't enough force in her blow to knock him clean off his seat, but it was sufficient to tip him to the side and cause his chair to tip likewise. Du Rashid, who was already making motions to draw his own firearm, floundered his arms about to stay upright, which only made the imbalance worse. He finally toppled over, onto his side, with his revolver pressed between his body and the floor.

Elisabeth popped up and pressed a boot firmly onto one of du Rashid's wrists before he could roll over and access his firearm. Vincent drew his revolver and pointed it in the general direction of du Rashid's prone form.

"Do not move an inch, Monsieur du Rashid," she said. She pressed the butt end of her cane against his ear.

Vincent reached out with a pleading hand to du Rashid. "Mister, monsieur, I apologize. I have no idea what's going on. Miss Elisabeth! Shit! What are you doing?"

"Do you have him, Master Vincent?" Elisabeth asked as she looked down at du Rashid.

Vincent stepped to the side to get Elisabeth less in the line of fire. He trained his gun more properly on du Rashid's torso.

“Yes, Miss Elisabeth.”

“It appears as if our technician here sought to cause some trouble,” she said. She tossed her cane aside and produced her small revolver out from the folds of her Mohammedan robe, to point it at his head. Her foot remained on du Rashid’s wrist. “I can’t think of any other reason why someone would have his holster unsnapped and hammer cocked back, can you?”

“*Bonn sœur*,” du Rashid pleaded. “There is a very good reason I—”

“Nein, not you!” Elisabeth growled. “I addressed Master Vincent. Rhetorically. Master Vincent, would you please stop drooling and disarm our friend? And lock the door.”

Vincent, in the midst of trauma, found himself in a half squat, free hand still held out, mouth wide open: a dazed ball player expecting the shot. He regained himself and holstered his revolver, then slid his hand under du Rashid’s hip and drew out his gun. He released the hammer and emptied out the barrel’s full load of bullets onto the table.

“The Wadi must have drained your senses, Monsieur, or emboldened you to the far reaches of foolishness,” Elisabeth continued, as Vincent walked past her to lock the door leading out to the entresol. “My testimony as a woman to immediate threats may not mean much to the BAAS, but Vincent’s word as a man would be rather interesting to their arbitration decisions. You mustn’t forget you’re in the Wadi. The men here are *very* protective of the weaker sex, even a kafir woman of the cloth such as myself. If it was known you laid even a finger of impurity on me, every man in this building would descend on you like starved wolves. Reputation rating be damned; arbitration wouldn’t even blink twice after the fact.”

Vincent returned into plain view of du Rashid, hand on his holstered revolver.

“I have a confession to make,” Elisabeth said to both of them. She drew her own revolver out and pointed it at du Rashid. “The fact that you, Monsieur Mohammed du Rashid, for some reason, are ready to commit violence against us is only half the reason I had to disable you. I can’t speak for my protégé here, but I’m fully prepared to enter the hereafter. I’m not suicidal, but I’d be glad to shed the baggage of this world when my time comes. The other reason—Master Vincent…”

“Not suicidal,” Vincent muttered.

“Master Vincent!”

“What?”

“Stop looking tough and get me another cigarette from my tin, please.”

In disbelief, he dropped his arms to his sides.

“Master Vincent!” she yelled again.

“Okay, okay!” He produced a cigarette, put its filtered end in her mouth, and stepped back again.

“Master Vincent…”

“What now?”

“Light it.”

Having a lighter in perpetual presence in one of his pockets at the behest of Elisabeth when he began his tutelage, he flicked a flame and lit the tip.

“Wonderful,” she said, taking a long draw. “Now, Vincent, you failed to see what I see right here before us. And that made me a little upset, as you’re a contracted protégé in a profession in which you must take note of everything.”

“Should I ask what I missed that’s so damned important?”

“We have a saying back home in Deutschland: ‘*Was du allein wissen willst, das sage niemand.*’ If you want to keep a secret, don’t tell it to anyone. Look at Monsieur, Master Vincent. Take a good, long look at him. He doesn’t need to speak his secret, but I knew it from the first few words he spoke. Do you know who he is?”

Vincent feared giving a serious answer. “He’s Monsieur Mohammed—”

“No!” she said, stamping her foot. “He’s not! If he were anyone else I would have taken care of him by now, but I want him alive, more than I want anything else I could ask for on earth.”

“Alright then, why isn’t he dead?”

“He’s the most important person in existence right now. He’s Docteur Jean Millis-Lestrange. That’s why.”

11. Arrangements in Secret

Vincent stood in the corner of Millis-Lestrange's office, caught up by the scene about ten feet away, engrossed in the image of Elisabeth in conversation with Millis-Lestrange. She didn't sit so much as hover a few inches above her chair in beatific rapture, leaning halfway into prostration over his desk, eyes filled with stars, her hands edging closer to his as their secular communion unfolded, as though she hoped to brush the hem of the mystic-philosopher's robe and find healing.

"After the explosion of the MTD, I had to escape," Millis-Lestrange explained. "The embarrassment was too much to bear, even though I was growing accustomed to rejection because of the highly theoretical nature of my research. I had already made some preliminary arrangements months before the demonstration, so I was able go into hiding with ease. Contingency management has ruled my life for many years. Even to this day, as you just experienced firsthand."

With all pretense abandoned, Millis-Lestrange, even with the gray scarf of his full blown beard, was more recognizable as his genuine identity of a French natural philosopher than a humble scribe and technician. Gone were the ill-practiced authoritative Arabic carriage and turban, replaced by his hairless pate—marred by a small bandage on his forehead where his hairline would be—and a hunched, skeptical cower from endless seasons of study.

"But why were you so suspicious of us?" Elisabeth asked in her waking dream-state.

"I'm suspicious of nearly everything, Miss Elisabeth. A week ago after having dinner at a cafe near my living quarters, I was attacked, and I found out he was hired. I dined with a colleague of mine that I pay to trail me home because of incidents such as that, that I have come to expect. We were able to fend my attacker off, but not before leaving this little memento here on my head. That someone would come looking for me was an inevitability."

"Who hired him?" Vincent asked.

“I’m not quite sure, but probably the family of the man that was killed after the MTD explosion. That poor, poor man. I hadn’t known he died until I was long gone. Had I known how grave his injuries were I would not have left so quickly.”

“We believe you,” Elisabeth said, caressing his hand in comfort, still levitating in her fantasy. “We believe you.”

“We have many visitors here at the Wadi,” Millis-Lestrange said, “but they are regulars. Whenever someone new comes in, such as yourselves, it is impossible for me to avoid suspicion. Please forgive me for such impudence.”

“We do. We do.” Elisabeth, diving forward for another fondle, held back. Vincent let a breath of relief out. “What has become of your MTD research? Have you been able to do any more work on it?”

Millis-Lestrange offered Vincent a guilty glance. “Yes. And no. Ustaz al Hawi grants us time for personal study but it’s not ample enough for the depth of the MTD’s potential. I’m able to do more by working on some ideas after hours, but in no way am I in a position to perform any further tests. I simply don’t have the resources to do so and keep it hidden. I conduct most of my experiments in my apartment since that’s the only place I can really store things. If I’m going to be objective about this, I would say Ustaz al Hawi took on too much in hiring me, but he was desperate for people who knew the tube technology to help with the tele-types and the project for de Sales. I can’t risk my employment here; I’ve nowhere else to go.”

“That’s not true,” Elisabeth said. “I can provide you sanctuary at any time.”

“Elisabeth,” Vincent spoke up. “Is that wise? We’re already starting down a risky road by knowing that he’s here. If we don’t notify BAAS or Dutch Bull, we’re going to take on some significant damage. Agree? Not to mention what will happen to de Sales.”

Millis-Lestrange lifted a hand, palm facing out, as though a petition for clemency were written on it.

“All of that is of no consequence,” Elisabeth said. “I can leverage church resources to grant him sanctuary for the time being, without putting our rating at risk. It’s happened before. It’s a perk of being in my line of work. Even without our sponsorship of innocence, the charges leveled at the docteur would be at the negligence tier, not criminal. He’s not even a threat to us. Or anyone right now. We both can testify to that

as people in good standing. Me, doubly so. As a woman of cloth, my testimony on character has plenty of weight. Even the arbitration BAAS employs recognizes it."

"'Not a threat'?" Vincent said. He surged forward a step, girding himself for engagement, with a crook in his leg from spending ample time leaning. "He was planning to shoot us. Both! By his own admission! I can't ethically vouch for that."

"Vincent, stand down."

"I can't ignore something like this, Miss Elisabeth. I'm not prepared to risk my reputation and my family's livelihood—"

"*Stand down!*" Her voice cracked dynamite next to Vincent's ear. Millis-Lestrange retreated his hands with a twitch. "I should *not* have to say that phrase twice, Vincent. Do not forget the terms of our contract."

Vincent cooled to a simmer and stepped back into the corner.

"Would you be willing to show us any progress you've made for the redesign of the MTD?" Elisabeth asked.

Millis-Lestrange tilted his head with a little shake. "I don't think that's a good idea. If you will pardon the condescension you might infer, I should say there's nothing really someone like yourself can understand casually. You would need a heavy background in electronal physics. Theoretical, preferably, to be exact. And he,"—he jutted his gruffed chin at the corner of the room—"doesn't appear willing to humor it. I'm at your mercy, however. You have very much the upper hand right now."

"Think not of that, Docteur," Elisabeth said. "We prefer cooperation, as is our wont, not blackmail."

She leaned back in her chair and leaned her temple on an index finger to concentrate thought. There was an undulation in the complication of her robe as she crossed her legs.

"What would it take," she began, and stopped. The finger twisted, drilling sense as the webwork noise of possibilities rang through her mind. "What would it take to complete the redesign of the MTD?"

"Right now, just time and quiet. I don't get enough time as I prefer, but my hands are tied on that point. Eventually, I will need some laborers to assist with the more physical aspects, since I'm no *poulet de printemps*. It's another matter altogether to construct a complete prototype and begin the testing cycles. That will require resources I just don't

have. I'm building some small components and testing in my flat, and every square inch is taken up with equipment and papers. All of my contingent funding was held by Applied Natural Philosophies, and after the *désastre* last year…" He spread his arms, abandoning the end of the sentence.

"It wasn't a total disaster, Docteur," Elisabeth said. "I know it does something. You deserve a second chance, and I'm going to give it to you."

"How is that?" Millis-Lestrange asked, arching an eyebrow.

"I'll get you money. All the money you need."

Millis-Lestrange held up an index finger and opened a desk drawer, producing a piece of scrap paper and casting a searching look at Elisabeth, as if to reassure himself of her sincerity. He scribbled some numerical notes, and glanced about the room and muttered to himself as he worked out the current costs in his head and on paper. He circled the final number showed his findings to Elisabeth.

Elisabeth took a half second glance at it. "Easy. I can even double that."

Millis-Lestrange burst out with a foreign laugh. "Again, I will ask: how? There's no way you can wrangle that amount of funding from Applied Natural Philosophies or any other college. Even if you attempted a front project, it could take years with the amount I would require. And then you'd have to deal with the fallout from the breach of contract if anyone found out."

"The money wouldn't be coming from any college," she said, confidence swelling her tiny frame. "It would be from me."

Millis-Lestrange's face fell into a droop, as though his muscles decided they'd had enough. "How?"

"That seems to be the question of the day for you," Elisabeth said. "No one's coming after me, or will come after you, for that matter, because of it."

Millis-Lestrange sighed and leaned back in his chair. "You'll have to forgive me, Miss Elisabeth, if this stretches my capacity for credulity. I nearly point my gun at you and now you're trying to throw an ungodly, if you'll excuse the expression, an ungodly sum of money to resurrect a failed time displacement technology." He turned to Vincent. "Doesn't this sound off to you as well?"

Before Vincent could nod his head, Elisabeth broke in. "I said it was most definitely not a failure. You must believe on this point."

“How was it not?” Millis-Lestrange pressed. “Previous tests in private were successful, but I am the sole witness to those.”

“It’s complicated,” Elisabeth said with an unfamiliar note of caution in her voice. “There will be time enough in the future for an explanation.”

Millis-Lestrange’s paunch jiggled from a chuckle. “Excellent choice of words.”

“Glad you noticed. Here,” Elisabeth said, standing up and reaching into her robe. “I can’t think of anything more right now to convince you of my sincerity than this.”

She pulled out her gun, placed it on the table, and held out her hands to him, palms facing down. Millis-Lestrange, eyebrows high, raised himself up in gradations, as though any faster progression would break the spell of the moment. He placed his gun opposite hers and extended his arms to hover his hands a mere inch under hers, palms facing up.

“Master Vincent,” Elisabeth said. “Your timepiece. Note this.”

Elisabeth and Millis-Lestrange waited, holding the ceremonial positions, while Vincent opened up his timepiece and slid up to the desk to the scrap piece of paper and pen. He nodded at her to proceed.

“Start of contract. I, Elisabeth Constantina Reese, hereby, through promissory estoppel, commit to grant Docteur Jean Millis-Lestrange the sum of money written circled on this paper, within ten days. Failure on my part to deliver on this commitment will grant Docteur Jean Millis-Lestrange the plenary option to apply full debtorship to my person and belongings, to be administered by Athens Arbitrations and Resolutions. Stop of contract. Did you get all of that, Vincent?”

“Yes.” He checked his timepiece. “Time is 1:49 PM. July the 18th.”

Great goddamnit. The woman is senseless, Vincent thought.

Elisabeth signed under Vincent’s name. “Do you agree to the terms, Docteur?” she asked.

“I don’t have much to lose, do I?” He re-holstered his firearm, then stopped as though stricken by an anxious thought. “Is there any other party that will be privy to this? Anyone who sees my name on here may happen to run checks on it, or they might recognize my name outright. That’s not going to go well.”

“My superior, the head of de Sales, is one Father On-the-Willows. I am bound by my employment contract with the university to inform him of this. However, he is sworn to secrecy as I am in matters such as this, and he would have professional interest in

keeping your whereabouts a secret. This contract will not go outside us three here, and Father. Athens Arbitrations is very sympathetic to the Church's tendencies in situations like this. I can't guarantee you of anything; no one can. But this is the best offer you're going to get."

Millis-Lestrange pursed his lips, causing a shiver in his beard. He signed the contract.

"I don't need to inform you that you may be making a grave error in entering into this," he said.

"No, you don't," she said. "I have little use for so much money and we are not infringing on anyone. I have little to lose and the world to gain."

"Take care not to lose your soul, *bonne sœur*," He signed the paper.

"It's safe, I've been told." She picked up the contract and held it up to the window behind Millis-Lestrange's desk. A translucency appeared to satisfy her. "We will write it up more properly and send you a copy. How much documentation do you have on your MTD?"

"Some. A good chunk of the originals were lost. A lot of what I have now is redundant or memorized, but I still had to retain some to further my experiments. If you are asking to take some for analysis, you are welcome to it."

"We are traveling light, but you can send it along with one of the daily auto-carts that go back to the university. If you address it as confidential to me, it's as secure a delivery as anything."

"Understood."

"We have a few hours left, Vincent. I'd like to make good on our official intentions for coming here."

"Finally," Vincent said, getting up to go. "Some actual work would be a change of pace."

"Not so fast," Elisabeth said. "Work comes later. Playtime first."

"*Now* what do you want me to do?"

"You need to look over what the docteur here has for further developments for the MTD. Then you can have your fun ogling those new tele-types out there."

Vincent, slumping his shoulders, looked at Millis-Lestrange, who spread his hands, helpless.

Elisabeth snapped her fingers. “You will learn to love it. Mammon has spoken, and—here’s another wonderful choice of words for you, Docteur—you may have a lot of work to do in the near future.”

12. The Flights at Bridge Zero

THE TWO MEN, mechanics, raised their arms and placed hands on the gleaming narrow fan of the rotor above them. One of them counted off a tempo with his boot sole slapping onto the concrete, emphasizing the first beat in a series of four even ones, to grant the exercise a tribal flavor. With a shout, he and his partner stomped forward and pulled their propellers with them, being careful to hold to the *hut*-hut-hut-hut meter that synced with the *click-click-click-click* of the coiling spring hidden somewhere inside the bulk of the helio's cowling. After what appeared to be two dozen revolutions, the mechanics' circumvention slowed as the spring achieved full coil, awaiting with unseen trembling the violent release of its potential energy. The tempo-setting man slid his hands down his rotor and clanked around with a metallic retainer. He inserted it into a hole in the cowling, and attached a cable over the rod. He signified his success with a *set-set!* and a politely showy clap directed at the couple strapped to the helio. The woman, a mangle of curled nerves and striped seersucker, giggled at the professional flirtations and settled into the barely-steadier frame of her partner, who looked up, with a broad smile of nervous wonder, at the humming spring above his head and the flight to come.

The two mechanics stood back on opposite sides of the helio, one picking up a handheld console connected to the other end of the cable. The other man held up a halting hand and pointed down at the woman's free-flowing skirt hem. The man with the console stomped his boot while the pointing clapped twice, with another accompanying *hut*, in fortunate synchrony. The pointing man pulled a strap from his belt and tied the woman's skirt hem closely to her ankles. Turning then to her patient partner, the mechanic tapped on the top of his bowler, which the mechanic had already checked to his satisfaction beforehand. He clapped again and strode backwards, majestic in his mincing, eliciting another giggle of anticipation from the woman.

He picked up the console again and checked the meters for correct readouts: steam pressure, rotor tilt, pneumatic servo feedback. His partner signaled to their contrapuntal couple awaiting on the helio-pad on the opposite shore in Al Makaan al Sarf. With readiness confirmed, the men began the countdown proper, from ten, accompanied with

another series of boot stomps. When they reached “five,” they descended to zero with double-time urgency. Their comedy was well-received by the waiting line of spectators, who had sat through the routine before. They did their proper part as participants with gasps and laughter and surprise.

The couple strapped to the helio, reacting more to the upswell of the onlookers than the countdown itself, contributed an uproar of their own to match. The mechanic slapped a button on the console, and the cable shot away from the cowling with a sharp, steamy hiss of an exhale. The cable slithered safely away as it huffed out the last vapors of steam. The retaining rod had been removed along with the cable, and the rotors, released from hindrance, spun rapidly and spat a deafening pulse of miniature wind gusts all around. The helio lifted the still-raucous couple off the pad. By some magical innerwork of the cowling—a series of levelers, calipers, gears, pressurized steam, and a small electronal spark—the helio tilted forward and guided itself with mechanized grace in an arc across Marinas Bay. Here and there, like an angered bull in winter, the helio’s system shot out small tufts of steam from exhaust ports at cardinal points on the cowling, as the helio sensed shifts in weight and wind.

At the far side helio-pad, on Al Makaan’s coast, the couple landed safely, accompanied by the measured claps of the mechanics and wondering stares and smiles of the gathered crowd. The woman, released from the encasement of straps, hobbled away on the arm of the man and waved to the crowd, like a prima donna exiting the theater after an injurious final performance.

“Get a move on now,” Elisabeth shouted over to Vincent. “I’m about to start eating the bridge.”

Vincent snapped to. He had been standing there, on the narrow side platform of the Waterway Bridge closer to the Athens-Marina side, in a professional trance, watching through his spyglass the entire process of the helio’s flight.

He stepped around the others pushed up against the low wooden fence of the platform. Elisabeth sat with her legs dangling over the platform, chin resting on the lower fence rail, tired yet cheered like an agreeable orphan. When he approached, she straightened and held out her hands with an eager twiddle of fingers.

“What exactly did you have me fetch?” Vincent asked as he handed her the bag.

“You’re the one who ordered it. The Waterway Special.”

“I know that, but that’s not helpful.”

“Foul *meddamas* and pita with a side of pemmican. Turkish delight for dessert.”

“‘Foul’?”

Elisabeth stuck her mouth and a nose into the paper bag and inhaled deep. “Ambrosia!”

Vincent sat down next to Elisabeth to unwrap his bag. She watched him intently. He regarded the gray beany mush of the meddamas and the soft, brown brick of pemmican with a scowl, but he lightened when he pulled out the circular piece of flattened bread and small bag of Turkish delights. He opened the bag of delights and came close to dropping it over the platform’s edge when Elisabeth slapped his hand.

“Dinner first. Then dessert,” she advised, her mouth overfull with bread and bean.

Vincent found the meddamas tolerable with the bread’s assistance, but the consistency of the pemmican brick was too foreign for him to enjoy in front of others.

“I thought you didn’t like eating,” Vincent said.

“I don’t. But when I do, I do.”

“That tells me nothing.”

Elisabeth, with a large piece of pita sticking out of her mouth, maneuvered out of her robe—an abaya, al Hawi had called it—while still sitting down. She removed her boots, wiggling her cotton-socked toes, unravelled her long braid and primped the mess of wavy hair.

“How soon do you think those will be viable for commerce?” Elisabeth asked Vincent, pointing at the helio that happened to glide past them, towing grinning day laborers across the bay. “You had a friend involved with them, correct?”

“Fairly soon. Last I spoke with him was when we were working in the Applied Natural Philosophies greenhouse. He was there part time. There was a lot going into them.”

He removed his derby, ran his hands through his matted down red hair, and set the hat beside him. He pointed his chin at the niqab and abaya piled atop her bag.

“You must be glad to get out of that,” he said.

She shrugged. “It wasn’t terrible. Despite its appearance, it’s actually quite liberating. Even more so than my Constantinian uniform.”

“How does that figure?”

“I didn’t have to worry about how I looked as much. My mind could concentrate on other things. I came up with half a dozen new article ideas, and was able to do my prayers more easily in public, when they didn’t coincide with the scheduled times here. I did them on the ride to the Wadi and you didn’t even know.”

“Since when do nuns care about how they look?”

She ran her fingers through the long curls atop her head and began to rapidly twist and drape them over her shoulder.

“I may be a sister but I’m still a woman,” she said with a heady laugh. “If our appearance isn’t at the front of our minds, it’s lingering in the back.”

Vincent scoffed. “I don’t think so.”

“Oh?” She became slanted, devious, as she continued to twirl her mess of hair. “You don’t think I’m a woman?” Her words, contoured with slink and curve, shot at him with a coquettish gaze.

“No,” Vincent said, in defense. “Not that. I—”

“Would you like me to prove it to you?” She stood up and began undoing her belt buckle. The metal clanged together.

“Miss Elisabeth!” Vincent whispered loudly, his face igniting red.

“The mentor-to-protégé relationship is vitally sacred. We can’t have this kind of lingering uncertainty, Vincent. If it will remove all doubt, I don’t see anything wrong with it.”

She gestured down the length of the fence to the other people enjoying Marinas Bay. “We’ll have third party corroboration, too,” she announced in their direction, and began unbuttoning her leather pants.

“Christ almighty,” Vincent said, looking away.

She cackled like a lascivious sailor. She fastened her belt back on.

“You’re too prudish, Vincent.” She returned to her perch at the fence and bit off a chunk of pemmican with a violent jerk of her head. “That means a lot coming from someone like me.”

“I’m no prude,” Vincent said. “If you’d like, I can prove it to *you*.”

There was a feral display of chewed pemmican in her mouth as Elisabeth roared again. “Now you’re getting the hang of it, my *Wunderkind*. If you’re ever trying to get information from someone, a little lighthearted verbal sparring will establish rapport

and loosen inhibitions. It's better to cultivate a connection than demand it. Don't do it with nuns, however."

"You're in overtly healthy spirits," he said. "I know why."

Elisabeth rolled her eyes. "If you didn't know that I'd have to break our contract for 'misrepresentation and irreconcilable stupidity' on your part."

"Yet you just called me Wunderkind."

"More or less. Consider it: I just reclaimed the man who can build the greatest machine man has ever known, and he will have the means to rebuild this machine. Wouldn't you be mooning over the hills for days over that? I know I will be. You're the one who looked at his work. You're going to be at the forefront of this with us. I'm honestly surprised that you yourself aren't my emotional equal in this discovery."

"I only spent an hour's worth of checking out his documentation and asking questions. That's nowhere near enough effort to say whether he's really onto a genuine discovery of that magnitude, or an impractical end. I don't know much about this other electronal source, the ambient energy, he claimed he discovered. However—" he held up a hand when Elisabeth's eyes widened at the disclaimer, "however, it does appear he's onto something interesting."

"Did you examine his original prototype?"

Vincent looked away from her, as though masking his avoidance by pretending to look at the helio-pad on the Al Makaan coast. "No."

"Then how were you so convinced of his quackery?"

"From others much more aware of current research than myself."

"My, that comes across rather 'impractical,' concluding a thing so examinable just by the word of others, rather than proper observation and reflection."

Vincent rubbed the back of his neck. "Yes, I'll admit I just went along with it. Before you enter into a diatribe, I will let you know I'm well aware of the limits of the material philosophies and the problem of induction, but it's not my job to work those out. I'm not a philosopher."

"If one has a mind, one is a philosopher by definition. Some of us are just in more ardent pursuit than others."

“There’s been talk lately in Applied and our sister universities back in Europe about renaming ‘natural philosophy.’ To separate the material fields from more theoretical ones. The front-runner, last I heard, was ‘science.’ It has a Latin root.”

“‘Science,’” Elisabeth repeated, and echoed it under her breath. “It flows nicely. They have my support. Dessert time.” She raised up her bag of delights to him, like a misplaced toast. “Partake.”

“Well, I’d like to think I’m ardent in that regard, but I can get snared too tightly by practical things.”

“In regards to philosophy? Don’t take my comment to heart, but let’s take this opportunity do a little exercise now, shall we? You’re already familiar with the problem of induction, so let’s find another chink.”

Vincent opened his own bag of delights. “Okay, how?”

“Let’s use the subject of the day: our MTD. It’s your proposition that the docteur’s new version has more viability than the initial prototype, even though you never had first-hand knowledge of it. Right? Let’s forget about the demonstration and what happened there, and let’s assume that your colleagues and the general opinion on the matter were correct: it was in fact based on erroneous research and bad engineering concepts. Not only that, but this conclusion was not arrived at erroneously. It wasn’t a haphazard hypothesis based on prejudice or academic rivalry.”

“With you so far.”

“Of course you are. Now, what is being employed to come to this conclusion about the initial MTD? It’s not experience, because it hasn’t been fully tested. Remember, no one has first-hand knowledge of the MTD’s function, aside from the docteur; we’ve only looked at blueprints and some of his notes and preliminary findings.”

Vincent wiped at his moist brow, turning the situation over in his mind. “Well, initially we would know from doing some quick math and deducing conclusions that way. Due diligence is satisfied when we plug in numbers. His measurements and predictions should be duplicable, and if we were to do that with a series of mini-experiments they should match what Docteur Millis-Lestrange came up with thus far.”

Elisabeth emptied the remains of her delights into her delicate mouth, causing one cheek to swell. “You’d be using instruments, correct? Measuring devices?”

“Correct. There’s an entire battery of them I would use to start off with. First—”

“Never mind that now,” Elisabeth said with a dismissive wave. “I commend your enthusiasm but we’ve a schedule to keep. Now humor me here. How were those instruments created?”

“With tools, I presume: hammers, anvils, forges, steam-compressors. I don’t quite know the process.”

“Uh-huh, uh-huh,” Elisabeth said with her index finger deep into the side of her mouth. She dug out an errant piece of dinner from between her teeth and flicked it off into the bay. “Tools made with tools. And have you met the people who used the tools to make your tools that measure things to give you presumably accurate data?”

“No. Should I have?”

She shrugged and let a small belch leak out the side of her mouth. “It couldn’t hurt. The man directing the manufacturing could’ve been half-blind and out of his wits from consumption. That would cast a rather unphilosophical glow onto his products, no?”

“What exactly are you getting at?”

“My point, Vincent, is that you natural philosophers—science-workers? Sciencers?”

“‘Science-workers’ has a good ring.”

“You science-workers rely on a lengthy array of non-science knowledge to produce your science-based knowledge. You have to rely on many factors outside of your agency and reach of intellect to get to where you are. The best you can do is move along with your best guesses and work out the wrinkles on the way.”

“That’s what good science-workers do: we form an idea based on what we know thus far and throw it against the wall. Many times.”

“Please don’t mistake me,” she said, peering at him with narrow eyes. “I’m not here to denigrate your field, but just to caution you. I struggle to impart this idea to the good Dr. Fallace here and there, as he can be starry-eyed about the matter. The whirlwind of expanding knowledge your people come up with is astounding, and he is in awe of it. You’ve overheard my conversations with him. I have to smuggle things into his mind like a corsair; his perception is razor-sharp and quick. And that isn’t to say I have my own reservations about *my* field of work.”

Vincent blanched at her concession. “Journalism?”

“Language. Words are a horrible conveyor of knowledge. It’s an *abattoir* of meaning unless we are working within a specific situation. People come to language with an

entire backload of prior experience and conclusions that color the procession of language in their mind. A picture is not worth a thousand words but an uncountable number of words, in many languages and contexts and apprehensions. It's an open minefield and confining prison at the same time." She took a cigarette out of her tin. "I don't trust language at all," she said with a defiant shake of her head. "Not at all."

"You do realize how paradoxical it is to explain the uselessness of words in words."

Smoke curled out the sides of her smile.

"So what's the best conductor of knowledge, to you?" Vincent asked.

Elisabeth held up her hands and pretended to squeeze a double invisibility in front of her. Vincent crooked an eyebrow.

"I'm not being lewd again. Senses. Our senses are the most trustworthy because there's very short distance for information to travel. The shorter the distance, the less opportunity for noise and error. The knowledge is instantaneous. You feel a fig and know it's smooth and round, then you look at it and smell it. There's nearly no chance that a fig can be faked, and even so, one cannot be duly blamed for thinking an accurate fake is the real thing because he bit into it and broke a tooth on wood, could he?"

She became silent in reflection.

"Is that why you were a dancer?" Vincent asked. "Or instructor?"

"Both." She lifted a socked foot up and pointed her toes as though offering proof. "And related occupations. But concerning dance specifically: back home I was with the largest *Staatballett* in Stuttgart in the *corps de ballet*. I desperately wanted to move up in the ranks but the directors preferred the statuesque. I was too short to really have an advantage over the other girls, so I took up instruction instead when my father came here to escape the later Upheavals. I'd like to know your reasoning?"

"Dancing, to me, seems a wordless language, imparting meaning sensually rather than logically. With just a little bit of background information—or maybe nothing at all—there's a lot that can be communicated with body movements. Agree?"

"I never considered it that way, but that certainly makes some sense. I had miniature epiphanies like clarity when I danced. The kind of waywardness that comes from confusion melted away. It's hard to put into proper words. It's a thing to experience, not passed down through language. It's a different animal when you instruct. You get a bigger picture of everything, but some of the emotional connection to things get lost."

She looked winsome and smiled. “I must have forgotten it—I often didn’t listen as I should—but I believe my father made an observation similar to yours. You should feel honored. He was a very smart man. Perhaps the smartest I’ve ever known.”

“I thought he was a tanner.”

“Aye, he was.”

“Did he hold professorship at some point back in Europe?”

Elisabeth tilted forward and scrunched up her forehead. “Vincent, he was educated up to primary school and no further but he had the firmest grasp of reason and insights into the human condition that I’ve ever come across. You don’t learn that in a classroom. Too, he dabbled in engravery.” She took her cigarette tin back out of her backpack and handed it to Vincent. “I think it takes a special kind of intelligence to create beauty.”

In a corner of the tin was an engraving of an albatross, tilted in flight. Some of the detail was worn down, but Vincent’s untrained eye could pick up skilled artistry. The rest of the tin had some strange markings that resembled writing.

“That’s a language,” Elisabeth said. “One my father invented. Don’t ask me what it means. He never told me. I don’t think he even knew. It was just something that would be figured out after a time.”

He handed the tin back. “Respectfully, your father sounded like a strange fellow.”

“Oh, he was. But I owe much of my life to him.” She turned her head to sneeze. “Time, please.”

“Almost 5:30. Did you get that from him, too?”

“The sneezing? No, that’s my mother’s side. My sister and I both have it. It’s not a reaction to anything; it happens because it happens. Think of it as part of my heedless personality, if you will.”

“I will.”

“It’s time we get going.” She stood up and began. “We have lots of work to get to. And you have an article to write. Make it good. It will be published.”

“Pub—published?” He spread his hands. “Are you sure that’s prudent? I don’t think I quite have the ability.”

“Prudence has nothing to do with it. It just has to be good. I can help, but you’ve been drinking milk for a while now. It’s time to move on to some meat.”

Elisabeth donned her Constantinian bandeau back onto her head, and gathered their belongings and bicycle. Vincent left to return their dishes to the cart at the side of the bridge proper. Elisabeth called up to him from the platform.

"Here," Elisabeth yelled, and tossed him two ducats. "Figs." She pointed down the bridge.

"Figs?"

"Figs!"

He gave her a sign of affirmation and bought a paper bag of warm figs from one of the carts. Elisabeth rolled the bicycle and sidecar up behind him. When he turned around, he flinched at her presence, surprised.

"Trade you?" she offered.

They made their way down the last quarter of the Waterway Bridge: the sinking sun bathing their backs, the homeward movements of craftsmen and their tools, the sense of bankers balancing their day's books, merchants finalizing sales, and wives and household servants returning with suppertime provisions. They were silent for only a moment—Elisabeth from a mouthful of cinnamon-tinged figs, while Vincent, she presumed, from dreading the effort to get them both home. She reached up from the sidecar with the bag in her hand as an offering, but he shook his head.

A few more feet and their silence was broken by the utter violence of an explosion ripping through the air somewhere behind them.

13. No Longer Pacific in Remembrance

She found herself, dazed and goggles askew, on the platform underneath the bridge, where they had eaten earlier. The last few seconds of the event were lost to her; she may have blacked out. She must have landed there on her left shoulder and banged the side of her head, or the jaw near the ear, on the platform when she fell.

One of her legs dangled off the platform's edge, and she felt herself slowly sliding farther off. If she was any more generous of physique, she thought, she would've already fallen straight into the bay.

"Vincent," she murmured, not hearing her own voice. Her ears rang high, buzzing, muffling out all the other sounds around her.

She sat up and felt a pull at her neck. Her satchel was hanging over the side of the platform as well, around her neck. She adjusted the strap and looked up at the side of the bridge. A bolt of pain shot through the side of her neck down through her shoulder. Parts of the heavy wooden fencing at the side of the bridge were splintered or completely gone. People all along down the platform, frenzied, continually hopped up to see over the bridge's edge.

The stepped walkway that led up to the bridge surface, which should have been intact right next to her, was completely gone. Peering over the edge, Elisabeth saw pieces of it floating down below in the bay's waters.

"Vincent?"

She felt something fall down her front, underneath her shirt. She plucked at the back of her neck and head, at the rosary—that was intact. Then she drew over her head the other chain, the one that held her pocketwatch. She had hung it around her neck when changing into her abaya earlier and never returned it to her satchel. The watch was smashed, with the back of it bearing the brunt of the destruction: cogs crushed and falling out, hands bent. Striking across the watch's glass façade was a jagged, diagonal crack, in the shape an electronal bolt she had seen in lithographs on the good Dr. Fallace's natural philosophy pieces. The watch slipped from her fingers down into the bay.

The other walkway was much too far away, down at the Al Makaan end of the bridge. Elisabeth jumped and caught the bridge's edge with her right hand. With a great heave she lifted herself up and over. Standing up on uneasy legs, a wave of nausea washed over her as she attempted to process the scene before her.

Plumes of thick gray and black smoke blew all around where people scattered in all directions. Elisabeth approached a burning hull of an auto-cart on the opposite side of the bridge. The wind blew papers across and over the edge of the bridge, and near the fiery wreckage lay what looked like strewn garbage, but turned out to be, to Elisabeth's revulsion, ripped clothing and dismembered, bloodied body parts. Some were mangled as to be unidentifiable.

Elisabeth drew her revolver and continued on from the destroyed auto-cart.

"Vincent!"

People ran past her, yelling in Franco-Arabic. The wind shifted and wafted the smoke all around Elisabeth, obscuring her path.

"Vinc—!"

Elisabeth stumbled over a large, soft object. She fell to one knee and hand, and the ground was wet and sticky. Coughing and waving the smoke away from her face, she brought her hand close to her face. It was covered in blood. She glanced behind her at the severed leg.

She coughed and more nausea crept up Elisabeth's stomach to her throat. Unable to push it back down, she rushed over to the side of the bridge and vomited up everything she had eaten for dinner.

Whimpering to draw in proper air, Elisabeth wiped her mouth and coughed hard. There was the faint, tinny taste of blood in her mouth and, unthinking, she stuck the barrel of the revolver into the very back of her mouth to completely dislodge the molar that had come loose. She spat it out and continued down the bridge.

"Vincent!"

Her voice became hoarse, and her ears began to clear up. A cacophony of voices rang out all around her. Somewhere, a baby cried and an emergency siren blared out. Her eyes darted everywhere on the bridge, frantic. There was no sign of the bicycle. There was no Vincent.

"*Vincent!*"

A group of people were gathered at the side of the bridge, crouching. Over one of their shoulders, she saw Vincent's head. His mouth was open and wasn't appearing to move.

Elisabeth scurried over, holstered her gun, and forced her way between two of the bystanders. Vincent, fair skin now cream-pale, his waistcoat and undershirt ripped and tattered, had every inch below his chest covered in blood. Elisabeth turned and gagged again, but there was nothing else to expel.

"Vincent," she breathed out.

To her he appeared intact, yet she plucked and adjusted his clothes in desperation, in search of a wound. There was nothing. She waved her hand in front of his eyes, but he gave no response. His breath was shallow and quick, and his eyes stared at something miles away. Someone in the stream of people running past knocked into the group of them. Elisabeth was pushed onto her bad shoulder.

She winced, recovered, and attended to Vincent again. Her senses were scrambled, and she reached throughout the various parts of her mind for anything she could do. Her hands, like trembling claws, scraped over her heart as though curating an intense heat inside her chest. She leaned in close to his ear and focused on a trickle of drying blood languishing near his chin.

"I—I don't know if anyone else saw it. The docteur may know, but you must listen. After the explosion, the entire area had filled with smoke and chaos. I dove and hid behind the remains of an overturned table. I was scared but I was determined to not look away. Soon after, before everything cleared, I saw it. It was a large rip in the air in front of me, but not quite in the air. It was as though the fabric of everything that could've taken up the space where the MTD once stood, and some amount of all the space around it, was torn open. But not merely torn, but also written upon with a pool of ink. It was like a god had reached up through the earth and scratched into the world a vista of the palest blue. The tear, the ink, the lake of air hanging in front of me—it was the sky of another world, bordered with the whitest of clouds. It was so beautiful, its existence, like it wanted to be the only thing my eyes could perceive and recall for the rest of my days. It was so beautiful, Vincent."

To speak his name once more would be an ill-omen, Elisabeth thought, like a final benediction: a premature eulogy. There was nothing else that came to Elisabeth's mind to say to him; her mouth revealed her entire life for the last year to him.

"Water!" she said to the men around her. "Water! *Maa'! Maa'!*"

There was a quick exchange between two of the men before one of them gave her a canteen from a nearby bag on the ground.

Elisabeth unscrewed the top and poured a trickle onto the top of Vincent's head.

"*Ich taufe dich im Namen des Vaters*," she said. I baptize you in the name of the Father...

She poured again. The water streamed down and mixed into that dried string of blood near his chin and washed it away.

"...*Des Sohnes*..." The Son.

She poured a third and final time. Vincent still breathed, still stared.

"...*Und des Heiligen*—" And the Holy—.

A shock of pain shot through Elisabeth, from her bad shoulder and arm, the one she raised to drop the makeshift baptismal waters over Vincent. It crept up her neck to her jaw. The world around her swam, tilted, and fell away from her window of senses.

Unseeing, she felt the strong hands of one of the men next to her, and his words rang muffled into her ears before losing consciousness.

"*Nous vous avons, sagirah.*"

We have you, little one.

14. Questioning with the Stranger

Elisabeth awoke with a groggy head. She was on her back in a bed, with her head turned to the side. Though she found it difficult to move, she turned her head to look at the ceiling. The room was quiet and low-lit.

She opened her mouth to speak but it came out as a series of groans. There was the distant sound of footsteps and a door opening, then closing quietly.

Too confused and tired to do much else, Elisabeth continued staring at the ceiling. Minutes later—perhaps longer—the unseen door opened again, and a nurse appeared above Elisabeth's head. She carefully examined Elisabeth in the common manner that nurses do.

The nurse spoke to someone at the foot of Elisabeth's bed—then, Elisabeth assumed, left.

Elisabeth lifted her head off the pillow, grunting, and saw a small Arab man standing with a longsuffering smile, as though he expected her agonized curiosity. She took note of his spotless suit and badge at his belt.

"Do not worry," he said. She didn't think she had the energy to look concerned. "You are safe."

"Vincent," she said. Though her voice was dry, it came out strong and clear to her ears.

"He is safe as well."

"Jesus," she muttered, and lay her head back down onto the pillow. "How?"

"The explosion was from a butcher's auto-cart, and the broadside of the cart collided with your bicycle. The blood was bovine. Mostly. He did have a cut on the side of his forehead. He is well besides. You two are both very lucky. A few feet closer to the auto-cart and it could've turned out much worse."

Elisabeth took a deep breath.

"There is water at the table," he said. "On your right."

From out of nowhere in the small room, the nurse reappeared. She walked over to her right bedside and gently helped her sit up. Elisabeth tried to reach over with her left

arm, but she saw that it was tied down in a sling. There was a dull throb and ache in her shoulder.

"You are at Jibreel Hospital." She handed Elisabeth the glass. "You arrived here last night. It's about noontime now. Be careful, Sister Elisabeth. Your left shoulder and arm are badly bruised."

"It feels as such. Merci."

She drank the entire glass while the man and nurse waited. When she put the glass down, she noticed her niqab and other personal effects lay on a table in the far corner of the room. She was dressed in her novitiate robe.

"Now," Elisabeth began. "You may begin your questioning."

With a flinch, the man started up to talk, and the nurse sat back down in the corner. Now that Elisabeth was more receptive to her surroundings, the tension the man emitted was palpable.

"Sister?" he said.

"You haven't read my reputation file yet, I see. You must only know me by my current profession. I am a passive Dutch Bull deputy now, but I was active for a good number of years. I know rank when I see it." She gestured at his badge. "High rank, from the looks of that. And I can't think of a single reason why a strange man of some importance would be in my convalescent room at all, if it weren't for some official business."

He rubbed at the side of his jacket nervously. "My name is Tazim Beauclerc. I am the head of Al Dera al Akhdar's operations." He granted a small, stiff bow. "Your emergency contact at the College has been notified that you are here. Would you like any of your associates to come? Your injuries, and the injuries of your companion, are not severe enough to require an extended stay. You are free to leave when you feel comfortable. Regardless, we will tele-script your decision to them."

"No, no need for Wassie to trek. We will leave as soon as possible."

Tazim pulled a chair from the table and dragged it closer to the bed. As he sat down, slowly, he again patted at the side of his jacket. She saw a bulge there, a printing too bulky and smooth to be from a firearm.

“Feel free to partake of your spirits,” Elisabeth said. “You have hard times ahead of you, if not already. It’s better that you have your wits. We won’t say anything.” She glanced at the nurse and smiled. “Will we?”

Tazim appeared doubtful, yet pulled the flask free from the inside pocket. “I am a secularist, Sister, while an ancestor of my supervisor, Monsieur El-Mufti, was an Ottoman jurist. The holiness seems to be hereditary. Fortunately, I do my job well, so he overlooks my *haraam* tendencies.”

“I have tendencies, too, and since we’re on the topic,” Elisabeth addressed the nurse, “*Mademoiselle*, if you would be so kind as to fetch the cigarette tin from my satchel there.”

The nurse stood up first and searched the satchel. It took her some time to find it, and Elisabeth feared it was lost from the explosion, or in disrepair. When the nurse handed her the tin, Elisabeth found it unmolested.

“It may not be much, Sister, but what can you tell me about what happened on the bridge?” Tazim asked after taking a pull from his flask.

Elisabeth told him the events starting from their dinner on the bridge up until her losing consciousness.

“May I ask what business you had in Al Makaan?”

“My protégé and I were making a routine inspection of a very large project at the Wadi, involving university records. That was on the day of the attack. The day before we had conducted interviews at your prison and at a hospital for an unrelated story.”

“So you’re a regular visitor here.”

“Not particularly,” she said.

“But you said the inspection was ‘routine.’”

“The project is well underway, but it’s very new.” She found his nitpicking on this point meaningless. “Today’s visit is the first of many to come.”

“I’m familiar with the Wadi. Do many people know you are here?” He shifted his weight in the seat and crossed his legs. The alcohol was taking effect. “I refer to anyone with whom you may have interacted, outside of what was expected. Or was there anything unusual, aside from the explosion, to your trip to Al Makaan this time?”

Elisabeth's eyes narrowed, then softened. Beauclerc's questioning was edging too close to Millis-Lestrange. She would have emitted bigger signs of nervousness had she not been half-bound and half-prostrate. For that, she was grateful.

"This is only the second time I've been to the Wadi, Monsieur," Elisabeth said. "And that first time was with a larger group of colleagues. It was a different experience, so everything to me was unusual in this visit. To satisfy your question, though, we did pay a man, a sponsored contractor of yours, on the Al Makaan side of the bridge to look after our bicycle. My protégé and I also had to ply our way into one of your famed dens. Mind you, it was purely for professional reasons, as one of our interviewees was staying there."

"So you are a deputized Dutch Bull agent, though now currently inactive. Would it be untoward of me to ask bluntly if you have any enemies?"

Elisabeth quickly pulled the cigarette from her lips and laughed. "Monsieur, being a deputy has made me enough enemies for two lifetimes, and being a journalist just about doubles that number. I can't give you any names but I wouldn't be colored the lightest shade of surprised if my throat was slit one day by the son of that lazy would-be assassin I exposed some time ago. Revenge may just be around the corner." She stubbed out the remainder of her cigarette inside her tin. "Are you implying that the bombing may have been directed at me?"

"Not at all, Miss Elisabeth. In that regard we have very little information at this time, and no one has claimed responsibility as of yet. It may still be too early for that, but we need any information we can get. Bombing is a highly ineffective and uncertain method of killing a particular person. It wasn't a suicide bombing, so it's not likely that it was a political act. We frankly don't know why it happened, but it will become clearer to us over time."

"Would it be untoward of me to bluntly suggest that it's the doing of Al Sayf al Ahmar?"

Beauclerc finished off the rest of his flask. "A blunt suggestion?" he asked, amused. "Do journalists often speak in such paradox?"

"Nuns do."

"Your implication is that the bombing is the work of one of our double agents of the Green Shield. I wasn't aware that our dilemma was so widely known."

“The power of the tele-script. Technology waits for no one. I should remind you that as a journalist I can tell when someone makes a leap of inference. I will ignore it for now, Monsieur. I know less than you do about the situation. I and my protégé simply rolled into it, literally. I am just offering some thoughts based on the scant information I have.”

“But what purpose would this bombing serve? It would appear too costly and random to execute such an atrocity with no aim.”

Elisabeth arched an eyebrow. “The head of a defense agency asks a humble wordsmith for advice on criminal activity? You’ll have to remit a payment at the current rates if you want me to issue an official consult. Yet, I can hazard at something. If the bombing was carried out by Al Sayf, it was because of a phenomenon called ‘ancillary perception.’”

“I don’t believe I follow.” Despite his curiosity, he stood and began moving the chair back to the table.

“I would be suspicious if you did. I just made the term up. They essentially want to damage the reputation of Al Dera—not your rating, mind you, but the view of the Green Shield everyone holds in their minds. The very act of the bombing itself within the context of your double agent problem holds meaning. That’s all they need, not the result of the act. It doesn’t need to be targeted toward anyone because it has its purpose built in already. The words of people’s names as targets would just serve to muddle their intentions. You shouldn’t be asking who my enemies are, Monsieur; nor should you be asking who *your* enemies are. You should be asking who wants to paint a sword of blood on top of a shield of emerald.”

Beauclerc stood next to the table with his fingertips resting lightly on the tabletop, holding him up, mooring him to something concrete in light of the abstraction of Elisabeth’s advice. To her, he was unable to appreciate her offer not because it was false but because it was not what he sought.

The törichten Mann. The foolish man, Elisabeth thought. *He’ll never get it. He’s too attached to finding a person, a certain thing*.

“It’s rude of me to be the one to end this conversation,” Elisabeth said. “But I have my midday offices to attend to. I don’t believe I can be of much further help.”

She swung her legs over the side of the bed; a brief interlude of dizziness, then a clear head. The nurse rose. “Mademoiselle, *s'il vous plaît*, hand me my prayer book from the table there.”

“Before I leave, Miss Elisabeth,” Beauclerc said. The nurse opened the door for him and stood outside. “I must warn you. I understand that your supervisor, the priest, is currently away, but one of your colleagues relayed my message to him. The Father responded to my tele-script. He was unaware of your protégé’s presence with you in your travel here. His word choice indicated surprise and consternation. I feel I may have let him in on some information to which he was not privy. For that I apologize, but I am sworn to not withhold information like that, even if I knew it could be damaging in some way.”

Elisabeth listened, with her prayer book opened on her lap, facing sideways to the door, and looked at him with her head turned, even though with her injury it caused her a great deal of pain.

15. The Dance of Words

The attendees on the open area of the function hall sorted themselves in shifting geometric patterns. Groups of eight people, two sets of pairs of pairs, stepped through the motions of dance, careful with their biomechanical timing and movements. Those watching, particularly on the balcony encircling the floor, enjoyed a stimulating picture of fluid symmetry in motion, of fractalized colors of mirror images, of wheels spinning in counterpoint within wheels.

Vincent did not enjoy it at present, because he was not in that room anymore. He, Missy, Christine, Elisabeth, and perhaps a hundred other people stood watching something else in an adjacent room in the hall. They were watching a drawn, dark blue curtain with intense focus. Moments ago the curtain was open, where everyone viewed a scene of nine, stock-still people, all in the appropriate garb of flowing cloth which mimicked Renaissance realism. One figure on the left mourned, while the rest of the models formed an amorphous group with the centerpiece: the battered corpse of the half-naked Christ, unresponsive to the stilled lamentations around him.

The ambient bustling and undulations of the curtain ceased, and all who gathered held their breath for the finale. Black-clothed and white-gloved househands spread the curtain wide with a flourish and revealed the immediate grandiosity of the Athenian school, recognized instantly by everyone. All of the tableau players participated, and this fact set off a gentle rush of light applause and courteous chatter among the spectators, who scanned the makeshift stage for their friends and colleagues posing in the scene. Vincent heard Elisabeth let out a small titter of admiration, and she directed Vincent's attention to the crimson robed Plato. As the scene wore on, he appeared to struggle to keep his finger pointed up.

After an exhaustive ten minutes, the curtains began their final close, this time at a much slower pace to allow for the dramatic, raucous applause from the gathered crowd, and attendants proceeded to relight the ensconced candles on the walls.

Vincent turned to Elisabeth as he was unsure of the proceedings to come. He wanted to discuss some things that had occupied his mind since the bombing last week, as an

excuse to focus his attention. The function so far had caused him a delicate unease through having his energies pulled in numerous directions and in small quantities. There was etiquette to fulfill and, like an androgyne wading into a sea of pheromones, he felt he had lacked adequate social finesse to react.

Elisabeth attempted conversation with Missy, absentmindedly itching her slung arm with her slender forefinger while keeping her blue and gold-trimmed sash from bunching or falling. The sash formed with her sling an off-center 'X,' and it made Vincent check his own sash for similar misalignment.

Missy, overwhelmed with amusement at being a part of the pomp of it all, jiggled and bubbled after every sentence she spoke to Elisabeth. Christine was appearing every inch on the cusp of coming into society, yet she fought her characteristic boredom by smiling and curtseying at the men who politely nodded their heads as they passed.

Missy paused enough in her admiring burbles for Vincent to cut in, when Dr. Fallace, maintaining his robe and sandals, tiptoed his massive frame behind Elisabeth, stooped low, and caught her waist up in an inescapable embrace. Elisabeth yelped and batted the unseen assailant behind her with her functioning arm. She was surprised, but with her faint smile, she most likely knew his identity.

Missy feigned shock and held her hands up in mock arrest. Vincent felt his cheeks burn at the attention it garnered. It made the cut under his bandaged temple pulse.

Dr. Fallace relented, landed Elisabeth onto the floor gently, and allowed everyone time to recompose themselves. Elisabeth made the proper introductions to the gushing Missy and strained Christine.

"How are we all this fine evening?" Dr. Fallace asked. "All of us worker bees at de Sales are still high on having our beloved Sister and his faithful sidekick, who will be so officially dubbed after the night's proceedings, back at our homestead."

"My!" Missy said. "So eloquent. I feel like a gentrywoman!"

"'At the touch of love, everyone becomes a poet,'" he returned while briefly resuming the pointed-finger stance of the philosopher. He gave a mischievous sidelong glance at Elisabeth. She rolled her eyes and straightened the bandeau at her hairline.

"Your story," he continued, "on what happened on the Waterway was the soul of suspense, Elisabeth. It's been the talk of the College. We don't suffer it lightly when one of our own are snatched so quickly from the claws of fate with something to show for it."

“The story wasn’t all mine. I had some assistance.” She tilted her head and winked at Vincent. “Why don’t you go change, doctor? The novelty of having one of the ancient Greeks in my presence is going to fade. Very quickly, I emphasize. If you do so, I may consider joining you in the next quadrille.”

With his mirth fortified by her proposal, Dr. Fallace erupted in a shout of joy. “I am turned, besotted, by your offer of dance. Are you fit to step with your injury?”

“My shoulder itself will be fine from my anodyne I took earlier, but I don’t need to exacerbate it. I will have to manage with one arm.”

“Until your arm is sufficiently soothed, dear Sister,” Dr. Fallace cooed, “I will have to entertain this young lady with the refined movements of our French socials from across the Atlantic.” He presented his hand to Christine’s direction. “I know the perfect troupe in need of a couple, Miss Christine.”

Christine looked at Vincent and Missy with a mix of horror and excitement. Missy egged her on.

“Didn’t you say you were changing first, Dr. Fallace?” Vincent asked. “And she’s not fit to step tonight.”

“Master Vincent,” Elisabeth said. “You should know by now not to take the good Dr. Fallace at his word, especially when a breach of protocol is involved. Though I don’t recommend risking such boldness yourself. He’s so well loved that he can escape criticism.”

Vincent and Elisabeth watched the enormous Dr. Fallace lead Christine, with Missy skipping gaily behind.

“Looks like there will be more than one kind of induction here tonight,” Vincent said.

“An incisive observation,” Elisabeth said. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say she had already come out to society, the way she carries herself.”

There was a moment where Elisabeth seemed to be recovering from this particular subject, and entering into another.

“I know,” she began, “you’ve been reading much more on the Deaf Prophet lately. Is it because of our trip last week? Anything of interest?”

“No. Well, a few things, of sorts.” He briefly wondered how she knew of his investigation. “His predictions all read a little like nonsense. They are difficult to take seriously because they lack specifics in a lot of areas. Consider that he wasn’t a religious

believer at all, yet he references 'Allah' many times. I know the Red Sword—and other Mohammedans—take his predictions as worthy, but why others? Why, say, the Jesuits?"

"'Allah' is just the Arabic word for 'god,'" Elisabeth said. "It's not exactly his proper name. I have some Coptic correspondents who use 'Allah' when they speak of the God of Christendom. Since the Prophet wrote in pure Arabic it's not clear to which god he referred. It is strange he bothered mentioning anything metaphysical at all, being an unbeliever. Perhaps he was just speaking in objective terms. I guess that adds to the mystery of it all."

"Have you read the entire prophecy?"

"In bits and pieces, yes, some time ago." She thought of the passage she read in her office recently. She shifted her weight to her other leg and scratched again into her sleeve. "It didn't interest me much."

"I read about this du Mahdi figure. He seemed to fit one of the 'wild men' the Prophet mentioned. And you're a terrible liar."

"Millet and marzipan, Vincent. Anyone would can make themselves fit the description. The Red Sword are numerous. Du Mahdi's self-inflicted insanity was just more newsworthy. Now, what's this about me being a liar?"

Vincent smirked and crossed his arms. "You've been working by yourself for too long. No one's been able to lend a critical eye to your body language. You give away too much. Agree?"

"Oh, bother," she snapped, itching her forearm with more intensity. "It's my arm talking. And the anodyne."

"Do you consider it a real prophecy?"

She shrugged. "It could or could not be. I can't say. It's not really something that compels me to decide one way or another. I should ask you, as a natural philosopher, if *you* think it's genuine."

"We're of the same mind about it, though if somehow it was determined it was genuine, it would probably have a natural cause for it. That's not my area, but I do know where the metaphysics department is. Precognition does sound fascinating."

He looked at her, wagering with himself if he should continue with where this was leading him. "Miss Elisabeth, there's something I need to ask you, while we're on the subject of time. Forgetting prophecy for the moment, have you thought about the

implications of the MTD? If time travel actually were possible? It's going to completely overturn everything natural philosophy has uncovered so far. I can immediately think of a dozen colleagues and professors whose area of study will be wiped out and have to be rebuilt from the very beginning. It just seems to invite chaos into the universe. Time orders everything. If we can move freely through the time dimension…" He spread his arms open as if in ominous conclusion.

"You raise some interesting questions. Keep this in mind for a possible story, Vincent. I can talk to the good Dr. Fallace about that for our Natural Philosophy pages. We should have you concentrate more on that area now, anyways. Yet, we have to be careful about revealing too much about our knowledge of Docteur Millis-Lestrange's whereabouts. It may be odd to publish an opinion piece like that ex nihilo. We should find a way to tie it into something current."

"Now instead of lying, you're avoiding the question."

"Your honesty is noted," she said with a note of finality.

Vincent began to lose hope of getting a straight answer out of her. Elisabeth stood on her tiptoes and looked over into the dance floor.

"It appears as if our good doctor and your sister are beginning their dance," she said. "This should not be missed. Come."

Vincent gritted his teeth at having the conversation undermined in that manner. Elisabeth had practiced forthrightness with most everything they had discussed in the professional, and theoretical, realm. Whenever he broached the topic of time travel phenomenon before, she found an apt excuse to not address it, usually attributing the roadblock to concentrating on his "professional development and discernment of the study of right things."

They weaved the short distance through the crowd to the edge of the floor, where others had gathered to watch the measured steps of the quadrille. The musicians on the far side of the floor had struck up the initial notes and those participants on the floor stood at attention to await the correct time to enter the dance.

"Do you think time travel is possible?" he asked, feeling the catch of frustration in his voice.

“Can’t say for sure one way or another,” she answered, not turning to him but fixating on the dance unfolding before them. “It’s a radical idea, but today’s radicalism becomes tomorrow’s orthodoxy. I’m certainly open for argument but I don’t believe it is possible, not because of any boundaries in what we are able to do using our discoveries within natural philosophy, but with our perception of time. We are assuming that time is like a measure of ‘distance’ upon which we can traverse, back and forth, like a kind of road. I find that view of time not very compelling.”

There was no note of completion in her voice as before; she was open to exploring it for now, but he thought caution was the best course.

“Do we have permission to speak further on this?” he asked, summoning the formal verbal request template between mentor and protégé.

A smile played on her lips. “We do.”

“Your belief in Docteur Millis-Lestrange’s work is paradoxical. You claim that the MTD actually did something but you don’t know what. Yet you also hold that time travel is more or less impossible. So, according to your logic, the MTD does accomplish something, but it can’t be for what it was intended. You’re investing an awful lot in an invention that was meant to accomplish an impossible—in your mind and mine—task, but accomplishes another task the nature of which no one is certain, not even yourself, who is the only one purportedly to know that it did something at all.”

Elisabeth was too engrossed with the scene before them to answer right away.

“It does seem a bit off the center mark, doesn’t it?” she said finally. “I’m confident in my belief about his MTD, but if you are implying hubris on my end, I hope to dispel you of that. Hubris finds a more comfortable home, not in the minds of those that believe they have accounted for all things—that’s absurd on its face—but in the minds of those who think they *can* account for all things. I am well aware of the boundary lines of our potential as a species.”

“And I haven’t even mentioned your disdain for new technologies. But, as one who believes in the metaphysical in the first place, you have to admit that time travel has to be within the realm of the possible. Agree? Just by mere tautology, if anything is possible, anything is possible.” He was about to continue exploring the idea but caught himself short. His fingers twitched and itched at the barrier. Elisabeth continued with

her dead-eyed smile and began bouncing her head gently around to follow the myriad of movement.

"But perhaps not," Vincent said. "Maybe time travel is contextual only to some universes, possible only under certain natural conditions. It could be that a god could make its impossibility or possibility dependent in his fancy at the time. In that case it's not a question of natural philosophy so much as it is theological. That doesn't get us much anywhere, now, does it?"

"Your *angst* betrays you," Elisabeth said. "Your pursuit is admirable even if you are answering your own questions. I won't question your sanity, but I will advise you that as knowledge increaseth, so doth sorrow."

"I've heard the expression. Is there a different path?"

"We Deutsche have the expression '*loslassen*.' 'Letting it go,' in a fashion. Or you could try some of the detachment disciplines the Hindoos pursue. I've heard it can be quite successful."

"Well, then. Is there—?" The thought of abandoning conclusion irritated him more intensely than the twists of logic. Moments elapsed as he tried to lose himself in the quadrille as Elisabeth had done.

"Is there something less, delusional?" he asked. "Less willfully ignorant?"

Elisabeth let out a sharp, monosyllabic laugh. "My Vincent, my Wunderkind: ever the skeptic. We all entertain our delusions, but we don't know they are such. As soon as an individual recognizes his belief as wrong, that belief is abandoned by the very nature of falsehood and truth. In this sense no one is ever wrong; as soon as we know of a falsity, we correct ourselves automatically, so self-delusion is an impossibility as much as time travel is. Can you reason yourself into thinking your given name is actually Bartholomew Bricklesby and not Vincent Eriksson? To tell you the truth, if you'll pardon my use of that expression in this conversation, I don't mind the designation of my beliefs as 'delusion.' Speaking only for myself, I can say it certainly feels that way for the briefest of moments, in the most trivial of circumstances: when I am walking on a woodland path on the first day of springtime weather, or looking out on Marinas Bay at dawn, or thinking of my father's strong hands and how he used to handle his engravery stylus. It comes without warning, often at the most inopportune times. I am enraptured

to the point of incoherence that I have to sit down else I risk injury. But the delusion is of a different sort. It's as if I am walking along an alien shore in *this* realm, *this* manner of existence, far from home, yet a part of me feels utterly at home, utterly at peace should the world explode and die all around me. It's at these times and at the points of furthest deception in the external realm, that I'm closest to the truth somewhere inside."

The dance continued and appeared to wind down to completion. It was a false ending yet, and the stringed instruments picked up the rhythm once again.

Vincent tapped his thumb against his thigh to aid his mind to recollection. The last few months, he had taken notes—unofficial scraps of thought on Elisabeth, her character, beliefs—for his own benefit, and for possible posterity. A portion of the notes he considered insightful were committed to memory for use in future conversation. Now that the opportunity arose, putting his memory into practice was failing his expectations.

"The truth," Vincent repeated with some disdain in his voice. "Not speaking for myself here, but really for you, Miss Elisabeth. I'd think the truth isn't the goal of your religion. It's more like your acceptance of, what's the term…omnipotence? That's the word. Agree?

"Think of anything you or I could see as the truth, here, on earth." Vincent held out one hand, palm up, at his hip level. "Now, think of your God, and how powerful He is reported to be." He offered his other hand in the same fashion, and lifted them up and down as an analogy of scales weighing an imbalance. "Could the truths we know on earth ever amount to a damn bit if your God could wipe it all away just by thinking it? When confronted with so much, what good is truth when it's really such a temporary thing?"

The stringed instruments swelled louder and would have drowned out Vincent's words if he spoke further. He had remember one of his written notes that he found particularly profound and was anxious to verbalize it.

"In my estimation," he said, when the strings quieted down to a normal volume, "you, as Miss Sister Elisabeth, in reality do not surrender to a revealed truth, you worship power in its highest form."

"That's one thing I admire about you, Vincent. When the time is right you don't suffer verbosity gladly with me. And you are in true form tonight. You'll be a fine protégé and I look forward to our work, our *official* work, together."

Vincent found further pursuit of the matter improper; what he asserted about Elisabeth up until this point was too direct even held up against his standards. He considered apologizing to her for prematurely smearing such a serious tone over the lighthearted celebrations, but that would attract attention to an issue Elisabeth wasn't even acknowledging. Instead, he joined her in absorbing the last steps and denouement of the quadrille and noted the laughing gaiety coming from the corner of the dance floor, where Christine and Dr. Fallace ended up. It felt to Vincent that the truth of the dance was enough for the moment.

The induction came. Vincent and the fifty or so other mentor-protégé pairs, sashed and rowed, face to face, on the ballroom floor, invoked the initiation formula. To Vincent it felt a bit like a very organized cattling into a slaughter pen, but he attributed his negative perception to nerves. A grin and wink from Elisabeth lightened his internal tension.

As soon as they finished the recitation, Elisabeth closed her eyes and muttered. Vincent assumed it was a prayer, but the distance was too great to distinguish, and the University president had already started his concluding benediction. Though Vincent knew the president bore no fault in this, he thought the man's insistent baritone pillaging Elisabeth's impromptu, private moment was an inexcusable vulgarity.

16. Under Lock and Key, Part I

The mentors, with their protégés in close tow, received the president and other university administrators near the entrance of the function hall. This was closely followed by the much less formal reception of the departments' colleagues and the honored guests of the mentors and protégés.

Christine bore her weariness—a soft-cornered kind of drowsiness made all the worse from the excitement from Dr. Fallace—with slumped shoulders. Vincent's mother, contrarily, still brandished her passion concerning everything about the night's proceedings and the pride of her son's new vocational position. Vincent thought her on the edge of hysteria and sought to contain her minor conniptions by having Missy redirect her into a corner of the foyer, away from the bulk of the crowd's eyes.

Elisabeth, in between receiving colleagues, was approached by Father On-the-Willows. He had been away with other department heads for the greater part of the week and had just gotten back.

"Miss Elisabeth, Master Vincent, congratulations," Father said with a stiff nod.

"Thank you, Father. I—" Elisabeth began.

"Please come with me."

She excused herself from Vincent. Father led her away from the bulk of the mingling hall-goers. Missy, still nattering on, emerged out of her designated corner and bobbled after Elisabeth with Christine following with a vague amble. Vincent held them back.

"Do you realize what you just did?" Father said to Elisabeth, once they were in a quieter corner of the foyer. His voice was at normal volume but his tone seethed.

"Father?"

"You took," he started with his voice shaking with the overflow of a frightening mix of emotions. Elisabeth leaned an inch away from him, and Father composed himself to a degree. "You took an uninsured, uninitiated, unregistered person off of University grounds and nearly got him killed in one of the most public places in Lesser-Athens."

Elisabeth, wide-eyed with shock, stammered to speak.

"Do you realize," Father continued, "the level of risk you put on de Sales through your actions, had that young man died? And the risk you put Applied Natural

Philosophies? Our reputation rating would've taken a two letter hit. Insurance would double for 24, 48—maybe more—payment cycles. We would have to let go of half our skilled staff and you and I would've lost our positions immediately. You'd better thank the Lord a dozen times over that this young man's mother is delirious in love with our work and our department and hadn't the slightest thought to bring this incident to arbitration."

"Heavens, Father," she said. She pressed her hand, trembling, just below her mouth.

Father, unable to withstand the sight of the overwrought colleague before him, relented and embraced her. He seemed careful enough not to crush her injured shoulder.

"Don't ever put me through that again," he said, releasing her. "Not with the liability, but with yourself. You put me through hell. I was sick when the good Dr. Fallace tele-scripted me, and I didn't sleep a wink that first night."

"You have my word."

They rejoined Vincent and his family. Father, turning to Vincent, drew a large breath, and his large frame swelled and deflated. Vincent stood tall, board straight, with his chin high. He and Father were the same height, but Father's carriage was intimidating.

"Are you sure you're in one piece, young man?" he asked as he clapped his shoulder. "Miss Elisabeth tells me you've been showing a lot of promise."

"Yes, sir. All in one piece, sir. I plan on doing my best."

Missy, exasperated enough with Christine's lethargy, bade the rest of them a good evening and left to hail down an auto-cart outside of the hall.

"I know you and Miss Elisabeth submitted a report," Father said, "but I want to know how the Wadi went. Besides the incident."

"Everything is proceeding as planned," Elisabeth said. "As planned as much as can be with our new little toys. But besides that, Father, there's a subject much more fascinating to us, and most likely to yourself, that doesn't appear in the report."

She summarized their discovery of Millis-Lestrange at the Wadi and the contract they had formulated.

"Fascinating," Father said. "Utterly fascinating. It's not for me how to advise you to on your personal finances; I'm sure you understand the risks in all of this."

“Believe me, Father,” Vincent said. “I’ve already gone through that with her.”

Elisabeth stared at him with an amused furrow.

“Respectfully, of course,” Vincent added. “We received documentation from Docteur Millis-Lestrange a few days ago. I’ve been combing through it quite a bit. He may be onto something, though it’s a matter about which I really need to sit down with him. A lot of his ideas are…very theoretical.”

“‘Theoretical’ sounds like a code word for ‘unworkable’ to me,” Father said, jovial.

“Not at all,” Vincent said. “Natural philosophers deal with theories all the time. It’s our bread and butter. There’s a line, though; some things are just too theoretical to be practical in the real world.”

Father peered at Elisabeth. “What is it that you see in all of this, Elisabeth? Your interest has a distinct personal hue to it. I don’t doubt that this will become a great story in the future when Millis-Lestrange is cleared of everything, but your partnership with him is a leap of faith even for you. Not even a leap. It’s a few shades short of foolhardy.”

“Or I could just value my work too much,” Elisabeth said with a sly smile. “Or I could be gunning for your job. I think you underestimate the impact Docteur Millis-Lestrange’s story could be, Father. If we do it right it will launch the *Intelligencer* into heights unseen. I’ve already started the process to withdraw my reserve ducats for this. They should be arriving at the office tomorrow, in fact.”

“I just pray that we don’t encounter a problem with Athens Arbitration,” Father said. “Millis-Lestrange’s case appears in the clear but we can never know for sure. If there’s an arbiter who happens to have indigestion that morning we could receive an unfavorable verdict.”

“We can only do so much,” Vincent offered.

“Another thing,” Father said. “We’ve been looking into Al Sayf’s increasing interest in infiltrating Green Shield’s circle, and—”

“Yes, yes, about that, Father,” Elisabeth said. “I apologize. I neglected to mention in my report about the ritual deafening we witnessed. It wasn’t pleasant. We had a pretext to look into a few more related things but we got sidetracked with discovering a missing natural philosopher and getting nearly blown to bits.”

She released a nervous chuckle. Vincent and Father looked at each other with a frown.

“In regards to that,” Father said. “Al Sayf has been rallying to the du Mahdi faction more and more. And a lot of them, if you remember the prophecy, along with deafening are adopting the single-arm trait. Most of them aren’t getting amputated, but there are more dedicated members.”

“We weren’t privy to too many single-armed Mohammedans during our trip,” Elisabeth said. “Though I wasn’t necessarily intent on finding one. Did you see any?”

Vincent shook his head. “That mention could be figurative, perhaps. Yet it’s being interpreted as literal more frequently, if what Father says is accurate. And more recently, since our escort would have mentioned it to us if it was occurring more frequently when we visited.”

“Good points, Vincent,” Father said.

“I do have them from time to time, Father. Sir.”

“So,” Elisabeth said. “It looks like activity with Al Sayf al Ahmar are intensifying even more, particularly with more zealous strains. Does du Mahdi’s faction fall under that category?”

Father nodded. “In many ways, yes, but as I mentioned before, it makes no sense that such a group would throw support behind an apostate. In less turbulent times they would have killed him the second their paths crossed. Du Mahdi must be a charismatic figure to get all of that to work out. Or he has something up his sleeve that is enticing enough to rally such support. We just don’t have the details right now.”

“I’ve heard that before,” Elisabeth said. “At least du Mahdi’s means of gathering sympathizers will be easier to figure out. By half, if I remember my arithmetic tables.”

“How so?” Father asked.

“Only one sleeve.”

Vincent rolled his eyes. Father involuntarily snorted out a quick laugh.

“Oh, before I forget…” Father pulled an envelope from his inside jacket pocket and handed it to Elisabeth. “Our good Dr. Fallace passed this off to me when I saw him earlier tonight. From one du Rashid, Mohammed.”

Elisabeth opened the letter, marked in bold red lettering on the front as “urgent.”

“It’s Docteur Millis-Lestrange,” Elisabeth said. “That was his alias when working at the Wadi. When was this sent?” She scanned the page quickly. “This is nonsense. It’s just a block of letters.”

She flipped the page around to show Father and Vincent. “Vincent, could this be some documentation on the MTD?”

He shook his head. “That’s no documentation I’ve ever seen.”

“Maybe we’ll find out eventually. Although he didn’t mention he would be sending anything else.”

“True,” Vincent said. “But this doesn’t seem right at all.”

“Could it be coded?” Father asked. “It makes some sense if we’re talking about the MTD. He might’ve not wanted you both to have complete schematics, or what have you, on it, until later. He wanted to wait until you got back here with his life’s work. If it fell in the wrong hands they would be missing something to make it work.”

“Possible, possible,” Elisabeth said. “He should’ve gotten the copy of our contract by now, so he knows we made it back safely, but that’s something he would’ve made sure to let us know beforehand. I side with Vincent on this but this needs deciphering. Every code has a key. We just need to find where it is. Vincent, do you think you could comb through his documentation for some possibilities, tonight? If there’s a key it may be something that doesn’t make sense by itself, like this letter. My schedule is free in the morning tomorrow. We’ll be able to dig into this.”

Vincent checked his timepiece. “It’s closing in on ten o’clock, Miss Elisabeth. Might take me an hour or so to sift through everything. Are you in any condition to be up so late? The matter with your arm and all.”

“Millet and marzipan, Vincent,” Elisabeth chided. “I’m just getting started. That quadrille ignited my envy for dance, and never minding the matter with the mystery letter, I believe you owe me a bag of figs.”

Elisabeth fetched her cigarette tin from her satchel under her sling with a bit of a struggle. She tapped the corner of the tin against the metallic de Sales College crest pin on her sash. The *clink-clink-clink* suggested a steady, upbeat rhythm, to which Elisabeth adopted an accompanying skipping step, past Vincent and Father, towards the door and the balmy summertime air outside.

17. Under Lock and Key, Part II

Vincent arrived at Elisabeth's apartment building with his satchel and a large burlap sack filled with documentation. Her apartment was on the first floor, to his relief. He stood in front of the door and stopped before knocking. The building was bathed in silence all the way from the outside front step, but behind the apartment door there were muffled booms and scrapes—a persistent smatter of noise that rang a note of familiarity with him.

He knocked. Elisabeth's voice sounded out. The words were unintelligible but her voice carried a tone of welcome.

He pried the door open halfway and peered inside. The room was dark, almost all the way black, with some angles of light slanting onto the floor broken up by a spasm of quick shadows. From a corner of one of the two rooms, Vincent was unsure which, came the sounds of stringed instruments crackling with the now-obvious needle-scrape of a phono-revolver.

Stepping now into the room, Vincent spied a rapid movement to his left, spinning in a cone of light. It was Elisabeth, twirling on one foot within the haphazard intersection of illumination from a trio of lanterns: two hanging on the walls and one on a small table near her.

Her white sleeveless nightgown flowed freely and mirrored her movements on a delay. Her left arm, freed from its sling, did not seem to be hindered by injury: a dark bruise splaying all over her shoulder, cresting at her collarbone area. A third accompaniment, her hair, released from its usual ascetic band of cloth, flew about her in a primitive whirlwind. It followed her movements, not as a matter of natural physical laws, but through a will all its own.

"Come in," Elisabeth said as she rolled up from an odd, bow-backed forward dip. "Sit. Mind the apparatuses."

Vincent swung the door all the way open, and hefted his bag next to the table. Behind the table, arranged on the floor against the wall, were perhaps a half dozen pairs of metal globes, increasing in size from left to right, with flat bottoms to prevent rolling,

each with a small handle on the top. There were also three soft leather balls of different diameters, and strange, freestanding racks of sturdy wooden poles and horizontal slats.

"I needed ample space tonight," Elisabeth said. "Close the door."

Vincent stopped pulling a chair back from the table. "That would be highly inappropriate."

"Nonsense. I advised the sentry on duty you would be coming." A wave ran through her arms to her fingertips, many times over. "We don't need to wake the building with our babble."

Vincent closed the door, peering out in hopes that he might see the sentry passing by. Elisabeth continued the cavorting that, to Vincent's underdeveloped sense of meter and step, appeared decoupled and mismatched from the tempo of the stringed music of the unseen phono-revolver.

"Documents?" Elisabeth asked, slowing a violent spin down to give visual attention to his unpacking. Next to the table lantern, Vincent noticed a syringe and a small, slender glass container of lidocaine on the top of the table. Both were empty.

"There's plenty here," Vincent said, finally sitting down. The back of his heel thumped up against one of the metal globes under the chair. "I set apart anything that could be considered our key. Using that as a filter, it didn't eliminate as much as I had thought. We're going to need a good dose of luck if we're going to find anything."

"Fate is, perforce, the provenance of luck," she replied. "And an undesirable fate can be overcome by drowning in the tidal wave of sheer numbers. We'll just have to go through everything, many times over if we need to. Make two piles. We can both address them first thing in the morning."

"If fate is what I *think* it is, wouldn't our plan simply be another cog in its mechanics?"

"My figs?"

He produced the paper bag from his satchel and set it on the table.

"You're lucky we stock these," he said. "Nothing is open at this hour."

"There you are with that 'luck,' again."

The music began a very gradual slowdown with the slackening crank energy. Elisabeth stilled her limbs, then approached the table, hair tousled and splayed in all

directions, face unreadable in the hackneyed lighting. She waited until the music ground to a bassy end, as though paying respects to the musicians' dying work.

Her presence there, with her countenance formed into something resembling a graveyard creature, reminded him of a revenant from one of his childhood storybooks. The subtle, even pulsing at the side of her neck brought him forward from childhood, to a recent physiology class. He pictured his hand, resting atop one pile of the documents, forming a series of translucent proboscises from the tips of his fingers, sliding out and into the side of her neck to nestle in the wet warmth of life inside. He would curve the sensors around the ridge of her windpipe, to the back of her neck, lazily plucking at one of the twin halves of her vagus nerve—causing a shiver of mild nausea to wind its way down to her duodenum—then back around to her common carotid artery. He would pinch it as an expression of secret play, between his index-and thumb-sensors, feeling the beat of warm life force the pulses of oxygen-rich blood through his vague grasp.

"Last time, Miss Elisabeth." Wassie's booming contralto filled the room from an unlit corner. Vincent snapped to.

Elisabeth nodded, stepped back, and performed a series of twirls as an overture while Wassie turned and turned the phono-revolver's crank. The metallic ping of the player's springs grated on the hair on Vincent's neck.

The music revved up to normal playing speed once again.

"I initially looked at pieces of paper that were the same size as the letter," Vincent said. "But I ignored sizes after my first pass. I went through it all again and found some more likely possibilities for a solution."

"No matter, Vincent. I'm sure the key to the docteur's lock is somewhere hidden in there. What did the one parishioner say to the other, standing next to him, after the minister spilled the thurible on them?"

Vincent refused to answer, and instead enjoyed the feeling of making her pine for a response. She twirled with her arms high overhead, alternating on each socked foot, the sinews of her calves creasing and straining under the weight, and the thin white skin of her upper back sliding over the tiny knobs of her upper spine.

Finally, she answered: "'I don't know about you, but I'm incensed.'"

Elisabeth's expert flailing, at one point, became uncontrollable and she was on the verge of tripping onto the floor, but then she shifted her body with the minute mental

recalculations of weights and counterweights, and recovered herself into proper uprightness. Vincent couldn't tell if the subtle stumbles were an effect of fatigue and lidocaine or a genuine demonstration of skill.

"Until tomorrow morning, Vincent," she said. "Get some sleep."

He returned one pile of documents to his sack and left, closing the door carefully behind him.

⸙ ⸙ ⸙

Elisabeth stole to her office just as the first light of dawn crested over the horizon and onto the west end of the building. The auto-cart driver, Robert, with whom she was familiar and could trust to call on so early in the day, hauled up the small, plain pine chest filled with her half of Millis-Lestrange's documents.

Her desk bore an uncharacteristic clutter of papers that Elisabeth had not remembered leaving there. Her tele-type's button board and card-box was pushed out of the way, right up against the rack of vacuum tubes and dials on the wall. The natural light in her office at that time was lacking for proper desk-work, and so, after paying Robert for his extra efforts, she stepped behind her desk to light the wall candle. She stumbled over a dark convolution on the floor.

"*Donnerwetter!*" she yelled.

A moan came from below.

Elisabeth jumped back and fumbled with the matches in her good hand, nearly ready to draw her revolver.

Whoever it was on the floor rolled over into the bookcase behind her desk, then sat up with another groan. It was Vincent.

Elisabeth leaned against the wall and found her pulse had quickened. "Master Vincent Eriksson, do I want to know why you're sleeping on my office floor?"

"Apologies, Miss Elisabeth," he said, standing up and rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. "I couldn't sleep knowing the work ahead of me. I couldn't very well keep the family up with the endless paper-rustling, so I decided to come here. I did get through most of my pile and narrowed it down even further, though I can't be sure how liberal or

withholding I should have been since I don't have the docteur's letter. I had to work by memory of what it looked like."

He began to speak further but a yawn forced its way out of his face.

"Please sit," Elisabeth said, offering her one of her chairs on the other side of her desk. "I'll have Wassie fetch tea. She should be here soon."

Vincent slumped down into a chair and made a vague gesture of indication towards a small pile of papers at the corner of her desk.

"There, that one," he said.

"I'll set it aside," Elisabeth said as she opened her office door wide. "But first, some light, and my dawn prayers. Short and quiet."

Vincent dozed lightly while Elisabeth took care of business, and the department workers began arriving at the standard start of the day. She left her wooden block upright as a signal for Wassie, who returned at some point during Elisabeth's prayers with a tray of tea for two and a bowl of fruit for Vincent.

After an hour of sorting and examining, Elisabeth and Vincent narrowed everything down to a few dozen candidates. They tacked them all, with Millis-Lestrange's letter, on a large corkboard Elisabeth had just filched from Dr. Fallace's office when he stepped out.

"This doesn't seem to be getting any clearer," Vincent said, while leaning in close to the corkboard and taking in all of their selected evidence with a pointillist's eye. "We're predisposed towards looking for papers that look like his letter. The key could be something that we're not expecting. Agree?"

"I agree," Elisabeth said. "We should go through these rejected papers again. If nothing jumps out at us we would have to go review everything again."

"I hope it doesn't come to that."

Elisabeth spied a pile of engineering schematics: layers of translucent vellum paper, bound at the top, which illustrated the inner workings of various devices and machines. Some individually bound schematics had sections separated by opaque white pages to delineate between different parts of an entire machine. She flipped through one of them and marveled at their complexity.

"Fascinating," she said. Her nose twitched with curiosity.

“Agree? Yet I know there’s at least two circuit diagrams in there that are certainly impossible, and some of those I don’t quite understand. It requires a lot of discussion with Docteur Millis-Lestrange, and a good deal of learning. He uses a strange method of algebraic formulations that—”

“‘Impossible’?” Elisabeth asked. “Which one is that?”

Vincent fished through the schematics and pulled one out.

“That last two pages you want to see,” Vincent said. “The wiring diagrams.”

Elisabeth looked at the series of black boxes, symbols, and lines going every which way, in the first diagram.

“I have no idea how to read this,” Elisabeth said, “but how exactly is this impossible? Not that I am doubting your expertise here. It just appears to me as any other of these diagrams.”

“‘Impossible’ is perhaps the wrong word,” he admitted. “It’s more...unworkable. Control boxes, switches, power sources, spark gaps, capacitors...all scattered and connected haphazardly. Wiring loops that don’t attach to anything. It won’t do a damn thing, in essence.” He tilted his head to get a different perspective on it. “Or it could blow a crater into the ground the size of the Wadi.”

“Is there a reason why these diagrams are smaller than the schematics?”

Vincent shrugged. “Not really. When printed, these can vary in terms of size. Depends on how meticulous the philosopher wants to be.”

“Are these wiring diagrams usually a single layer like this? On vellum?”

Vincent nodded. “Yes, one layer. They are normally on opaque paper but they are the last page so it doesn’t matter how they are printed. If the philosopher doesn’t care much he’ll just—”

“Get the letter.”

Vincent pulled the letter off the corkboard and handed it to Elisabeth. She slid it under the first wiring diagram vellum.

“Here, look here,” she said, eagerness rising. “These boxes, the switches, appear to be indicating certain letters in his letter. All of the other figures don’t match up quite as nicely. This might be something.”

Vincent grabbed a piece of paper and a pencil from the desk and began writing down the indicated letters. Wassie knocked politely at the doorframe.

“The auto-cart transport you had scheduled is here, Miss Elisabeth,” she said.

“Ah! Good.”

Elisabeth quickly stepped outside of the de Sales building to inspect and sign off on the contents and terms of delivery. When she returned to her office, Vincent was looking at the paper full of letters he wrote with a look of confusion.

“Well?” Elisabeth asked.

“Just another jumble of letters.” He read off a series of letters and showed them to her.

“Let’s try to get some words out of them. There has to be something there.”

They each quickly wrote out different blocks and configurations of the letters provided. Elisabeth looked at one of Vincent’s particular ideas.

“Look here,” she said, and quickly scribbled out four words. “I noticed this looking at that one idea of yours.”

“‘Aha, sememes, sulus, aibohphobia,’” Vincent read them aloud.

“Meaningful as mud,” Elisabeth said. “Aside from ‘aha,’ I have no idea what those mean. They may be technical terms. Hand me my dictionary, please. On the top shelf there, left-hand side.”

Elisabeth looked up “aibohphobia” first, and chuckled at its definition. “It means ‘fear of palindromes,’ and it’s a palindrome itself. I’ll have to make a joke out of that.”

“You mean you don’t have enough in reserve?” Vincent said. “Interesting. All four words are palindromes. Looks like odd number ones, too.”

“You’re right. That doesn’t seem to help us, though. What would he be trying to say with that? Do we need to look at other palindromes?”

“I don’t know,” Vincent said with hopelessness in his voice.

They both sat in silence for a few minutes—Elisabeth with a cigarette and Vincent, feet propped up on another chair, finishing the remnants of the tea kettle and rolling onto a tea dish a pair of dice he took out of his waistcoat pocket.

“You have dice now?” Elisabeth asked.

“Just happened to have them on me. From a simple statistics game Christine and I played a few days ago.” He stopped himself short before continuing his explanation. “These are odd-number palindromes you said? That would mean there’s a center letter.”

“Odds are, yes.”

Vincent was unabated by her wordplay. “Do the center letters spell anything out?”

“‘Help,’” Elisabeth said. “It says ‘help.’”

They exchanged shared glances that held relief, frustration, and concern.

“How grave do you think this is?” Vincent asked. “We should check the other vellum diagram too. Maybe there’s another message.”

Elisabeth did so—numerous different ways, but there was no matching of boxes or any other figure to Millis-Lestrange’s letter.

“Maybe we’ll come across the key later,” Vincent offered. “Perhaps another letter will be sent?”

Elisabeth pursed her lips. “That doesn’t seem likely, but one can never be certain. There’s still not a lot to go on here to satisfy all my loose ends, but my instincts speak contrarily.” She thought for a moment.

“It’s a shame we figured this out after the auto-cart left with my—the docteur’s—funds. I’ll have Wassie tele-script for an auto-cart. I hope Robert is available again. Be sure to take those diagrams with us.”

“Why is that?”

She rapped the broad side of the wood block on her desktop, just once. “We’re visiting the Wadi again. We have another clue waiting for us.”

18. Concerning the Two Chief Spherical Models

Elisabeth, draped in her abaya, niqab pulled down around her neck, cane back in hand, followed Vincent and al Hawi through the elevated turns of the Wadi's entresol.

"We were aghast to learn of the incident on the bridge," al Hawi said. "But relieved to know you were both relatively unharmed. Here we are, again."

They entered the tea room where they had first met Millis-Lestrange. This time it was more heavily occupied with library employees breaking before the final stretch of work for the day.

"Shokran, Ustaz al Hawi," Vincent said with a slight nod.

"You *do* learn fast," Elisabeth whispered to him.

"As before," al Hawi said, "the Wadi is yours. Feel free to conduct your search with complete authority. I pray you find your documents."

Al Hawi bowed and left, and Vincent prepared tea for himself and Elisabeth. They sat at a small table for two and listened to the conversations all about them.

"Do you think we should inquire Ustaz al Hawi about Docteur Millis-Lestrange?" Vincent asked. "Ah, du Rashid, I should say."

Elisabeth considered it. "I think it's wise not to. He knows he's missing, but he's not likely to know anything about him that would help us. We can't outright ask him for the docteur's address; he may not even know it or have a record of it. There's no use in informing him of our interests."

"But he must know we talked to du Rashid when we were first here."

"Yes, he but he doesn't know what about. And remember I had us visit a few other offices. If we had just talked to du Rashid, then he disappeared, it may have aroused suspicion."

"Alright then, but how will we find his address?"

"I don't know. But we will. If we found the docteur without looking for him last time, there's a possibility we'll find something of value here again."

"That's putting a lot of faith in chance. And just last night you were on me about luck."

“Vincent, planning so much for the unknown is a fool’s errand. You have to learn to take things as they come. Invent on the spot. Improvise.”

Vincent grumbled.

Many of the librarians got up to return to their tasks.

“We should follow behind them,” Elisabeth said. “Some of them may be going back to their offices, if they have them, so we won’t look as out of place.”

They followed the mass of employees out of the tea room. Vincent nudged Elisabeth and nodded at two librarians walking along the entresol ahead of them.

“Those two look important, not just tele-typists,” he said. “They may have their own offices.”

Elisabeth nodded, and they trailed them on the entresol to the far side of the Wadi, then down a flight of return stairs, landing on the ground floor where the rows of tables and reinvigorated tele-typists began to plug away.

The two men continued down a side hall away from the main room, where offices and rooms of differing functions lined either side. Vincent’s pace felt a little too quick for Elisabeth’s sense of proper plain-view skulking. She held her cane in the crook of her elbow and gently pulled back on his arm. He slowed his steps.

The men approached a T-intersection in the hall.

“Remember,” she said, “his office is to the right.”

The men, in a deep conversation, stopped at the intersection. Vincent slowed his walk to a crawl and pretended to adjust the strap on his holster.

Elisabeth sucked her breath in and held it.

The men turned left.

Elisabeth let out a slow hiss.

Vincent and Elisabeth took the right, to the end of the hall, to the last office on the right. The wooden sign on the door read, “Mohammed du Rashid.”

Vincent pushed down on the door handle. “It’s not locked. Is this strange? This is strange. Should we go in?”

“Yes, yes!” Elisabeth said in a loud whisper.

Millis-Lestrange’s office appeared no different than their last visit. Elisabeth hadn’t memorized every position of the items on his desktop or nuance of furniture placement, but there was nothing that prompted concern. They peered around for anything.

“Doesn’t look like there was any foul play here,” Vincent said as he examined some of the curious devices and objects Millis-Lestrange kept on a shelf. “Not as many electronal-oriented things as I expected, now that I’m really looking at things. Maybe he’s keeping them all at his living quarters.”

“No, no sign.” Elisabeth flipped through a stack of folders on the desk. “It’s not impossible that employees here leave their doors unlocked even during long stretches of holiday. This is a very collaborative environment—even more so than at de Sales. So there’s always a chance one could possess something another could use.”

She unstrung a portfolio and filtered through its papers. “We have Ustaz al Hawi’s full authority to look where we need to, remember. Anyone who questions us would need to bring it up with him. Nothing here.”

Elisabeth sighed, closed the portfolio, put the hand of her uninjured arm on her hip, and looked around for another possible area to inspect. She spied a type of hollow globe comprised of a multitude of concentric rings that were tilted at various angles. It sat atop a short wooden pedestal on a corner of Millis-Lestrange’s desk.

“Interesting object,” Elisabeth said, crouching down to get to eye level with it.

Vincent looked over his shoulder. He had moved on to a box on the floor, and was kneeling down over it to cautiously pick through its contents. “That’s an armillary sphere. Based off of the old astrolabes. Used for celestial positioning, maritime navigation, the like.”

“It moves, yes?” She crept a hand closer to one of the device’s more prominent rings.

“Yes, but don’t touch it. It’s considered bad form to tinker with another philosopher’s instruments, especially if they aren’t present.”

“Vincent, I’m a writer, not a natural philosopher,” she said, retreating her hand.

“But I *am,* as you well know, so I’d feel responsible.” There were some metallic clanking sounds as he rummaged through. “I probably shouldn’t even be poking through these electronal parts he—”

“May I help you?” It was a man’s voice coming from the open doorway. It was neutral but booming.

Elisabeth fell back onto her backside in surprise. Over the edge of the desk she saw Vincent's head shoot up. It was then that she saw the corners of a slip of paper underneath the armillary sphere's pedestal.

"We're from de Sales College," Vincent said. "We spoke with Monsieur du Rashid last time we were here and we believe we left a few important documents behind."

Vincent's head, bobbing with a confident strut, moved over toward the doorway, and the man, who appeared to be a tele-typist, turned to face him and away from the desk.

My Wunderkind! Elisabeth beamed in her mind. Coming up onto her haunches, she slowly reached up and slid the sphere and pedestal off the corner of the desk, while Vincent and the man exchanged words.

The sturdy wood and metal proved to be heavier than anticipated. Maintaining her grasp with her good hand, the armillary and pedestal dropped to the ground, intact, though it landed atop a pile of folders with a quieted thud. Elisabeth glanced up at the man. He hadn't noticed.

Elisabeth tilted the pedestal onto its side. The slip of paper underneath was lightly glued. Removing it was no challenge.

She grinned. The paper was exactly what they needed.

She grabbed a pair of folders nearby and slid the paper into one of them. She stood up and brandished the folders to Vincent. With a tilt of her bad shoulder toward him so he could see, she popped a thumb up, out of her sling, as an indication of approval.

"Ah!" Vincent said, cutting the man off in mid-sentence and taking the folders from Elisabeth. He made a show of searching through its contents. "Our missing documents are found. I must have left them here during our conversation at our last visit. We take our leave."

The man stepped aside to let Elisabeth and Vincent through the doorway, though he appeared less than pleased at their presence.

"What did you find?" Vincent asked as they doubled back through the office halls.

"The docteur's address," she said. "Well, someone's address. It was on the bottom of the armillary's pedestal."

"That doesn't sound exactly promising. If he's in trouble, we have no idea if it will get worse. Or when. We may already be out of time. You remember how he said people were after him."

“We won’t know unless we go there, will we? Come, let’s talk to Ustaz al Hawi before we leave. I want to tele-script the college before we leave.”

They ascended up to the entresol and met al Hawi in his office. He was delighted to find out they had found their missing items, and led them to their tele-scripting station, situated nearby down the entresol. Vincent introduced them both and Elisabeth handed the technician her message.

“I wanted to check in with Father,” she told Vincent while the technician sent the message, “to see if we received any new correspondence with the docteur and the status of my delivery to his account. The bank would have tele-scripted him by now, if they received it.”

“I think I know who that man was.” Vincent leaned against the wall and crossed his arms.

“Who?”

“The man who questioned us at the doorway. He was probably the docteur’s colleague, the one he mentioned last time. The one he pays to follow him home. I didn’t get his name.”

“If the docteur is missing, that man might be getting suspicious. He would know where he lives, additionally.” Elisabeth let out a soft *hmm*. “We could pursue things with him, but it’s risky since the docteur probably didn’t reveal his true identity to him. But then again, what if the docteur made plans with him and is expecting us?”

“Let’s not forget if we confront him about the docteur, he might think we’re really after him and try to deal with us.”

The technician emerged from his station and politely handed Vincent a tele-scripted note.

“‘Nothing on both. Be safe. Father,’” Vincent said, reading.

“This is troubling.”

“That’s putting it mildly.” He made an irritated growling sound. “There’s too many damned unknowns here,” He kicked the heel of his boot against the wall.

“Despair not,” Elisabeth said, putting a hand on Vincent’s arm. “The path will reveal itself as we walk upon it. In fact,” she waved the paper with the docteur’s address on it, “we have our next step. Come, it’s time we get moving. Let’s get our things and see Ustaz

al Hawi before we go. You'll need to talk to him and request an auto-cart to deliver us near our docteur's address."

"Him? Why me?"

"You should be well-acquainted with Ustaz al Hawi's gentle soul by now. And you handled that man wonderfully back there. I don't want you to lose your momentum. More meat, Wunderkind."

Al Hawi, with his usual overt graciousness, ordered an auto-cart at the library's expense. It was the end of the work day and the travel had been slow because of foot traffic. It came to a complete stop near sundown, as all activity ceased for an appointed prayer time. People lined the slipshod streets to kneel facing east and chant their holy words. Even their auto-cart driver exited to perform directly in front of the cart.

Elisabeth took this time to say her vespers. Vincent remained respectful and quiet, reading a book he kept in his bag, though at times his eyes shot up to search for anyone else doing similar. He found none.

After praying, the driver turned the auto-cart crank to full tension before continuing his route. Vincent and Elisabeth were dropped off a few streets over from the paper's address. They made their way in the stream of people to the docteur's house, a worn but sturdy gablefront with a small front porch. It was recessed some distance from the dusty street, surrounded by a short fence, and as they turned to the opening in the fence that led into its front steps, Vincent deliberately shifted and kept walking.

"Explain," Elisabeth said when they reached the next building, a restaurant, and stopped at its corner.

"Did you see who was on the porch? It was our friend from the Wadi. From the docteur's office."

"Ach!"

"He was at the front door."

"Let's see if I can see him. He may recognize you, but he won't me with my niqab on."

They crept along the restaurant front to the other corner, near Millis-Lestrange's house. Vincent, after settling their bags down in front of him, turned his back and leaned on the restaurant's corner. Elisabeth was able to look past him and to the house's front.

“He must be looking for the lessor,” Elisabeth said as the man peered inside the front windows.

“The docteur didn’t trust him enough to give him a key.”

The man turned away from the windows, looking dissatisfied, and stepped off the porch. Elisabeth ducked behind Vincent, then slowly peered around him. The man was looking up at the lone second storey window. He then exited out of the gate, crossed the street—occasionally glancing back at the house—then back up the street, away from Elisabeth and Vincent.

“He’s gone,” Elisabeth said.

“Now what?” Vincent turned around and spread his arms. “We’ll have to wait until the lessor comes back.”

“Millet and marzipan.” She slid up next to him. “We’re not waiting. It’s no burr on our goblet if the lessor is out. It’s not as if he would accommodate two complete strangers.”

“What are you suggesting, that we break in?”

“Not ‘suggest.’ I’m saying we really do it. Around back.”

Vincent, despite his inhibitions about blatant trespassing, led the way past the house’s fence and to the back, and offered a generally-worded protest of her plans.

“Ah, perfect,” Elisabeth said, looking up at the small outcropping of the balcony. “A door. There’s our way in. Now to get up there. Vincent, are you able to jump and reach the bottom of the balcony?”

“I can try.”

After a half dozen attempts, the closest he came was scraping his fingertips on the sides of the wooden floor of the balcony.

“No good,” Vincent said as he caught his breath. “If I could get ahold of one of those iron supports I’d pull up. No good.”

Elisabeth searched around the back area for something that would serve as a sufficient support for Vincent. There was an outhouse that appeared close enough to the balcony to be useful.

“Try the outhouse,” Elisabeth said. “The roof is a little pitched, but it looks robust.”

Vincent walked around the outhouse with a clinical eye, as though summing up a wrestling opponent. Now facing its front, with a small hop he was able to wrap his

fingers along the top edge. The outhouse began to sway side-to-side ponderously as it bore his weight.

He let go. “No good, again. Come the next thunderstorm that thing will blow away, and that’s not the sort of place I’d like to have an accident.”

Elisabeth sniggered. Vincent became rigid.

“That was not intentional,” he said.

“Here,” Elisabeth said, looking up again at the balcony and beckoning him over. “I’ll need a boost.”

Vincent doffed his derby and scratched the side of his head through his fiery red hair. “Is that wise? With your one arm and all.”

“It may not be wise but it will work. Here, boost. Now.”

He placed his hat back on. Elisabeth pulled the niqab off and down around her shoulders, slipped her satchel off, and carefully removed her arm from its sling. Vincent crouched down next to her with his fingers laced, palms up. She stepped into his hands and held onto his shoulder for balance.

“Careful now,” she said. “On three. One, two, three!”

Vincent grunted, heaved, and launched Elisabeth upward. She yelped as she rose into the air at an angle she wasn’t expecting. She grabbed hold of one of the wrought iron spindles on the balcony’s railing with her good hand.

“What was that all about?” Elisabeth asked, looking over her shoulder, down at Vincent. She dangled with her abaya flowing about her boots. “I nearly flew over the roof.”

“Apologies. You’re much lighter than I thought. Or I’m much stronger than I thought. You holding up there fine?”

She chuckled and turned her attention to the balcony, assessing her situation. “Another wonderful word choice, Vincent.”

“Another fluke. I’d concentrate on not falling, Miss Elisabeth.”

“Yes, yes. One moment.”

Elisabeth, wincing from the twisted pattern of the spindle biting into the skin of her right hand, braced herself and began to sway side to side. With a pronounced *oomph* she swung her right leg up and hooked the toe of her boot in between two of the spindles.

With some painful wrestling with her wounded arm, Elisabeth was able to grasp a spindle and eventually slide herself up and over the bannister.

"I'll go unlock the back door," she said down to him.

"How are you getting in?"

She produced her revolver and, with its grip, smashed one of door's small glass panes. She weaved her arm through the hole and unlocked the door from the inside.

"Alright, then," Vincent said, and turned to grab his bag and her satchel.

Elisabeth stepped quickly through Millis-Lestrange's living space, concentrating more on finding the stairs down than taking note of the state of things.

She made her way to the back door and let Vincent in along with their bags, and they both went upstairs. The second floor consisted of two rooms and a small closet. Both rooms were quite empty, save for basic furniture: a table, some chairs, a chest and a desk, and a mattress. Here and there were tools and small machine parts. Against a wall in one room were assorted larger pieces of furniture and random junk.

"Strange," Elisabeth said. "Looks like a lot of things are gone, but there was no sign of intrusion."

"It's as if he relocated. Left things behind he didn't need, if this really is his place. Why would he do that, and send that letter for help?"

"I don't know. This is getting more peculiar by the hour."

She bent down and picked up a vacuum tube. It had a crack in it.

"He probably kept a lot of his MTD equipment here," she noted.

"Some, not all. There's a lot that went into it. I'd say he kept most of it at the Wadi. He did say Ustaz al Hawi allowed housing for some of the employees there, to do engineering."

"We should have checked while we were there." She cursed herself silently for the oversight. "But let's assume that's true, that his MTD equipment is gone. Knowing that he may have done this willingly is leading me to believe there's deception going on. Someone must have convinced him to do all this. He wouldn't up and leave in such delicate circumstances. Not when he's expecting my ducats."

"We're talking about Docteur Millis-Lestrange here, Miss Elisabeth," Vincent said as he moved a chair aside with his foot, at the side of the room with all the collected junk. "Someone with his work ethic will let obvious things pass by their notice very easily. A

lot of natural philosophers I know that are deep into the experimentation process tend to ignore their immediate surroundings. It takes a lot of mental energy spent to maintain focus. It's not every day—"

"There." Elisabeth pointed to a familiar object on the floor next to Vincent.

"Another armillary?" He picked it up.

"Under. Look under," Elisabeth said, standing up and scuttling over.

He tilted the sphere and found a piece of paper taped to it. He carefully pulled it off.

"*Sapperlot!*"

"Another address," Vincent said, reading. ""1st Street Aumouth.' What an odd address."

"The only numbered streets I know of are here in Al Makaan. Here, let me see." Elisabeth fished out the paper from the office armillary. "The paper from the first armillary sphere looks worn, like it's been in place for a while. This new one looks fresh. It was probably placed here very recently."

"What does that tell us?" Vincent asked as he rummaged through his bag for his map of Al Makaan al Sarf.

Elisabeth pursed her lips. "I'm not sure yet."

"These street names are in English but it's transliterated. What's Arabic for 'first?'?"

"You want to look for 'one,' not 'first.' So, '*waahid.*' It should be near here, a few streets over, now that I think of it."

"Here it is," Vincent said, and spread the map on the floor. Elisabeth, after re-slinging her injured arm, knelt down next to him as he traced his finger northward along a street, on the coast of Marinas Bay. "I don't see an 'Aumouth' intersecting with it. Do you?"

"Not at all," she replied. "What if he means '1 Aumouth Street?' That's really reaching. For a note that's intended to lead us to him in case of an emergency, it's awfully imprecise."

Vincent flipped the map over and scanned through the table of street names. Elisabeth retrieved a cigarette from her satchel. She lit it then lit the wick of one of the lanterns Vincent had hooked onto his backpack.

"There's an Asmuth in Lesser Athens. It's not far from the bridge."

Elisabeth exhaled smoke and scratched at her slung forearm.

"I don't like it, but it's all we've got. Let's get going."

19. Into the Mouth of a Saint

"Millet and marzipan."

"Great goddamnit."

Elisabeth and Vincent stood back to back in the center of the small courtyard at the intersection of Asmuth and Copper Streets. It was now late dusk and they each held a lantern, with their bullet of light aimed at the vague circle of buildings around them—buildings they had just examined three times, then three times over again.

"Nothing."

"Not a thing."

"No '1' address in sight."

"There's not even anything that could be considered a '1.'"

Elisabeth sensed Vincent move away from her, then heard him speak with a passerby. There was the rustling of Elisabeth's map of Lesser-Athens he held. She couldn't make out the exact words but by the tone of his voice she knew the conversation had ended unfavorably. She slid the beam of lantern light up higher, to the tops of the buildings and the ragged line they formed, muttering out a vague, broken-worded prayer of assistance to a patron saint of secrets she could not recall. The path she sought out was becoming dimmer with every pass of her light over that artificial wood-and-metal horizon. Vincent then talked to another person, then another, each conversation becoming less audible as he moved about the courtyard.

He returned behind Elisabeth. He said nothing, but the drag of his steps coded his failure.

"I need to sit," Vincent said.

He walked in front of her, and the chain of his pocket watch gleamed as he passed directly by her light. He entered a coffeehouse and sat down by the window with the map set before him on the table, with his head in his hands. Elisabeth's mind began a descent within her. She sensed it but could do nothing to return it to its place, like witnessing a drowning of an old friend. A dreadful emptiness remained.

She hurried into the coffeehouse and dropped two silver ducats at the wooden box hung near the entrance. She set her lantern on the table, careful to aim it out the window, and turned the flame off.

“This is a penny-school,” she told him as she sat down across from him. “Entrance fee.”

Vincent grunted. Elisabeth ordered two coffees when the cafe-keep came by their table. In one corner of the large room, near the serving counter, a man sat in a high chair and read a newspaper out loud to a group of what looked to be day laborers. Their rapt attention was at times broken by scattered, hushed commentary from one to another, or the tickling pings of porcelain on porcelain.

“I can control your mind,” Elisabeth said brightly, with no hint of humor. “Do not picture a slice of chocolate cake with a boot stomped on top of it.”

“That’s not like you to not tell a joke, Miss Elisabeth.”

“No, it’s not. Be glad I didn’t entertain you with some of my gallows humor. I’ve got quite a collection in memory. Those are assured distractions, both for their comic value and their impropriety.”

She thanked the cafe-keep as he brought their coffees. She fetched a cigarette out of her tin. “My father used to tell that cake bit to people when he first met them. It was an experiment of sorts, I believe. You could tell a lot about a person by their response. In your case, for instance, I sense defeat.”

“Time is a bolt continually being rent,” Vincent said. “We ride the tear down until we’re dead.”

“‘We are birthed over a grave,’” she countered. “You’re being profound, but morose. What did that mean?”

“I haven’t the foggiest.” Vincent looked up with weary, unfocused eyes. “I wrote it in my journal last week. I was hoping I’d understand it someday. The mention of your father and your cigarette tin brought it to mind.”

Elisabeth thought to pursue the matter further, but Vincent engrossed himself with a section of the map.

“Farnsworth, Collegiate, Illivitch...” He began reading off some of the street names near their current location.

As he spoke, he brought forth the pair of dice he kept in his waistcoat pocket and began rolling them atop the map, ignoring their resulting number, and rolling them again. Elisabeth attempted concentrating on the man reciting the newspaper but Vincent's meaningless, persistent drone of randomized names, and the dysrhythmia of the dice rolling on the table, broke her attention.

"Saint…," he said.

"'Saint?'" The hair on Elisabeth's arms prickled.

Vincent nodded and continued reading and rolling dice.

"Saint, Saint, Saint…" Elisabeth repeated, and took Millis-Lestrange's second note out of her satchel. "What if this 'St.' doesn't refer to a street but a saint?"

Vincent looked at her, one eyebrow raised, now silent but still rolling dice. "Is there a Saint Asmuth?"

"No, but look here. Remember, it's 'Aumouth.' There's no Saint Aumouth, either. That I am aware of."

"May I?" Vincent asked, taking the paper from Elisabeth and peering closely at the address. "This is odd. The first 'u' here in 'Aumouth' looks like it might be capitalized. Compare it to the second 'u.'"

Elisabeth craned her neck to see and winced from irritating her injury. "I'll take your word for it. But why would that be of consequence?"

"Well, 'AU' is the symbol for gold in the periodic table of elementals, though I can't be sure really how that—"

Elisabeth, punctured by a sudden spike of revelation, let out a sharp cry of surprise. Vincent flinched and swore. Some of the cafe patrons turned their heads.

"This can't be!" Elisabeth cried with a tooth-baring smile.

"How? What?"

"'AUmouth' is 'Gold Mouth.' A reference to Saint Chrysostomos: Saint Golden Mouth! Our university's namesake!"

"Of course. So how—?"

"Stay with me. The '1' refers to the first building ever used for the University."

"First building? Are you certain? There's no way we could figure out which one was first. After the Riots there was an entire group of buildings appropriated for the University. Which one of those?"

“No!” she yelped and slapped the note still in his hand down onto the table. “Not that! Think before the Riots. What was the University at that point?”

Vincent shrugged, confused.

“St. Christopher’s Cathedral, my *Dummkopf!* There’s a building not in use anymore that housed the first students of the University. *Meine güte!* I was there, in that very same building, a month or so ago to receive my postulancy. This is outrageous!”

“You—we—could be wrong.”

“We cannot leave this stone unturned, Vincent. We have to get to St. Christopher’s as quickly as man’s machines will take us. Drink your coffee.”

“I’m with you, but promise me one thing.” He took a sip of coffee, then another. “Give me something else to occupy my mind to replace the image of a boot stepping on a slice of cake.”

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They stopped at a nearby tele-scripting station to send an urgent message to Father On-the-Willows’ apartment building, informing him of their plans. He responded soon after.

“‘Abort, abort,’” Elisabeth read the paper from the operator. “‘Red Sword violence near grounds. Extremely unsafe.’”

“‘Grounds?’” Vincent asked.

“St. Christopher’s estate proper. It’s a large block of land south of the University, from the coast where the Cathedral is, extending west a few miles.” She folded the paper and tapped it against her chin thoughtfully. “‘Near grounds’ is not a very precise area. It could even be over the border into Lesser Athens-Marina.”

“Why don’t we script back to him for specifics? Or tele-script the Cathedral?”

“The Cathedral doesn’t have a station yet, though we could contact the College. There’s always a few press-typists on site after-hours doing odd jobs and staying at the ready if our tele-scripter picks up something worthwhile. But we’re going to the Cathedral regardless.”

Vincent, who had knelt down and was rummaging through his bag to find his jerky, gave Elisabeth what seemed an involuntary look of apprehension.

“It’s time I made this clear to you, Vincent, especially in light of what happened at the bridge recently and because I wouldn’t feel right with myself if I don’t air this concern. Our relationship contract calls for absolute obedience on your part, except in cases where I put your bodily person in danger. Knowing this, I feel compelled to explicitly offer you the option to not accompany me to the Cathedral. Our contract, as in your obligations as well as mine, will persist regardless of your answer, as will my estimation of your character and level of commitment. You’ve been a loyal protégé thus far, so I can confidently predict your answer, but before you give it I want you to consider your family and the resulting state they may find themselves in, should something happen to you.”

As she spoke, she could see his pupils dart left and right under a hardened brow as he took in the possible situation. Near the end of her offer, his eyes relaxed as though he had already come to peace with a decision.

“You forgot my mother, Miss Elisabeth, and her expectations of me. If I let you go alone into the jaws of danger, even if you return intact, it would be a good decade before I am fully reconciled with her. I won’t even fancy what my father would do to me if he were aware of that same circumstance. Consider me by your side.”

Elisabeth pursed her lips. “A mother’s wrath is wisely avoided by any means. It’s a bit of an odd sort of self-preservation, your decision.”

“Or self-defeating.”

He stood up and offered her jerky. She declined, and he ripped into his piece with fervor. “But there’s no use in seeing things through melancholy lenses right now, is there? We’ve got a science-worker to save.”

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They tele-scripted Vincent’s apartment to inform his mother that he would not be home tonight. Vincent made sure to word the message cautiously—he made it clear that it was an important matter, but did not mention the possible danger. After receiving the standard confirmation response, Vincent appeared at ease.

They then chartered, via tele-script, an auto-cart. It arrived ten minutes later.

“We’ll get dropped off at the last station,” Elisabeth said, “right at the beginning of the LAM-Cathedral trail. The carts aren’t designed for travel on the trail but there’s a bicycle station at its entrance. If we’re in luck there will be one that suits our needs for rental.”

“More bicycle riding in my future,” Vincent noted as he helped Elisabeth up into the auto-cart seat.

“I would undertake that if I could, but I don’t know if I could haul both of us, especially with this.” She gestured distastefully at her slung arm.

The cart rolled into the night. Elisabeth silently recalled Vincent’s unfounded warning back during their first trip to the Wadi, regarding du Mahdi and supposed Red Sword agents, and how desperate and unsure Vincent acted in confronting her. As he was the one, out of the two of them, to stick closer to protocol, delivering a portent based so much on conjecture and a general sense of things must have struck his passions an excess degree, such that he felt necessary to give voice to his concern. If Father’s tele-script had flared his attention to that matter again, he did not make that apparent.

Elisabeth struck up a conversation with the auto-cart driver about the route and the situation on the church grounds. He wasn’t privy to anything Elisabeth and Vincent didn’t already know, but the interaction helped pass the time and took Elisabeth’s mind off her growing anxiety about Millis-Lestrange.

At a point midway, they stopped at a stockist, who happened to still be open, to purchase supplies. Vincent bought a great mound of food—Elisabeth didn’t discover what, exactly, since after handing over his ducats he gathered it all in his arms and began consuming it outright.

Elisabeth purchased a flask of tea for later and searched among the shelves of tinctures for lidocaine, as she was feeling the wear-off from her now-empty container. The stockist only had one bottle of a few doses in stock, which she bought.

They arrived at the final auto-cart station at the beginning of the LAM-Cathedral trail, and tipped the driver. He directed them to the bicycle station around the back of the auto-cart port. The station, a squat building with a dead flat roof, had an office in the corner. The door was unlocked but the lantern hanging above it was not lit.

Elisabeth was about enter in when Vincent, politely and carefully, set her aside by her shoulders and barged in himself, lantern held aloft, trotting invasively and looking

about for the sleeping proprietor. Elisabeth remained outside, smirking to herself that her influence and instruction continued to grow on him.

There were words exchanged inside, and Vincent emerged with the weary-eyed proprietor. He motioned both of them to the side of the station where the bicycles were kept. Vincent loaded their bags into the undercarriage of the sidecar and they were on their way.

"I give us about an hour at the most until we arrive," Elisabeth said. She took note of Vincent's high level of energy in pedaling. "Although at the rate you're going it will be half that. What exactly did you eat on the ride here?"

"Too many things to mention," he responded without a hint of loss of breath or rhythm of pedal. "Espresso."

Vincent pedaled through the trail, drilling through the gauntlet of trees. The moonlight filtered through the summer foliage. The bullet of light from the lanterns attached to the fronts of the bicycle and sidecar ruined the effect of the speckled moonlight on the path. Elisabeth found herself entranced by the speeding dirt over the side of her sidecar.

Elisabeth told Vincent stories from her youth and her time with her parents in the Outer Settlements, to keep him from becoming disheartened by the long ride and monotonous environment. At one particular stretch of the trail, where the trees were thinned out on either side, they could see the backs of houses on a small, ridge-like hill that ran parallel to the trail. There must've have been a walking path all along the length, a third parallel route, on the side of the hill. Elisabeth could see people walking down the path, mostly men with loosened tongues on their way back from the pub. One pair saw Elisabeth and Vincent's lanterns hopping and gliding along and waved to them.

Elisabeth motioned for a stop when it seemed to her that they were well past the halfway point, so Vincent could rest and relieve himself in the woods. While he was away, Elisabeth dozed off and awakened with a start from her bad arm being bumped or twisted in her seat. She downed her tea and injected the first dose of lidocaine.

They were off again, in silence.

The path began to widen and clear of the bordering trees; they were finally approaching the Cathedral.

“We stop here,” Elisabeth said. “Go the rest on foot. I don’t want us stomping around so conspicuously if we shouldn’t be here.”

Vincent walked the bicycle into the last sparse bit of trees at the end of the path and struggled to wrap the hitching chain to a narrow-trunked pine.

“I wouldn’t worry about theft here,” Elisabeth said.

“It’s still out in the open,” Vincent said. “It wouldn’t feel right to not secure it.”

“True,” Elisabeth said from the edge of the trail. “But a bicycle here won’t be an unusual sight. I say leave it be.”

“I trust your judgment.”

“You are wise.”

He peered through the trees to the other side, away from the bicycle trail. Elisabeth was tempted to climb a nearby tree to get a better view of the hill on which the Cathedral stood.

“Is that another trail?” he asked.

“A road. There’s less of a grade, so it’s better for auto-carts. It parallels the coastline.”

“So we could’ve taken an auto-cart after all,” Vincent said. Through the protective darkness of the trees, Elisabeth could sense him turn and focus his glare at her.

“Perhaps, but it would’ve taken some time to get to the other end of the road from where we were. And if an auto-cart blew a steam-pipe, we would’ve been stranded. Bicycles aren’t as fast, but they’re more reliable.”

Vincent stepped through the bunching of trees to the path, both of their bags in hand, snapping twigs understep and cursing from the branch-scrapes all the while.

“Remember, too, secrecy *uber alles* at this point in the game,” she told him as he brushed bits of forest from his waistcoat. “Try not to make a commotion.”

“Is that an issue? I can barely see the Cathedral from here. At least, I think it’s the Cathedral. I see some faint lights.”

“Allow me. Wait here.”

Elisabeth handed Vincent her lantern and jogged a satisfactory distance up the inclining path to get a better, elevated view of the grounds.

“The clerestory windows,” she said, quietly, when she returned to Vincent. “Monsignor keeps well-lit the area of the nave where the side chapel is, in case any travelers happen by. I could make out the clergy house and the college building in the

moonlight. Nothing lit there. It all seems business as usual. To address your earlier question: that someone could see us is not the issue—we should sully our lanterns somewhat, on that note—but there's little between us and the Cathedral to block sound. You don't really want to see the first Cathedral building, regardless. It's a gray slab of ugliness, perhaps as ugly as the prison. Think of a cross between a manorial house and a keep with all the beauty removed."

Vincent slung their bags over his shoulders, and both of them now trudged up the long, gradual slope up the hill to the Cathedral. The nighttime sounds of crickets and related bugs rang out in their ears; they were the only sounds.

"Before we continue, you should get an eyeful," Elisabeth said.

She turned around and pointed at the panoramic view of Lesser Athens-Marina and Al Makaan al Sarf. The firelights twinkling against the dark traced a vague shape of the coastlines along Marinas Bay.

"I hadn't realized how elevated I brought us. It certainly didn't feel as if I was pedaling uphill." Vincent said. "Magnificent view, however."

"It will be more so with the work of people like yourself. Imagine all of this afire with electronal power. Think of all that could be done with lights that never go out."

"Are you abandoning your Ludditism, finally?"

"I have a fancy for technology and the 'new things' when our reach doesn't exceed—"

"Look here, Miss Elisabeth," Vincent interrupted. "The booth there at the end of the road. Shouldn't there be a guard in there?"

"It does seem that way, doesn't it?" She turned back to face the Cathedral. "That booth's a property border between Lesser Athens and the church grounds. I don't like how this looks. Let's circle around towards the front side, where the hill is steeper. There're quite a bit more trees, so we'll have more cover."

The trip around the hill was easily taken, but long, as they skirted the edge of the forest on the dry, dirty, flat grass.

"Are you noticing the ground, Miss Elisabeth?"

She slowed her pace and examined the ground directly in front of her boots. The grass and dirt appeared to be chewed up and traumatized in some places.

"I thought it felt a little lumpy underfoot," she admitted.

“I’m no tracker, but it looks like there’s been some activity here recently. This isn’t a usual path for travel, I don’t think. Agree?”

“Agreed. It’s too uneven here, and it doesn’t lead anywhere useful. Most visitors to the Cathedral would simply take the natural path up the hill formed back there, before we turned off.”

Elisabeth kept an eye on the ground as they progressed, and the recently-worn tracks into the terrain persisted.

The mass of nocturnal insectoid buzzing, whistling, clicking, and ticking inside the opaque tangles of trees to their left reached crescendo volume as they walked. It felt impossible that their movement could be heard by anyone nearby, but Elisabeth didn’t want to flirt with that risk. They kept their steps light and rapid, and lamps dim and angled down.

There was a movement and a hint of light in the distance, near the top of the hill. Elisabeth stopped, stooped, swung her lantern behind her back, and placed it on the grass—all in one fluid maneuver. She held up her hand next to her head, palm forward, then crooked her finger to beckon Vincent closer. There was a warm presence of his head at her right shoulder.

“Woods. No lantern. Now. Quiet, quiet.” she whispered.

She turned her lantern to dark behind her back, then slid sideways into the black air of the forest in just a few crouching steps. The soft crunch of Vincent’s own steps closely matched hers, but she did not look behind her. She would not be able to see him.

Elisabeth stood up.

“Vincent,” she whispered again, maintaining her gaze out onto the hill. “May I employ your spyglass?”

She heard Vincent disencumber himself of their two bags and carefully rustle through one of them. There was soon a cold, metallic, round object in her right hand. She brought it up close to her face—Vincent had already telescoped the spyglass for her.

“Stay here.”

Elisabeth took six large steps forward, being careful to place her steps to prevent tripping or snapping a twig. She then looked through the spyglass and pointed it at the curved side of the hill towards which they were headed. There were two men with scarlet

sashes, lanterns hung above them at the opening of a large pipe, standing alert, a hand at their revolver.

She returned to her original spot in front of Vincent. She would have bumped into him in the blackness of the woods had he not reached out with his hand and bumped his palm into her hip.

"I'm here," he said. He seemed to stand at full height.

"Two Red Sword agents, right at the opening of that large pipe," she whispered up.

"Great goddamnit."

Elisabeth handed the spyglass back to Vincent and groped around the forest floor for her lantern. She saw a slight glint on the handle—her eyes were starting to adjust.

"Slowly," she said as she hooked her lantern onto a satchel strap, "let's backtrack a ways before stepping back out. Lead the way."

Elisabeth reached out to place her good hand on one of the bags at his back. He was carrying them by hand, she thought, for her hand landed on the small of Vincent's back. Vincent picked his way a few good feet in the reverse direction. She patted his back twice, and they stepped back out into the forest's edge.

"Back to our bicycle," she advised, again in her whisper volume.

They both kept a low profile on the walk back to the trail. Elisabeth glued her eyes on the hillside to pick up on any possible movement.

"This is unfortunate," Vincent remarked when they arrived at their bicycle, still leaning against the tree.

"Yes, and it brings up an interesting question."

"If," Vincent conjectured, with a pause, "If Docteur Millis-Lestrange is here at the Cathedral, he must have something to do with the Red Sword."

"Precisely." Elisabeth walked out onto the trail's edge and peered down its path. "Although it doesn't explain the notes we found."

She came back to the bicycle, where Vincent was rummaging through his backpack. She fumbled around, in the light of their lanterns, with her one hand to gather the unwound hitching chain that they decided to keep unlocked.

"Here. Allow me," Vincent offered.

"Thank you." She fished a cigarette from her tin and lit it. "So, the doctor may have some allegiance to Al Sayf, though I'm thinking it's a recent development. If he was

aligning himself with Al Sayf before we met him, we wouldn't have met him. He wouldn't have been incognito at the Wadi. He would dedicate his energy to rebuilding the MTD, somewhere else. What's the following question?"

She stepped back out onto the trail and began walking back the way they arrived. Vincent caught up with her on the bicycle, pedaling slowly right next to her. Elisabeth knew him well enough not to repeat her question but allow a proper space for thought.

"Before I state my question," he said, after a minute, "let's examine your premise. The docteur doesn't have anything to offer them, since I doubt they have interests in his research. He'd just be eating up resources. He has nothing except what you've given him. He's not with them willingly. This fits with what we know already for sure concerning his situation. So, I suppose I would ask, if he's essentially been kidnapped: why would the Red Sword have an interest in him at all?"

Elisabeth paused in mid-stride. Vincent skidded short to a stop.

"I must admit I hadn't considered those angles," Elisabeth said. Her cigarette burned to its filter. She tossed it aside. "My question asked whether the docteur held allegiance to the Red Sword, and *when* he swore that allegiance. I presumed too much. Your concern conforms to the facts in our hands, and you managed to disagree without being disagreeable." She performed a hasty curtsy as his reward. "If I wore a hat it would be tipped to thee as well."

Vincent planted his feet on the ground and looked around. "May I ask where we are going?"

"Down a ways. I don't feel comfortable being so close to so many Red Sword agents. I don't assume you do, either."

"But what's our next move?"

"Our next move," she said as she resumed her pace, "is not a move at all. Unless you consider sleeping a move."

"Shouldn't we do something about the docteur?"

"What do you propose we do? If there are guards at that pipe, the Cathedral is likely crawling with them. I just pray Monsignor is safe, and that our docteur has a good explanation for his move. The Church has had good relations with Al Makaan in general, so I am hopeful that is the case. Right here."

Elisabeth pointed to the left side of the trail, into the section of woods between the LAM-Cathedral trail and the auto-cart road.

“Stop here. I’d like us to be aware of both roads,” she said, removing her pack from underneath the sidecar. “The roads are getting farther apart, so we should stop here.”

Vincent walked the bicycle into the woods and again leaned it to a tree, a few feet away from the edge of the LAM-Cathedral trail. The trees were sparse enough that they could see the auto-cart trail on the far side, but they would still be hidden from view.

Elisabeth settled her pack down, right beside the bicycle. It was the least rocky and least twiggy clearing in the immediate area.

“You will have first watch. I know you are still riled up from your espresso. I have my compline to do. Wake me in two hours.”

“Yes, Miss Elisabeth.”

She lay down, using her pack as a pillow, with her lantern turned low beside her, and opened her prayer book. After completing the office, she turned onto her right side, with her satchel and revolver beside her, within reaching distance. She could see the back of Vincent’s form, vaguely silhouetted a few feet in front of her, just beyond the front tire of the bicycle, at the edge of the auto-cart trail. He sat cross-legged, rooted and still, save for an occasional rummage through his pack.

Though this situation was exceptional, a flicker of concern crossed her mind: an unmarried man and woman, at night, alone, would rightly be damaging in most circumstances, even if nothing illicit occurred. The comfort of having someone within her sight, guarding her, erased the issue from her attention, and the inevitable lure of sleep overcame her.

20. Within, Between, Alongside

Elisabeth was with someone else, not entirely bodily, but not in any metaphysical manner, either. She felt the unmistakable state of being in which one's self was accountably whole and complete, yet comprised of herself with an incorporeal attachment to another self. The other self of her could be sensed spatially, temporally...a being within, displaced by what she would describe by fractions of an inch on either side of the borderline of her dreamlike body, both of them possessing separate minds, but in perfect concentric harmony of intent and action. She was aware of him (the unidentified other had a masculine patina to its existence) and she was aware that the other was aware of her, and sharing in the same emotional presence of mind as she was. There was little time to advance her self-examination any further. They moved—floated, more so—with that concentric agency, along something like a mass of land that was rather more like layers of interlocking color than solid earth. There was a destination and purpose in mind, but its meaning was too unworldly for Elisabeth to fully comprehend. Others were there—beings that seemed much like the Elisabeth-and-Other being, yet she was unable to find the will to attend to it, to compare and verify. In tandem with the moving, they—the Elisabeth-and-Other, and the others like them, in close proximity—embarked on some task or quest that involved floating as they had always done. Forward, always moving forward, with the shifting colorscape around them. At times, the environment changed or became more solid-seeming, other times there was barely any color at all, and it was like they were sliding through a vacuum that was not quite black but drained of any perceivable color. Others would come and go, not at random; Elisabeth sensed when their seasons of traveling with the Elisabeth-and-Other would begin and end, and they would go to entreat company with others, or to float on in their journey for a time, or to a form of death. This all continued for an amount of time that Elisabeth-and-Other could not exactly measure, but it felt to her that their life's end was approaching. It was less a cessation and more a culmination, reaching the apex of their existence, attenuating not to a last few brittle half-notes of noise but a resolution to a lifelong chord progression. It did arrive: the Elisabeth-and-Other concluded itself and dispersed

into the chroma of its surroundings. There wasn't a falling into non-existence, but more like the resolution of sexual intercourse, going by what she conjectured of the act. It was the dispensing of one thing and the beginning of life for another.

Then there was nothing.

21. Rediscovery

Elisabeth sat up to a recline on her side. She had been lying on her bad shoulder and much of her arm was asleep, numb from how she lay. Vincent was stomping toward her from the other side of the forest.

"I'm up, I'm up," she said.

There was a rumble of multiple auto-carts coming from the opposite trail. She wiped away the sleep from her eyes with her palms, holstered her revolver, and grabbed her lantern and satchel. She stumbled up and over to the edge of the auto-cart trail, with Vincent beside her. After slipping her satchel over her shoulder, she hid behind a tree trunk to safely view what was coming up the trail.

The first auto-cart appeared, with an array of lanterns aflare fastened to its front and sides. It plowed through at near-full speed, spitting up pebbles and dust behind it. A number of people rode on the back, full to its capacity. It was too far from their side of the trail for Elisabeth to see exactly who the passengers were. She looked back in search of Vincent, who had found his own tree behind which he hid. She saw his silhouette shrug.

More auto-carts roared up the trail, two abreast, also filled with people. Like the first auto-cart, they all blew by too rapidly for her to make out any details. Drawing a deep breath, she turned her lantern up to full brightness, and held her arm out.

As the next pair of auto-carts flew by, she saw the shoulder patches on the line of men in the back. One of the patches was a plain shield of bright green.

She dropped her lantern and brought out her reputation card from her satchel. Thinking of a better idea, she returned her card and instead grabbed the folded leather wallet with her Dutch Bull deputy patch sewn onto it.

There was a fortunate length of time until the next pair of auto-carts would pass by. Elisabeth, as she stepped out into the road, motioned with her head for Vincent to move likewise. She held her hand up to signal to the approaching pair of auto-carts, and in her other hand she brandished high her wallet badge.

The auto-cart on the far side huffed out a cloud of steam as it came to a halt a short distance ahead of Vincent. Elisabeth and Vincent approached the driver's side, and Elisabeth handed him her wallet. He studied it for a moment, then handed it back to her. The armed men in back watched Elisabeth and Vincent with curiosity.

"You two are close to dangerous happenings," the driver said. "I'd suggest you don't get any closer to the Cathedral, Deputy, even if you are here for your work."

"We don't plan to, Corporal," Elisabeth said. "What all is the matter?"

"Al Sayf al Ahmar have held up the Cathedral. We think they've been here for a few days at least."

"'Held up?'"

"They've done nothing explicitly against Church contract, but it seems suspicious. We're just doing reconnaissance. Would you like an escort?"

"We planned on camping here for the night, but that is gracious of you."

He nodded and drove off. Elisabeth and Vincent stepped back into the edge of the forest as a few more pairs of auto-carts sped past.

"I don't believe they're here for reconnaissance," Vincent said. "Al Dera al Akhdar doesn't enlist an entire other agency for that. Agree?"

"There were Dutch Bull agents?"

"Yes. Perhaps you didn't see them. I'm really surprised they don't have any Yellowstone infantry with them."

"Al Sayf didn't have to break Church contract on the grounds. Al Dera is using this as an excuse to extract them out of their own ranks. It's a very bold move on the Red Sword's part. Most of their advantage was gained through their secrecy. They're in plain view now."

"So they must be making a large move."

"Yes. And Al Dera knows it. This is more serious than we had thought. They're not here to look, they're here to capture or kill. I just hope our docteur doesn't end up among them. If there is conflict, we do have an advantage."

"How so?"

"When people are shooting at each other, they're fixed on the people shooting. They're not bound to notice people who *aren't* shooting. Namely, us. This conflict is our opportunity. We must move apace. How are you feeling?"

“Tired, but I can still function.”

“If you want to rescind your commitment, now is the—”

“No,” he said, then another, more resolute, “No.” His face was stolid in the half-light of Elisabeth’s lantern. “This needs to be seen to the end.”

Elisabeth nodded, and they retrieved the bicycle and all their belongings, and started back up the road toward the Cathedral.

Vincent left the bicycle close to where he had when they had first arrived, at the bit of forest at the end of the two trails. They found a number of the auto-carts parked discreetly at the road’s ending, but Elisabeth wasn’t sure if it was all of them.

Vincent produced his spyglass to view the top of Cathedral, over the crest of the hill.

“Can’t see much of anything right now. The same as before.”

“I’m going to circle the hill, as we did before. The Red Sword are guarding it for a reason, and I think I know why.”

“No, I’m going,” Vincent said. “Not with your arm. You stay here. My eyes are better than yours.”

“Absolutely not,” she countered with a shake of her head. “You stick out like a beacon. It will be harder for them to see me. If I crouch down low enough, I’d just appear to be a large rabbit.”

“Or wolf,” Vincent said. His brow creased. “They might ignore a rabbit. Not so a wolf.”

She suppressed a guffaw, and it came out as a cough. “There are no wolves in this area, Vincent.”

“They don’t know that.”

“Yes, they do.” She turned her lantern off and drew her revolver. “Al Sayf agents may be homicidal, but they’re not stupid. Final word, Vincent: I am going. Wait here. Give me twenty minutes. If I’m not back by then, do what you feel you need to do.”

In the poor light, Elisabeth could feel the shadow of resignation darken his face. “Yes, Miss Elisabeth. I’ll wait by the bicycle.”

She removed her satchel, sling, holster belt, and with some reluctance, the white bandeau from her head.

“No gun?” Vincent asked. He gathered up her trappings as she eased herself out of her sling.

“This is reconnaissance, not engagement,” she said as she fluffed out her mass of hair and twisted it into a functional braid over her shoulder. “My holster is just going to hinder me, and I don’t want to occupy a hand just to carry it. I’ll need all the freedom of movement I can get. Quick in, quick out. Twenty minutes at maximum, as I’ve stated.”

Her fingers flicked rapidly down through the length of her hair. When she finished, he handed her his spyglass, and she made her way around the hill, tracing along the curve of the forest border. When she sensed her memory of the pipe opening being recalled, she slunk low to the dirty grass. Her crawl was slow but steady: folded, compact, feline, yet a few degrees lopsided to ease the strain on her left arm. Since taking her arm out of the sling it began to throb more acutely. She thought of her anodyne. She would have to ration that final dose.

She came upon the miniature ridge where the pipe emptied out. From behind a tree, she extended the spyglass. The two Al Sayf al Ahmar agents were not there.

She felt for her timepiece over the fabric of her robe and remembered its destruction at the Bridge. Deciding quick action was more needed than stealth at this point, Elisabeth took up a light jog back to the rendezvous spot. Vincent emerged from the trees, her gear in arms, as she drew close.

“All clear,” she said. She began donning her satchel and other items.

“Al Dera al Akhdar’s presence here is probably known.”

“Yes, but to what extent, we’re not sure. There haven’t been any gunshots yet, so we can assume things are at a cordial stage now.”

When they were ready, she led the way back to the pipe. They both stood there and looked at the opening. Elisabeth was loath to admit to herself her doubts about their next move. Vincent shined his lantern into the pipe’s opening.

“There’s no end to it,” he said.

“Of course there is. At least, I think there is.”

He looked back at her with raised eyebrows. “May I ask what you’re plan is here?”

“Let’s start in. I’ll explain as we go.”

Vincent had to crouch and bow at the waist to fit through the pipe opening and walk through. Elisabeth merely needed to hunch her shoulders and lower her head down.

“I’m noticing a lot of dirt in here for a drainage pipe,” Vincent’s voice sounded out hollow in front and back of them. “This have gotten washed out. Agree? And look here.”

He stopped and tapped at a small piece of angular metal with his foot. There were loose screws next to it.

“The Cathedral’s scholastic building was built with a vertical escape hatch, back when general relations with the Yokuts weren’t as established as they are now. It leads all the way down into the ground and out a drainage pipe, so I’ve been told. I have firsthand knowledge of the escape route. Remember that I was here not long ago.”

“You haven’t the faintest idea about where we’re headed.” He stopped. Elisabeth stumbled to prevent bumping into him.

“Untrue. In fact, that’s a statement lacking any falsity at all. The faintest idea is all I have about this.”

Vincent drew his revolver with his free hand, as a precautionary response.

They continued on for close to half a mile. The bullet of Vincent’s lantern light extended far ahead of them, but it seemed to reach into black nothingness. The dusty-dryness of the pipe’s bottom persisted, with no sign of any water that would travel down and douse their boots.

Vincent had to stop and rest for a moment. Their travel wasn’t particularly strenuous, but Elisabeth suspected the position in which Vincent had to bend himself, the privation of light and diminution of forward sight, and the uncertainty of their destination, were taxing his reserves. They shared a piece of hardtack and drank from their cantinas.

“I’m not particularly tired,” he noted, “but I’m constantly expecting to be headed uphill, as I would assume pipes to be angled even at just a hair, to facilitate flow. The pipe is just going straight as far as I can sense it.”

He bent over and scuffed his boot heel on the pipe’s corrugated bottom.

“It doesn’t even appear that there’s been any water flow through here,” he said. “I would expect to see some wear or discoloration here.”

Elisabeth held back from coaxing him to a conclusion. She took a drink of water.

“That would mean,” he continued, “that we’re on the right path. That it’s straight is a sign that this wasn’t meant for drainage like one would expect.”

She swallowed water and sighed through a wide smile.

“What’s all that?” he asked.

“Nothing at all.”

They continued on in silence and arrived at the end of the pipe, which opened out into a wide, shallow staircase of rough-hewn stone. Looking up to the top of the stairs, they could see a landing and a doorless entrance. There was a mechanical hum and a steady light shining out onto the landing. Elisabeth set her lantern down and turned it off; Vincent did likewise.

They ascended the stairs. Vincent held out his revolver at the ready, and walked through with Elisabeth close behind.

They stood at the end of a wide corridor. The light came from what looked like roundish vacuum tubes that hung from the ceiling. Elisabeth, fascinated, could not stare directly at their intense light for long. She had heard of such wondrous contraptions through Dr. Fallace.

"Electronal bulbs," Vincent whispered. "Your 'lights that never die.'"

Though the illumination wasn't needed, Vincent guided the lantern bullet along the walls and the floor. There were piles of metal and tools, cabinets littered with knobs and switches on their facades, and electronal cables running in all directions. At regular intervals in the wall were other entrances, probably leading to small antechambers, Elisabeth thought.

She urged Vincent to proceed. They both cast glances at all the devices as they passed by, Elisabeth exhibiting more curiosity through her ignorance of their function. She broke off from following Vincent's lead and examined one of the consoles closely. It was attached to the wall with small pipes issuing out of it. There was a small gray door on its front, and it appeared to not be closed all the way. Elisabeth opened it to reveal a panel bearing two rows of tiny, horizontal, switch-like levers. With her lantern hooked into her thumb, she ran her fingertips along the blunted metal edges of the switches. Possibilities flooded her mind as she imagined what would happen if she flipped just one of them.

Vincent hissed, farther down the corridor. Elisabeth turned, raised her lantern high on instinct, and then lowered it. She didn't see him anywhere on the winding path of uncluttered floor. Her eyes swung to the left and right, to the walls of metal cabinets and unlit portals.

She scurried her way down the corridor with light steps and struggled to hold her voice back from calling out Vincent's name. At a near full run, she tripped and her

lantern crashed to the floor with a glassy crunch. She landed square on her left shoulder and the pinpoints of pain blinded her.

Elisabeth struggled up to her haunches to nurse her shoulder. Vincent was there, sideways against the wall, revolver held up to his ear, pointed at the ceiling. He tilted his head toward the entrance, to indicate the source of the sound. There was a wildness to his eyes.

There was the sound of tired, shuffling scrapes of boots on stone, mixed with the mumbles of the just-awoken, coming from that antechamber. Elisabeth and Vincent exchanged confused expressions, though for safety she twisted around her right arm to draw her own revolver from her belt and sat upright onto her knees.

Elisabeth heard no urgency, no malignancy in the echoes of the casual boot steps coming closer to the entrance. The stooped figure emerged, with his long beard angled to one side and sleep dragging down his eyes.

Elisabeth and Vincent lowered their guns. Her brow contorted with a stew of different emotions that begged her to cry out just to release them.

“Miss Elisabeth!” Docteur Millis-Lestrange said, brightening, in a rumpled night robe and boots. “And Master Vincent! I must’ve startled you. I thought I heard someone arrive. So good of you both to finally come. May I offer you some tea?”

22. Future Power

"WHY AM I here? Well, I'm working on the MTD, as we've planned. Biscuit? These are much more *savoureaux* than that hardtack, Master Vincent."

They had gathered for tea at a table in one of the antechambers that functioned as the doctor's kitchen and rest area. The room was well-kept and lit with the soft glow of oil lamps. The room was, Elisabeth thought with relief, much more open and calming than the bright storehouse chaos of the main corridor.

"You received my transfer of ducats to your account, then?" Elisabeth asked.

Millis-Lestrange nodded. The tip of his beard whipped up and down. "On the recommendation of their foreman and some of my colleagues that knew him, I hired some hands to assist with moving everything and setting it all up."

"So why did you send that encrypted letter for help?" Vincent asked. "We had a dickens of a time figuring that out."

The doctor's face fell. "That was not supposed to be sent. That's so unlike Romain to make a mistake like that."

"Who's Romain?" Elisabeth asked.

"My colleague at the library, the one I told you about, who accompanied me to work and home when my employment began at the Wadi. I had that letter you received in waiting at the post office to be sent out. If something ever happened to me, I instructed Romain to have the letter posted. I figured that whoever had my plans was a party I trusted."

"Or a criminal," Vincent said, "in which case it wouldn't matter at that point."

"There was no receiving address written on the envelope when I gave it to the office," the doctor continued. "That was a little after my little agreement with Romain. I didn't have anyone I could trust enough that would be worthy to receive it. No one, that is, until our contract, Miss Elisabeth. I addressed the envelope that very night after work."

"There had to have been a better way of installing safeguards," Vincent said. "And you could have at least mentioned it to us. Asking for help when your life is being threatened should be clear."

“Vincent,” Elisabeth said, frowning.

Millis-Lestrange shrugged. “What can I say? The encryption was a last resort. Another colleague of mine devised it for me. As I said, it was never meant to be sent.”

“Hold on one minute, here,” Vincent said. “If you don’t need help, why are you holed up underground with who knows how many Al Sayf al Ahmar agents crawling around above your head? And you said you were expecting us. How—?”

“Vincent, not again, please,” Elisabeth said. “There’s time for that soon enough. I want to know if there’s anything else you may need, Docteur, and how things are progressing.”

The doctor’s smile gleamed in the soft light. “Thanks to all the help I’ve hired, I was able to move and set things up rather quickly. This past day I’ve just begun in earnest to continue on the MTD. But first...” He held up an index finger and stood up from his chair. “I’d like to show you both something.”

He led them out of the antechamber and to one of the corridor’s corners, next to where they first entered, to an array of rectangular machines of differing sizes and facades. Cables and tubes ran from the machines’ backs, up the wall behind them, held up by makeshift hooks dug into the between-stone mortar. They snaked along the ceiling, coming together as a bunch, twisting around each other like confused vines.

The bunch of cables hung in midair a foot or so above Elisabeth’s head, and terminated in a metal ring about the size of her palm. While Elisabeth was fixated on its metallic gleam, Millis-Lestrange held up what looked to be a large glass vacuum tube, which he turned upside down and carefully screwed into the metal ring. In the center of the tube stood a hollow sphere made of crisscrossed wires, supported by a straight wire attached to the base of the tube.

“Vincent,” he said, checking the cables and tubes attached to the ring, “the lever switch at the last console there. The one in the down position. Please stand by there and get ready at my mark.”

“Here?” Vincent asked. He pointed to a large, knife-like lever with two prongs, bolted against the side of the console.

“Yes, that one. Miss Elisabeth,” Millis-Lestrange said, “please stand behind that barrier there.”

He pointed the chin of his beard at a blank board of metal sheets clamped together, propped up at an angle by wooden planks. It came up to Elisabeth's neck.

The doctor went to one of the tall consoles against the wall and repeatedly pumped a springboard pedal near the ground, with his foot. At once there was a loud, grinding groan and a series of rapid crackles emitting from the console—or the tube itself. Elisabeth was unsure.

The bunch of hanging cables twitched and gently swayed. As the doctor continued the frenzied pumping, the crackling became less and less frequent, until, after about a minute, all the noise left was the empty groaning from the console.

Elisabeth saw the doctor's teeth shine in the half-lit chamber as he raised his hand, grabbing Vincent's attention. He ceased pumping with his foot and then pointed at Vincent, who lifted up on the handle of the lever switch with a grunting heave. He struggled to push the lever past the halfway point, so he crouched down to better leverage his weight. He rose, and the lever budged farther, but only by an inch. Millis-Lestrange rushed over to lend support. Vincent prevailed, however, and the lever snapped up into its releasing position. Vincent gasped and caught his breath.

The doctor and Vincent joined Elisabeth behind the metal sheet as the peculiar hollow grinding continued. The doctor handed Vincent two identical handheld devices.

"Both input and output?" Vincent shouted over the din, more an observation than a question.

The doctor nodded. "You're wondering why. You'll understand very soon." He turned to the tube. "Observe. There may be some more loud noises, but please do not look away."

"'Look away,' Docteur?" Elisabeth shouted, then snorted. "I make a living by not looking away. For want of my profession I would not find it within me to look away at anything, even the profane. All such preservational reflexes and instincts were bred out of me. Or, more likely, they were never in place at all. I was born—designed!—to gaze upon the impossible."

The unsettling mechanical grind trailed off, and the doctor reached over the console nearest the barrier to flip a switch—one much like the lever Vincent bested but far easier to handle. A purplish-blue glow rose from the straight wire inside the vacuum tube and crawled up to the wiry sphere of metal in the center. Here and there, the light flickered

in different places along the wire and sphere. In response, the doctor fiddled with switches and knobs on the console, and the light glowed constant.

"50 Luccas, about," Vincent said, reading one of the hand-meters. Then the other: "Both of them."

The doctor flipped another lever up, with equal ease as the previous, and instead of a groan there was a much more pleasant hum that thrummed out from the consoles. The glow inside the vacuum tube intensified to an undulating brightness, as though the light wanted to burst through the confines of its glass prison. Short beams of purple-blue light began to stretch forth through the wires of the metal sphere. They stretched out longer and farther until they extended to beyond the tube and into the open air.

Then the doctor flipped the third lever, the final one in the console's sequence. The humming intensified, as did the light in response, to such a degree that Elisabeth struggled to maintain her gaze on it.

"Hold fast," Millis-Lestrange said.

"100 Luccas even, now. In and out."

The wire sphere now was absorbed into the light so that the metal was completely engulfed in a glowing ball. The rays of light began shifting and flickering as though its source of the sphere was rotating on an axis.

Then Elisabeth, eyes still glued to the vacuum's emerging inner workings, noted a small undulating movement appearing next to the center sphere of light. This diminutive sliver enlarged and morphed into its own bluish spherical shape and began to roll itself along the perimeter of its larger counterpart.

It's a galaxy! Elisabeth thought. *Gott mit uns!* God be with us!

"Reading?" the doctor prompted.

It took Vincent a moment to answer; he must've been looking at the wondrous tube instead of the meters. "200 Luccas in. 205 out? This isn't right."

"They are correct. I assure you. Keep your eyes on them. Closely."

There was a sharp crystalline *snap!* from the vacuum tube as a small jagged crack appeared on its surface. Still, the luminous sphere, its rotating rays of light, and its orbiting child, continued unabated.

"203 Luccas in. 258 out," Vincent said. "Still impossible."

“Input will taper off,” the doctor said. He was crouched in front of the switch console. “Miss Elisabeth, I trust your concentration has been holding fast. Please continue to do so.”

The monotonous humming from the consoles faded into silence, while the artificial binary system inside the tube continued its luminous dance.

“204 Luccas in, almost 300 out. There’s more energy coming out than coming in. That tube shouldn’t be—”

The vacuum tube, as though interrupting in agreement, shattered violently. Elisabeth cowered behind the barrier on instinct.

“Hold fast!” the doctor bellowed.

Elisabeth peered over the edge of the barrier. Completely gone were the glass tube and wire sphere. Directly underneath the swaying metallic ring hung the blue binary light system and its shifting rays, even more bright and alive without the confines of its manmade prison.

Elisabeth crossed herself. Vincent muttered an astonished curse.

The twin stars dissolved in a soft puff of ether.

“The creative force of the universe,” Millis-Lestrange said.

23. Theories and Departures

"A 'CREATIVE FORCE' isn't a good enough explanation for what the great goddamn I just saw," Vincent said. He held the hand-meters away from him as though they were infected specimens.

"How much of my documentation have you gone through?" Millis-Lestrange asked.

"Quite enough. I get lost on some of your math. Versor algebra isn't my lot."

"You green philosophers, always getting swept up with the crowd." With a measure of elder tolerance, the doctor smiled.

"Perhaps the crowd is sweeping for a damn good reason."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," Elisabeth said. She rotated her hands to stretch out her wrists. She found her fingers shaking. She spied a simple stool behind her and sat down. "This should be a conversation, not an argument."

"Where did those extra Luccas come from?" Vincent asked. "I'm going to trust that these meters are working properly."

"I don't know where they come from exactly, but that's what happens when you're using a unipolar electronal system."

"I've been meaning to ask you about that, as well."

"I thought you might."

The doctor wheeled a chalkboard over in front of the consoles. It rattled and shook as it rolled over cables.

"You get an electronal discharge between two polarities. That much we all know is true and given so far by the natural philosophical community."

"Yes."

The doctor erased the scratched equations from the board and began drawing a series of 1's with smaller 1's next to them. Some of them had plus signs and some had a minus dash.

"Now, the unipolar system is a bit of a mislabel," the doctor continued. "Because, in theory, there absolutely needs to be two poles. So there is another pole, an anchor point from which the electronal charge must push out from."

“But where is it?”

“Somewhere. I haven’t figured it out yet, but it’s somewhere not in classical physical space. For now I just call it ‘anti-space.’”

Vincent stood astounded and ready to ask for a further explanation, but Millis-Lestrange plowed into something of a mathematical discourse using the simple grouping of numbers he scrawled out as illustration points. There was some back and forth between him and Vincent, more numbers, graph curves gracing along axes, and diagrams introduced, most of which Elisabeth could not follow.

Vincent considered a lengthy, concluding explanation by Millis-Lestrange. The doctor waited patiently while Vincent looked up at the ceiling in thought and rolled his eyes around as though a miniature spotlight had ignited inside his skull.

“So,” Vincent said, as a summation, “those extra Luccas are produced from this anti-space, correct?”

“I would rather say ‘brought in.’ I don’t know exactly how they come into existence. What matters is that the electronal charge piercing the barrier separating space from anti-space carries those Luccas along with it.”

“But, given that all you’ve explained is true so far, that doesn’t offer any explanation for why your light continued to burn even after the vacuum was removed.”

“That’s the real gem in all of this. As the electronal charge moves along in time, there’s a second electronal charge that moves backwards in time.” He grinned. “You just witnessed a bit of time travel, my young man.”

“Bullshit.”

“Quite the opposite.” Here the doctor returned to the chalkboard to point at what was written there so far. “It’s true of both the polar electronal systems as well as my unipolar system, though I think the time travel is only possible with unipolarity. You see, the anti-spatial electronal current moves back in time while the normal-spatial current travels forward in time. The point at which they ‘cross’ is right at the physical, geometric border of the electronal-magnetic charge. This occurs in both of these dimensions but we don’t observe the anti-spatial version. We *cannot,* since by nature we cannot observe what’s not observable. This meeting point, however, can be brought into our space, pushed into our space, and it displaces the charge, depending on how far it’s pushed, which is why you saw the light linger. Since the electronal lines of force travel

backwards in anti-space it can only be brought into our space forward in time. That light traveled forward in time because it was light, shoved forward and displaced, from anti-space."

They continued for minutes in a similar fashion, and Elisabeth's head, and injured shoulder, began to throb. She was in sore need of her second sleep, and she imagined Vincent would be desiring similar had he not been roused to passion by the conversation with the doctor.

"Gentlemen," she pleaded. "Far be it from me to be the agent of caution, but even I have my limits. It's very late and, regardless of our relative safety here under the Cathedral, there's a possible firefight coming to pass all around our ears. I suggest we figure out a course of action."

"A firefight?" the doctor asked in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

"Docteur," Vincent began. "Do you know exactly who you hired as your 'helpers'?"

"I told you. On the recommendation of a colleague, I hired these men to help me move all my equipment and set it up for me in here. I don't know who they are, but they are very knowledgeable and they provided this space and security."

"This security is Al Sayf al Ahmar, an outlier Mohammedan organization," Vincent said. "They're exactly the wrong people to get involved with, not to mention they almost killed Miss Elisabeth and me."

"I have heard of them, yes," Millis-Lestrange said, with a look of bewilderment. "I keep an eye on the bounty periodicals to track my reputation. I've heard the name mentioned."

"Al Dera al Akhdar—the Green Shield, I'm sure you know of them, as well," Elisabeth said. "They have been after Al Sayf for a while, and they found out they have holed up here, and they arrived soon after we did. If things go sour we could be in some trouble."

Millis-Lestrange appeared troubled. A flicker of thought danced across his features. "There's one thing I'm not understanding."

"Only one?" Vincent asked.

"If I never provided you an address, and you didn't know I was here, how did you find me?"

“You *did* provide us with an address,” Elisabeth said. “Or someone did. We found your clues from the two armillary spheres.” She brought the two papers out of her satchel and passed them to him.

“These aren’t mine at all,” he said after a quick glance. “I don’t recognize the handwriting. I know it’s not Romain’s, anyways.”

Vincent spread his hands at Elisabeth in frustration.

“Docteur,” Elisabeth said, and paused. Her nose wiggled with shared exasperation. “Docteur, who were the colleagues of yours that recommended the hired hands?”

“I could name them, but I’m sure you wouldn’t know them.”

“They were probably clandestine Al Sayf agents,” Vincent said. “Ones with their hearing intact.”

“But you also mentioned their foreman?” Elisabeth asked.

“Yes, he approached Romain and me one afternoon, while we were on break, soon after we met. He was with some of my colleagues and offered me his men’s services.”

“And you accepted right there? Didn’t Romain have reservations about the deal?”

“He did, but the foreman was convincing and seemed eager to help. He’s here now, I believe. I only saw him once more after I had my equipment moved here and set up.”

“You didn’t tell any of them about what your research, did you?” Vincent asked. “Or about your current reputation?”

“Absolutely not, although I didn’t have to. The foreman already knew of the MTD and my former identity. He assured me that it would be kept secret from his men. At first I was skeptical, but I knew I could trust him because he was the one to deliver your ducats, Miss Elisabeth. I would have preferred that he didn’t know about my situation, like we had agreed—”

“What?” Elisabeth stood up and knocked the stool down behind her. She rushed over to him and nearly tripped over a cable stretched along the floor. She grabbed his elbow in desperation.

“Docteur,” she pleaded. “You need to be very clear with me: who was this foreman? Can you remember anything about him? His name? Appearance?”

The doctor stepped back and raised his hands to ward off her aggression. “I don’t remember his name. I—I don’t think he told me,” he said with a stammer. “He was tall,

very massive. Long, strange hair. Spoke oddly. I'm certain he was deaf; he always had someone by his side to help him communicate."

Elisabeth hissed, and Vincent swore. She patted her satchel and holster to make quick inventory of all her belongings, and darted for the end of the long corridor, opposite of where they entered.

"Miss Elisabeth," Vincent said, as he and Millis-Lestrange followed her.

"I need to find the opening of the escape tunnel."

"Where are you going?"

There was a doorway leading into a small room at the very end of the corridor. The light from the electronal bulbs seeped into that room and revealed it to be empty. Elisabeth peered up at the darkened ceiling, squinting.

"I'm going to find du Mahdi," she said. "Before the Green Shield or anyone from Dutch Bull does. If he's captured, he could easily make some kind of deal with the information he has. We can say *Tschüss* to our MTD while the Docteur's documentation languishes in arbitration confiscation. Where is this confounded entrance?"

"What exactly are you going to do with du Mahdi after you detain him?" Vincent asked. "He'll need to be delivered for arbitration regardless. His MTD documentation would be held as possible compensation for the family of the man that died at the demonstration. So you'd have to kill du Mahdi and anyone else who know about the docteur."

"Nonsense. I know how to talk my way out things. Into things, too. It's part of my profession. And if the man's family holds onto the MTD documentation, I'll simply sell myself into slavery to buy it back. Everyone has a price. I'll think of something. Your lantern, please."

While she continued searching the ceiling, he and the doctor left. Soon after, they both returned, with Vincent explaining to the doctor du Mahdi's reputation. Vincent pointed the bullet of his lantern up.

"Nothing I say is going to dissuade you," Vincent said. "And it shouldn't. This MTD, even if there's a chance it could work, is worth a thousand of our lives. But I'm going to ask you if I may do this in your stead."

In the center of the ceiling there was a rectangular hole and, and next to it, a slab of rectangular stone, bigger than the rest of the ceiling's stones. She presumed that large stone to be the terminating step of the escape tunnel.

"Ah!" Elisabeth approved. "There it is. It appears there's a platform I can use to hoist myself up into there. If I can reach it."

She turned to Vincent, who lowered his lantern to the floor to alight the small room's general space.

"I understand you feel it's your place to offer," she answered him. "Your offer is not warranted, yet I recognize and appreciate it as appropriate. But, after all your willingness this far in this endeavor, I cannot take advantage of your excess good will. It would eat away at me. No, I think I will take this one. By myself. We cannot afford to leave our docteur unprotected."

She took out from her satchel the bottle with the last dose of lidocaine and a syringe, unopened in its original glass tube.

"If it's any consolation, you may be in even more danger than I," she said, as she pulled up the left sleeve of her uniform and administered the last of the medicine into the crook of her elbow. "I recommend that you remain here, but if the time comes where it's safer for both of you to escape, do so with no regard for my whereabouts or well-being. An unfavorable change of circumstances will dictate that decision, but you must see it clearly for yourself. You may consider escaping out the pipe."

"That seems too risky," Vincent said. "If those guards returned there would be no way of concealing ourselves."

"If you are found out, that may work in your favor," she responded. "Du Mahdi, for whatever reason, wants the docteur alive, so it's not likely that they would want harm to come to him, or you, as his assistant. Paradoxically, Al Dera and Dutch Bull may pose more of a threat to our goals here than anything else. If they start a war here, there's no telling what could happen. The docteur's life and his work are far more important than anything else right now, including our own lives, Vincent, as you just noted. I wouldn't mention this fact right now if I knew both of you didn't recognize it as well."

The cool, numbing rush of the drug crawled up the length of her arm to her shoulder. Elisabeth stood there with her bare white arm straight, at a near-unnatural angle to her body and to the floor, as though in performance to Vincent and the doctor of some

amateur impromptu contortionism. Vincent and the doctor awaited the drug's finishing effect patiently, though the exhibition felt to Elisabeth as an ill-conceived coda to her weighty evaluation of the circumstances.

She let out a pronounced sigh to signal completion, and removed her belt holster and satchel. Elisabeth hiked up the edge of her Constantinian robe to her thighs and began bunching it.

"I'm girding," Elisabeth told Vincent and the doctor, to answer their confused expressions. Millis-Lestrange politely turned his back. She figured he didn't quite understand what the process entailed.

Elisabeth slipped the bunch of her robe under her crotch and brought it forward to tie each end at her front. She rebuckled her holster.

"You'll need another boost," Vincent said, as he and Elisabeth looked up at the ceiling hole.

"Of course. Docteur? Will you oblige? I require Vincent's height to steady me, so I will need you to do the actual lifting. This ceiling is rather high for a toss."

Millis-Lestrange turned back around and approached the center of the room with an embarrassed air.

"What must I do?" he asked.

"Kneel down, palms up on either side of your head. I'll need to do a boot in each."

"Ready," the doctor said, once in position.

"Ready," Vincent said, behind her with a strain in his voice.

Elisabeth stepped in each of the doctor's palms, and with Vincent steadying her with a hand on her back, the doctor rose to a standing position

The bottom edge of the rock near the hole was two, perhaps three feet away. There was no telling how thick the rock was, so the edge onto which she would need to grab was at an unknown distance above her, filled with blackness.

"Little higher," Vincent said.

The doctor grunted again and straightened his arms to their full extent. Vincent's hands were on the back of her thighs. Her fingertips brushed the sides of the stone, but could not reach the top edge.

"Just a little higher."

“You’re up as high as we can get you,” Vincent said. “I may know how to do this. Are you able to balance yourself on the ceiling? I’m going to let go.”

“I’m fine,” she said, as she pushed her fingers against stones on either side of the hole.

Vincent’s hands left her. There was a mumble of conversation between Vincent and Docteur Millis-Lestrange, then Vincent spoke up to Elisabeth: “Brace yourself, Miss Elisabeth.”

“Brace?”

The doctor shifted his hands under her so her legs scissored. Before Elisabeth could respond in question, there was a pronounced bump somewhere along her backside. She shot up into the utter black of the hole and, somewhere in her instinctive flailing about, found purchase onto the platform stone with the point of her elbows.

“I’m here,” she shouted out.

Elisabeth swayed her bottom half around, gained enough momentum and leverage and pulled herself up and fully onto the stone. Once she felt situated enough, she leaned over and popped her face down the portal, into the room.

“A lantern?” she asked. “I won’t be able to take it with me but I’d like a quick glimpse.”

Vincent, with great care, tossed his lantern up to her waiting hand.

She leaned back against the side of the vertical passageway and saw what she expected. Above and in front of her, on the opposite side, a few feet above her head was the last slanted stone of the passageway, affixed firmly into the wall. Directly above her was the penultimate stone. That last stone was close enough for her to crawl onto, while the next one may require her to land a jump to grab onto it. The jump would be short, but it was significantly risky, given the darkness and her numbed shoulder. The thought of possibly having to repeat such a dangerous stunt further up the passageway made her dizzy with apprehension.

Elisabeth pressed her face against the sides of the passageway, as there appeared to be ample room between the sides of the slanted stones and the walls to maintain a line of sight up along its length. The light shone high, and by some fortunate trick of the stonework she could see some distance up. Yet, there was little frame of reference—it

was all wrinkly, semi-smoothed angles of the sides of the passageway and slightly imperfect installations of the slanted stones.

Elisabeth leaned forward to drop the lantern to Vincent.

“No surprises,” she said. “That I can see. Vincent, my Dutch Bull wallet, if you please, from my satchel. I will need it.”

“Are you sure you can do all of this in the dark?” Millis-Lestrange asked.

She withdrew from the hole and sat back to shove her face into the darkness of the passageway, as though she would gain more insight from seeing nothing.

“I’m absolutely unsure, truthfully,” she said.

Vincent, who must have returned to the room below, said something Elisabeth couldn’t make out. She returned to the opening in the ceiling.

“We will be concentrating on keeping the docteur safe,” he said. “But we’ll keep our ears open in case you return this way. Ready?”

She nodded. He tossed her wallet up to her.

“Perfect. One moment.” She sat back up and buttoned the wallet securely over her holster belt so that the deputy badge was in plain view.

She leaned over to the opening once again.

“Docteur Millis-Lestrange: survive at all costs,” she said. “The world needs you. Vincent: why did the lifelong potato farmer not want to leave his village?”

He thought about it for a moment. “You should reword that. There’s already a reason for him not to leave that wouldn’t have anything to do with the punchline.”

He went further into it, but she waved his additional objection away as though it were a housefly. Millis-Lestrange was chuckling.

“Do you know the answer, Docteur?” Elisabeth asked.

“He had too many roots in the area.” His face, gnarled with humor, became a disproportion of bulbous cheeks and pig-squinting eyes.

She smiled and hovered there, nearly upside down, as the doctor’s mirth subsided. She thought that some serious parting words were warranted, but neither she nor the other two could really produce the necessary verbal sentiment. The discomfort held by Vincent and the doctor were evident in their askance stance. Their minds seemed to struggle for response in much the same way she struggled to contain the absurdity of the image of the two of them standing on the ceiling.

She sat up and disappeared without a word.

24. Ascent to Stars, Descent to Sea

Elisabeth took into account what she remembered of the structure's height, the likely depths to which the passageway plunged into the earth, and how many stones were below her now, and concluded she was about halfway to her destination on the roof.

This conclusion left her attention in the twinkling of an eye, since she arrived at it about half a second before she leapt from the stone on which she braced herself, onto the one above. She crouched down and sprang up, arms held wide, desperate to discover if she had made the accurate mental estimates. On an earlier jump, she had misjudged her position on the stone and grazed her chin on the next stone. She was sure the scrape drew blood, but was glad that the impact was not as severe as it could have been.

Her leap this last time was successful. Her upper body landed square in the middle on the stone, with her arms hugging it and hands grasping its sides in the space between the stone and the wall. She writhed and wormed her way up the slanted stone by inches until she was able to place a knee and heft her body fully onto the surface.

Elisabeth lay on her side, fetally, so her feet wouldn't dangle off the edge and cultivate a mild anxiety within her that the weight of her boots would drag her off. The stones were angled at about a forty-five degree dip, but their unpolished, textured surfaces made them easier to traverse and difficult to slip on.

Many of the stones were installed in close proximity to its neighbors, a situation where only crawling and hoisting one's self up were sufficient, while a select few were spaced far apart enough to require leaping. Her shoulder was holding up, still numbed; she was relieved that she retained enough muscle memory, developed in her professional showmanship years, to be able be effectively physical in such a state. She could sense that continued exertion was taxing the muscles that had been weakened from non-use. The pain that would come after the lidocaine wore off would be excruciating.

She closed her eyes—it made no difference, as there wasn't a pinprick of light that pierced the passageway around her. Her breath was heavy and whimpering. The air was thick with the cool odor of stale soil.

Her quickened pulse throbbed deep in her ears. There was a disembodied voice inside her ear that reprimanded her for not reconsidering her decision to climb a structure designed specifically for rapid descent. The must in the air triggered a swallow reflex, and she heard the viscous saliva glob slide lazily down her throat. She exhaled a bulk of air. The force of escaping breath pried open the stuck-dried corners of her mouth with a pasty crackling. She licked one corner—it sounded like a dying slug scuffing its shriveled body against sand.

Though she was still in want of breath, the sharpened awareness of her distressed body was too much to endure any further. She stood up on the stone, on the toes of her boots, and reached up to brush her fingertips on the surface of the next stone up and evaluate its distance and size in her imagination. Then, another successful jump.

Again, with no wasted time, Elisabeth reached for the next stone but felt something unusual. The stone above stretched the whole width of the passageway, and it was cut jaggedly, like a large piece the shape of a corner was removed from its middle section.

"No," she whispered.

She realized the situation. The stone above her was not one larger, miscut stone, but two separate ones. The stone two positions up had broken off and was wedged between its predecessor below—the one just above her—and the wall. Her next step up on the path was thoroughly blocked.

"Nein, nein, nein!"

Elisabeth punched a wall of the passageway with the side of her fist. All hope of getting Millis-Lestrange out of here alive and in secret drained out of her. The MTD would never come to be, despite all of Vincent's expertise in electronal engineering. It crushed her thoroughly, as though the doctor's research, his toil, were *her* research and toil. It was all gone, atomized into dust and buried deep in the earth, forgotten for all generations to come.

The revelation began to enrage her. There had to be some way around this.

Around this, she thought.

She felt around the two rocks above her, and at the space between them and the wall. The space was narrow by the intact rock, but by a stroke of fortune the broken stone had favored one side when it fell, so there was a wider space on one side and a much narrower space on its opposite.

Elisabeth jumped twice and dragged her hands on the fallen stone's side to get a better account of its position. It did angle towards the wall just a touch, but there might be satisfactory space for her to slide through.

After many strained attempts and a few slippery close calls, she was able to grab, hand over hand, onto the corner of the left side of the fallen rock, and the top surface of the intact rock. There was not much time because the angle of the surface onto which she grabbed was not ideal for maintaining a sure hold.

She pulled up fast. She had to turn her head to the side as she rose to fit it through the space, as her arms in front of her face took up precious space. The rest of her body slid up and over easily, once she could wrap her fingers around the other side of the intact rock for leverage.

The fallen stone was wedged in securely, so there was no danger of loosening its position and having it fall farther down. Yet there was another issue: Elisabeth would have to jump double the distance to reach the next stone.

She jumped up from the high corner of the fallen stone to feel for its original home. A large chunk of the wall had been broken out along with the stone, so there would be no threat of banging her head on an outcropping piece of stone or mortar. If she could jump from that corner of the fallen stone again and then leap off the wall onto the next stone…

Elisabeth performed some practice jumps at half power. On her final warm-up pass, she could feel the side of the next stone up, but banged a knee on the fallen stone on her landing. If she used the full strength of her legs she could perhaps make the landing.

Crouching down in full on the slanting fallen stone, Elisabeth sprang up with a shout, found purchase with one boot inside the hole where the fallen stone had formerly connected to the wall, and pushed off with full force in the opposite direction, with another shout of effort. She landed on the next stone with her body, just above her navel…and she landed hard. The wind rushed out of her lungs, and she squealed as she inhaled and exhaled to reclaim the missing air.

"Safe, safe, safe," she repeated in a hoarse whisper as her breath reluctantly returned.

She felt around to make sure her revolver and holster at her hip, and the watch and rosary around her neck were accounted for. Everything was where it should be. She

prayed that there were no further installations above her masoned by uninspired or vengeful construction journeymen.

There weren't. Elisabeth had lost count of how many more stones she had to traverse until the top. When she ran her fingers along the flat surface on the underside of the false section of floor, she sobbed tears of relief, exhaustion, and apprehension. There was no sound that filtered down into the passageway, but there could be anything lying in wait mere feet above her head: Al Sayf al Ahmar agents with their guns pointed at her head as she opened the hatch, a metallic mess of more electronal equipment, Al Dera al Akhdar agents lending a helping hand out of the passageway. Or nothing at all but an empty rooftop and the moonlit sky.

Elisabeth crawled up to the topmost stone and pushed up on the hatch slowly, just enough for her to slip out.

On her stomach, she slid over to the crenellated stone wall to avoid being shone upon by the moon. As she moved, she spied at the far side of the roof a crude, four cornered tent-like structure with an open-air side. There were electronal bulbs ignited somewhere inside the tent, for she could see some vague outlines of what was inside.

Along the perimeter of the tent, under the edge of the roof, were posts set in metallic boxes. The tops of the posts terminated in an object of tightly coiled wire, oriented horizontally, something in the shape of a bulky life preserver. All of these objects, perhaps devices that could find suitable home in Millis-Lestrange's workroom, were identical from the distance at which Elisabeth saw them, and at their cubic bases were attached cables that ran over to the stone wall and over its edge.

There was more electronal equipment past the post-devices, but she could not make out any details, and there was no sign, visual or auditory, of any direct human presence, either on the roof or anywhere on the Cathedral grounds. She berated herself for neglecting to take along Vincent's spyglass.

She rolled over onto her back to contemplate her next step, and to relish in the breezy, clean air. The half-moon must have been at her back, for all she saw was the mysterious expanse of the clear night sky, with its scatter of stars glowing unhindered by clouds, though the view was obstructed by the wall to her left. Her interrupted sleeping pattern, the exertion of navigation up the passageway, the stress from all the uncertainties and unknowns, the altissimo drone of countless crickets, the soaring,

sidereal sweep of æther above her, the paint brush-spray of light on a barely-perceptible revolutionary path—all conspired against her, and she fell in and out of a light doze right there on the warm, breezy roof.

The tail end of a sneeze woke her. She had moved in her sleep a few feet away from the roof's wall. The sound of men's voices drifted to her in the quiet night air. Their resonance impressed upon her that they were not close by, perhaps not even on the roof with her. She glanced around her, paying special attention to the tent across the way, to find no one.

She now sat up and walked on her knees, with some care, on the fabric of her robe, over to the crenellated wall—at some point in her ascent in the passageway her girding had unraveled into its standard bearing. Peering over the stone wall, Elisabeth found a group of men carrying lanterns and walking out onto the promontory that jutted into the Pacific, a quarter mile west of the Cathedral. They must have numbered in the few dozen, and by the silhouettes and spots of brightness provided by the lanterns, Elisabeth could tell that they were mostly Al Sayf al Ahmar agents with a smattering of plainclothed men.

A presence about her, nearer to her, coaxed her attention away from the men's procession. Elisabeth fell back down to her hands and knees, turned and muffled a grunt with pursed lips. The lidocaine was beginning to wane, and the ambient soreness in her shoulder, made more acute by its abuse in ascending the passageway, wrenched and twisted her nerves. Pressing flush against the wall again, she saw an agitation from far off, under the tent. It was a person, going from one part of the tent, pausing for a moment, then proceeding to another part. Her view to the insides of the tent were hindered by the array of pole-devices on the outside.

The figure inside the tent then walked over to one of the pole-devices on the edge of the perimeter and knelt down to its boxed base. He moved to the next pole and did likewise, and then to the next, circumnavigating to every pole-device in the array.

The position of the person's poorly-illuminated body to the pole-devices made identification difficult, but his movements suggested masculinity to Elisabeth. Now finished at the last pole-device, the figure—a man, she was now certain—stood up at full uprightness, a height so monstrous compared to a standard human's stature that it defied conception, even perceiving it at Elisabeth's distance. His hair, more like a mane,

flowed about him in ropes. At his right shoulder the hair swung about with an unnatural gravity, as though his hair swayed *through* his arm instead of around it. She realized his entire arm was not there at all: it was gone, from the top of the shoulder.

With eyes affixed to the man, Elisabeth, fighting a wince, dipped her left hand down to the holster at her appendix and drew her revolver. She passed it to her uninjured, weak-side shooting hand, and with her left hand's fingertips planted lightly on the roof floor surface for balance, ferocity welled up within her and spilled over. In an uncontrolled frenzy, she hurtled forward and ran at full speed, nearly stumbling on the skirt of her robe.

"Maalik du Mahdi!" she shrieked. "This is a Dutch Bull detainment! *Une détention de Dutch Bull!*"

He simply stood there, half-hidden behind a pole-device, as she sprinted closer with her revolver trained on his upper torso.

There was a series of furious, sharp snaps in the air and all of the pole-devices came alive with primal electronal energy, with crackles of thin, spidery light, like horizontal lightning bolts, shooting across from their spherical, wiry tops. The sheer force of the sound and the sight of undulating, zapping bolts of light was enough to divert Elisabeth's mind away from its animal functions: running, breathing, holding what little water she had stored up—to coping with the otherworldly phenomenon just a few feet in front of her. Her knees gave out, and she collapsed headlong toward the ground. Instinctually, her free, left hand shot in front of her to break the fall, and the impact sledgehammered her shoulder nerves.

She ended up on her back. The pole-devices were a few feet above her head. Phlegm sprayed straight up into the air as a series of sneezes seized her with such force that a slurp of bile rose into her mouth. There was no telling what effect those bolts could have on the human body, but with her revolver still in hand, she retrained it onto du Mahdi's shadowy head. He was standing close to the buzzing mechanical workings of the pole-devices, unconcerned with the possible risk from the electronal bolts and her firearm.

Only the outline of his head was visible above the rounded top of the pole-device just above her. In the brief moments of illumination, when the crackling bolts of energy transmitted back and forth, she could see his fixed glare bearing down on her.

He slid away from the pole-device, deeper into the interior of the tent. Elisabeth cried out, but a large clang drowned her voice out. The cracked-ice patterns of energy disappeared and the devices' cubic bases wound down to stillness from being deprived of their power source.

Elisabeth rolled and twisted to maintain her sights on du Mahdi, while she rose to a stand. Standing up, the return of the crickets' chirping played in her ear, which to Elisabeth sounded now like an ersatz choral arrangement compared to the powerful buzzing of the pole-device's discharges.

"Before you hold me guilty for the crimes you hold in your mind that I have committed," du Mahdi said in a steady tone of over-pronounced words. "I must ask that you watch."

He pointed out over the wall, in the direction of the promontory Elisabeth had spied out before. She slid back a step and looked over her shoulder quickly, then turned again to du Mahdi.

"I'm not taking my eyes off of you anymore," she said. She found her voice quavering with unsure excitement.

"As you can see, my sagirah, I have no weapons on my person," he said. "I have no desire to harm you. If you wish, you may consider me detained, though right now we are trapped here on this roof. If you take me through this door and down the stairs, my men will surely see to my safety and kill you. This is all secondary. It is of the utmost importance that you witness what is about to pass."

Du Mahdi raised his left arm, his only arm, high and backed up to the far side of the tent to put himself at a safe distance. His raised hand pointed again to the promontory.

She lowered her revolver, but kept her arm cross-bodied in case du Mahdi changed his mind about his benevolence. She walked slowly to one of the wall's crenellations, still keeping du Mahdi's open hand in the corner of her eye.

The Al Sayf al Ahmar agents were at the edge of the promontory, in a loose semi-circle. Within the semi-circle, two men sparred off against each other. One of the fighting men had an arm tied behind his back, while his opponent, just like du Mahdi, had only one arm, as the other was fully amputated. They must have just begun the fight, since they were sizing each other up and throwing light jabs and kicks, while barely connecting the blows.

The men around the fighters swelled a cheer of impassioned Franco-Arabic. It occurred to Elisabeth that though most of them were deaf, it was a natural thing that they retained vestigial habits of their pre-handicapped condition.

The battle began in earnest. Full contact punches and booted kicks were underway, however unbalanced their movements were from their self-mutilations. It continued in this manner for minutes until someone from the crowd tossed two heavy-bladed daggers into the sparring circle. Each of the fighters picked up a weapon—Elisabeth could feel the crazed upswell of the spirit of combat from the two men—and thus began a different fight altogether.

Blood was drawn within seconds: a deep cut on one of the fighter's bare shoulders. Shouts and violent, flailing gestures from the crowd prompted the fighters to a more passionate grapple. The fighter, the one with the arm tied back and the bloody shoulder, rushed his opponent and swung his knife with an uncoordinated swipe of his unrestrained arm. As his opponent stepped to the side and ducked, the result was a mere slice only through air. The lunge, a few degrees too enthusiastic, left his back open for easy attack, and his opponent took full advantage. With a great cry, he leapt and smashed the butt of the monstrous knife into the back of the man's skull. The blow brought him fully down to the ground, onto his stomach. His opponent kicked the knife out of his hand. It skidded across the dusty rock of the promontory to the feet of spectators.

The de-bladed man rolled over onto his back, moving to get to his feet, but too dazed to coordinate his limbs into proper balance. His opponent, to toy a bit with the crowd's collective emotion, wound his arm like a crank and, with the full force of gravity and muscle, jumped up and smashed the knife's hilt again into the man's head, this time directly onto the temple. The fighter on the ground, instead of disoriented, was now inert, save for a few twitches of his legs.

The soon-to-be victor straddled his fallen opponent's torso with his back facing Cathedral-side. A moment of reverence fell upon the rest of the men. The fighter lifted his arm high, shouted what sounded to Elisabeth like an ejaculatory Mohammedan prayer, and with the knife held reverse grip, brought the blade down somewhere on his unconscious opponent's upper body. Elisabeth caught her breath and crossed herself as

he stabbed a dozen more times to the circle of silence from the bowed heads about him. She was thankful the victor's back held most of the carnage secret from her view.

The victor then stood up and grabbed an arm of his now-dead fellow guardsman, pulled him over to the very end of the promontory, and kicked him over the edge into the Pacific. He returned to the circle of men, who all broke silence as they decided which pair of one-armed Al Sayf al Ahmar agents would be the next to fight. Through the rolling of dice (Elisabeth presumed, as much of that process she could not see) and some minor debates, the new fighters were selected and the process began anew.

In her peripheral vision, Elisabeth spied movement far to her left and raised her revolver again at du Mahdi, who had lowered his arm and slunk back under the tent's roof.

"Is that what you wanted me to see?" Elisabeth yelled over to him, without thinking. "A bunch of men killing each other for false prophecy?"

Du Mahdi was standing at a table of electronal controls and parts. He shook his head and pointed out to the promontory, and she grew suspicious. Was he only partially deaf, or could he perceive her intent without hearing the actual spoken words?

"Watch," he said.

She shook her head. "I'm not turning my back to you."

He sighed, grabbed something from the table, and returned to his former spot down the crenellated wall. Whatever he held in his hand was connected to something else inside the tent via a long cable.

Elisabeth returned to the wall and directed her eyes to the promontory once again, to see the two new fighters battling just as their previous comrades, though there was no sign of any weaponry involved yet.

She waited for a momentous thing to pass, as du Mahdi had urged: for the Red Sword agents to sprout wings and antlers, for dawn to break early, for Monsignor Gilstone to rappel up the side of the Cathedral building and declare the entire situation a practical joke at her expense. Nothing happened.

There was a sound of metal scraping against stone. Du Mahdi had set the small handheld box onto one of the crenellations, peered down at it as if considering an encoded message written on its surface, then flipped a tiny switch on it.

One of the pole-devices behind her snapped with electronal energy. She flinched and turned around to see a bolt of horizontal lightning, one of the long, undulating sparks from her first experience with the devices minutes ago, zapping its way across the pole-devices. The bolt was making its way closer to the wall where Elisabeth and du Mahdi stood.

The bolt snapped over the edge of the wall, right past du Mahdi, who was stoic and silent as before. Elisabeth leaned over the wall to discover that there were pole-devices bolted into the wall, thereby giving the electronal energy a proper path away from them...and towards the promontory.

The bolt made its way clear to the section of rock where the promontory jutted out via a string of pole-devices Elisabeth didn't notice in the cover of darkness until now. The electronal charge ended its journey somewhere in the middle, on top of the promontory, just behind the crowd of Red Sword agents. It must have set off a kind of charge, for there was a loud crack and a puff of smoke. All of the Red Sword agents looked around them, confused from the loud noise. Some of them, expecting a gunfight, even drew out their side arms.

Then there was a series of explosions all around the promontory which spat up dust and large chunks of rock. The promontory jerked down and listed at an angle. The Red Sword agents, now realizing what was going on, scrambled around to find a way of escape. One of them ran right at the explosions, probably in hopes of chancing through, before all of the charges detonated. As a matter of unfortunate coincidence, a charge exploded right under his running feet, and his legs blew out from under him and over into the ocean.

Some of the agents fell off of the promontory with a yell of surprise, while the rest fell to the ground to hug the only solid thing nearest to them. The safety lasted only a few more seconds, as the final, most powerful charge detonated. The promontory blew off the rest of the outcropping with a deafening percussion.

Not one of the Al Sayf al Ahmar agents made it off the promontory. Though their fate, like the loser who had fallen victim to the stab wounds in the first duel, was hidden from view, Elisabeth knew they could not have survived the plunge. Their bodies would have been dashed against the side of the cliff, on the rocky base below, crushed between falling stones, or drowned in the cool summer waters of the Pacific.

25. The Sympathy Verses

"Those men," Elisabeth said, with shaking knees. "All those men are dead."

"Think nothing of it, sagirah," du Mahdi said. "They were aware of what could happen to them if they allied with me. In the grand sweep of prophecy, they are not needed anymore."

"They were your allies?" she said, her eyes hard, mouth ready to explode with ad hoc curses on him and his descendants. "Why were they not needed?"

She raised her revolver up to him again, not so steadily as before, and stepped closer to him. The emptiness inside, which she felt earlier near the penny-school, began to fill up like a grievous abscess, ready to burst with anger.

A flash of warning came to her: she was too close to du Mahdi, and he could easily disarm her or knock her away if he was fast enough. That caution vanished, but his person impressed upon her a sense of impending dread that is felt when one is in close proximity to an unmoving, murderous object. Her nose came up to just below the level of his sternum. Seeing him from even just a few more feet away didn't impart the full visage of his stature and heft, dressed in a plain white rumpled shirt and tattered waistcoat, massive black beard and head full of plaited locks. Du Mahdi would tower over Vincent, who could pose no comparison to his powerful frame.

Du Mahdi left the wall and went back under the tent. He calmly cleared one of the simple wooden tables of the electronal device parts on it, leaving only a small lit lantern. Now reaching down to the floor, he brought up a book and pen and placed on the table top. He then reached over to a nearby cluttered table and stayed his hand there.

"Sagirah," he said. "I am going to move very slowly. I now have a gun in my hand. My finger will be off the trigger. I am bringing it to this table with the book and pen. If you can restrain yourself from forcing violence onto me before it is the proper time, it would be better for both of us."

Without waiting for a response, he dragged his hand with his trigger finger pointed up, the gun pointed down, and his thumb resting behind the hammer. He brought the

gun to the table and let it go, in the traditional position of the formal request for communion with an unfamiliar party.

"I'm sure you have many questions," he said. "Please sit. I am not a rhetor this night, nor do I intend to employ legerdemain with logic or language with you. I am both a teacher and student, now. As it was written, '"Come, let us reason together," saith the Lord.'"

He sat down at the table and waited. Elisabeth couldn't grapple successfully with the baldness of his presumptuous request. The thought of doing anything other than incapacitating a mass murderer, and someone who might have attempted to take her life, prompted a short wave of burning nausea deep within her. Yet he was correct: making a move to end his life, or even injure him, as he was now, might result in unpredictable, unfavorable results, even if it would achieve a good in the immediate.

The nausea tapered off. Not daring to lower her revolver or break direct eye contact, she slid over to the table across from du Mahdi and sat in the chair, and with an easy sigh, she placed her gun opposite his as an official acceptance of his invitation.

"I must ask also for your forgiveness, sagirah," he rumbled. "My ability to understand speech from reading lips is rudimentary, hence this book you see before you."

He opened the book to an earmarked page. The right page was blank, but the left side bore Arabic words. Scattered scribbling, all in different handwriting.

Elisabeth, curiosity afire, took the pen and wrote in English.

Why did you kill those men?

She flipped the book around on the table. Du Mahdi moved only his eyes to read it.

"As I mentioned, they were not needed anymore. There was a possibility that one of them would have been required, but since you showed up, I found this to not be the case."

She turned the book back around so she could write.

Explain more, she wrote, and flipped the book again.

"The Deaf Prophet—you undoubtedly have heard of him—wrote of this day and time, where two of us will fight each other until one of us is victorious."

Us?

He nodded. “You and I. ‘Wild men.’ I had great suspicions you would be my opponent, and that suspicion was confirmed when you arrived.”

I have no desire to be part of this prophecy.

“That only confirms things further, sagirah. That you are uncaring about the Deaf Prophet’s words, whereas I consider them to be the very words of our Lord, shows how contrapuntal you and I really are.”

Who am I? Plenty of suitable candidates around.

“It is not I that takes notice, or for me to say ‘This person!’ or ‘That person!’ It is the Lord who reveals things to me. I was not searching, but you were shown to me. As such, I took this as an emblem and confirmation of things to come.”

She pointed to the “*explain more*” words she had written earlier.

“We watched you and your protégé when you came to the prison where I was held, then at the hospital, and then to the den. Your persistent presence bent our ear, but the Lord had set your heart onto Millis-Lestrange and not the prophecy. You were noticed, but I was waiting on a sign, a wonder, from the Lord that would show you—or anyone—as my opponent.”

Vincent! she thought, seething. *He saw all the signs. This was all a trap. Why did I ignore him? Why didn’t I listen!?*

“Then it was revealed to us,” du Mahdi continued. “The day of the explosion on the Waterway Bridge. We saw you...I saw you...and how you dove heedlessly into the churning chaos of what happened there with no regard for your physical body. It was then that I knew of you, and knew you. How you long to free yourself of the prison of your life of words and language! The talismans of scoundrels and lie-weavers! These damned half-meanings and spider webs of misunderstanding! The wretched world of civilized men. You wish to run into the endless landscape of the wild world beyond and let all of your senses cry out to take it all in. You wish to fall into the heart of all creation, not clothe it with the dirty menstrual rags of our language.”

Elisabeth’s eyes widened and her hand felt for the imprint of the rosary cross that pressed at her stomach, behind her robe.

“You were the one who—,” she began, but cut herself off.

Bridge bombing. Armillary spheres. That was you, she wrote.

“It was.”

How many murdered then? and before? Your future is gone. She applied the pen hard when she wrote "gone," and it tore through to the next page.

"My life is of no concern to me, since I only seek to carry out the words of our Lord as spoken through the Deaf Prophet. I needed some way of leading *only* you here, though there were others like you with whom I had done similar. Most of them didn't have the wherewithal to follow the trail or couldn't be bothered to."

I had help. The few who were successful?

He pointed out past her, to the Pacific. "Dead."

Elisabeth felt that a circle was drawn, a complete cycle finished, and they had returned to the point of origin. The regression was maddening to her. With a lazy awareness, she drew a small circle in the corner of the page, and kept circling it with her pen in hopes that the repetition would soothe her anxiety.

Du Mahdi must have sensed her dissatisfaction, for he waited patiently until her next question. Elisabeth sighed and shrugged her injured shoulder, which had, until now, been ignored from all of the excitement. Her left arm then lay limp at her side.

There was shouting coming from the enclosure, from somewhere down in the building.

"Despite the deaths you brought about earlier," du Mahdi began, "there are still many of my sympathizers here. They are ones that do not believe they are my opponent, so this meeting here is further sanctioned by their agreement not to interfere."

Elisabeth wrote "*Call them off*," but scratched it out. The situation was far too deep for that to happen: the Al Dera al Akhdar-Dutch Bull dispatch knew they were here and probably had first-hand account of the promontory explosion. Perhaps they knew already that du Mahdi was here. There was no telling, if it came down to a firefight, which side would enjoy the advantage. If the alliance had the upper hand, she could stall du Mahdi's plans, whatever they were, but she wouldn't know the victor until the alliance agents burst through the enclosure's door onto the roof. If the Al Sayf forces won, they probably would refrain from entering the roof.

Deciding to plan for the worst, Elisabeth thought it best to work to end her predicament as soon as possible. She needed time to devise an escape, yet it was becoming clearer to her that this confrontation must end with direct violence.

What interest do you have in Dr. ML?

“I have none. Natural philosophy isn’t important to me except as another tool to execute our Lord’s will. If it’s a pile of stones or an aero-cart, it makes no difference to me.”

Behind her stoic face, Elisabeth exulted. Assuming he was being truthful, he was unaware of the doctor’s revived work with the MTD.

“You may be wondering if I have revealed Docteur Millis-Lestrange’s whereabouts to the general public,” du Mahdi said. “Or at least to any of the agencies in search of him. Rest assured, his existence here is not known and I did not plan on making it known, but depending on the outcome of our discussion here, I may not have personal control over his fate. I don’t know what possible interest you could have in him, except professionally as a journalist, but he would have remained unmolested if I knew you wouldn’t seek him out.”

Elisabeth celebrated in silence again, this time letting a small smirk curve up a corner of her mouth.

Your hopes for outcome?

“My hopes are irrelevant in this matter,” he said. “I’m sure you can understand that. One of us will be the victor and ‘carry the Word of the Lord to the Yokuts and beyond.’ I know this because it only requires the will—the force—of one us to reach this goal. That you are even a partially unwilling participant in this is of no concern. One of us *must* die this morning. It only requires the will of one of us to accomplish this.”

Du Mahdi’s constant deference to divine mandates was beginning to whittle away at Elisabeth’s patience. There was a twinge of guilt at this revelation, but her attention could not be diverted. Yet, his mention of morning beckoned her to lean to the side to see past du Mahdi’s massive shoulders to the sky over the roof wall. The brightness of the electronal bulbs on either side of the table hampered her view. Without thinking, she turned in her seat to the Pacific where the clear sky was burnished with a pale yellow glow.

She flipped back around quickly, expecting to see du Mahdi with his revolver pointed at her. He hadn’t moved.

There were more shouts from somewhere down the steps in the keep. They were more pronounced than before, more embattling and aggressive. She had to write something.

Death not necessary. I could kill you and not go to the Yokuts, and remain here with my reputation intact. Prophecy, you, and I = no contract, not bound to each other by anything now but default church contract, claims of rights on my person or yours are gelded.

"And what are rights, my sagirah? It's not a reality we can hold and mold in our hands or even point to and say, 'This is what a right is.' That is foolishness conjured up by the idle minds of royal courts from the Old Country. Rights are just an agreement between two people, like you and I here, enforced at the point of the sword. 'May the Lord deal with me ever so severely.' Remember? Our agreements can deal with anything we'd like—the rights addressed therein can be rejected at any time. Utter meaninglessness, running after the wind. No, what you call 'rights' are simply the agreement to employ force should those contractual provisions be unfulfilled. Through all scales of contracts, from between two agencies, like you and me, to the grandest of empires. Did those men on the promontory have rights? It didn't matter if they did, or if they were killed in violation of the commencement agreement. They succumbed to an applied force. Such is the essence of the earthly life, of the red teeth and the red claws of nature. Nothing matters but power, and our capability and our will, to use it."

He frowned and tilted his head, in an expression of both humility and intensity. The hard shadows cast on his features from the table lantern offered him as a ghastly display. "There is no God, nor any pantheon or legions of demons. Nor does there exist love, lust, cowardice, war, envy, or goodness. There is only *power*. There is only *force*, down to the most fundamental interactions in creation that your beloved natural philosophers can explain. Power—measured in degree, directed through distance, apportioned by intent. What you or I call might call 'the Lord' is essentially a certain configuration of power. Ultimately incomprehensible, of course, but a configuration of power just like everything else we can perceive."

Dancing on the edge of her memory was a passage Vincent had shown her some time ago, written by a natural philosopher whose name she had since forgotten, which she had bothered to memorize as a matter of mental exercise.

There were gunshots below them, somewhere in the building. Three of them. Elisabeth tapped the pen tip on the table. Her eyes darted from one random word she

had written in the book to another. She had to write those words. Write something. She remembered it as she committed it to paper.

"*There is no self-contained theory possible apart from practical meaning, for a language is used in its enunciation, which implies that developed ideas and complicated processes of thought are already in existence besides the general experience associated therewith. We define things in a phrase using words. These words have to be explained by other words, and so on forever, in a complicated maze. There's no bottom to anything. We're all antipodians and upside-down.*"

As du Mahdi read, his long-managed patina of detachment sloughed away. He exhaled sharply—a hiss of exasperation and incredulity.

"You cannot hide behind language now, my sagirah," he said. "Consider your first love, a love that has sustained to this day: dance. Could you, as a journalist, do justice to the accepted abandonment of convention that dance brings? Or is it something one has to perform to fully comprehend? You write with your right hand. I can tell by your holster that you favor your left hand for shooting. You are at a severe disadvantage. The question is: will your body grant a forgiving talent, to help you to keep your aim true, when otherwise it would fail? Will you accept my invitation to perform the dance of violence? Will your words become actions this morning? It only requires one of us to create conflict—the other will submit, unflinching, to the power and die, or attempt to repel the attack. In either situation, a struggle will pass. You *will* conspire with me in causing the Deaf Prophet's predictions a reality. The time of the prophecy is coming now."

He pushed his chair back.

"No, don't," Elisabeth said. She dropped the pen and rested her pinky finger on her revolver.

"The season for words has passed. If you will not take up arms, I shall."

He pushed back even further, away from his firearm.

"Stop!" Elisabeth yelled. "What are you doing?!"

She maintained her finger on her revolver's grip, yet she dared not make a further move for it.

"Without a pierce of your skin, without a corruption to your spirit," he said, "I can teach you how to desire death."

He stood up, monstrous and terrible, confrontation radiating from the mass of his beard. A titan primed for battle.

“But that is not to be!” he bellowed. “Your body will become an agent of violence! Kismet has arrived!”

She flinched. Her elbow knocked into the chair’s wooden back and her bad shoulder jerked up.

“No! Stop!” she screamed, and shot up from her chair into a hobbled posture of readiness.

Folded into seconds, there was a drag and suspension of events and movements: the transmutation of time into a null peculiarity. Elisabeth perceived their reciprocal stances, antithetical mirrors as totems of the Deaf Prophet’s prophetic vision. The wires of words that connected Elisabeth to du Mahdi had snapped, and there was nothing now that could establish a reconnect. Only the prospect of violence existed between them.

With a single grandiose swat of his arm, he knocked over both electronal bulb posts, the table, and everything on top of it. The bulbs made a peculiar bursting sound when they exploded on the roof stones. Elisabeth dove to the side alongside the table, which lay on its side, blocking her from his view...and her view of him.

Many seasons ago, she had been thoroughly trained to rely on the safety her firearm provided, should wits or evasion or flight disappear as an option. In a head-to-head bare-knuckle confrontation she did not impart a threatening carriage, genuine or perceived, to most any contender. She had developed a preternatural sense of the location of her hand relative to her firearm, and it was because of this training that Elisabeth knew exactly where her revolver landed in the mess of frenzied motion, and among the clutter of wooden and metallic things, and in the dim light of breaking morning. It was nestled, hidden, among a coil of cable a good ten feet away from her.

Du Mahdi’s firearm was right at her knee; it was too big for her to handle effectively. There was a scuffling sound coming from below her boots. Du Mahdi stormed around the corner of the table. She could grab his revolver but that would leave her head wide open for a crushing blow.

To keep him in sight, she scrambled back away in zigzagging, haphazard crab scuttles, with only the force of her legs alone and her good arm for balance. He picked

up his revolver and aimed just as she shoved back with her legs to reach inside the center of the coil of cable and draw out her firearm with both hands.

There was no telling if he would be in the path of her line of fire, but, borne from desperation, she squeezed off two rounds. He grunted; one of the bullets may have hit. She scrambled up to a crouched position while still backing away.

Elisabeth saw two quick explosions as Du Mahdi fired two shots: the first zipped by her right ear, while the second grazed her right trapezius. She dove behind a blocky cabinet and felt all about her shoulder area. Torn cloth and a little wetness.

She heard more scuffling from the direct other side of the cabinet, though this time they were uneven, sloppy. That she connected one of her bullets with du Mahdi's body was a sure thing to her now. She lay down on her back and kicked the back of the cabinet with both feet. It was heavier than she expected, but it stood atop wheels. It shot forward, listed, and fell over, right on top of du Mahdi's feet, tripping him.

Elisabeth rolled away to one side as he fell over the cabinet. He fired off a round and something small and heavy fell onto her hip. At first there was no pain, just an odd relaxation on the lower right side of her body, then came a burn and spreading wetness. She inhaled and exhaled hard, repeatedly, with an intensifying whimper.

Without looking, she fired off a round, then glanced up. It was far too high of an aim to hit anyone. Du Mahdi was hunched over the fallen cabinet, still drawing breath, with his revolver loose in his grip. She couldn't be sure in the dim light, but there appeared to be blood trickling down onto the top of the ash wood of the cabinet's top.

She dropped her revolver, and clamped down on her right hip with both hands. The burning sliced straight through her, but a cooling sensation began to wash over her leg down to her foot.

"It can't—it can't be," she breathed out in broken words. "This isn't right."

More sounds of confusion and desperation fell out of her mouth. Whether they were coherent words or gurgled babbling, she couldn't tell as her vision faded and succumbed to blackness.

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Elisabeth's eyes shot open to du Mahdi's face a foot from hers, upside down on the floor. He was doused in drying blood on one side of his face, running all the way down to his wrist, and there was an unthinking, distant glaze to his eyes. He was still breathing. There was a large strip of cloth fastened tightly around his neck. He had no firearm in his visible hand.

She was lying on her side, still on the roof, all her weight on her injured hip. She tried to slide along the floor, but the pain was too much to bear. Du Mahdi wormed his way slowly with his hand and elbow down to the closest edge of the roof, down beyond her feet. He coughed and attempted to speak to her, but his words ended up as soft gargles.

There were gunshots and shouting coming from just the other side of the enclosure's oaken door. Elisabeth's gun was just beyond her reach, near du Mahdi's feet. She twisted and lunged forward. The torsion of her torso exacerbated the wound at her hip, yet with a loud gasp she was able to grab hold of the revolver.

She held it up to the door, ready for whomever might burst through it.

Du Mahdi let out a pained shout. He was now at the wall, crawling up and over the embrasure with a length of rope in his hand. The other end of the rope was tied to some part of the enclosure beyond Elisabeth's vision.

A few more gunshots inside the keep, and then silence. Du Mahdi slid over the side of the wall and disappeared. The tied rope thrummed and jerked about with his presumed descent down the side of the Cathedral building.

The keep door was thrown open, and Elisabeth lowered her gun. Her body was racked with relieved sobbing when she saw the trio of Dutch Bull guards filtering onto the roof with their guns drawn. An agent, one with a lantern, spotted her, ran over, and called over to the other agents. One of them dashed over and unslung a bag from his shoulders, and pulled out a field medical kit.

The agent set the kit down next to Elisabeth and rummaged through it, soon producing a needle and vial. Elisabeth pointed to the wall and rope, and told the agents in malformed words about du Mahdi and his escape, all the while clasping in distress the wrist of the agent with the lantern. He tried to console her as something was injected into her arm. It was clearly a sedative, as Elisabeth's words became even more indistinct and she fell into unconsciousness.

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Elisabeth remembered many visitors to her bed's side at the hospital, when the haze of painkillers relented enough to enable sufficient consciousness. She would not remember them individually by their visages of their faces, nor their conversations, nor even by the sounds their voices, but by the touch of their hand on hers.

Though, they were memories disconnected from the knowledge of the people in her life: the sense of familiarity in their touches was present, but assigning touch to actual person was all guesswork. There may have been the gentleness of Wassie, the overconfidence of Vincent and the nurturing grace of Missy—and Christine, as her smaller counterpart—the rough humor of the good Dr. Fallace, various employees at de Sales, and even the seasoned knowledge of Docteur Millis-Lestrange. Their personalities were written into Elisabeth's memories as an unorganized, uncertain array of sympathetic caresses.

There was one visitor that Elisabeth distinctly remembered: Father On-the-Willows. She recalled his guiding touch by way of a certain string of words. The words were not of consolation or concern, but of blunt information, notifying her that du Mahdi had successfully evaded the Al Dera al Akhdar-Dutch Bull alliance at the Cathedral grounds.

Father On-the-Willows also made remarks concerning Al Dera al Akhdar officials' quick, successful campaign ousting Al Sayf al Ahmar from their ranks. He said the Red Sword were all but officially dissolved, yet Elisabeth knew it wasn't from the skills of Green Shield administrators. Nor was it because of the power vacuum left by du Mahdi—there were other Al Sayf leaders that could've capably taken up his mantle. Elisabeth was certain that the Red Sword dissolved because their purpose was fulfilled: there was now a wild man, existing far from the jurisdiction of the civilized arbitration inside Lesser and Greater Athens-Marina, living among the Yokuts and peacefully teaching them.

Epilogue: To Far Away Times

At a former helio-pad near the Waterway Bridge, alongside the slow bend of railroad tracks, right on the coastline on the Lesser Athens-Marina side of Marinas Bay, stood a curious structure. It was a stage, only a few feet high, covered in a cylindrical hood of glass that was closed and rounded at the top. In the middle of the stage stood a large metallic pole with a sphere made of interconnected pipes attached to the pole's terminus. At the stage's base, a long, grandiose metal plate bore the engraved words in high contrast: "The Amazing Millis-Lestrange-Rapace Mechanical Temporal Displacement Machine."

Most unusual about the structure was the plain, seat-like slab of metal fastened at the base of the pole. Though in perfect symmetry and alignment with all the other curves and corners of the structure, it appeared to serve only as an ill-considered decoration: a forced element of design to convey a sense of aesthetics in a machine built only for a practical purpose.

Attached all around the sides of the stage were cables and tubes, appearing to any who might pass by to be randomly selected and connected with no aforethought for organization, effectiveness, or basic safety. To those natural philosophers who were currently monitoring and adjusting the usage and feedback of these tubes and cables, they represented years of mental drudgery, compounding failures, and successful discoveries.

One of those philosophers—scientists—in particular became the target of Sister Elisabeth Reese. He stood at his assigned station, in front of an electronal console that appeared to her untrained eyes no different than the rest. While most of the others were visibly at work, down to their waistcoats and rolled sleeves, he seemed to be allowing his mind to wander.

The early autumn night had a slight tang to its dreamy balm, and the large electronal light-sets, shining down on the entire scene, heated the air a few degrees higher. Offsetting the heat of the lights and activity was a sweetly smoky breeze coming in from the bay, but the anticipation was most at play—not just from the invading presence of

the structure itself, nor its publicized purpose or brazen claims of effectiveness. The hustle of worker-employees and professors from College of Applied Natural Philosophies; the professional murmur from the gaggle of invited guests around Elisabeth, who were gathered at the barricade behind the official console area; and the thickening line of onlookers from the Waterway Bridge and those scattered around and atop the now-motionless train-cars on the rail—all these served to stimulate everyone in the area with expectations of grandeur.

The man, who was the focus point of Elisabeth's interest, took a kerchief from his back pocket to wipe down the back of his neck: his console was right in front of one of the light-sets and he'd probably been stationed there for over an hour.

A light on the far right side of his console blinked. Perhaps one of the readings was off and he had to make an adjustment. It was then that Elisabeth made her move around the barricade and behind Vincent. She gently poked his back with her cane.

"I know it's you, Juan-Pedro," he said as he adjusted some settings on his console.

She poked again, more emphatically.

"Great goddamnit!" Vincent said as he whirled around.

She was not Juan-Pedro, and his face betrayed his surprise. She stood akimbo with one hand at her hip and pointing the butt end of her cane straight at his chest with one eye closed. There was an insolent smirk on her face.

"Young man," she said with the overwrought trans-Atlantic accent of a shrew putting on aristocratic airs. "How did the aspiring author find so much inspiration by walking up and down the staircase?"

"I don't—"

"All of the storeys."

"That may be one of the worst ones yet."

Elisabeth lowered her cane and affectations, and they mirrored smiles. His face was lined with work-weary creases, and his formerly callow physique filled out with the muscularity of a seasoned field engineer. He stepped closer and leaned and angled his body to catch her in a highly improper embrace. He seemed to think better of it and executed a proper bow to answer her curtsey.

"It's been a while," he said. "Is it too presumptuous of me to assume you've been following our progress?"

“No, not presumptuous. The good Dr. Fallace, as you well know, has been much involved with documenting your goings on, and I’ve been following his coverage. Here, I’m just present as an interested observer with the proper credentials.”

“An observer who crossed the line into actor,” he said, looking past at something behind her.

Elisabeth turned around to find a Dutch Bull agent standing right behind her.

“Sir,” Vincent said to him. “She’s fine.”

She flashed her reputation card at the agent. He nodded in approval and walked back to the shadows behind an electronal light-set.

“Are you still at de Sales? The *Intelligencer*?” he asked.

“Of course. I’ll be there for quite some time, I believe. It will be hard to leave, but I have a good three decades or so left in me. We Reeses come from a slow-cooking, briny, robust Deutsche stock. It may take us a little while to simmer into our vocation, but when we do there’s very little that can spoil us.”

“Have you been staying out of danger?”

She gave him a coy look. “Of course not! I’ve tried to, but certain circumstances just won’t let me be. The stories I have…”

“Perhaps when life slows down for us, you could share.”

“Toil never tarries, but we can always push back. I would enjoy that.”

One of the other employees, some kind of head of operations by the looks of him, came over to the console to speak with Vincent. There was some fiddling with his tubes and wires on the console’s reverse side, and some ribbing back-and-forth debate on the correct configurations. The issue was then resolved.

“You know, Miss Elisabeth—” Vincent said.

“‘Sister Elisabeth,’ please,” she said. “Not out of personal pride, but recognition of the position. It’s my identity now.”

“Sister,” he said. “I find that hard to believe.”

“That I’m an official nun?”

“That you haven’t been following our research. You risked your life, and mine, more than once back when we found Docteur Millis-Lestrange, to reignite research into a technology, the effectiveness of which somehow only you knew at the time. Only to

ignore the outcome of it all? Either you take me for a fool or something doesn't quite add up."

"Vincent, my role in that particular process ended when du Mahdi escaped, you and the doctor were safe, and my ducats recovered. The season ended, and it was time for me to step back. What good would it have done for me to play the *haus frau* and hover over your affairs? I don't have the time nor constitution for that. I had full confidence in you and your colleagues. That I removed myself speaks more about you and your virtues of inquiry into the natural world than it does me. Ah! While it's on my mind…"

From her satchel she produced a small, leather-bound book and handed it to him.

"This should look familiar to you," she said.

"It does, it does," he said. "My journal." He opened it and casually flipped through the pages. "There was always a chastisement from you waiting in reserve. I suppose I could've been more diligent with this. Agree?"

"Perhaps. Books are merely a tool. Learning is the end."

He rifled through the pages one by one now, and sparks of recognition flashed on his face upon skimming. Elisabeth hoped he wouldn't go back to the unlined flyleaf page in the beginning.

"This isn't my writing," he said with a frown. "Looks like your penmanship."

"You weren't meant to read that until after tonight."

"Why tonight?"

"At this point, you may as well read it now and see."

"'Young Vincent Eriksson of Lesser Athens-Marina was my protégé for a year before moving on, with honors and my complete blessing, to the College of Applied Natural Philosophies. During the season he was under my charge, I found him to be quite adept at all subjects and ideas pertaining to his instinctual expertise of natural philosophy and the field's trends, technologies, theories, and desirable applications in the physical world, and practical human endeavors. In addition, I also found him to be expert in facets of higher learning in my particular field of language, communication, and the abstract philosophies: adept in being half-hearted in effort, professionally indecisive and inaccurate with prioritizing duties, masterful in the art of being dismissive of anything not in close familial relation to his desired field, and a bay-wide rebellious streak if he woke up that day in an incorrect balance of humors. This state of affairs isn't

uncommon, since no student or protégé, not even the brightest, most promising, or most overreaching of pedants, can be expected to inject the full amount of his passion, diligence, or mental prowess into every task his pedagogue sets before him. However, with the incidents that passed concerning Docteur Millis-Lestrange, events with which the reader will undoubtedly be familiar, I can propose and testify in full confidence, as one so singularly connected with him and his abilities, that Mr. Eriksson surpassed all my expectations in wrestling and overcoming his professional doubts concerning Docteur Millis-Lestrange's research, his personal reservations with my leadership and vision for our partnership, all concern for bodily self-preservation, and even safeguarding the remaining threads of good sense that I had left unsevered in my starry-eyed sprint towards Docteur Millis-Lestrange and his then-clandestine research. This is all to say that, while he was merely an average protégé 'on the books,' as the saying goes, he was without reservation the best man and mind anyone could have at their side, both in life and in work—indeed, I owe him my life, many times over. And for these few facts alone I can say I am grateful for having been his mentor and guide through that one remarkable year not so long ago. Signed In Full Authenticity, Sister Elisabeth Constantina Reese, 18XX.'"

Another light blinked on his console. Any potential reaction he could have shown from reading her foreword was swept away by distraction. Elisabeth was grateful for this since they were in full view of many of those behind the barricades; a scientist showing such a negative emotion would be unseemly at an event like this.

Vincent left his station as the foreman shouted out a call for all those involved with the demonstration to gather in front of the structure's stage for a photograph. Elisabeth looked on as they all organized themselves at the stage's front, and a fleet of photographers were allowed past the barricades.

The foreman, at the front and center, stood with a man in strange clothing that had an artificial leather look to it. The foreman looked all about him, then beckoned Vincent, who was somewhere off to the side, standing tall near the back of all the workers. Vincent walked up to the front and posed proudly next to the foreman.

Elisabeth blushed and brought a hand to her cheek. A chaotic salvo of photographic flash-bulbs fired off to document the accomplished pride etched on all the tired workers' faces.

My Wunderkind, she thought, with a glint in her eyes.

Vincent returned to Elisabeth and the console. He pointed at her cane that she had hung on the console's edge.

"Still playing everyone for a fool?" he asked.

"In part. I carry it with me just in case the weather acts up. My hip doesn't like the fog. Otherwise, I'm right as rain. Just the other night I did the *grand pas de deux* from *Giselle*. I may have missed a few beats, but I consider it a good show."

"What you said earlier…why would I have to wait until after all of this to read it?"

"If things didn't go as planned for tonight, I wouldn't have given it to you until you all got it right." She lowered her eyes and thought about it. "In reality, I shouldn't have given it to you. I was too hasty."

"It's not like you to make a thoroughly-considered decision."

She looked up at him with eyes narrowed to serpentine slits and a half-suppressed grin. He appeared anxious about an immediacy between them and had difficulty in verbalizing it. He beckoned her to crouch down with him. He pretended to show her the configuration of wires and paneling under the console.

His face was at her shoulder, his lips speaking directly into her ear, yet the words were not about the position or purpose of the wires in front of them. His words were of his work for the last ten years and the grand scope of the results, results that she would soon witness for herself. The glint in her eyes returned, welled up, and spilled over the edges of her eyes. She covered her mouth and nose and quietly wept with subtle twitches of her shoulders, having had the simmering nausea of uncertainty, arriving and departing randomly since the first MTD demonstration by Millis-Lestrange, swept away like cobwebs just by the act of his words. Something fell inside her, not as though damaging or losing a part of herself, but rather fell into rightful place, like the letting go of a drop of water into the sea.

With a shout, the foreman signaled for everyone's attention and began addressing the expectant audience. Elisabeth, now composed, said goodbye to Vincent to take her place out of the way, but he bade her stay.

The foreman then gave another signal, and all of the workers at the consoles turned behind them to lift a metallic platform to a standing position, propped up from behind

by hinges on either side. Elisabeth had noticed them lying flat, but it was an astounding maneuver of theatrics to actually see them rise into place.

Striding in a solemn march was the man in strange leather clothing—the man who stood at the foreman's left side during the photograph. He passed through the middle of the rows of consoles, as in a procession: a priest-adventurer on his way to intercede at the altar for the congregation.

The man went behind the stage and ducked out of view. Soon after, a hatch opened up in the floor of the stage, under the great glass dome. The man emerged, shut the hatch door, and with a few twists of hand, locked it down, tight and secure.

He then sat down at the seat at the base of the large pole, reached behind his back, and placed a long, thin tube with a complication of strange fixtures on the end of it, into his nose and mouth.

After giving the onlookers a moment to absorb the image of the man's presence inside the structure, the foreman then gave a command to the console worker at the far corner from Vincent's station. The worker there slid his hand over dials and switches, and a rumble and hiss familiar to Elisabeth ensued.

The foreman went down the rows, and let each worker, one by one, conduct their own symphony at their stations to lead up to the grand finale. Elisabeth reached into her satchel for her cigarette tin but stayed her hand atop of the cool metallic surface. The pole inside the structure began to glow softly with a nimbus of blue light. The air around the pole sparked with electronal charge. The cacophony of gases and currents of power passing down unseen avenues was approaching a climax.

She passed her thumb over the tin's artwork: crossing the albatross in flight, its body and sleek wings, and then over the concocted letters of language. Without forcing her attention down a path to decipher the words as though they constituted a rational proof, as she had attempted in the past, she soon understood in her own hasty manner what the words meant to her:

Blessed by the gods is he
Who is in possession of this tin.
By the lynx of Opthalmitis,
By the command of Æther,

He shall see many a great thing—
The mighty unseen wonders
Of this world, revealed in time!

The foreman then gave the signal to the worker stationed next to Vincent.

"We're up next. Would you like to have the honor?" Vincent asked. "When I point to you, push this small lever all the way up. That's the final step in all of this."

"Absolutely not," she said with an emphatic shake of her head. "This is your land and your morning. You're the one to shine the dawn over it."

He acknowledged her with a nod, and said: "At the very least, would you allow me this honor?"

Vincent discretely extended his arm with an open hand to her, as an offering. She slipped her own hand into it and held on.

At last the foreman's commandment came to Vincent, who dutifully cast his spells over the console, single-handedly. The glass dome was now nearly filled with translucent light, and small, hazy spheres of illumination. Vincent placed his hand on that final lever. Elisabeth squeezed tight as he pushed it forward, and the curious structure with the man in strange leather clothing became engulfed in a field of solid light.

About the Author

hotmetalstudio.com

Jay is a software engineer living in the suburbs of Pittsburgh. After playing in numerous rock and metal bands, he put finger to keyboard and wrote about music for Buzzgrinder and Noisecreep/AOL Music. He has published a book of microfiction, *Bored in the Breakroom*, and he blogs about philosophy, religious belief, and miscellany at jaydinitto.com.

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