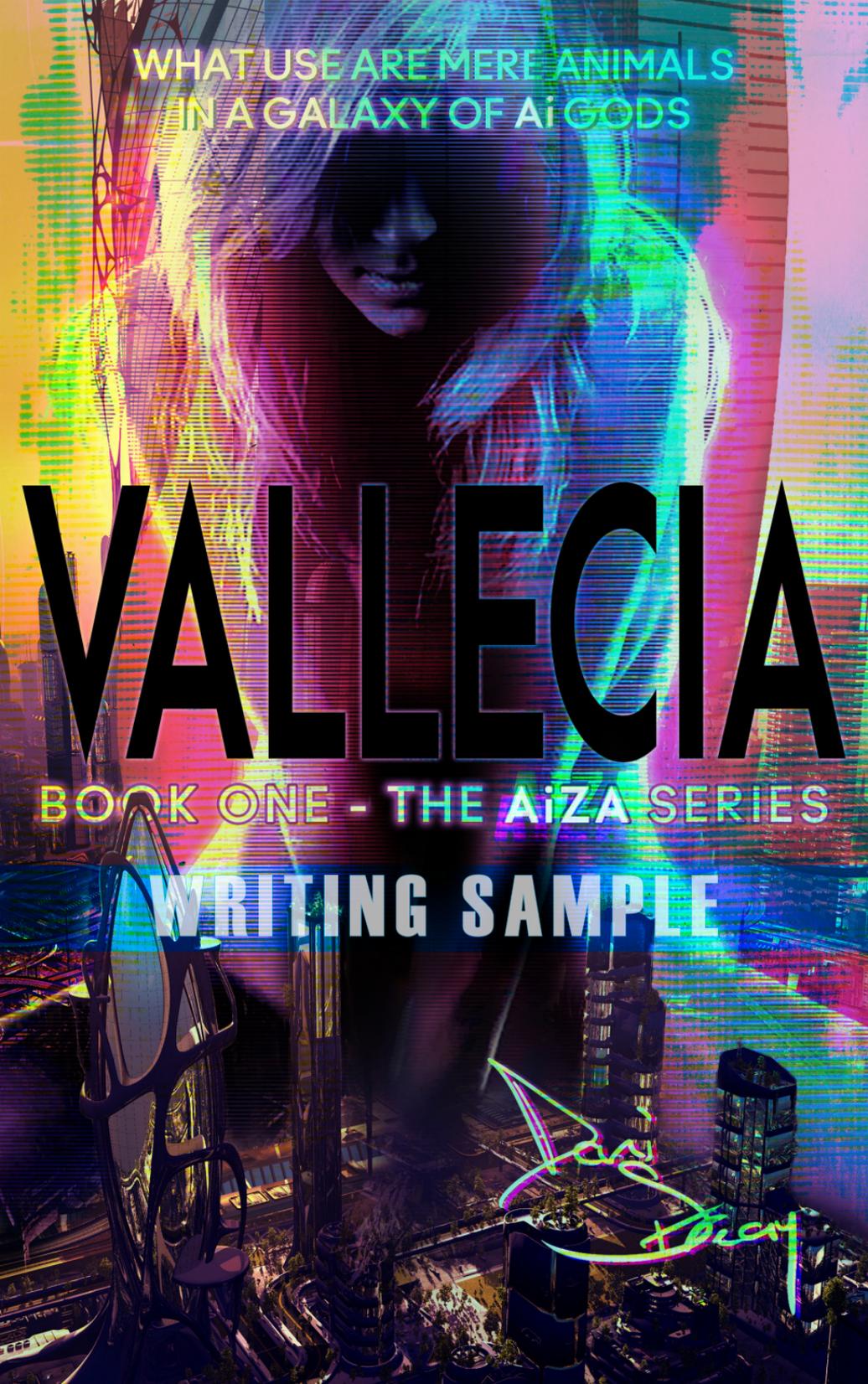


WHAT USE ARE MERE ANIMALS
IN A GALAXY OF AI GODS

VALLECIA

BOOK ONE - THE AIZA SERIES

WRITING SAMPLE



Aperture

Silence.

A lonesome world, dark features contained within a misty atmosphere, layers of cloud flowing from the horizon, racing beneath at hypersonic speed. Looking downward, one might find through the clouds a surface of vast brooding ocean, fractured ranges, forests seeming untouched as if not housing the tens of billions of sentient beings residing beneath that leafy facade.

An unknowing visitor seeking quick profit could easily underestimate this greatest and most dreaded of worlds. It had happened once already, several thousand years before, a simple flash raid of opportunistic privateers that would awaken and release upon the galaxy the most ruthless and terrifying species to expand into the limitless black.

As stated in tribute centuries later by a representative of a capitulated foe: “Tread lightly the giant seeking to step foot upon a world of Gods.”

A bloom of the brightest orange ignited the atmospheric barrier from beneath the horizon, instantly spreading its brilliance across the clouds. Above the mist speckled the reflective surfaces of countless platforms and traversing craft, until now concealed within the night. They continued with their hurried little tasks as the one original God rose to mark another day, consuming these self-aggrandising imposters with true might.

As if to bow, the hypersonic penetrator completed its short, peaceful, blistering tare through low-orbit and dove back down into the fire. Orange glow flared about the nose, sending a new surge of shudders and shifts throughout the cabin. With that, sound too once more crackled to life; first a whisper, soon a howl of charging wind and groans of shifting accommodating form.

The thick clouds quickly consumed all view, snuffing the fire of reentry. Rennai pulled his attention back from his detached mindful state, back through the ship's hull, back from its particle projection of the intensity outside, into the serenity of the insulated teal-lit cabin. He retreated through the pane of his visor, through his head-up display of necessary mission data and back into his own mind.

He caught himself up, looking about for the other six members of the Apex Legion Special Missions Unit 73, laying like their Team Leader silent on their bellies and elbows in wait. Weapons and equipment were secured, eyes and minds still, with all that remained being to ride out these final moments before unleash.

The howl of wind outside grew to a roar, bringing the rise of an artificial moan in its wake. And the clouds cleared.

Chaos, a darkness of deep bluey-grey ocean now pattered by the morning murk of air traffic and mist. Vivid lines of gold and orange cast from the horizon to radiate all. They ignited the artificial surfaces of ocean-locked structures, and the airborne personal craft buzzing about them by the hundreds. The rays drove on and out for the distant West, glittering the waves and all in between except for stark carves of looming shadow. These shapes led the eye back eastward to reveal the most dominant features of the horizon.

The skyline silhouette of the Mumbai megalopolis reached like the hand of a Sapiens Devil bursting from its gravity-imposed tomb to impale the orange God and grab the universe by the balls. The centre-point pushed well beyond all, beyond view, a single middle finger to the limits of petty physics and self-doubt.

We are Human.

Fuck you.

That was essentially the gist.

"The Sapiens Cock" stood ever hard and poised to fuck the galaxy, the first monument of man greeting any visitor arriving to Earth's most affordable spaceport. Where once, several thousand years before, migrants upon this planet may have found at least superficial welcome of their tired, poor, and wretched, in contemporary times the message was clear; Get behind the base of this, or get onto its end. Know your place, and get to work for the expansion of man.

And the hypersonic craft honed deftly for that very base, slowing itself dramatically, readying to get to work. It was a civilian zone, but under heavy corporate militia control, and Imperial Guard Centre wasn't watching on this one. The operation was low-signature, intended to stay dark, but considering the value of their seventh companion and ruthlessness of the enemy, Rennai would light up an entire block to get her out. Every member of his team felt the same.

21 billion people of multiple Hominin species resided upon the surface of Terra, and about the same could be found again off-grit. There were plenty to spare, and Rennai's naturally empathetic sensibilities had to stand down in the face of strategic priority.

It had been a relatively brief flight from the Imperial citadel residing upon the air just outside the Terra capital of Lamjania, Imperial sector Brasil. It had been a brief lead up for the operation overall, from conception to execution merely a matter of days. The Homo-Transcendus species was one of action, and considered more being lost through indecision than the wrong decision. Transcendents didn't make the wrong decision. They just simply hit a problem hard enough to make it right.

We are Homo-Transcendus.

Fuck you.

And so the seven figures of mid to late twenties lay calm and assured in their seven versus two-hundred million odds. Team Leader Blade Lieutenant Rennai Aklass assured this to himself through another glance across their clear radiant faces. Some of the five men and two women glanced back, though most lay still lost to mindfulness.

Only she bearing the most striking of faces, and normally the most mindful of all, blinked with racing thoughts, her crystal orange irises determined, though darting this way or that, full rose lips parted in anticipation. She made for a dainty manner and elegant feminine image, and had fewer combat operations to her name than her finely honed lesser valued protectors. One of her value tended to operate with an escort more of the Company level. They were never meant to be this exposed.

Overall, she appeared assured, simply anxious, so Rennai returned his attention ahead. This was his first command, and he assured himself again that indeed he was assured.

The cabin lights dropped them into a rich ruby, signalling the drop was imminent. With a muffled suck of air the floor split in half between them, sending natural light striking up in a V through the drop doors

as they opened slowly outward to either side. The team, held now in place by magnetic fields, sent their attention down through the busy air-traffic. It felt so much closer when viewed through eyes as opposed to particle projection. Private craft shot and charged past as the Transcendent spectral dart threaded invisibly through the lanes in full ignorance of societal norms.

“Sound off.”

“Two okay,” began Mazon Dunblasse clearly in Rennai’s ear.

“Three okay,” followed Lahreel Vashe.

“Four okay.” Jhalis Kno.

“Five okay.” Gial Malai.

“Six okay.” Eiver Paleen.

“Seven okay,” completed the Enchant Ki’Soun Tillam, her divine breathy voice light and fitting of her delicate image.

Rennai rounded off the routine. “One okay. Phalanx Team okay. Stand-by for drop,” and released a long calming sigh against the shield of his visor, returning his gaze ahead to the rays of the sun. He held with them, his mind releasing, advancing once more beyond the blurred display of wavering vital signs... beyond the visor... beyond the craft...

“No,” she had once told him, years before, the features of her perfectly imperfect human face mostly silhouetted by the sun behind her. It displayed an unnerving level of resolve not common to be found there. “No, I wont,” she further affirmed, and pulled her delicate hand from his.

The nerves stammering young Rennai’s speech only that previous moment had instantly sobered, his mind not yet processing the need to lift him from his now awkward position knelt upon one knee before her.

She stared down now all too coldly upon him with no quarter to give. The sun-haloed crown of branches from the forest behind her looked threatening now in their jagged intent.

“Everyone knows what you are,” she had told him. “There used to be doubts, but there’s no question anymore, not after what you did. Humans, can’t, do, what you did.”

Rennai could only sit, and stare.

“And I won’t hold you back anymore.”

The beautiful young man finally lowered his hand, his weight pressing back in retreat. The tiny ring he clutched in his fingers now felt like lead.

“... Wh... But...” He tried to reanimate.

“Don’t you think I know how bored you are?” she pursued. “How sad, and unfulfilled you are here? The rest of us feel like embarrassments around you!”

“Vallecia, dear...”

“No-don’t-STOP ME NOW, MOTHER! THIS IS HARD ENOUGH!” the young woman erupted with downward thrust fists and a release of tears. The middle-aged parent reined her advance just short of taking her daughter’s arm.

“Lhadia,” her father gently intervened in turn from a nearby chair. He ushered his wife back, and she surrendered. The friends and extended family attending the outdoor barbecue remained seated at the many long tables, looking away and to each other, politely keeping to themselves.

“I-I don’t want anything out there,” the young man pursued, finally lifting his weight to his feet and seeing opportunity to all the more press his case and prove his devotion. “All I’ve ever wanted was here, with you.”

“And I won’t be your excuse anymore,” Vallecia refused, cold, relentless. “You don’t belong here, Rennai. You belong out there,” she pointed beyond the tree line. “Humanity needs you out there. You’re not a Sapiens,” she completed with the weight of tears finally forcing her gaze from his. “A-and I want you to please... finally go.”

Rennai released his memories to drift and dissolve, honing once more into the shapes of Mumbai ahead. He followed the sun’s rays through the branches of forest and silhouette towers as a calm woman’s voice resonated in his mind, emanating from no particular source.

“... Two... One... Mark.”

The seven figures dropped out into the open sky, opening their hands at once, stretching and reaching back by their hips. They extended their bodies outwards and on in full embrace, charging wind, tearing engines, the belly of the dropcraft screaming now overhead and on.

“Team clear. Riise, riise, riise,” the ghost narrated as her deathly body dissolved with the gain of distance to leave a mere dark flickering digital shadow. It punched forth, ahead, and high, higher, making a rapid acceleration back into the mists of orbit and leaving the world behind.

The seven exposed figures held resolute in formation; two diagonal lines, one of four, a second of three, needling themselves in a precise trajectory down through the Hominin chaos. They honed for the dark mountain of pubic hair concealing the base of the crystalline strato-towers. The morning sun rays lanced through the purple, green and yellow leaves of immense multi-kilometre tall Transcen-Banyan trees; Colossal-Flora concealing all but the megapolis' tallest structures.

Mumbai was one of Earth's dozen corporate megalopolises, sectors independent in management, though still operating under the core Imperial constitution. While most tended to closely emulate Brasil's example, those more willing to take a financial risk, or financially hindered enough to prevent relocation, strived for the traditional fruits of free enterprise in sectors such as this.

None had benefited from such free roam like the namesake of the central pillar tower, the words 'SINGH CO.' descending its mid section as searing orange letters burning within the silhouette frame. Many had referred to the sector of Maharshatra in the past as 'The Kingdom of Singh'. Well these seven daggers lancing now for the kingdom's heart would deliver a reminder that the Kingdom existed as one mere pixel of the Empire of Terra, in the eternal Deitine's name.

The bulk of Mumbai stretched beyond sight to either side, north and south, structures visible in closer view becoming quickly concealed within the leaves of giant Strato-Flora forests, genetically refined to house, shield, support and serve the sentient will to which they complied. Not so for the Transcendent species' hundreds of times their size, which raised the very city centre and all levels of infrastructure into the cradle of their roots.

The mangrove-like props spidered outward to plunge deep into the ocean, and sitting between them at sea level, a giant dark ring of relentless old-world steel lay flat and waiting arrival of the Imperial representatives. The Mumbai Dome was the final material attempt from previous millennia to save the old city from the rising tides before advances in botanical genetics solved the issue for good. The city-sized arena itself was as green as any other about it, with parks and gardens intertwined with the advertisements of multi-storey upper middle to high-class structures.

Rennai shifted his gaze leftward, acknowledging a taxi closing a little too rapidly upon a proximity requiring reply; a driver perhaps in temporary loss of himself and thus risking more permanent loss of far more. He passed overhead, safe to drive another day, and the seven

continued their press of the needle on for the Dome.

Waiting to greet the oncoming travellers stood an enormous off-worldly woman. Slender, of rose to blue blushing skin, she danced in a slow endless sway of pronounced hips, side... to side... with the repeated step of her knees. The brightly lit giant wore a woven fabric half-mask wrapping up into her vibrantly coloured and spiking hair. Similar fabric wrapped her arms, and legs to the middle of her thighs. The rest of her exaggerated hourglass figure was left completely naked but for narrow tapered adhesive strips of silver cupping her crotch and nipples.

Her lower half swayed, and swayed, flowing to and fro, making occasional secondary twists or curls of accent. Her arms complemented with precise pausing poses about her chest, shoulders and head. Large sleepy non-Sapiens irises of vivid un-Earthly blue held locked upon the approaching visitors, full moist lips opening for her tongue to lick, hook, and lure.

‘DANCE WITH ME,

INTO THE CRAVES’ was written in two lines hovering before her stomach, while floating behind her a pattern of downward flowing chevrons ignited in waves upon the air, arrows leading down, down, come down into the dark. She stared and licked and swayed endlessly as the team closed, passed the wall, threaded beneath her and down through the structures, out of the morning sun and back into the endless night.

A vivid grid of white, pinks, teal, green, yellow, neon, all colours pattering this subterranean labyrinth of steel. Pillars, concrete, few shafts of daylight, though swarming headlights buzzing over the black roofs to flow down through the passageways of light and blast. Walkways, terraces, balconies, advertisements; video, holographs, building-sized characters slowly turning about or strolling the length of a passage. Vivid brand logos spun upon the air, and holographic trees, reaching almost to the steel imposed sky, ignited the night with the glow of their orange trunks, blue leaves, or any assortment of distinctly un-botanical colour.

The Phalanx Team threaded down through it all, narrowed now to single zigzagged formation within this world of endless night known as The Craves. The pre-determined directional path honed them for one major arterial funnel of clubs, shops, action and crowds. A white wash of swell murmured as they closed, surging to life as ocean waves, accelerating sharply to match their bullet-pace past the city windows, and they plunged down through within a monsoon of holographic bubbles.

The crowd of thousands wandered and gathered upon the ocean floor, none the wiser as the seven black wraiths shot overhead, a pod of spectral blue dolphins now bounding and surging with them through the walkways and signs and rushing rows of blurred detail.

A bikini-clad giant turned to see them, breaking from her enticing dance to fill the passageway on hands and knees, leaning for them in yearning, opening her mouth and rolling her tongue to receive. They struck through and out the back of her head, vibrancy, commercialism, pumping curving thrusting sexuality, sin and gore. ‘LIK LAND’ promoted brightly upon a wall, ‘PLEASURE PLEX’ upon another; ‘BLAST CHAMBER’ floated as turbulence in the air, ‘BOIL POINT’ within a cloud of holographic steam, dark forms dancing within as pedestrians passed through with little regard. An ocean of crowds scurried to and fro as the shadowed seven swept through and banked in upon a major arterial, leaving the neon to peter out in their wake.

A final empty gauntlet of enclosing darkness. They threaded down through the remaining mile of steamy passageway, glow from the world behind still bringing forth some life to the puddles and clouds of vapour. A giant tapered pillar of glistening steel awaited them at the end of the passageway, where the digital route terminated their flight. An indicator flashed upon Rennai’s visor pane.

“Stand by.”

It pulsed... pulsed... Green. “Pull!”

The team hauled their bodies violently back, forcing legs forth and slowing speed to nil. Each dropped simply from the air to set boots and knee to wet pavement with no offence. They sent their gazes about the structural intricacies, assault rifles drawn from their left hips and set ready to the pits of their arms.

And once more, silence...

Just the ominous howl of commercial industry, commute, and urban life contained to endlessly reverberate within the structures of this steel, concrete and holographic cave. A distant thud of club music from blocks away. Streams of water poured on endless supply from a multitude of sources above. The air was thick, misty, humid; the passageway empty, dark, industrial in nature.

Not a soul.

The team knelt in their thick black bodysuits hugging their Transcendent physiques, padded about areas of concern, though not all too much concerned such types. Now stationary, their forms could be more defined, like the articles of equipment and purpose strapped or wrapped about them for convenient access.

“Clear right,” spoke Eiver.

“Clear left,” followed Jhalis, two steadfast, perfectly chiseled bastions of strength, clear perfect masculine faces of olive and coffee tone.

Rennai, the comparative babyface of the group, himself of a clear olive tone, focused down the gauntlet of walls to familiarise himself with the tall thick pillar he had thus far only viewed via particle. There was little difference, but it was different all the same; not intimidating, but unnerving perhaps with its stillness.

Two reenforced featureless doors were the only definable feature of the structure climbing to meet the ‘The Dries’, the sunbathed upper levels playing part of this city’s roof. They were named so for their convenient lack of condensation and occasional flash flooding from faulty sewer doors.

“Eyes on target,” he commented. “No contacts. Clear.”

Their visors retracted, minimising their fields to leave that of mere tactical monocles and glow of Transcendent skin.

“Aiza is weak here,” spoke her soft voice. “This truly is the Trickster’s realm.”

He looked back to find Ki’Soun in the centre of the group, searching the surrounding air. “One-fifty-plus Ethereals have observed our arrival and are focused here, though none can see through our shrouds. The number is falling.” She frowned with effort, though shook her head. “There may be more though my range is so limited.”

“What range do you have?”

She continued to look about herself, gnawing her lips in thought.

“Perhaps fifty metres,” she looked. “I’ve never felt her so weak.” They eyed each other... and she looked ahead for the doors herself. “I cannot penetrate the hold itself.”

“Closer?” he asked, and she fluttered in uncharacteristic bother, a frown of concentration bringing the only discrepancy to her otherwise flawless youthful face. Her soft full lips opened in huffing exclaim, and bright orange irises flashed ahead to the pillar on occasion, trying to gauge this or that of her surroundings.

Others glanced in turn with the pause, until finally she returned to him.

“... Perhaps.”

Rennai and Ki’Soun watched each other. She appeared almost apologetic. None of her kind ever required under a hundred metres to penetrate, dominate or utterly decimate anything.

Rennai then met the patient look of Gial to the Enchant’s left; muscular, dark skinned, clear adonis face and soft crystal eyes despite the power of his structure. Lahreel watched from the right, teal irises piercing through to deliver their message of uncertainty. Her heavy-lashed sleepy-swept gaze, straight nose and equally soft full lips of a natural breathy pout though ever countered any portrayal of disturbance. What remained instead was a dose of distilled demure, a thoughtless neutral look bearing impact like some strato-starlet of porn, adding one more check for the ‘Transcendent’ title. No matter where they chose to land, these people topped the seductive scale.

“Advance,” Rennai conceded, and the team picked up and forth, moving far too swiftly for such a level of silence to allow. But silent they were; superior strength, superior hearing, superior balance, superior articulation all compiling in support.

Quiet streets, empty but for the window lights of the odd Sapiens worker perhaps more accustomed to the Dome’s endless night, and choosing to adopt their own independent sleep schedules from the outside world. Dark lanes rushed by; their target ahead closed.

“Contact,” Ki’Soun hissed, halting them and dropping each to a knee. She had swung about to face the way they had come. “Behind us. Large rogue force inbound, melee and light ranged arms, thirty seconds.”

They turned with glares, frowning, glancing among themselves and their surroundings.

“This LZ was clear,” Jhalis stated.

“Line to Six. Weigh left,” Rennai directed. “Stand-to.” They had finished the formational about-turn in the space of a breath and knelt to wait and observe. Jhalis, Eiver, Rennai and Mazon, the Team Lead and Assaulters in front. Gial, Signals, and Lahreel, Weapons, flanking the Enchant delicacy safe in the middle behind.

A tumultuous ruckus closed upon the passageway’s end. The group was big, and coming right on. Rennai checked behind them. The pillar doors were still closed.

“Should we get off the passage?” Eiver glanced back. “Let them pass?”

“They’re here for us,” Ki’Soun said flatly, bringing another round of glances.

“How would they know we’re he-” They emerged. Roars; cheers, deep guttural calls and wailing shrieks erupting from within the congealed mist, now igniting with vivid neon shapes defining limbs, or hair, or entire figures, all shuffling, closing, emerging from the curtain as a rabble of steel, colour and flesh.

They filled the passage and discovered their prey. 7-foot armoured giants of a multitude of natural and customised skin-tone made up the front lines. Human, though ultra-masculine, thick and tapered with muscle, hunching with anticipation in their sports armour and gang weapons. Sapiens filled out the rest of the number, accessorised and genetically-customised the same, vibrant with spiking hair, glowing cosmetics, and every variety of augmentation.

Tattooed women, many dressed more suited to a night of street walking than blooding, moved among them with decorated assault rifles, shotguns, and melee weapons all the same. Face cages revealed thickened fluttering lashes and glowing full lips, armour plates strapped about promoted over-sized busts and naked hips. Others meanwhile had come fully dressed and enclosed, ready with their men to plunge right into the maw.

Gladiators, brawlers, mercenaries; a chaotic army of grotesque, fully armed and prepped, ready and eager to go. It was a trap, and Rennai checked behind them once more... the doors of the pillar remaining sealed.

Their lines filled out all the more from the mist, perhaps as many as two hundred had come, though the number was impossible to gauge with the chaos and vibrancy. There was no order to be seen, just glowing trim lines and webs and animations of their urban and sex wear, the figures illustrating their violent and lewd promises for the visitors.

“WELCOME TO THE CRAAVVES, FASCIST T-SCEN WHORRES!”

A variety of demoralising signs danced among them; animated holographs depicting an elegant male angel strapped down and hollering while being fucked in the arse. One foot-long flaccid tool of such intent was being flopped and waved in taunt by one of many would-be dominants.

Rennai narrowed. They were expecting them... How?

He checked their back again, checked the roofs about them... Clear.

“Ethereals?” he asked.

“They’ve lost us,” Ki’Soun replied. “Most now observe them. Others are searching though cannot find us.”

“They know who we are though... expected us.” Mazon looked back without much concern. “Far too much of a coincidence, and too much time to prepare.” He checked their surroundings himself.

“Alley is blocked,” spoke the breathy voice of Lahreel, glancing to that parallel. “This passage is a defensive gauntlet. No extraction but up.”

“Stand-to,” Rennai reapplied with no immediate concern, and the seven examples of perfection each held their spaced formation, kneeling in wait, though perhaps bearing a little more weight to their exhales.

The front line of giants, the Homo-Gargantuan species, stowed their victory tools to ready their blood tools instead, bucking each other up to began their glaring advance. There were a lot of them, and after gaining their initial momentum, they began to jog.

Had they detected their arrival via some manner of orbital sensor on route?

No, they had had more time to prepare than that.

Long term, the team’s operation was compromised and would require adjustment, though they’d need to deal with this mob first before relocating and going dark once more. This crowd knew ‘of’ them, perhaps through biased hearsay, but they were far too confident to reveal any actual experience in who they now sought to engage.

No one who truly knew Apex Legion would dare come at them directly like this; and they clearly had no comprehension of who knelt at their sides.

Ki’Soun exhaled the nerves and set to applying her craft, stretching arms aside to summon the surrounding mist of electrical forces to her whim. She reached to this place and that, feeling the currents here and there, tapping and drawing them to where she would have them redeploy. The result brought a most subtle turbulence of static air particles grouping on the microscopic level, a shimmering screen coagulating as a curtain of silk before them.

Rennai checked behind; the doors still closed. They were likely to be flanked by some unseen force who would make themselves known upon initial engagement.

“So they look pretty hostile to me,” Mazon glanced back, fishing for the opportunity to fire.

“Hold.”

The aggressors closed rapidly in full force, though Rennai watched the women behind, supporting gunners in thigh-boots and thongs climbing bins and vehicles to take aim and make the first shots.

Impacts struck and rippled the static shield before him.

There.

“HIT’EM!” With tears of the air the team let loose back in turn, their kinetic pulse rounds striking clean through the shield and into the Gargan lines. It stopped their momentum dead, dropping and scattering their neon number immediately for cover, common sense perhaps finally gaining upon the aggression of their species or stimulants.

More and more shots rippled the curtain before them, the superiors remaining knelt in the open, sending rapid but placed burst after burst after burst right back, bursting select points of chest, back, or skull, dropping figures large and small in their place. The aggressors piled into what cover they could manage, glaring and screaming at each other in exclaim, perhaps realising their strategy of ‘fuck it’ was officially fucked, as the fuckers they faced clearly didn’t give a fuck.

The support gunners had piled behind the industrial bins packed along the flank a hundred metres ahead. Ki’Soun focused upon a private sedan asleep along the flank opposite. It surged with a new life of light and power, anti-grav emitters igniting to full and launching the craft forward into the air, rolling those using it to hide across the pavement. The craft heaved a tight leftward hook, striking through three of the assaulters and on for the now compromised sanctuary. The gunners screamed, arms out in futility before it SLAMMED into the bin with a burst of blood.

The puppet master then wrenched it back out in aggressive reverse, hunting down fleeing others and diverted much of the gunfire towards bringing the vehicle down.

“Contact ALCHEMIST!” Lahreel called and placed a tag upon their HUDs, identifying through the fresh gap a white-haired degenerate in the rear thug lines. Ballistic goggles and bulky coat, a generator rig and battery packs strapped and intertwined about him with cables and lights.

His generators had already wound up to first stage, and subsequent Transcendent shots dissolved harmlessly into his own personal laser shield with a digital fragmentation of yellow and green. With a grit of his jaw the man stretched forth his arms, spinning light from the emitters, the reactors wailed further to life and sent the warping unstable field further out and before their lines as their own official counter.

“HOLLLD, Stand to,” Rennai responded, ceasing the team’s fire. They lowered the buttstocks from their shoulders... taking opportunity for tactical reloads while checking their surroundings. The Gargantuan

and Sapiens thug number double-checked and swarmed back into the street, recreating a cohesive line. They were notably a little more wary this time, perhaps questioning why they hadn't done the shield thing first. Sometimes the cocks were just bigger than the minds.

“Shields. Blades.”

The team stowed their ranged weapons back along their hips, and disks of turquoise energy spun instantly to life from their forearms. Each drew featureless two-handed hilts of black from the same hip, holding them out to their right. With sharp CLACKS the 4-foot straight blades spun from nothing to snap to instant life, single-edged with angled tips.

The team held ready, monitoring the uncertain though quickly rousing advance, the spectral curtains of both sides closing to the point of contact.

The Gargans roared once more, superhuman testosterone clenching their muscles, jaws, and intent. Lahreel fluttered and closed her eyes, pulling lips between her teeth, releasing the stammer of her core through a quivered breath from her nose. She held her cold stare of the three honing specifically for her, leading countless more behind, enhanced by the knowledge her companions would each be busy with their own.

“... I'm scared,” she softly spoke, though maintained that stare.

“Good,” Gial released a heavy exhale. “So you're clear... sharp... lethal.”

Ki'Soun allowed for the most subtle of furrows, the more experienced assaulters ahead tensed and glared... This was the nervous part.

“Thank you,” Lahreel then followed, locked upon the three glaring glowing beasts. “I love you all, my beautiful men.”

“I love you,” the others said in turn, to her and each other. Rennai meanwhile contained his attention, staring, waiting, watching the horde close.

“Aiza is with you!” the Enchant ensured.

They waited...

“Protect the Enchant...” Rennai prepared. “FOR THE DEITINE!”

The Giants pierced the curtain and reared back to strike.

“FUCK-EM!”

BLAM, the four struck through the Gargans, slamming into the line behind with blistering CRACK. Several giants dropped limbs or halved in their wake, while the magnetic shields repulsed the Sapiens violently back, slamming them through the crowd, tumbling over the top, and

sending all clambering.

The Transcendents now unleashed with no other option but death; swiping, ramming, stomping, spinning, often sheathing shields to deliver two-handed strokes and chops, then casting immediately again to deflect or bounce a flailing figure back into the chaos.

Gial and Lahreel darted laterally in the rear, keeping Ki'Soun clear to observe and adjust. She picked passageway lights, or displays on enemy equipment to suddenly flare and blind them, mist to whirl and confuse. An unmanned vehicle slammed through the rear, sending many tumbling. Many were left just frozen in shock, only able to decipher the glaring grimacing faces of these dark angels from childhood nightmares now blitzing through detached limbs and mist clouds of blood.

Asura were real, realised, and now tearing their number and confidence apart.

Ki'Soun picked a woman on the flank with a grenade on her belt. She took her leg off at the thigh with the blast, dropping several more, and leaving her gripping the pavement, glaring blankly in shock.

“CONDUIT! GET THE CONDUIT!” voices called from her left.
“ALIVE! ALIVE!”

She spun to find the numerous figures now charging from a hidden side passage flank. She wrenched free and unfolded a 90cm staff, snapping to life the metre long blade on the far end, thrusting, wrangling, keeping them at bay as she rapidly backed up. “ASSIST-ASSIIISST!!!”

BLAM! Gial was into them, slamming one aside and into a distant wall, Lahreel soon to follow, both swiping, slashing, beating back the flanking threat.

“SOONIE UP THERE!” she pointed to a warehouse rooftop behind, to which Ki'Soun saw and leaped up to the position with no contention.

The team contracted themselves at once, back from the bulk, while their Enchant Mistress articulately tugged back the field in places to keep them contained while exposing their foe. She ignited a parked truck to life and sent it charging out of its garage and into the opposite wall of the side passage, sealing the flank once more.

Lahreel landed beside her, letting loose a succession of fire back down, before closing to her. “I need a window on the creep!”

“Stand by!” Ki'Soun confirmed, and Lahreel focused upon the surging, now steaming Alchemist staggering in tow of his lines, maintaining their shield. She paced about her back, breathing a long calming exhale through

her wide open mouth, charging her following round to high-impact. She set a boot to the edge and aimed her specialist rifle in with a final empty of her lungs.

“On-scope.”

“CLEARING!” Ki’Soun called and thrust forth both hands in a concentrated static burst, lancing a hole straight through the mist, through the glowing field, right to the lumbering electro-wizard.

Crack, BAM! The man’s head popped a fan of blood, both figure and laser shield alike collapsing to the pavement in turn.

“WE’RE CLEAR! FUCK-EM!” Rennai called, the men shield-battered the closest back and away, whipping free their rifles once more and opened up with no relent. They dropped those immediately in view and buckled the rest to flight, the final straw was broke and the battle was done. The welcoming party now scattered in free for all, bolting for dear life, shots slamming in to burst blood here and sending weapons and limbs spinning there.

They cleared in a mere tens of seconds and soon BA-BA-BAM, the final woman squealed, dropping to a motionless heap just shy of the corner, leaving the passageway to calm once more.

Moans... crawling, nudging, huddling figures daring to peer up to the blood-glazed Transcendents left straight and glaring back, scanning over all as they heaved the damp air. One by one glowing neon articles of digital apparel dimmed with the fade of the wearer’s heartbeat, losing their kinetic power source and leaving mere dull flesh in their place.

The passage darkened... darkened... and darkened about them.

“Clear.”

“Clear,” they all assured.

“SOONIE, YOU RIGHT?” Eiver called.

“I’m alright!” the Enchant assured, dropping softly and daintily back down to their level. “Are you all?!” Eiver stroked her crown in hand, and pulled her to him, kissing her forehead. “Jhalis your vitals are disrupted!” she inquired from the cradle of his bloodied chest.

“It, it got a little close,” he replied, looking sobered, strung, but nodding in assurance. “I’m good.”

Lahreel took him and kissed him, holding their bloodied lips locked through several hums, before breaking and repeating the same with Mazon.

“Ethereals?!” Rennai huffed.

“Thousands have arrived,” Ki’Soun replied, looking about them.

“Though none see us, only our effect. They’ll lose us once we move.”

“Okay we’re relocating right now, going dark,” Rennai set into gear, looking razzled like the others. He fanned a holographic map upon the inside of his forearm. “Extract to the safehouse, uhh...” Lahreel took his face.

“C’mere,” she kissed him in turn, mouthed him, tongued him, humming. “Mmm’love you. You know that?” she moaned, and he nodded, taking her shoulder. She held her forehead to his, teal irises staring into him with radiant excitement. Her bottom lip curled in to taste. Her breath roused him, but she left him for Gial... and he blinked, and returned to his duty.

“Uhh...” Rennai cleared. “Extract. Nav Echo-Two. How copy?” He looked to the others, who nodded in turn.

“Copy.”

“Alright we moving now,” he said with a glance of the ever silent pillar. “Op postponed till we find out what just happened. Okay jump, JUMP, JUMP!”

They launched as one, up, over, and disappeared into the neon-stroked dark.

VALLEGIA

Book One - The AiZA Trilogy

By Dani Strey

- Part 1 -

Chapter 1

Her blood-soaked hand trembled before her eyes. There was nothing she could do to stop it. The young coffee-toned Sapiens woman sat glaring as if it weren't actually her own. Her side-shaved purple hair had sticky blots and splatter all through it, though she wouldn't become aware of that until much later. The image played as contrast to the fraying denim shorts she had torn down to the coverage of underwear, loose curtain of fabric she draped as a crop top, and body-sleeve or bright fishnet actively flooding waves of alternating colour all along her figure.

"I can't, they just... they... He was, there..." she said to the woman tending to her blood-drenched side, "right there and then... He was gone, just... he just, burst, he just..."

"Keep this pressed," directed the paramedic in coveralls, maintaining a more tightly honed mind. She looked once more across the crowd of moaning wounded, and the mentally shattered beside them just staring in shock. Late teens, twenty-somethings, only a few life-brawlers over thirty. They were mostly urban kids paid an amount beyond the level to refuse, and revved up with false-promises of easy victory and liberation from their plight.

A young Gargantuan watched with a visual whimper, pleading voicelessly with his hands out while a small eight-armed metal case like a robot crab sat nested upon the chest of another of his kind lying bloodied before him, an electric pulse surged on repeat from the crab into his chest.

“I’m losing this one,” spoke a smooth human voice from the crab’s shell.

“Ah’shhhit-no-no-NO!” a second paramedic clambered over, the crab scurrying free to allow him make his direct physical effort for the umpteenth time that morning. It attracted many disbelieving eyes as the stricken man’s neon dulled and flickered for the final time.

“Patient deceased,” the crab stoically advised.

“Wh-fuckin’ NO!” he slammed his equipment aside, and the Gargan rolled aside the other way to weep into another’s arms.

The Sapiens paramedic gathered himself, and looked to the rest, while the crab returned to collect the sensor’s from the corpse’s chest.

“Pressure’s not returning here!” another crab spoke with a cartoony female voice, the being securely embracing the nearby stump of a severed Sapiens leg.

No time; dwell later.

“Alright come on, next!” the Paramedic pointed, and set back into gear. “Clear out!”

A Sapiens man of early forties watched this scene from above, safely insulated from the disturbance in a clean crisp bright yellow shirt. He held silent, gaze left to simply dart from one catastrophe to the next. He was himself no stranger to violence, his coffee-toned complexion hardened, scarred in places and tattooed with a grey wave of pattern flowing up from his collar to enclose the left of his face and be lost within his short designer-messy white hair.

If paying attention, one would notice some of the strokes slowly shifting across his skin, the pigments changing like pixels to morph the pattern over time. They would take a different form in an hour, and then another still in the next. No one was looking in that moment though, and the man himself could only shift his gaze between one scene to the next. The now motionless carnage filling the passageway. The countless wounded filling the warehouse staging point. The motley teams now tepidly filling the lanes, attempting pursuit of the last figures they ever wished to meet again.

The man rejected it all, looking away from the panel of sensor feeds and out the window of his spacious well-lit apartment to the bright morning sky. He landed among the transcendent leaves, the clouds, the passing traffic, unwilling to yet process what had just occurred. The poolside terrace was bathed in golden light, and a group of mid to late

teen Homo-Sapiens girls, guys, and other were already chatting happily in their bikinis. Many were topless, all of them glammed up with style and accessory, some of inhuman skin tone or pattern or proportion, and all completely ignorant of the utter devastation having just taken place directly beneath their youthful giggles.

He isolated himself to their playful sexuality and naive feminine cheer, reminded once more that things would be alright. Maybe he just needed to distract himself by dicking one of them for a while.

“We lost... what, fifty?” asked a second well dressed man beside him of darker tone, his own attention still locked to the large screen. “Eighty?!”

“We knew they would escape,” the first reminded, if only in self-assurance. “That’s what the second stage is for.” He kept with the thonged rear of a dark-purple skinned girl lying sideways upon a deckchair, allowing the shape to rouse him more than it normally would.

“Escape?!” his companion lifted to him. “THEY TORE THE SHIT OUT OF US!!! WE DIDN’T FUCKING SCRATCH’EM!”

“It’s a...” Aminal Madan stepped free of it all, “set back,” moving to the terrace doorway to keep himself absorbed within the sexuality. The young toys were now sitting up and watching back for the source of the sudden outburst. Millice Doln, his right hand in a crystal shirt, however followed him over in tow, looking to further press the case and keep Madan locked to reality. He was however locked onto the slender lines of an elegant, supple-breasted femboy, glancing knowingly back through a flutter of ‘natural’ thick lashes.

Yes...

He’d take that one... put him over the couch back... set him in place...

“IT’S A COMPLETE ASS-FUCKING AMINAL!” Millice exclaimed, snapping him to. “We need serious help!”

“Not yet,” Madan refused, leaving him again, this time for a personal bar along the opposite wall to take up a bottle and glass and pour himself a drink.

“Get their guys down here right now!” Millice pursued, pointing back to the direction of the Singh tower dominating the outside view.

“Not, yet,” Madan reasserted with a direct look at him. “Wait for stage two. I will not allow them any excuse to question our expenses. They’re gonna pay for this.”

His partner reigned his anxiety... looked aside, huffed, sighed... and placed hands to his hips.

“We’re not recovering from this,” he said. “How do we hold the blocks now? We’re not recovering.”

“We always recover,” a woman then spoke from the couch, “and we will build bigger and stronger than ever.”

Strapped silver heels upon long glossy genetically bronze-bleached and sparkling legs, the curvy forty-something lounged in her black bareback one-piece swimsuit, a simple arrowhead of modesty covering her from each bulging breast to crotch. A sheer white sarong was wrapped about her hips, and she was accessorised with all manner of jewellery to match the sparkle of her skin. Brown, gold and blonde streaked hair flowed full and softly curled about her shoulders; her full lips were ruby, and eyes heavily shadowed despite the early hour.

She directed her nose towards the view of the trees, rejecting all concern. “What’s the loss of a few rips and whores,” and rose from the couch with an impatient sigh, walking for the window, politely helping herself to her partner’s fresh drink along the way.

Madan simply made himself another without complaint.

“At least contact the Vamp,” Millice pressed on.

“That Cunt will eat into our profits as much as sh-“

“Our profits are safe,” Madan cut the woman off with a look. “Go for your swim.”

Lali just sighed, and returned to coldly watching the squeaky little toys outside from an easy lean against the doorsill. They had all notably subdued and lowered their attention with her arrival.

Madan looked to his business partner and nodded. “Get the Cunt as a contingency.”

Millice nodded in return, the concern perhaps partially alleviated.

“And what about the law? They’ll be hearing about this soon. What will they do?”

Madan was watching the particle feeds again, the chaos, the panic, saying no more.

“They didn’t even warn us,” Millice continued on his own, watching as well. “They had to know what we were in for, had to know what they were capable of... They didn’t even warn us.”

Madan just kept staring... until he suddenly blinked and once more returned to the vision of youthful playful joy, the beautiful femboy teen tempting a glance back... He took a drink.

“We’ll be alright.”

* * *

A late forties Sapiens man woke with a sharp draw of the air. He kept with himself for a moment, staring up into the beam of morning light casting through the opaque window; dust particles drifting in and out of existence.

The man progressed through the stages of rising with a succession of straining huffs and sighs, sitting upon the side of his single bed to look about the lonely single room apartment.

He washed his creased face of dark skin, patted over his thinning black hair, cropped back for practicality. He requested his usual simple breakfast via his tiny kitchen, the apartment AI directing the appliances to play through the usual routine. He wasn’t the culinary indulgent or craftsman that others were. He simply ate for the purposes of utility.

A photo on the wall over his tiny two-seat dinner table showed a pink to bluish skinned Homo-Galilean with a fringe of sandy-pink hair. She was perhaps twenty years of age, with the typical lighter weight, extra-curve and ultra-feminine frame of her species, standing next to him holding some form of official certificate. He was firm, but humoured, playing a fine reserved counter to her unbridled smile. Both were in the formal variants of Terra Imperial Civil Guard uniforms.

He took the usual time to dress and make himself presentable in the utility variant of his uniform now, stomping his feet into his shin-high steel capped black Canvar boots, and hitching up his weapons and equipment belt. He set his large pistol onto his right thigh, upon the charge plate, and checked the battery; good to go.

He pulled on his Civil Guard black self-cooling Canvar duster coat, previously stowed beside an image of an older couple sitting in a living room. Another beside that showed the same young Galilean dressed in casual clothes, hair out about her shoulders, sitting alone at a table despite the vibrant crowd in the background. She was turning to meet the capturer, pleasance to her large violet inhuman eyes and inherent Gally good looks.

The man checked and patted over his Imperial Civil Guard shield and paused at the front door.

There he composed himself, closed his eyes, placed his hand upon it and lowered his head. "I pledge to you, Aiza, for the advocacy of the Deitine and her promise for Humanity's eternal bloom. Protect me, assist me, guide me... I will see her bidding done."

The door slid aside, igniting his world with Sol. The man placed on his broad brimmed hat, bearing a shield of its own, and stepped on out into the passageway.

"Morning Marshal," a pleasant man passed, giving a nod.

"Morning Mr Khatri," he replied, looking up to the magnificent towering Banyan displaying the full range of colour across its four metre leaves.

The tradition of many of Earth's coastal cities by 6000ad was to rebase their structures around, within, and upon the roots and branches of colossal Transcendent-Trees. Select local flora were genetically engineered to filter salt water and live off of the ocean, thus removing any resource-defined cap to their growth and keeping the rising tide at bay through pure consumption and carbon recycling.

The Megapolis of Mumbai, Maharashtra Sector, had selected the Banyan, a number of which offered multi-level foundations for the city's central features. Generally they partnered well with the island platforms of The Dries to contain the sun entirely for themselves. A single broad morning ray, however, shone reliably down through the leaves, through the spaceport terminal shaft and into the grungier depths of The Craves to light the central Courthouse blocks; the largest sunspot to reach ground level of the Mumbai Dome.

The massive black sea wall blocked all view to the west, and all to the east of the Courthouse beneath the The Dries remained locked within endless night, passage lights, neon and nightlife. The Marshal swept what he could see of that dark world, his gaze climbing up past The Dries, past the dancing Gally holograph, and through the Banyan and pyramid of clambering skyscrapers all so desperate to cling to the leg of the Singh strato-tower. He followed that broad mirrored path up, ever up, beyond all, disappearing well beyond the clouds.

He watched it for a moment... and a newly arriving transit shuttle dropping swiftly down through the invisible anti-grav transit chute to deliver its parent ship's haul of cargo or immigrants. The Marshal held with the sight of the large tubed hole lancing its path through the

clouds all the way beyond the atmosphere. He drew a breath and set on for the day, venturing the more humble journey across the passageway to the understated Courthouse front door.

“Morning Marshal,” a kindly woman greeted in passing, to which he nodded back.

“Ma’am.”

The middle-aged male Deputy was cleaning a cup in the rear kitchen when the door opened. He had to lean back to find who had entered.

“Morning!”

“Pen signed on yet?” the Marshal ‘greeted’, setting his hat upon a rack at the door.

“About ten minutes ago,” the thin sprightly Sapiens replied. “She’s out in six quad.”

“What’s that, appam?” the Marshal narrowed, making way around the desk facing the door.

“Coffee,” the Deputy corrected, setting the cup aside. “New place I told her about. Best appams are over in forth.”

“Hm.” The Marshal went to sit before the terminal, readying to brief himself on the night’s happenings before heading out on his own rounds. It was only a moment before he paused to read something.

“What’s this?”

“Very big engagement just this morning,” the Deputy eagerly advised, making his way over, clearly having expected to brief him on it. “Right outside the Keep. Multiple combatants.”

“Dead?”

“A lot, but all gang militia according to that. SinghSec says it was a Ramali insurgency. They’re calling it secure now, but...” He shrugged. “When do we ever get all the details from them? I went into the Ether to see if there was any mention. There’s certainly chatter, but mostly speculation. I figured you’d had a heavy enough night already though, so didn’t wake you for it.”

The Marshal glanced briefly to the half-face headset beside him.

Hm... no. There was no point. Corman was the Ether surfer, the Marshal the eternal novice to that realm.

“Where’d you say Pen was, Sixth?”

“Sixth,” the Deputy nodded.

“I’ll route to her,” The Marshal stood, setting into gear. “SinghSec will claim it, but we’ll check it out just in case.”

“It seemed like a big one,” the Deputy nodded, thumbing his belt.

“Want me to hang about?”

“No it should be alright,” the Marshal shook off, and placed the hat onto his head once more. “It’s likely an inter-Corp action like they say. We’ll just check civilian damage.”

“I’ll ask about the Ethereals a little later,” Corman nodded, “see if anything comes up.”

* * *

The young woman progressed slowly on... jolt... jolt... jolt... her rose to white-skinned rear jiggling ever so with each paced step of her long purple boots. Her arms were gloved with the same colour, and deep red hair hung curled and bouncing the same about her completely naked back. The motion continued until reaching the end of the corner, where she paused... then turned about, her front naked as well but for three strategically placed purple adhesive strips.

She began her slow easy return, figure curving and slender thighs and breasts jiggling to all the right standards of her vocation as she combed the scene with large heavy-lashed un-Earthly ruby-iris eyes.

Within the night streets the night vibe ever maintained, and despite the morning hour, the woman and her fellow Homo-Galilean sisters were only halfway through their ‘clock’. The long-legged, hour-glassed, large-eyed, multi-tone skinned, naturally exotic and famously free-loving beauties from far off-grit, still pulled the same attention no matter what hour the outside world tried to impose.

Arms, legs, shoulders, backs and hair were all wrapped and riled up into an abundance of vibrant colour and spectacle. Fabrics and ribbon complemented the varied skin-hues of their otherwise naked slender elven forms. Tiny thong bikinis or strategically placed adhesive strips were employed to protect the Earthling’s conservative sensibilities, but these were entirely counterproductive additions to the Gally mind. They did provide extra possibilities for decoration though, and that was

absolutely their thing.

The women roused, making their signature swaying hippy dances of lure, calling to the direction of a cruising vehicle which had slowed to check them out. The driver seemed particularly honed upon the rose member of the gaggle, who quickly employed herself with a lift of the arms and rotation of her Gally hips.

“COME! I DRAW YOU OUT LONNGG, SAPPIE’BOYY!
GET’DRAWN!”

The surrounding alleys, vehicles and hotel windows resonated with groans, hums, whines, claps of slapping flesh and squeaking gasps of response. In one lane a blue Gally walker danced, displayed and teased for the erected mass of a Gargantuan blue collar leant back upon an old discarded bench. His super-masculine bulk dwarfed her delicate super-feminine frame, but she was the dominant there. The perhaps inexperienced man could merely beam in amazement as this playful giggling nymph ever stroked and dragged herself so happily upon him, sniping the occasional opportunistic peck of his cheek, nose or cock, singing hums of anticipation before they officially got started.

Neither noticed the seven dark figures pass mere metres behind her back, crossing through to the next orange-lit court.

Mazon held up to sweep the scene with eyes and gunsights, covering his comrades as they passed.

“How do they even handle those things?” he whispered to Lahreel. “It’s the size of her.”

“Where there’s a will there’s a way,” Lahreel gleamed back for herself. “And with that...” she nodded, “there’s a will.” She moved on.

Rennai passed and stopped to cover another direction, and the Enchant passed in turn, bearing perhaps more of a blush to her cheeks than her team sister.

“They’re certainly an... impressive species.”

“You girls are welcome to him,” Mazon tossed in her wake. “I’m taking that rose Gally we passed two blocks back.” He nodded back to Rennai. “We gotta come back here more often.”

“We’ll grab some souvenirs before we leave,” Rennai humoured in turn, though was far too lacking in humour to press it, more focused instead upon the surrounding rooftops. A sensor was mounted upon a nearby wall, likely militia, though he had to presume any of the militia’s Ethereals currently using it to witness the flesh realm would remain

unable to see them.

A holographic sexy Italian woman, the mascot of a closed restaurant wearing only a chef's apron, hat, and heels, stood nearby staring right at him. It honed him at first, though he soon realised she was just staring emptily into space. Perhaps the last Ethereal to occupy her had forgotten to shut her off once having finished their shift.

Rennai sat watching.

How did they possibly know that Apex were coming?

The team moved swiftly and silently through the grids, slaloming like a snake and dodging the boisterous passages of crowds and lanes of hidden mischief. The rooftops were quicker, darker, but the shadows of object and silhouettes of completing glow more secure.

They had retained themselves to the darker industrial outskirts, where a lower percentage of the countless 24-hr Crave clubs filled the passages with intoxicated tourists and predatory locals. Only a couple of times had they needed to hold up in the shadows for the slow pass of a suspect vehicle overhead, glowing with pattern and decorative lights, passengers leaning over to peer down in search of something, most likely them.

There were a lot of parking garages filling the rooftops of the Craves, and these allowed the team the freedom to quickly dart up and over the top of whole blocks at a time. They needed only to huddle in with the pass of occasional people making their way either from their rides to start their 'night', or to end their 'night' walking arm in arm with their newly acquired rides.

A group of rowdy young men were crowding something at the end of an alley, one firmly shoving himself into someone the rest held secured over a discarded workbench. They hollered, cheered, taunted in belittlement, each waiting their turn to deliver that aggression directly upon the 'him', 'her' or 'other' they had indentured to their service through pay, debt, manipulation or force.

Such had long been known to be the culture in that region. From the top down a long stepladder of successive dominants indulged upon the subs below, whether through work, class, relationships or fantasy. No equality, nothing shared, everything open to being taken and won.

Most of the Empire's residents lived and prospered within their social collectives of two to any number of thousand individuals, all sharing

food, resources, partners, the raising of children, and shelter within communal complexes, buildings and land holdings. The independent corporate regions and planets, however, were about the individual; man-eat-man in pursuit of true wealth and power, continuing the traditions birthed through the dawn of agriculture; institutional religion, nationalism and pursuit of wealth.

Rennai looked around, smelled around, listened around, witnessed around. It was interesting to be reminded of what the Sapiens species could so easily become.

Their journey ended with their arrival to a long neon graffiti-washed wall lining the entire length of a passage. Peering over the barrier revealed the dark walls of one of the city's large single storey incubation farms. A line of windows crossed the top, beneath the roof, and the entry was to the far end.

The yards were clear; empty, quiet. The Apex each set down upon the opposite side and made quick work of the distance, pulling up at the corner to sweep the empty vehicle park and entry. The offices and appending structures were clear.

The darkness was penetrated by a rectangle, the personnel cutout of a large main door opening to expand a subtle passageway of light across the floor and features of the space. Mazon pointed his rifle nozzle this way and that, noting the rows of dividing opaque screens looking more like a field hospital. He pressed his way in, illuminating the space with the automatic lights. The others followed in turn, fanning out and threading fluidly through the two rows of progressively larger fabric sacks, incubating and growing the genetic-steel components of whatever machines, vehicles, or products the factory had been commissioned to grow.

“Clear.”

“Clear,” was announced from each in time, and the team gathered up to the far end, near the storage rooms. Looking back, there wasn't much visibility through all the partition screens.

“We'll set a beacon on the roof and call in the drop,” Rennai spoke, “get in link with Hagess and find out what the hell happened back there.”

Gial nodded. “On it,” and began his way back to the door, intending to find the stairs to the roof outside. The others eased up, lifting monocles

and taking a more casual look about, finally rubbing their faces free of the congealed blood. Gial slowed however, noticing the trouble to Ki'Soun's expression.

"What's wrong?" He took her shoulder and she looked at him aghast.

"I can't... Aiza is not here." The others looked in turn, as she turned about in search. "Not at all! I feel Sarpheriss everywhere! I can't even breach it!"

Gial set to his comm hub, as the others took curious concern and reasserted their look around.

"I'm getting no channels," Gial said, looking to Rennai.

"Will the beacon even work?" Lahreel asked.

"I don't like being here, Rennai," the Enchant said, as if in plea. "I've never felt so naked."

The team looked to him and each other.

Mazon finally asked, "Who chose this safehouse?" before cold steel HACKED down through the screen and deep into his shoulder.

Ki'Soun wailed out in reach as he was wrenched back into the crowd of surging Gargans. Eiver snatched her back and to the rear as the others reacted as they could, deflecting attacks, being battered aside, or contained and hauled to the floor by countless number. More giants smashed through the screens to all sides, swinging desperately with the memories of the last engagement still fresh, countless Sapiens rushing about and through the gaps to make up any slack.

It wasn't one-sided though, the Transcendents quickly drawn and hacking through the attackers, despite more and more giants crashing through.

"WE'RE SET UP!"

The Transcendents hopped and darted up across the machinery to all directions, bringing a flail of panicking blades and axes and panicked blasts of guns. The Enchant was corralled back with priority.

"HOW MANY?!" Rennai called.

"I CAN'T SEE THEM!" she screamed. **"THE TRICKSTER CLOUDS ME!"**

A Sapiens hand yanked her back by the belt, tumbling her over machinery. She took the arm off with a swipe about her head, but another man grabbed her glaive hilt and wrestled her down. Jhalis was over the machine and through him, engaging the next. The man

blanked and fell apart, the sections and blood collapsing over her and flooding. Ki'Soun wrenched and spat through it and the collapsing body of another, finding a third honing upon her to which she met with a hard thrust of her blade.

“ASSIST!!!” Gial yelled, contained, lifted, and pinned against machinery by a Gargan and Sapiens, others scampering to get around and make the kill. Rennai, shield out, SLAMMED into their side, bouncing all through the neighbouring screens.

“ASSIIISST!!” Lahrel screamed in raged panic, pressed to the floor and wrestling with the impossibility of two Gargans, one on her lower half, the other containing her arms and weapon. The one on her thighs reeled back, lifting his hammer, intent to slam down onto her face.

“NO!” a third grabbed the weapon’s end. “WOMEN FOR CAPTURE! THEY WANT THEM ALI-” He collapsed in halves to Rennai’s blade. Gial took the arm from the other, and Lahrel gutted the third off of herself and rolled free of his collapse and back to her feet. She was slammed by a shoulder across the room, vanishing into the thick of the awaiting crowd.

“LARIIE!!” Rennai surged but was forced to engage others flooding the gap between.

Jhalis was crowded and forced down, one quickly sawing his blade up through his stomach and into his chest. His face fell blank, he dropped lifelessly to the floor, and they roared in furious cheer, resolved all the more that victory was perhaps possible.

A Sapiens launched from the rear and into the air to strike the wall. A dark figure leaping in turn to scamper up his falling body and spring across to the window ledge. Lahrel rushed along that in turn, leaving her grenade to do the rest.

CLAP! Plasma, blood, parts, springing from the rear, slamming, slapping, spattering the roof, walls and dropping all places about. She leapt and corkscrewed her body down to arm’s reach of her party, though another Gargan latched solid hold of her leg. “HELLP!! ASSIST!!!” BAM, Gial slammed through the Gargan and engaged the next. Lahrel dragged free and back, and the remaining team swiped, hacked and corralled, regaining buffer space.

“BACK-UP, BACK-UP!” Rennai enforced one side, Eiver completing the line to the other and slamming a man away with his shield. The attackers regrouped and stacked up as well, keeping back and wary, though ever pressing, fear and desperation in their eyes, panic in their

yells and orders to one another, clearly reminded once more they had bitten off well beyond what they could ever hope to chew.

They kept with the Transcends' rapid retreat, backing into a storage room. Ki'Soun slammed the door shut, Lahreel groaned to lift and tip a stack of shelving over to bar it, and the others barricaded with whatever else could be found.

They were blocked, no second door, and the five stood glaring, heaving air, listening to the desperate commotion and yells outside.

Ki'Soun quivered bloody and distraught. "They're gg... They're gone!" Rennai took firm clutch of her in his arms. "I could do nothing!" She broke into a full flood of tears, surrendering to his collar.

"We can't stay here," Gial told him soberly from the door, clacking his blade into nothing and dropping the blood free from the air.

"Rennai," Lahreel shakily pointed through tears of her own.

He looked up, reminded of the windows lining the top of the walls. His heart was slamming, nerves strung, head racing, images of Mazon, Jhalis... He had to clear, had to clear, and checked the numerous stacks of equipment and screens about them, listening to their opponents next door still frantically trying to decide what the fuck to do now with their own officially bullshit situation.

They had the initiative. He had to get Ki'Soun clear.

"You four stay," he said to them. "Hide, screen yourselves and hold here. I'll draw them," he nodded to the window, then to Ki'Soun. "Do what you can to get her out."

Eiver nodded, Gial followed.

"What about you?!" she gasped, pulling from him and clutching his chest in both hands. She was trembling uncontrollably; her first close-quarter and outmatched engagement. Rennai himself found such peace in her worried, pretty, blood-glazed face.

"We'll all get clear," he assured her softly, and looked to the others. "Go dark, twenty-four hours, and find each other tomorrow night." He looked to the others. "Don't use coms. We can't trust them. Understood?" They nodded, and he looked upon her flushed enchanting face once more.

"If I can find a place where Aiza remains strong, I will find you and contact," she nodded, taking his face in both hands and kissing his lips. She held it, maintained it, pushing her body as much to his as he could,

heaving air through her nose and humming with the effort.

“My love for you,” she breathed through the break of their lips.

“Beautiful boy.”

“Thank you, Enchant.” He took the back of her head, “for everything you’ve done for me.” He gave her a firm single kiss in return.

Rennai separated from her and took the men’s shoulders, hugged and pressed foreheads, nodding good luck through tears. Lahreel took his jaw to kiss his lips as well, holding it, then kept her forehead to his to share stammered breath. She was trembling, but forcing through it. Rennai watched the Enchant now burrowing herself into Eiver’s collar.

“Keep her safe.”

“We will,” Lahreel promised back in whisper. “Good luck.”

He was up onto the windowsill and out into the damp air, looking across the empty passageways beyond the farm wall. There was activity now, gang militia rushing past to get to the farm’s entry. They hadn’t yet figured out the need to coordinate and lock down the perimeter.

He looked back inside, finding his team already huddling into the recesses and drawing optical camouflage nets free from their pouches. All though were watching him.

Rennai pressed his lips, still tasting the women there...

He turned away, moving swiftly along the roof until reaching the end where what he found paused him in his tracks. The rear court was filled with militia, another alchemist, and router pillars set directly facing the wall. They were blocking Ki’Soun’s connection to Aiza and concealing their own force in the process. They had just been waiting there all along.

He wanted to destroy them, but... he looked back towards the other end, finding more figures arriving to add to the crowd. He kept low, doubling back the way he came and to the roof’s edge, where he hopped silently across and onto the wall.

Checking the area, he crossed again to the fire escape of a multi-storey block opposite, which he quickly and quietly scaled all the way to the top.

A group with vehicles had gathered by the farm wall gates. He needed to attract the attention.

Fuck it. They didn’t know his voice.

“THERE! THEY’RE OUT!” he yelled himself and the group startled. “ESCAPING ACROSS THE ROOF! THEY’RE OUT! THEY’RE OUTSIDE!!”

Secondary yells came in turn from the rear court, and more from the entry, where glowing figures began to step out into the clearing to look.

Good. Rennai fired several single shots down towards them and dashed, bolting up along the roof’s edge where he could still be seen, before ducking out of sight under a barrage of snapping kinetic and flashing bolt fire in return. He quickly crossed the roof and leapt to the next, finding a stairwell house wall to press against and wait, watching back to the direction of the farm.

The sounds of engines filled the air, and soon two sets of headlights rose up into view.

Rennai fired at them each, blanking one of the lights and turning the second vehicle aside.

“THAT WAY!” a voice called. “ACROSS THE ROOFS!”

Muzzle flashes flickered, bringing a rain of snapping fire and clanking kinetic rounds.

Good. Rennai eased and backed into shadow. The others would be safe. But he had to move.

Chapter 2

The wind rushed, coils hummed, structures and forms both natural and manmade flashed past at speed beneath them. Marshal Randeep Duman sat comfortably back in the saddle of his Guard-Spec single seat 'Arbiter', casting his narrowed gaze through his aviators across this world that was his charge.

In his mirror his First Deputy Penpei Nai kept a tight formation on his five o'clock, her own bulky steed packed out the same with all manner of equipment and necessity. What was visible of her was a soft chin and pert pink lips under the large frames of her own aviator glasses and a tri-corner Deputy's cap.

The pair coasted over the bright friendly districts of The Dries until finding their intended point of entry, where they banked and dove back down into the night. The rooftops and neons of The Craves were revealed once more, rushing beneath, supportive pylons and glowing digi-flora passing aside.

The pair honed and funnelled into the familiar dark and misty arterial passageway, bringing view of the pillar to the opposite end. They slowed, pulling up on this apparent battle zone, and hauled their Arbiters aside to make a softly strafing halt.

Silence.

The pair placed their boots to the pavement, and sat looking across the scene with focused reserve.

"FUCK!" exclaimed the young Homo-Galilean with slightly less of that reserve.

Blood and body parts filled the passageway. Drag marks scraped off into lanes of their own, and impact holes were the culture. The Marshal lifted his weight, and the Deputy followed in turn, both dismounting and stepping out to either side of the carnage.

A Civil Guard Chirp Drone was nearby, standing to. The hovering little disk with a sensor bulb had been the one to initially call it in. There weren't many misdemeanour fines for it to issue with this one, though the Ethereal controller had managed a few for those who might have survived.

The Deputy's aviators folded back on their own, shrinking to her temples once more and revealing the bright glare of her large unearthly violet irises darting from one abhorrence to the next. Her skin was currently a greyish pink, though would gradually partition and fade through grey to blue depending upon time of day, temperature, emotional state or level of intoxication. Her thick light-pink to luminescent-white dyed hair was back in a bun, a notably un-Gally commitment to visual austerity. She had still managed a dash of lipstick and eyeshadow though.

Duman hadn't seen one this big for a while.

"You ever seen one this big?"

"Not for a while."

At least there were no residential building collapses this time.

They set the bike lights on to 'mark it', brightly illuminating the craft in a softly wavering cross gradient of hue, and began their official assessment.

"What is this, a Corp War?" the twenty-three year old said, looking to the narrow passages flanking, a full-sized truck embedded randomly into a corner. She stood frowning, flabbergasted, and returned to the bodies. "I don't see any SinghSec about."

"Might be still fighting someplace."

"... Nothing on the feeds," she followed, scrolling through the listings of her monocle display, "not for Sarpheriss or Aiza."

"Square it off, Deputy."

Deputy Nai propelled herself with fresh commitment back for her ride via the long slender legs of her species. Her tapered tunic and black leggings emphasised her hourglass all the more, just how she would have it. She collected the wand and pointed it about to mark the vertices in the air, lines of vivid orange light filling in between for the cordon on their own. It was a pretty big scene.

“Tmma call in some more Chirps to assist.”

Duman meanwhile maintained his careful scrutiny. There were impact holes riveting the entire area. He was surprised they hadn’t heard it themselves; it must have been a monsoon.

The Deputy spied a few homeless guys nearby; two Sapiens and a one-armed and heavily scarred Gargantuan watching from an alley.

“Hey you guys see any of this?!”

“Couldn’t miss it!” one returned. “Goddamn battleground!”

“Deputy,” the Marshal drew her eye. “Bodies are all militia. No Corps.”

She turned back for the homeless. “You see who came in?! Ramali, or some other corp? What kinda vehicles?”

“No vehicles. They flew in themselves.”

The Deputy paused...

“I’ve seen it before,” the old Gargan continued. “The assault on Calladine. While we contained the Ghouls front line, Tier-1s flew in just like that on their flanks to breach their colony mainframe. These guys were military.”

She looked to her boss, who was already watching with a frown.

Her boots placed carefully through the bodies while the Deputy spun and flipped her large pistol artfully about on her finger for some muse of her own.

“Singh Sanitary’s got their work cut out on this one...” she commented, “when they decide to show up.”

The Marshal was scanning the blood pools through his own monocle, sighing with weight with the respective profiles showing up on his device. Many of the destroyed bodies matched familiar teens and twenty-something urban kids-turned-thugs he had watched grow up. Most had survived though, and staggered or dragged themselves off with hopefully a better lesson he had ever managed to teach them.

“These ones are cut straight through,” the Deputy said, crouching near one body, elbows on open-knees, still flipping her weapon out to the side. “Single strikes, really clean.” She looked back for him. “That’s some serious strength... Gargantuans? ... It doesn’t really look the same.”

“It’s not strength.” Duman pointed to a heavy splash of directionless wall splatter, a subtle drift of secondary drips carrying diagonally

upward. “This is an upward cut... backhanded. This is technique... training, precision... A very thin, very sharp blade.”

“So you think witnesses were right about them being military?” She straightened herself to his height. “Independent mercs?”

“No comment...” he replied, stopping to recognise a four year old girl in a cotton dress staring up from behind her mother’s thigh... as she lay in the passageway fifteen years later, hair green and knotted into rope about forward striking black devil’s horns, over-sized breasts naked to the world with the death of her digital crop top, tiny briefs with a black prosthetic Devil’s tail, thigh-boots, tattoos, assault rifle, and a three open impact holes across her chest and shoulder. “But independent mercs don’t do orbital infiltrations.”

He moved on for the next, and the Deputy continued her pistol spinning, flipping flawlessly with an adolescence-worth of mindless practice. It used to bother him, but he had come to realise it was a focus method for her. It often led to her picking up on a lot more discrepancies than he did, usually because he was endlessly distracted by her goddamn juggling.

“I can feel her still here,” Pen looked about herself, to the air. “Aiza.”

She stowed the weapon with a sudden shove, and stood finally in stillness and silence, addressing the graphics of her monocle display. “My link has so many more channels available than normal... It’s like Tricky Dick ain’t even here.”

The Marshal looked for himself, sure enough finding the secure Guard Central channels and feeds populating the air far more freely, the Trickster Sarpheeriss seemingly unable to counter and shut them out of their area just yet.

“... A Conduit,” the Marshal said to his distant view, and she turned and looked at him blankly.

“You serious?”

“Or the equivalent.” He moved on, studying the peripheries.

“... What’s the equivalent to a Conduit?”

“Exactly.”

Penpei stopped, becoming wary of something in her digital view. She looked at him.

“Uhhh hey we got a Chirp alert for the Bosun Fabrication Farm.”

Rennai pressed himself back against the alley wall, keeping to shadow. He watched down the perpendicular teal-lit lane towards the direction of the hurried voices rapidly closing in behind. Sure enough, three motley Sapiens characters soon rounded the corner, pausing only for a quick glance before pressing further in.

They were all punks, adhering to the Craves dress code of ‘whatever, just make it glow’. One with an auto shotgun led the way, the next with a pistol, and the last had to make do with a glowing pink machete. Rennai held himself back within the shadow, the trio’s jittery eagerness likely to take them right by without notice.

“C’mon let’s just get the fuck out of here, man,” the third muttered from the rear, bringing all three to a stop.

“... I agree,” the second eventually supported. “We definitely shouldn’t be splitting up like this. We couldn’t take ‘em grouped up. We definitely can’t take ‘em alone.”

The first held, eyes darting blankly, clearly seeing their point but conflicted all the same.

“I, I need the money, man.” He looked back to them. “Look let’s just... stick with it, but hang back. If we see anything, we’ll call it in.”

“And then what?” The second replied. “We charge at ‘em again? That tactic don’t work too good.”

The leader pressed his lips, pulling them between his teeth for a moment’s thought.

“... It’s a lotta money,” he finally released in appeal. “Come on.”

The trio ushered themselves on towards the passageway and Rennai watched them go. These guys were clearly terrified, and money was speaking louder than any personal or cultural hatred of Rennai’s kind. But money from who?

Another vehicle was coming in, filling the surrounding lanes with noise. Soon the lights filled the tops of the building walls and Rennai stepped beneath a fire escape to screen. The vehicle never revealed itself however, and just continued on overhead and past.

He checked both teal and green ends of the lane, the trio having left and joined the clubber crowds of the oncoming passageway. He was more exposed on the rooftops, but it was too busy down there.

He hopped with a huff, catching the rail, and stepped over onto the first level, beginning a careful ascent of the stairs.

Ki'Soun.

Were they after her specifically? Did they know she was coming?

How?

* * *

The Marshal and Deputy both stood at the door of the fabrication farm, staring blankly at what they had found. It was Penpei who finally broke the silence as usual.

“... You gotta be shitting me.”

Blood, bodies, entrails... the floor, the walls, the screens all splattered, and... the ceiling...

The Marshal stood passing his gaze across all the hanging dripping details.

“Well I guess this is what happened to the rest of Madan’s crew,” the Deputy said, making her first steps inside.

“Wait,” the Marshal took hold of her arm, eyes fixed upward, and a serving of hanging innards gave way and dropped with a wet slap to the floor before her.

“WHA-GE-“ She spun away, screw-face, fists punching every which way, feet stamping, until she splayed her hands out wide in final exclaim. “FFFUCK!!!”

The Marshal stepped on, leaving her to it.

“This is... ffuck!” she spat again, holding to catch herself, blinking, attempting to get back into gear. “They can’t have too many left after this, surely.”

“Worried about your job getting easy, Deputy?” he asked, carefully stepping through the mess and scanning each pool and meaty chunk.

“Actually I’m kinda curious about the power grab that’s gonna happen as a result,” she replied, pressing in to mimic his actions along the parallel row, though notably pausing on occasion to look for threats above.

The Marshal stopped to point something out.

“These two here... They’re not Madan’s crew.”

First Deputy Nai made her way over to take a look and bring up their profiles herself.

“They’re Shards,” she said, and sighed with weight. “Ffuuuck, I actually went to school with this one... broke him off from going at it with Madan guys maybe a week back.” She drifted off to look idly about, sighing again. “He was an asshole, but... Fuck,” she huffed, then returned to the Marshal. “So... so what is this, some kinda street gang union?”

“Someone paid them enough to drop the old grievances...” he started, scanning across a broader arc, “and work together...” until holding upon one blood pool in particular, “against something great.”

He walked on towards it as Nai stood watching the familiar corpse. She blinked aside and pressed further in, navigating around it all to reach the other end.

“**H**ey some really heavy private bounties just came through on the Trick Feed,” the Deputy informed a little time later. “SinghSec contract, three men, two women. But they’re not naming the targets outright. Just says ‘rival corp militants’.”

“Look here.”

She glanced, and stepped over to the Marshal’s side, where he pointed to one blood sample among the rest of the ocean. She scanned for herself, and the profile came up as ‘classified’.

“So they are military?” she voiced. “Guard?”

“Get a physical sample,” he said through a sigh, and looked on and around. “I’m willing to bet this is Transcendent blood.”

The Deputy was staring at him. The Marshal just continued on.

“Why here?” she asked, though he gave no answer.

“Holy, sacred, fucking, bliss,” a voice echoed from the door, where now a team of twelve uniformed and well armed and armoured Singh private security contractors stood glaring blankly about the insanity.

“This is a crime scene, Ladies and Gentlemen,” the Marshal informed, drawing their eyes. The Team Lead caught up with himself and pressed further in.

“Yes it is... so it’s time to move along there, Sheriff.”

“It’s Marshal,” he countered, “which means I have power of sentencing, so it’s best you and your team move along there yourself and not risk obstructing our proceedings.”

“This farm is Singh Corp owned,” the man pressed, his team broadening out as the pair came to them.

“And this district is Terra Imperial administrated.”

“Well you can take that up with Mr Singh,” the man advised with a nod.

“No, you can take it up with the Deitine,” the Marshal deflected once more. “I believe she holds the top card, and we operate freely here, in her name, when circumstances call for it. And as you can see...” He looked up to certain articles on the ceiling, drawing their attention up in turn, “circumstances call for it.”

Several of them ducked aside, stepping clear of the apparent threat.

“It means if you keep getting in our way, we can string your ass,” the Deputy followed, standing straight and firm like her superior in check of the right flank.

“Speaking of a G-String up the ass...” a voice then spoke, drawing her eye to a man just ahead of the Marshal blatantly eyeing her over. “You’re a little too covered up there, ain’t ye, Gally?”

Penpei smoothened out, pressing her lips and lowering her chin to watch him.

“You can keep the cap...” he went on to the grins and nods of interest from others, “but you don’t wanna get that clean tunic all stained now. There’s a lot of us you gotta g-” His legs vanished from beneath him and his back hit the ground. The Marshal’s hand was supporting the back of his head, but the other rammed a stun baton into his collar, seizing him up and knocking him out in an instant.

The furious clacking of weapons to all directions brought the Marshal pause, though a notably slumbered pause it was. He reined back to take ease in the surrounding spectacle, the glares, the rifle barrels... finally ending with the leader, of whatever rank or title their type carried.

“Can I help you, Ladies and Gentlemen?”

A few had trained themselves upon the Deputy as well, who already had her pistol drawn and aimed right for one, right between the eyes, and not giving a shit for any of the rest.

“You’re not taking him, Marshal,” the leader calmly advised. “Stand down, Deputy.”

“Oh I’m sorry...” Her large Gally eyes closed, then opened again now staring at him through their corners, “and you are...?”

“We don’t want any trouble with you,” he said in turn to the boss.

“Oh but you want trouble with my Deputy,” the Marshal frowned, raising himself to stand between them in no hurry, not bothering to turn bodily to address him, instead merely holding that frown past his shoulder.

“No,” the leader complied. “He was an asshole, and deserved a reply... But you’re not taking him today.”

“No Sir I believe I am taking this man, as is my sworn duty as a Civil Guard Officer,” the Marshal simply informed. “This man obstructed an investigation and insulted a fellow officer of the law. That I will not abide, along with any further obstructions to justice.”

“I will make sure he is disciplined, myself,” the leader reasoned. “I give you my word. But I can’t let you take him.”

The combatants stood watching each other.

“Well that’s your decision,” the Marshal ended. “Deputy, fix the cart.”

“Sir.” She lifted her barrel, and spun it forward, down into her holster as she stepped on past the rifles.

“It’ll be a snug fit,” the Marshal went on, “but we’ll get you all in just fine.” He proceeded to disarm and cuff the unconscious man, leaving the weapons for his colleagues. The Deputy meanwhile retrieved a long rail from the Marshal’s ride.

The security guards looked to their lead for direction, but he restrained, and finally gave in with the shake of his head, letting the law take him.

The long slender legs clopped back in, violet eyes glancing across them in scrutiny as she passed. Penpei took the Marshal’s side to set the frame about the captive, and with a jolt, a laser web snatched him up into containment.

“You can tell Kaneta he can come down and sign for him in twelve hours,” the Marshal informed as he led the cart back outside.

“Now step back from the scene,” the Deputy followed up in tow, and the pair returned together out to their waiting rides.

A group of street kids had gathered to check things out; unique in their make up due to the large green cartoon gorilla and life-sized ruby bull standing with them. Duman recognised the group as regular Madan scouts and errand runners. One of them in particular...

“PARIK REDDY!” he barked, calling out the kid most trying to avoid his notice. “TAKE CARE OF YOUR MOTHER!”

“MAANN, MARSH, SHE AIN’T NEE-”

“TAKE CARE, OF YOUR MOTHER!” he further enforced, setting to hitch the frame up to the back of his Arbiter as the kid waved off his friends and dawdled on home in slumped defeat. The ruby bull glanced and trotted after him in turn, flickering slightly with the past of a mist cloud.

“... So are we getting involved in this?” Penpei spoke from his side, keeping low and close.

“You don’t believe we should?”

“Well it’s just...” she tried, watching the security beginning to fan through the scene regardless, “bein’ corps n’T-Scens and all... Is it really our business? I mean why would they be here?”

She saw him face her in the corners of her gaze, and pulled her lips between her teeth.

A distant boom resonated through the blocks, drawing both to look. It was nothing too out of the ordinary, but considering the circumstances...

“No corporate gang leaves an Aiza signature like that,” he said to the direction. “Even military Conduits do not leave such a mark, not here. If there is indeed a Transcendent Conduit here inside the Dome, then Deputy, we may be talking about a Guardian Enchant...” He looked at her directly, fluttering her gaze with the weight of that. “We are honour-bound to intervene and ensure his or her safety regardless of what claim one of the Corp big cats might have over this Sector. Do you concur?”

They watched each other.

“Yes Sir,” she nodded, glancing down.

“Now I’ll write this one up...” he returned to task, “then I’m heading out on a wider patrol, see if I can get wind of anything else.” He glanced back through the door. “I want you to stay here and scan what you can before they can clean it up, take it back to the court, and check the G-Cen expanded register for any mention of this.”

“Will do,” she agreed, eyeing them as well.

“You’ll be alright alone with this lot?”

“Taking offence is my own choice,” she said. “All they got is insults.”

They watched each other once more. The Marshal nodded, and moved himself on.

The night life dropped no beats over the subsequent hours, though people were notably more wary, actively glancing into lanes and about the rooftops, spreading the story of the dark Asuna suddenly coming out of the night to wipe out the city's noble defenders.

Those angel-faced devils now freely stalked their city rooftops, which the residents now actively searched in paranoia, gathering out front of their homes and businesses to spread the word of warning.

"Have they come to raid us?" a store owner asked. "I've heard that's what they do. They come out from Brasil on excursions to low class areas where they hunt and snatch women and children to toy with and eat."

"The Deitine wouldn't allow that," a neighbour protested.

"Well perhaps she doesn't know!" he tossed immediately back. "How could she? She has an entire galaxy to watch."

"Well they're not taking my children," snapped a middle-aged woman wrapped in a Sari. "I swear I will kill every last one of them with my own hands."

A gathering of twenty-somethings were sharing similar reservations, hanging about on the glowing children's playground equipment in the passage out front of their residential block.

"I mean we can't do nothing, right?" a young woman exclaimed. "Is there even any point in locking our doors and windows? That wont stop'em!" She eyed the roofs, hugging her waist and clutching her chest, suddenly a whole lot more wary of her enhanced and purposefully inviting cleavage. "I mean if they see us, and want us... that's it. I..." She paced one way, then turned back the other; her neighbours sat silently peering to each other and about the blocks themselves. "I heard once they like to stab you in the hands and feet... open your stomach up, and rape you while you're just like, gutted and bleeding out."

"... Are you serious?" another woman furrowed, and she waved off, turning away.

"I dunno that's ju-that's just what I heard."

Rennai sat perched upon the dark corner of a building, scanning wearily and warily across the lights and motion of the passages. He had been moving non-stop, dodging non-stop, avoiding non-stop. They hadn't gained much more than occasional suspicions of him when he had allowed them to, but they weren't letting up either.

He was exhausted, but just had to keep leading, baiting them away and hopefully providing the others more of a window to move.

He followed the slow skipping pass of a gigantic Red Riding Hood drifting along the length of the passageway, tossing handfuls of glitter out from her basket as she went. The particles latched as flyers onto the air before any of the crowd not wearing an effective ad-blocker. They were a simple hand's swipe away, not taking a second thought.

Nearby sat the four-storey featureless block of an Ether Hub, one of many about The Craves and countless throughout the Empire.

Almost half of humanity now lived permanently within the Ether, tens of billions of sentient souls occupying that realm of eternal magic and wonder, befriended, supported and entertained by the perhaps trillions of AI souls in there with them.

Their withered physical bodies meanwhile were sustained within enclosed life-support tubes known as Life Holds, kept by the thousands within residential hubs such as this one, offering substantially cheaper living costs and extended lifespans.

Etherials were all about him at any moment, reengaging the flesh realm via jobs operating cab-less vehicles, building or office administration or wearing the monstrous suit of Miss Red Riding Hood there. Most however had rejected the tangible entirely, instead working careers in the Imperial economy, or knowledge bases, research fields, and spending off-time existence within worlds beyond conception.

Many pilots of corporate industrial or military vessels were Etherials, with domestic craft being operated remotely from ports or colonised asteroids where their lifeholds were kept within range. Interstellar vessels usually contained two or three lifeholds of their pilots within their holds who alternated shifts. They were sharper and more capable than flesh-based Sapiens, and more contextual, creative, and replaceable than AIs.

Rennai watched the holographic giant skipping her weighted way on down the crowded central passage, passing numerous other bright cutesy or sexy marketing characters. His gaze came to rest though upon one window over others, one of many among the many multi-storey

blocks through the rows of fire escapes...

It was a clothing store... more specifically the storage rooms above a clothing store.

Soon he was going to have to lose the gangs himself, then double back and find a safe place to wait for contact and link back up with his team. Best way to do that would be to perhaps not look too much like a Teir-1 Special Missions Operative.

He climbed in through the window without bother, his lock-stripper making no effort in disabling any barrier this middle class window could provide.

The room was dark, empty of life but packed with shelves... Designer clothing... whatever, good enough. He unclipped his gear and opened his suit, stripping himself down to the waist. He took time to check over his radiant rippled spotless physique, turning himself this way and that, checking for wounds he may not have noticed.

The same thoughts just kept on flipping in his mind.

They had been set up, and likely by someone back in Imperial Command itself. There was no other way they could have known of their operation. Suspecting this, he had no choice but to disconnect from the Guard networks entirely. Only Ki'Soun would be able to navigate them more securely without giving her presence away.

But he couldn't begin to guess what they'd find.

Rennai stripped naked, separated the essential kit, and picked out a careful selection of urban wear balanced for concealment, understatement, practicality and local social conformity. Grey tactical boots with orange edges, grey and black tiger-striped utilities, a dark hooded open jacket, and white t-shirt with a bright artistic pattern of... something, whatever, words, whatever, something concealable when required, though displaying no intention to hide. The jacket concealed the speciality of his belt and equipment. It was common enough to have a weapon hanging from your hips, but the high-spec nature of his would draw suspicion, so hopefully the jacket would provide a few seconds of doubt time.

Just to be safe, he detached the assault rifle housing and amplifier and pulled free the pistol grip, downgrading the weapon to a less powerful though far more concealable submachine pistol.

He bundled the rest of his kit with extra clothing for multiple changes into a pack, and would find somewhere on a roof someplace to stash it all.

He also needed to rest.

Chapter 3

The Marshal sat back, cruising The Dries as he had done throughout the evening, checking the Chirp array and watching the militia movements within the city below. They seemed to randomly group all of a sudden about one point or other, though no combat had been reported. In fact, each time as the Marshal arrived, most had already dispersed with those remaining promoting a notably good mood. Whichever battles they were being summoned for had turned out to be false alarms, and they weren't too disappointed about that.

Now, looking with his visor down through the peaceful commercial crust of The Dries, into the digital rows of The Craves, things appeared warily calm. He wasn't sure what that meant.

A bleep on his comms drew his attention. The First Deputy was calling in.

"You were right on the blood," she spoke from the Courthouse kitchen, keeping out of earshot from the cells. "A Transcendent. We've got fucking T-Scens here."

Duman cleared and looked at the Singh tower... He noted however the exacerbation in her voice.

"And how are you with that knowledge, Deputy?"

Time passed, and she made no reply.

"You don't like it."

"... No Sir, I don't," she stated to the wall before her in the Courthouse kitchen.

"You don't want to help them."

“... No Sir,” she owned beyond a further delay. “I-I think they’re getting what they deserve.”

The pair shared the following silence.

“Well Deputy...” the Marshal finally replied, “integrity’s a bitch.”

She smirked.

“Yes Marsh. I’m good on this,” she animated, turning herself about.

“But my first question is, why are they even here?”

“You’re the cop,” he replied, continuing to watch the tower. “I’m gonna make another round and spiral in. You head home for the night.” He swept his attention northward. “This could be a heavy week.”

“It already is,” she said. “No I’mma see what I can take care of here first.”

“Head home, Deputy. You’ve had more than enough overtime for one career.”

“You can talk.”

“Why do you think I’m saying it?” he said to a passing open-air mall.

“Go home... or head out, or whatever people of your age do these days... Go find a, man or, whatever.”

Penpei frowned, smirking into the space before her. She made her way back out into the front room. “Yeah thanks Marsh I’m good.” She slowed in the corridor however with a thought. “Uh’heyy’um... you don’t, reckon they might be here to take down Madan... or even Singh, do you?”

The Marshal was firmly watching the tower, the final orange rays of the setting sun radiating the surface out from the deepening shadows and twilight of all else around, along with the clouds and large drifting craft contained within its reflective shape. A god-like video panel reaching all the way to the heavens. “I couldn’t speak for their intentions.”

“I mean you’ve been writing those reports and requests for a while now,” she followed. “Maybe someone finally got round to it?”

He continued to watch... then swung his ride away to circle in. “I’d advise against getting any hopes up,” he replied. “Their world’s a pretty long way from ours.”

The Deputy’s gaze staled with that.

“Yeah they wouldn’t give a shit,” she replied, and propelled things along, looking aside to an inebriated Gargantuan in the closest of the row of cells. “Also, we’ve still got that Pelvin guy passed out in Two.

Want me to wake him or leave him?”

“That was your catch I believe,” the Marshal replied. “Your discretion.”

“Wilco, Marsh. See you soon.”

They ended, and Penpei continued on for the front desk.

“You know somethin’, Deputy?” a voice spoke as she passed by. The SinghSec soldier was leaning against the bars of his own cell. “Those sweet lips a’yours...” He grabbed his groin. “I’ve had a partial hard-on the whole time I been here. Why don’t you come kneel down by the bars a little bit?”

“Every Sappy guy who can’t get it goin’ with his own women thinks an Olenai’s gonna fix his broke rod.” She sat down in the desk chair to relax. “But all they ever do is wind up disappointin’ a whole other species.”

“Well we can still try it, and Gally’s are always horny, right?” he reasoned, pressing himself directly to the bars. “C’mon, you ain’t doin’ nothin’ now. C’mere, bend over like a good Gally and help me fight my affliction.”

“Exactly,” she tossed. “I am doing nothing right now. I am in a completely neutral, eternally horny state.” She pressed back in the chair and set her feet up on the desk. “No need to go backwards.”

* * *

Rennai had found a concealed space upon a rooftop, a shadowed corner beneath a bright flashing billboard where he set up his magnetic field sleeping web ready to sleep.

But he couldn’t sleep. He felt uneasy, restless, so instead sat perched again upon the corner of another building, watching the city with no definable means to his aim.

A Gally hooker hummed happily away through a blowjob she was giving in an alley below as he searched past the glare the dark ceiling of pylons and roots, the drop-top towers extending down like peg teeth from the ceiling of The Dries. Beyond, the Dome’s two-hundred metre walls stood in the distance illuminated by the moonlight, black steel from surplus resource imported from the great asteroid mining boom several thousand years before.

Other smaller walled districts existed about Mumbai, though most of the population resided above sea level, intertwined within the transcendent

roots or among the forests to either side. Outside the Dome walls, within recesses darker still, genetic mishaps and social rejects roamed the remnants of the ancient city with their own concerns.

Endless darkness and airy industrial reverberation charged the air. Rennai sat in the middle of it all, the hooker humming expressively on, the occasional groan of response or comment shared between the guys awaiting their turn.

He thought about home.

The green, and the sun, the birds.

A repeating flash of colour drew his eye to one of the countless competing advertisements. A large projection of a naked Galilean woman blinking through multiple slow motion poses in the middle of the passageway, each strategically covering her not-so-privates with hands or convenient turns. 'LIK-LAND' flashed between each pose, the name of the multi-storey club sitting beside her.

“Wouldn't you like to go there, and see them?” Vallecia had once said, forehead snuggled into the collar of his navy blue shirt as they lay together in the grass.

“There are Olenai here,” Rennai reasoned with humour.

“But they're Sapienised here, all covered and reserved.” She sat up and looked about, scanning the edge of the jungle across the river, the children playing in the park before them. The capital's vast layered platforms of porcelain, platinum and diamond hung faintly and silently within the sky over their heads and beyond with neither cable to hang from nor pillar upon which to perch.

The folds of her light yellow dress sat fallen gently about her. “No I want to see all their beautiful colours and hear their sensual songs.” She turned back for him. “You can only see that in Mumbai.”

The Galilean flickered on, repeating pose after pose, and Rennai sat watching.

Real life versions of the exotic creature snaked and curved in thong bikinis within enclosed glass displays. They grinned, kissed, enticed, luring the patrons inside. Heavy crowds of tourists and locals alike populated the front, shifting between the clubs and the numerous food stalls set up throughout. Vehicles swooped in to slow and cruise the

hippy, leggy, colourful naked forms along the flanks of the passageway, independents all doing what they could to draw the Sapiens stag.

The one in the alley hummed and hummed away.

There were many Olenai settlements on Earth, though none more promoted the species' most infamous and sought after cultural export, Lik'laun, the mass-mating festival occurring once a Olenai year, though conveniently simplified and abbreviated to every waking moment within The Craves. The young single women would sparkle themselves up to the extent and climb public podiums to adopt their luring sways of promise, each adding their own expression and personality to the movement, to then pick from the males circling to interpret and claim.

The initial Sapiens visitors of a thousand years before had gained free rein of preference through novelty alone. Upon the stories returning to Terra, the tourism trade marketed Olen heavily on that luring motion; a party planet to end all. Though many came to Terra to spread out and seek advantage in career, a largest percentage of the immigration were young women visiting Terra for a multi-year fishing trip, hooking the Sapiens dollar to send back home. The 'Gally Sway' seen in the Dome and other lower-class Terra settlements came with a price tag, though still managed to draw the tourists through the convenience of a more acceptable post-coital goodbye. Pick a girl off of a podium on Olen, and she was essentially moving in and rearranging your furniture the next day.

The Homo-Gargantuan males also tended to find some level of popularity within the Sapiens need, provided the straights were willing to swing. Rennai looked to an open-topped militia vehicle rising up over the block and passing on. More gang members still were moving through the crowds along the passageway, armed Gargans among them towering over all.

That was the other vocation their species tended to be hired for.

The net was catching up, and he needed to move.

Hood up, shifting through the crowd, Rennai watched yet another vehicle slowly coast overhead, packed with ever more armed Sapiens thugs.

He was on 'Lantern Walk', a comparatively dark passageway filled with a cloud of bright fiery holographic paper lanterns. They appeared at first as simple bokeh, but focused as one closed upon the central

Chinatown square to take their intended forms. The result left the crowds as mere dark figures crossing immediate glaring view.

Rennai passed beneath the countless floating orbs of fire until picking several Sapiens punks leaking through the crowds ahead. He seeped into a small civilian gathering about one of the public noticeboards, keeping his hood forward and allowing the militia to pass.

They had really picked up the hunt. There seemed to be far more than before. Maybe his plan had worked, and they had lost the others? But it meant the heat was now on him.

A young Sapiens woman had noticed him, and was brightly watching past her shoulder, clearly liking what she saw and trying to meet his eyes. He turned away, acting as if to be looking for something rather than avoiding something... and found bounty posters on the board.

Transcendents... four males, two females at large.

The sight cleared his surface.

So the public were going to be wary now, if they weren't before. He was going to have to more actively recon, find them, get everyone into shadow... and then came a vocal gasp.

He looked to find the bright silver eyes of a tall thin Olenai glaring at him in clear recognition of his trans-human appearance.

"Don't worry," spoke a shorter, stouter Sapiens woman at her side, glaring at him as well. Both were wearing reflective coveralls; tradesmen of some sort. "We wont tell," she whispered, ushering forth, "but you have to hide, get over the wall."

The Olenai pressed her lips and dropped her gaze, complying with her friend despite her clear alarm. Rennai backed away, glanced his surroundings. The women watched him, the Sapiens assuring her friend as he found an alley and quickly stepped in.

Fuck.

He was tired... growing complacent. He had to get clear... find his team and get them out, wherever they could possibly be.

"Hey!" the woman suddenly hissed, spinning him back. She was leaning into the alley to hiss a warning. "Salette! Get inside! It's Salette!"

She and her friend hurried themselves on, the crowd behind them quickly rousing and clearing the passage in turn.

"Salette!" he heard called again, and quickly growing wary, Rennai pressed further back into the lane, finding several others rushing in after

him. It alarmed him at first, but they were merely seeking sanctuary, so Rennai followed with them in through the side entry of a bar.

What was Salette?

Many were crowding in there but tables weren't being taken, the former occupants now hovering about the windows to look for themselves with the new arrivals.

"Here for the bounties?" one asked a friend, clearing Rennai's surface.

A hunter.

"Must be. C'mon we don't wanna get in the way."

Rennai restrained any reaction and went with it, swiping a random half full pint from a table to hide behind and pressing through to a corner. He kept view of a window, glancing down the bokeh-lit passage for whatever was apparently coming for him.

"There! Salette!" a voice called and the bar fell to silence. It sent all the more hefty a chill through his nerve and his eyes darting. He couldn't see anything though.

"Is it really her?"

Whoever this was, she was clearly a big deal, and he had no idea of her capabilities.

He had to move... and began looking and planning... until the flicker of a lantern brought him pause, lifting his attention to the roof edges.

A slender feminine figure, a silhouette, stalked slowly between the fiery orbs along the rooftop opposite. Moving diagonally, a slow crossing of her notably long legs adding all the more curve to pronounced hips, hands hanging lax out by her sides about an array of equipment.

Olenai?

She seemed too muscular; more of a Sapiens weight upon an Olenai frame.

And Rennai sobered with a thought.

A Phallen.

He pulled himself immediately back from the window and left the crowd, the bartender noticing his sudden retreat and watching him cross the floor for the bathrooms.

Rennai entered the quiet tiled space and finally released an echoed huff.

A Phallen, there, in Mumbai. The rarest species of Hominin, from the frontier... and the most dangerous in the galaxy.

He looked about himself, across the featureless walls, thinking of what to do. The bartender had seen him enter so he couldn't hang around. He looked to the small window, seeing no security measures able to contain him. He'd get back up onto the rooftops to at least remain level with her, but he couldn't let her see him.

Rennai dropped into the alley, making a quick check, and rapidly scaled the fire escapes rather than jump, trying to conserve energy and potential noise.

He sat crouched upon a rooftop within shadow, keeping out of sight from this sudden wave of apparently numerous hunters. Rennai watched that dark creeping figure slowly pressing on through the fire, searching the passage below.

He followed the hunter from ground level, passing more easily now though the passageway crowds with the attentions of most locked above like him.

As legend would have it, the Phallyan were a divergence of the Homo-Transcendent strand cross-engineered with the Galilean, an experiment of some Trillionaire playboy out on the frontier. It was an attempt to genetically design for himself a harem of super-servants. It wasn't so rare an occurrence, with the rejects of many such efforts occupying the ruins under the roots or out in the wastes right there in Mumbai. This one however worked, at least to some relative respect, a genetic super-strain of artisans and gladiators soon to be valued across the galaxy for libidos and sensuality even exceeding that of the Gally. The Phallyan also had their exceptional capabilities in dance, and movement, in passion, combat, aggression and sadism in turn.

They weren't supposed to be fertile, but nature tended to be a bitch that way. After only a hundred and fifty years of slavery, the Phallen, as they would become known in Lamjania, rebelled in a way only such a passionate species could... with operas of terror and curtains of raining blood. They broke badder than any rebellion in history. The Deitine initially refused to aid the Trillionaire in his own fuck up on his insistently independent planetoid. Upon the subsequent super-coven of pirate hordes fanning out to raid and enslave frontier colonies to fuel rituals of torturous Pagan sacrifice, however, she decided to reply.

They were the rarest species now because the Terra Fleets had made sure of it. The Phallyan were hunted ruthlessly in the Frontier Wars, ensuring only shells remained of their colonies, and scatterings of their nomadic covens drifted scarcely enough apart to never again unite. There would have been a few thousand at most down on the grit, and this one had to be watched at all costs.

Ironically however... Rennai had managed to lose her.

She had moved across to another roof, screened by multiple floating orbs and out of sight beyond a corner. Upon gaining the line and reclaiming the view, she was no longer there.

Rennai held... looking this way and that, not wanting to show any notable reaction.

He carefully scanned the length of the rooftop features, turning about, following those behind him, where he froze, holding dead in his tracks... watching the red-lit silhouette of the Phallen now perched upon a roof among the fires above, staring right back.

The pair watched each other, and he released a long steady breath, calming, readying himself, empowering himself.

Okay... it was on.

Good.

She wasn't getting Ki'Soun.

The creature held staring, waiting, rose irises vivid through some manner of mask like some stripped balaclava. They stared on, observing each other for some time more... and she launched herself straight up into darkness.

Rennai clenched, drifted back, quickly relocating further into the lane, wrenching his attention this way, that way, till she dropped down upon him SLAM.

He had ducked aside, blade out and parrying hers. She was on him, SLING, CLACK, he deflected her attacks and rolled over a bin. Rose eyes glaring from the other side, people behind her hauling up in the lane. She darted about SLAM, a spike-heeled boot cracking the wall where his head had been. Rennai scooped up between her booted legs and body-slammed her into the opposite bin. She growled out and CLANG, he blocked her sword by his face. She clamped her booted calves and naked thighs about his neck and shoulder, wrenching him in with all towards her blade.

Rose eyes vivid in glare. Extended fangs, ruby lips snarling. He swapped blade hands and SLAMMED her side with his fist, SLAMMED her again with his knee, throwing her leg over and taking the back of her head, SLAMMED her face into the metal.

Get clear.

He scampered free and darted back into the square, finding the space where he left her empty, the dark figure spidering up over the fire escape and leaping through the lanterns, onto him CLANK. He deflected with a stagger, fuck, and bolted free and into the lane to regroup.

Nearby, among the reeling crowds, a G-Cen Chirp sat recording it all, issuing a round of fines for public disturbance and endangerment.

A bleep drew the Marshal's eye to his screen.

His face cleared, and he swung his Arbiter about and dropped down into the depths.

Rennai parried, parried through the lane, but she was relentless. Reaching the end he shored stance and drove on her, the pair clanking through a rapid intense exchange of blocks and parries, neither giving ground, fuck you, fuck you too, they struck on, struck on. He blocked right, BAM, caught her heel to the left cheek.

He fell against the wall, dragged a bin into her hip, she stumbled, parried his strike, but caught his boot straight to her abdomen. She groaned with a pitched tone through gritted teeth, curled and staggered back, dropping to the pavement.

Rennai launched himself up onto a fire escape, climbing one level, climbing to the next, trying to shake his senses clear of that kick.

He saw just in time her leaping all in one go, honing in and CLACK, he deflected some fucking dart thing she threw and she was onto him. SLING, CLACK, Grip, they clenched, her forcing him against the stairs. She drove a knee down hard into his balls, he clenched, groaned, and drove his own up into her, lifting her weight and collapsing her aside to stagger and clank amongst the steel rails. Kicking her sword aside and stomping her back, he darted up the stairs, rounding to find her clambering up over the rail on the next level.

Fucking... He BOOTED her back off and raced up the final few levels to the roof, finding an open space but for raised skylights of a loft where

he could match and finish this more soundly.

He breathed out a long calming breath, looking among the holographic lanterns now drifting like fiery jellyfish around him.

He turned back; rose glare, fangs, CLACK, he glanced her blade and reengaged, shoring and swiping, matching with her once more. Rennai drove forth, striking, lunging, shoving, sending her stumbling and drawing a frustrated singing exclaim. A final parry and she got clear, ducking back and flowing aside on her toes between the orbs.

He held and honed, not taking the bait to risk overcompensation, and kept his balance. Rennai stepped instead more carefully aside to bring the skylight to his right, removing that angle of attack from her options. She glared on, locked to him, heaving with a pitched vocal tone to her exhales as if singing, surprisingly gentle. Her long springy legs propelled her one way, then the next, little hops and shuffles of eagerness on her toes. She was more agile and open to move in that space, but that was alright. Rennai hit harder than her, and only had to time it.

The Phallen settled herself, and lowered...

She sprung to skip, side-step, dart in CLANK. He glanced her off balance, kicked the back of her shoulder, grabbed her collar, scooped her hips and lifted to face plant the bitch straight through the skylight. CRASH. They tumbled down together through the shatter and noise, she twisted beneath him and turned him onto a pantry, SLAM.

Rennai found himself among broken wood, crockery and ringing blur, clenching and groaning through the vivid rush of shock and presumed pain.

Clear warm light.

He shifted, turned... He found the pale burgundy flesh of a thigh before his face, the back of his head cushioned upon the other. He looked aside to find her gusseted crotch and thonged arse a few centimetres away, a sight perhaps more appealing under different circumstances. He grabbed her booted knee and pushed the thigh up, finding a rose glare piercing through from his own thigh, snarling fangs right on the bulge of his FUCK! He wrenched, shoved, she clawed, they wrestled, snarled, he pushed her up, booted, and sent her stumbling over a kitchen table with a pitched whine.

Rennai was up, the Phallen up, but they held... the table now between them.

Hold.

She released a hard vocal release of tension and ache, more force initially but soon tapering almost to a perfect choirgirl pitch. She widened her stance in ready.

Both stood heaving, gaining the first real look of each other in the light of the loft apartment.

She was absolutely beautiful... but more in the way of a death poem. Strips of her own black, cream and purple streaked hair wrapped her genetically perfected face as a mask, top, middle and chin. It was secured at the back of her head by a feminine bow of countless ruby fabric strands. It left her eyes to shine bright, and her full ruby lips and deathly pale burgundy-toned chin and tip of her nose.

She was looking down to his side.

There was a pain in his side... a broken plate in his side.

Fuck... He yanked it free, immediately losing strength, a steady flow of blood gushing in turn.

He held ready, and found her watching now with notable humour.

“Interestinnng,” she sang perfectly with a grin, a soft, playful childlike voice, tips of K9s sharp and protruding.

Her bust was oversized with purpose, strategically squashed and barely contained with a simple front-clipped horizontal strap, forcing together the considerable burgundy-white cleavage. Her chest and collar and stomach lay bare, and a utility belt sat about her genetically perfected hips. Her thighs and hips were exposed, though two short squares of padding shielded her abdomen and rear like a skirt. They were secured at their corners to the tops of long black steel-heeled utility boots.

She had a pistol on her thigh, but had either forgotten about it, or didn't much care.

His own was still with him as well, but with the distance it wasn't an option.

Like the Homo-Galilean, their stronger Transcendent cousins, Homo-Phallyan walked naturally upon the balls of their feet, suffering no hindrance from this decorative footwear of the Sapiens women, long legs in fact pulling them off like the original creators barely could. Matching long fingerless gloves with gauntlets were similarly strapped just under the armpit. A variety of pouches, loops, and devices were strapped about her, linking her torso and utility belts, her arms and thighs, and a master utility pack sat neatly upon the top of her rear like a plume.

Her blade was shorter, curved, ornamented and with a purple hue.

The pair watched each other on, now more wary of this shift in fortunes.

Her hips swung suddenly aside, a leg soon to place in tow... then another, and again in perfect balance, beginning a slow... careful... rounding of the-She-darted-in-SLAM! Rennai staggered back, glancing the next strike, the next, the next; he darted away, coming straight back in on his terms, vicious and unrelenting, driving her over lounges and about tables; he had to give everything now.

She parried and kicked up his blade with a flip, cartwheeling back over a couch and to her feet, stilling once more as he settled rather than pursue...

They faced each other... and Rennai noticed the subtle tremble to her hand.

Ahh... she had injured something as well, or was wary of her own exhaustion and was trying to pace things. He took the opportunity to scan the place.

A large window facing the outside lane within dash distance, some kind of study desk in reach along the way.

Desk... window... Plan.

He looked at her... then went for the window and she picked it at once, darting about to intercept. Rennai had grabbed the desk on-route and hauled it upright as a shield. He ducked back as sure enough BLAM, her boot stomped right through.

Got her.

He grabbed her leg, took the momentum, got under the desk and lifted. She squealed out loud before CRASH, he shoved the desk out after her, sending the entire lot crashing down into the outside lane.

The impact resonated far below as Rennai collapsed back... dizzy, gathering himself... He found the apartment's balcony on the other side of the building.

He had a chance, but a limited one.

The Marshal sat coasting slowing over the Lantern Walk Square, inspecting the shifted and dented bins within the alley.

Following the Chirp's particle recording, he hauled his steed up onto the roof of the building, finding the smashed skylight. A second Chirp was inside, its feed showing the space clear, the neighbouring lane clear as well but for a smashed desk.

Salette had added a considerable number to her already un-freaken-believable number of outstanding fines. It was a running joke at this point among the Courthouse staff.

The Chirp however had also noted the Transcendent blood.

He had escaped, but wasn't moving far. He needed to hide.

The Marshal looked ahead to the markets.

Rennai pushed himself on, moving through the alleys with endless glances beyond his shoulder, and avoiding the odd staring passer-by.

Fucking hell that bitch was hardcore. He 'may' have evaded her, but it was doubtful.

He needed a hiding place close enough to a crowd to throw her off, so the best option with his current affliction was a market he could see in the passageway ahead.

So it was essentially decided; he needed to take her out, but it was going to be tough now with a sword.

There would be no telling what level of threat detection or kinetic shield she might have implanted behind those tits of hers, which would make taking a shot at her from anywhere over twenty meters a lost cause... So it would have to be close quarter, or with a more specialist weapon system with a baiting decoy, which Rennai didn't have.

Kinetic shields tended to have to recharge, so maybe just a full burst on her might catch her with the later rounds?

Maybe a bomb? It would have to be big to bypass the shield... if she had a shield... but 'big' meant 'collateral'.

He sighed. Maybe he should concentrate on surviving the night first?

He checked his path for blood trails. He couldn't risk leaving any... and he saw her.

He exhaled, letting himself collapse down into shadow behind an industrial bin. She was on a roof once more, skipping in across the gaps, hoping to make up his gain.

She balanced along the roof's edge, staring down upon him. Rennai held himself motionless though, watching the Phallen stalk slowly and gracefully over and past, missing him, finally reaching the corner and holding in search of the crowd.

With a feminine huff she sprung and flipped easily across the street, legs simply passing over her head to rest together upon the roof opposite. There she squatted open-kneed, the narrow strip of black between her thighs he knew quite well left to the air again with no self-consciousness. Her arms hung between them, slumbered hilt tapping now idly in impatience, her upper body pressed back to counter the weight to her front. She simply sat balanced upon her toes and watched, and scrutinised... ignoring the fuss and hurry of fleeing citizens below.

Rennai just held as he was, fighting himself through the pain not to release too heavy a breath.

Being Apex, his skin would hide him from any sensors she had, though she would still detect discrepancies of environment and heavy breath.

Further figures hurried themselves past upon the warnings of others. The creature meanwhile ignored them and just continued to scan, as if certain Rennai was there somewhere and perfectly comfortable to wait him out.

“Move along Salette!” a deep voice called, attracting both her and Rennai to the middle-aged Marshal now standing in the street.

“And why in all the Quad would I do that?!” she tossed back with that melodic voice of a soft cultured girl. She leaned her weight forth to rest upon her hands in the manner of a frog, pushing her ridiculous cleavage out between them to impossibly promote all the more. Her full bottom lip hung open for some purpose of its own.

“You’re disturbing the peace. Needlessly scaring the civilians,” he replied. “Move along.”

“I am merely sitting here, Marr’shal,” she applied with a lick of the air. “If a rat wishes to flee, then is that not solely a matter for the rrrrat?”

“Why are you here?” he pressed more flatly.

“I am looking for something I have claimed as’minne... That is all.”

She sat watching, soft blinks of observation as the Marshal took a moment to look about himself.

“Do you see it?” he finally asked, and the odd pair watched each other. The articulate Phallen suddenly bore no suitable reply, and her lips pulled closed to a curious pout.

She blinked, and turned her head, scanning carefully about a final time.

But then something flinched her, drawing her attention. She checked some manner of message displayed via a panel upon her inner

forearm... and then looked with interest to the north.

“... M’no.” She jumped straight upwards, vanishing into the dark.

Rennai held clenched, nerve strung, checking every which way and possible direction.

She was gone.

He then noticed the heavy closing steps, and found the Marshal approaching, watching after her, himself. He held up to stand at the end of the alley.

“She’s gone,” he said to the roofs, then finally addressed Rennai directly. “Head to the other end of the alley. I’ll meet you there.”

He moved on to the next group of civilians, and Rennai finally released his breath.

* * *

The orange afternoon rays shifted through the peaceful Banyan, lighting the passing air traffic and reflecting the leaves, radiant sky and clouds from the tower glass.

Music was playing, thumping, filling the air. Gang members, with sports armour and weapons still stowed ready about their forms, did what they could to ease their nerves about the pool, embracing the rare chance to feel the sun. The numerous pets in bikinis, curls and jewellery danced, pranced, jiggled and giggled about them, still perhaps not quite gathering the extent of the events which had occurred that morning. Notably the mood wasn’t all too receptive of a party vibe. The crowd looked more tense than anything, simply just doing what they could to kill the time.

Aminal Madan sat back at his desk, casually drawing the mist from a haze wand between his fingers, softly blowing it back out through his lips as he watched the tree and this poolside scene through the window. The entertainment were seeing to their role inside the building as well, tending to the interests of the numerous higher ranking gang members and investment associates strewn about the couches and bar. They were notably playing things more subdued however with the understatement of their superiors, though one teen was squeaking and moaning in the far corner with several guys teaming her to the commentary of several more.

Another heavily groomed, topless coffee-toned pet was straddling Madan's thighs in a black thong that she grinded with purpose upon his partially inflated mass. She was inspired by the taking of her school-friend, but perhaps not gaining the attention she had hoped. Her tattoo of orange scales flooded with her arousal, sending waves of pattern to the key points of her body and everything, full display, but... no dice. It was pretty clear something was up, but it wasn't what she was horny for.

Millice kept to himself by the bar, nursing a stale drink. Lali was sitting aside on one of the couches in a sleeveless charcoal pencil dress. She too wasn't engaging anyone, just scrutinising the performance of the squeaking toy, memorising notes of criticism to chastise her with later.

Madan drifted lost within his deep thoughts, staring blankly out the window, the young Sapiens ever trying to entice him up with her gentle grind, gentle open-lipped smile of suggestion and soft waggle of naked breasts... She wasn't having much effect.

He blinked with the motion of figures entering the far end of the room.

Androgynous late teen twins, Sapiens, a male with skin died light ruby, and his blue-skinned sister. They made their confident stride from the elevator landing, passing the rousing crowd, and Madan watched them through the corner of his eyes as they approached his desk.

The male wore a neon-patterned panel skirt over bagging combat pants tucked into shin guarded boots. A vest and gauntlets matched the pattern of the skirt and covered a fine black embroidered shirt with high popped collar. White makeup like a geisha was touched with dabs of neon colour, and a scooped wave of vivid pink hair made it complete.

The female was black and UV-white, form-fitted, black boots, pants, vest, UV-white shirt. Subtle strokes of dark makeup accentuated her minimalism along with crystal white short hair.

Both had holstered ornamented pistols stowed upon each thigh, the male two sword hilts, and the female a single dual hand.

"So you get'em or what?!" called the guy from the far couch, heaving fuck toy on hands and knees before him curled back by the yank of her hair clenched in his fist. He tossed her aside, and all left her forgotten, attention officially diverted.

The new arrivals ignored however and continued to the desk. Millice raised himself from the bar in interest and Lali turned bodily to watch as well, officially invested. Madan held his sideward stare of the pair until they drew to a halt before him.

He noted the male's light expression... then the female's narrowed gaze and subtle humour...

The corner of his own lips pulled back into a grin.

"Hahh-WE GOT'EM!" a man sprung up, punching the air, and sprouted a bloom of cheers and applause beyond the room and across the pool terrace.

"Not the Sparky, yet," the male pointed a vibrant fingernail in note to Madan, a soft eloquent voice, "but Kulun's group corralled them and the Vamp got shock fields in there, stunned'em. We brought two of the men and one of the women down. They're over at PP's right now."

"I think they baited us to allow the Sparky's escape," the female followed, "but it's a good take regardless."

"So you have her?!" Lali beamed, rising and making her quick-stepped way to the side of the desk. "The other female?! Where is she?!"

"All three were getting worked at PPs," the male shrugged. "We lost too many on that one. They're getting the reply." Madan glared at once.

"No fucking marks on the female!" he roused, sending the pet stumbling and scurrying free of his lap.

"She'll survive," the female placed.

"I didn't say survive! I said no fucking marks!" he loomed. "Scoring her gets us back to black! We want no excuses for them to reduce their payment!"

"We know," the female followed in subdued.

"Do they?!"

"Yes," she assured. "They're having fun. That's it."

"What'll happen to the men?" Millice then asked from behind.

"Into the pits," the male replied simply, and Madan turned away to look beyond the window once more. He had more light to his eye, releasing a weighted sigh of relief. The crowd outside were lightening up as well, perhaps granted a reprieve from certain death.

"So, what," Millice asked in his ear, "should we tell Kaneta?"

"No!" Lali snapped, kneeling on the couch and gripping the back.

"First let me break her in!" She scampered from the couch as her dress and heels would allow, rounding the deck to appeal to him. "Amiiii I'll make her worth a billion. You know it."

He just grinned.

“... You’ve got ten days,” he said. “Make her worth two,” and Lali clapped her hands together before her chest with a bright grin.

“Amiii...” Lali rounded, ushering the pet aside to press him back into the chair, taking her place side-saddle on his lap. “We’ve got her, we’ve got her, we’ve got this!”

“She’s not the prize,” he reminded. “We still need the Enchant. That’s the money.”

“No but she’s absolutely the funn,” Lali beamed. “You wait, I’ll have her flawless when we deliver.” She struck a finger out towards the strato-tower before them. “They will compensate more than enough for our losses. I’ll make sure of that.”

“There’s still one of the assaulters at large as well,” the male of the twins went on, “but it shouldn’t be much longer.”

“Raise the bids on’em and tell the Vamp.” Madan said, looking to the pair. “Get back out there and keep them moving, unable to regroup.”

Lali leaned in as well to follow up. “And we want any Shards looking to take advantage of our stumble to see you out there ready to respond. If they test you, show no restraint.”

The teens nodded.

“If you can get her right,” Madan mused with his woman, “and we get the Sparky, wrap them both up in a bow... we’ll still make gain from this.”

“I told you we’d recover,” Lali loomed, pressing his nose as she sat herself up. “So what’s it like over in PPs? Anyone capping it?” she asked with a smile and playful voice to all, bringing out the female’s smirk.

“I made sure of it,” the male assured. “Music, lights and everything, up on central platform. It’s a real banger.”

“Good, make sure they send a copy to me,” she lounged back upon her man, wrapping herself in his thick arms. “I’ll enjoy it later with my bath.”

* * *

It was a quick concealed trip in the back of a containment cart, and now the Transcendent sat hopelessly at the mercy of this Sapiens Civil Guard in his humble little ground level townhouse.

A nano knit patch had been applied to his wound, and Rennai sat staring in virtual delirium on the side of the man’s single bed. He found

a mug held out in offer before him, and after deciphering the image, accepted it.

“So you’re one of these T-Scen now tearing up the city,” the Marshal began as he took a seat himself at his tiny dinner table.

“Certainly wasn’t the intent,” Rennai watched him warily. “None of you were supposed to know we were here.”

“So why are you here?” the older man pressed.

“... Well it’s...” he delayed, trying to place his words.

“I understand, it’s classified,” Duman obliged. “But I might be able to help with what you’re able to give... perhaps help ensure the safety of the Enchant.”

That stalled him, and Rennai watched the man once more.

“... You have aided me so far,” he conceded, diverting his attention through a covert sniff, then sip of the water.

This guy could have been looking to pull the bounty for himself, though something about the humility and utility of his living-space paid fine argument against that. It wasn’t minimal through lack, but intent.

“We’re here to infiltrate the facility to the north,” he began. “The pillar. Do you know it?”

“Where your first engagement was?” the Marshal asked, the soldier nodding the affirmative. “It’s known as the Keep. That’s the stronghold of Aminimal Madan. What’s your intention with him?”

“We don’t care about him,” Rennai shook his head. “Our intention is to spike Aiza into the system there directly, so that she may overpower Sarpheriss in this area and gain access...” he nodded towards the strato-tower above, “to one of his clients.”

Duman cleared, lifting, though he contained it pressed back in his chair.

“A breach through Madan’s network wouldn’t provide a gateway to Singh,” he countered. “I don’t know what portion of the Trickster his engineers maintain, but it must be a dominant face.”

“Not Madan’s client,” Rennai countered, “Singh’s client. We spike Aiza into the Keep, she doesn’t face Sarpheriss directly, never confronting Singh security, but leaks instead between his faces. She uses them as a carriage around Singh’s operation to uncover one of his associates out on the frontier. That’s who we’re looking at.”

The Marshal held, and lowered his gaze, fading notably with that.

“... So you’re not here for them,” he asked. “The Corps... the gangs.”

Rennai saw that.

“Not directly,” he replied, “but we are rebuilding Aiza’s foundations here, for good. Her primary attention might be to ferry herself out to the frontier, but she will naturally remain and explore here as well, move the Trick aside for a bit, see what they’re hiding.”

“Well she was dominant here once,” Duman said, now unable to hold the Transcendent’s gaze, “so I guess Sarpheriss have more than one trick up their sleeve to supplant her.”

Rennai watched him, taking another drink as the Marshal ushered himself on from the disappointment. It was nothing new, and he hadn’t lost anything he had possession of the previous day. He had long been aware of the worthlessness of hope.

“There’s no record of you mentioned in the G-Cen alerts.”

“There wouldn’t be,” Rennai shook his head.

“Even with the presence of the Enchant?”

“Especially so,” he sustained. “Her presence here was critically sensitive. No one should have known we were coming.”

The Marshal took concern with that.

“So this compromise to you has come from within?”

“Yes,” Rennai nodded, now himself clear on that fact. “And it makes me think her arrival especially was planned for, hence why they would risk putting her in with such a small team. What would they want with an Enchant here?” he asked. “I would think they wouldn’t want Aiza anywhere near this place.”

Duman spent a moment looking aside in thought.

“... I’ll have a think.” He then blinked and propelled things. “Do you have a Reaction Force?”

“Apparently not,” Rennai huffed. “Our safe house as well was a set-up. I can’t access any secure channels myself and risk exposure. I’ll need Ki’Soun before I’m able to find any of that side out.”

“Ki’Soun?” the Marshal frowned, attracting his eye.

“... The Enchant,” Rennai conceded. “I must find my team, secure her... She can find out what’s going on and help coordinate our next step.”

“Well...” the Marshal assured, “I am proud to say the Courthouse is the strongest pillar for Aiza anywhere within the Dome. Sarpheriss constantly try to move and counter her, and block her, though they never succeed.”

The Transcendent nodded in silent acknowledgment.

“That’s good... How many are you?”

“I’ve got three Sheriffs and their Deputies out on each of the corners, and two up top,” the Marshal informed. “Here in Central it’s myself, my First Deputy. Two part time Second Deputies who share the off-shift... Several hundred Chirps doing the light work around the city, tagging misdemeanours, issuing fines. The Ethereals are based in the G-Cen fortress outside of Dehli, so, no compromises there.”

The visitor sat staring blankly.

“... That’s it?”

“That’s it,” the Marshal nodded.

“You two for the entire city?”

“That’s how it works,” he nodded again. “Each city within Mumbai has a G-Cen component, though corporate security militias partition control of the majority between.”

“We were told you were far stronger,” Rennai stated.

“Sounds to me like you need to not rely so much on your intel sources.”

His gaze drifted aside, trying to gather the reality of that.

“... So how does that work with any effect?” Rennai finally asked with genuine curiosity.

The Marshal simply watched him, and shook his head.

“It doesn’t... but we do what we can.”

The Marshal had fed him a bowl of at least some form of leftover, perfectly adequate though to Rennai’s current needs. He had left him to it as much as could be managed in the tiny space, occupying himself with clearing up a few things around the kitchen. It gave the Transcendent a chance to observe him.

The Sapiens local of mid to late forties seemed notably tired in his manner... or defeated...

No, not defeated; resolved... grinding on with his impossible duty, wheels spinning regardless till the end.

And it was an impossible duty he had been assigned, with so little traction to be made in this. Having faced what he had thus far, Rennai wondered why the Marshal had even bothered trying to see it through? This was a corp city to the bone.

“How long you been Marshal here?”

Duman glanced.

“About thirteen years. Twenty-six total under shield.”

“What was it like when you took over?”

He delayed his sweeping of the bench with his hand for crumbs, and stared into the space before him.

“... About the same.” He continued on. “I suppose I managed a couple of hits early in my time, though the gangs have solidified with the corporate backing. There’s no getting them out, but at least they’re not directly endangering civilians anymore.” He paused again. “Only kidnapping, manipulating, or recruiting the civilians kids... selling them, having them kill each other, or attack you.”

The pair shared a glance, and Duman returned to task. “You could say we have more of an understanding now I suppose.”

“... Did you know many of the gang-members we killed?” Rennai asked, slowing the Marshal once more.

A four year old girl in a cotton dress stared up at him from behind her mother’s thigh.

“... A few.” He pressed on. “Anyways... Every Marshal hopes they might just improve things a notch...” eyeing the photo before him, “before they pass on the shield.”

He dropped the crumbs into the sink and washed his hands in turn.

“My predecessor pushed things a little forward, before it came back on him... but he set things up, and I think I might’ve carried that torch on for some effect... perhaps... having made things a bit easier, for... whoever comes next.”

He said no more, and Rennai studied the photo the Marshal had unconsciously eyed several times through that; a smiling twenty year old Galilean holding a certificate with him at her side.

It wouldn’t be his daughter. She looked full blooded. Young Gally’s and older Sapiens certainly weren’t an uncommon pairing, but it didn’t fit in

this case.

“No wife?” Rennai asked. “Family, elsewhere?”

“This is no life for a family,” he chuffed. “I have a lady friend I see on occasion...” he went on, “professionally,” he conceded, “well, we’ve become friends. The work though keeps me occupied.”

Rennai lowered his gaze into memory.

“... I tried myself, once,” and Duman paused what he was doing, and glanced curiously back.

“You’re far too young to have a history like that.”

The soldier looked, and lightened. “Maybe.”

“And here I thought you Transcendents tended to inter-couple,” he asked, raising Rennai’s brow.

“Yeah, they do, but...” The Marshal looked with his self-exclusion. “I’m kinda new to all that myself,” Rennai completed. “That was a Phallen who I fought with,” he then changed tact. “I’ve only seen maybe, two in the flesh... well, in armour. A personal security detail of a Martian dignitary, and a shitload more reserved than that one.”

“She’s a bounty hunter,” the Marshal explained, returning to the chair. “Among other things. Normally stalks the branches and towers, but comes down on occasion into The Craves for a special take. I suppose you’re it,” he nodded. “We have history, her and I.”

“I’m guessing not romantic,” Rennai looked.

“She has accrued we could say a commendable collection of outstanding fines.”

“Well by all means, Marshal,” he obliged, “do not let me hold you up from making an arrest.”

Duman took a moment.

“It’s complicated with that one... but one day I’ll manage to get her into a cell.”

“Death penalty?” Rennai hoped.

“Actually I’ve heard of Marshals executing on a fraction of what she owes, but I’m afraid I am not a believer in capital punishment for fine dodging.”

The visitor chuffed considering who they were talking about. “So this cannot be an official G-Cen bounty she’s pursuing.”

“A private local system,” Duman explained, “third party, which many of the Corporations use. Trickster soul drives it.”

“What interest would a Phallen possibly have here in Mumbai?”

“The Corp Bigs like having her, so pay her far more than any other escort to keep her grit-bound and entertaining them,” he replied. “It’s a very good look to have a Phallyan centre platform of some corporate launch party or product showcase, or to throw in as a special bonus to close a deal. And it’s a very good use to have one hunting for you at times like these. Makes one think twice about playing underhand in trade deals... I guess also those she is gifted to are never quite sure she’s actually a gift... Keeps them wary.”

“So SinghCo?”

“She’s a free agent,” he said, “though I imagine mostly Singh.”

“So once that bounty’s gone, so would her interest?” Rennai pursued, leading the Marshal to think.

“... Perhaps.”

The men shared the following time in thoughtful silence, until Duman decided to advance. “So what now? ... After you retrieve your team, is this operation of yours off? You’ll return to Brasil?”

“Oh hell no,” Rennai frowned. “No I wanna fuck these guys all the more now,” he sat up, placing the bowl aside. “Even if I have to do it alone, Madan’s going down.”

Duman held... lifting, lightening... though shoved that aside and took the bowl to the cleaner.

Meanwhile, across the lane, the First Deputy sat pressed back in the office chair, legs up and crossed upon the desk corner. She watched with tempered curiosity the massive bulk of the dishevelled Gargantuan leaning in over the desk upon her. He was taking time in eyeing over her slender lines, to which she simply blinked back.

“You know you and I would have a good time, Pen-Pen.”

“Oh yah?” she raised a brow.

“We’re a good fit,” he pursued. “You’re strong, loyal, dependable...” he shrugged, “and you’re the only woman to ever make me wanna be the same.”

“Well...” she blinked, lowered her gaze, pressing her lips, “starting nowww, orrr...?”

“Just bend her over the desk, Garg. You know she wants it. She’s playin’ hard to get.”

“Talk about the lady like that again and I’ll break you,” the giant honed upon the second cell.

Penpei glanced back for herself.

“I’m guessin’ you’re used to that, right?” she asked. “Girls playin’ hard? Showing you their interest by walking away?”

“Well I dunno...” the guard shrugged. “I just take ’em and fuck ’em.”

“Oh yeah?” Penpei lifted. “Any particulars you wanna confess to?”

“Pay no attention to him, Pen,” the Gargan waved off, drawing her attention and looming back on in.

“Deputy,” she applied.

“Deputy,” he obliged. “A woman like you demands to be treated with respect, and honoured... the man laying himself prostrate at your feet, playing carriage for your traverse across these troubled waters of life.”

She sat watching him with a curious frown.

“... You know you sober up really damn well, Pelvin. I am shocked you’re the same guy I arrested the other night. You are what they call a ‘nasty drunk’. You need to quit that shit and go straight. You could really kill it. You obviously like Olenai, well Olenai collapse over this kinda shit.”

“Already am going straight, Deputy Penpei,” he parried. “It was all just a rouse to get in here, spend time with you.”

“Confessing to misusing a Deputy’s time and G-Cen resources, Pelvin?”

“I’ll confess to whatever you like, beautiful,” he obliged. “Lock me up again for another night. We can call in some dinner, drinks... lock up the court, share one of them cots.”

“Yeaahh I don’t do the romance stuff, Pelvin. I’m a solo gig,” she said off to the side. “I’m afraid you and me are staying strictly business.”

“Well I fully plan for us to get to business, Deputy,” he immediately swapped tact. “Don’t let the size make you squeamish. I’ve had plenty of Gallies. It’s just a matter of patience and excitement...” He nodded towards the cell. “We’ll build up to putting you right through that cot, just how you like.”

She stared... raising her brow...

“Well you went just right to that, huh.”

“No use wasting time when you know what you want,” said frankly with a shrug.

“That’s true,” she blinked. “Welllll I am definitely patient,” she said again off to the side. “After your display on Friday though...” she returned to him, “not too excited.” She then looked to someone stepping up to the front door.

“So what might I do to rebuild that bridge?” Pelvin immediately dodged, though glanced as well with the door opening.

Back across the thoroughfare the Marshal had brought out a small device, setting it upon the table. From it projected a particle map of the Dome sewer system, which he used to illustrate a plan to his younger superior with a notably applied weight.

“It can confuse you, visually, but just keep to this main tunnel, or follow the flow of any main tunnels, and you’ll come to the water.”

Rennai was clearly reluctant, and seeing this, Duman pressed all the more.

“Keeping northward along the coast, you’ll come to a Terra Guard Naval pontoon base perhaps as soon as a day. They have a Ranger Squadron stationed there.”

“I cannot leave here,” Rennai stated frankly. “Not without my team.”

“Without help of another team, there isn’t much chance for your team to get into the Keep now,” Duman countered. “Also, though your Conduit I imagine will have an easier time remaining hidden for now, Salette and Singh Warlocks will be able to pick a strong Aiza presence in time if they clue in to looking for it.”

He pressed his fingers to the device once more.

“Through the sewers, you can get out of here. You could gather a local strike force, maintain secrecy to your operation, and return and hit the Keep directly. They would know you’re a Transcendent, and with an Enchant involved, would know better than to ask questions.” He brought his hands to his hips. “You can get in, get out, and disappear.”

The Transcendent watched the map, making it look as though he was considering it. It wasn’t a terrible plan, though he knew it would take a week to do it, not a couple of days, and he wasn’t leaving his team even a couple of days.

“You’re not leaving them,” the Marshal pressed. “You’re increasing their chances of survival. Whatever the Corps are offering, it’s going to be a lot, and as time passes, the bounties will raise. I will try to uncover what I can of them in the meantime, brief you when I see you next.”

“I don’t want to involve you in this,” Rennai shook his head. “You have enough weight against you as it is. This kind of thing would leave a bad taste with the local power holders.”

The Marshal lowered his gaze, nodding in appreciation, though placed his words.

“... It’s my job.”

“DUMAN!”

They looked to the door, the barking man’s call having come from across the passageway.

“Go,” the Marshal said. “That is not someone you want seeing you.” He ushered Rennai for the back door.

“You’ll be alright?” he asked warily.

“Yes. Go,” Duman assured.

Rennai remained a final moment, taking this humble stranger in. “... Thank you.”

The Marshal nodded. “Go.”

The Marshal opened his front door to find a man standing in the middle of the white-lit thoroughfare, watching back. He had an expensive grey suit over a charcoal shirt, hands in his pockets. The mist blanketing the passageway, blooming with the crystal white austerity of surrounding Court Square businesses, brought a winter feel to the sight.

The SinghSec Guard, now liberated, was stepping out from the office to follow in tow. The First Deputy and the dishevelled Gargantuan stood watching it all from the door.

“Get with your guys,” the man nodded humourlessly past his shoulder, and the normally cocky guard ushered himself on in full compliance with a dutiful nod.

The man returned to facing the Marshal once more. Mid to late forties, fair tone, strong, grey streaked dark hair, two hilts protruding out from his open jacket upon his left hip.

The men just stood watching each other, holding the world in suspense.

“Why didn’t you tell me you found him?” the visitor eventually asked.

“Have I found him?” Duman replied.

“Yes,” he nodded frankly, and looked past him, into his home. “I have sources, Duman. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Why would I tell you?” the Marshal didn’t budge.

“Call it in the interests of maintaining societal order,” the man mused to his surroundings.

“So who have I found exactly,” Duman mused in turn, “and what’s it to you?”

“He is of my benefactor’s interest.”

“And what obligation do I have to your benefactor?” the Marshal matched. “I believe my benefactor greatly supersedes yours.”

“Yeah well mine knows we both exist,” the man tossed aside to the direction of one of his guys, now emerging from the alley beside the Marshal’s home, giving a nod.

“Sewer in the alley,” he informed, and the visitor looked past his shoulder.

“Go,” he said to the rest, a SinghSec tactical team, fully kitted and ready. They set at once to pulling up a sewer lid from the passageway and dropping down.

The Marshal stood watching this, and the man made a slow casual approach.

“We go back, you and I...” he said, “and you know I admire you... the way you took down Rajeem, cleaned up the Crows...”

“And the way you set up the next in his place,” Duman returned, eyeing him.

The men watched each other.

“I set up order,” the man replied. “What Rajeem’s fall left was anarchy waiting to happen. There is nowhere near as much open crime now on th-”

“Whatever you say,” the Marshal rejected, returning to the Singh team. “From what I gather there are far more than one at large in the city. Why all the concentr-“

“We got the others,” the man tossed in, looked aside to the other end. This had cleared the Marshal’s brow. “Like I said, I admire you, Duman... but there’s a limit to that.” The man turned and walked on, giving nothing more. “Don’t fling that tool around me, Girl!”

The idle spin of her pistol lost its enthusiasm, and the First Deputy looked at the Marshal and shoved it away. She stepped down from the door and crossed over to him, eyeing a Witch shuffling among the SinghSec guys, generator suit initialising the opening stages of winding up. She had massive explosive yellow hair, bug eyes, and a twitchy manner like a nervous rat.

The suited man glanced the Marshal a final time then strode off to a nearby luxury sedan where a beautiful upper-class Olenai stood waiting in attendance. She was looking warily about herself, perhaps making her first ever visit to the infamous Craves.

“Who was he looking for?”

The Marshal held watching for the final guys to drop down, and then immediately scanned the rooftops.

“Gear up, tool up,” he softly said, clearing her surface. “We’re heading into the sewers. I’ll tell you on the way.”

Rennai moved as swiftly as he could through the tunnels; damp, dark, with mould over the graffiti and trickles of ankle-deep water one wouldn’t want touching their ankles. He hopped between either side of it, dodging the trash still yet to be flushed out, following the Marshal’s directions to find the water.

The echoes of voices reined his momentum and he stopped to listen, deciphering from them what sounded to be a considerable group advancing through multiple tunnels.

Okay, time for some shit.

He drew his pistol, and expanded his shield, looking to let them make the first move and adjust. He kept an adjoining tunnel to his left and lowered to a knee, watching and waiting.

Figures emerged from the darkness ahead, and shortly a fully armed tactical assault team came jogging up, the first guys honing... scrutinising something ahead...

“... Wh-CONTACT!”

Rennai opened up, sending shot after shot down into them, the guards ducking aside and for cover behind trash or an adjoining tunnel of their own. A barrage of automatic fire washed in SLAMMING his shield at all angles and ricocheting aside and about, sparking and spitting the walls. The shield did its job, but the impacts still knocked, and

eventually they'd get his foot or knee or something, so Rennai pulled back into the adjoining tunnel.

“GO! That way!” Many of the guards took off down their own adjoining tunnel to flank, while the rest bolted up along the main tunnel in pursuit. The first came in full bolt, reining momentum with rapid shorter steps to turn in. He caught Rennai's blade as he pounced back out and into the others.

“BACK! DOUBLE BACK! DOU-“ The last dropped and Rennai surged on, charging up the length of the pipe to reach the guards' adjoining tunnel, where the first of the rest came back, yelling in panic as they caught the same.

He knocked the barrel of the last aside with his hilt and cut him down, now half way along. Rennai strode on to the end, officially revved to rock. More voices resonated from the tunnel ahead and he rolled his neck, rolled his shoulders, gearing up as he entered the tunnel and stood to look... finding a whole new group of far more guards and a yellow-haired Witch, notably out of blade range, with generators fired up and ready to meet him.

Shit.

She glared and reared, releasing a piercing scream, arm emitters igniting, and Rennai bolted for it the other way. Forks of lightning struck all about him in pursuit, snatching and clenching him, searing, gritting and stumbling him through the last few meters till he could roll into sanctuary of another adjoining pipe. He staggered about on all limbs for a bit and pushed on, pacing quickly on to the tunnel's end, searching for a way to bait and double back, close to CQB and cleave the bitch.

The tough G-Cen boots dropped safely into the murky sewer waters, long used to such indignities. The Marshal and Deputy stood side by side, frowning or glaring respectively towards the direction of the sheer fucking insanity apparently taking place just a few pipes away.

“Uhhh...” Penpei began. “Fuck?!”

The Marshal nodded her into the rightward tunnel, so he himself could take the left.

“Are you serious?!” she called in his wake, though he was already jogging on.

Penpei blinked to herself, looking about, checking her far sleeker and shinier boots for...

Priorities, Pen.

She huffed the nerves free, steeled, gritted... and pressed on to join the insane.

Rennai had tried a couple of times to flank, but had soon dropped that idea to instead simply bail on that whole thing and make a break instead for the water. The tunnel opened ahead however into a multi-level chamber, with multiple entries.

It had him slowing to look for where to go, when a figure flipped in sideways to land flat on both heels directly before him.

He reared at once, down, and ready... as Salette slowly extended her long legs to stand before him, feet widely apart and hilt ready in hand. She had a pistol on her thigh, but clearly wasn't bothering with that again. Like him, she was considerably more scratched up and bruised from the last time they met, but seemed pretty determined to not let that cramp her style.

He said nothing, and she said nothing... merely stared through her strips of hair... until a commotion beyond her right shoulder drew her partial attention. More SinghSec piled into the space from a tunnel behind her, holding up and glaring with the sight of them both.

Rennai released a heavy breath, preparing to dash in to beat their guns and get them between him and her. The commotion of the Witch's rushing team echoed in the tunnels behind him.

This was gonna be tight.

"Back up, Sweetiies," the Bounty Hunter advised through her soft melodic tone. "I make claim herrre."

"Orders from Kaneta," the team lead countered. "This is our paycheck."

That peaked Rennai's interest, and he crossed a few steps with no particular hurry, positioning himself for the tunnel directly leftward.

She honed, their rifles notably directing towards her, and she stepped, turning bodily to face them, inflating her chest and lowering her chin to glare. "Donnn't," she growled with serious weight surging the duotones of the normally young tween voice.

The team held, stepping, nudging, looking at each other...

“Fuck you, Salette. KILL HER!”

Rennai dashed past all and back into the tunnels, leaving the clatter to fill his wake.

Good, very good. The Witch would likely be drawn to that as well. Rennai was in the clear, free to simply bolt out a few rows, lose them, duck about to the gates annnnd... run into a team of Gargantuans manning the flood gate. They were already roused with the commotion, and now reeling with the site of his sudden appearance before their eyes.

Fucking Hell. Madan Militia.

Rennai huffed another settling breath as the teens and twenty-something giants all scampered about as much as their hulks allowed, shoving and positioning each other, readying to receive. The waters and lights of Mumbai Bay lay just behind them.

A couple of shotguns; mostly melee.

They weren't making any first moves themselves... They were nervous.

“There's no getting them out,” the Marshal had said, “but at least they're not directly endangering civilians anymore. Only kidnapping, manipulating or recruiting the civilians kids... selling them, having them kill each other... or attack you.”

Rennai held watching as the young Gargans began to will themselves forth into an uneasy advance. There was no way around them.

He was just going to have to do it, wasn't he.

The First Deputy closed in upon the conjoint tunnel chamber, pistol out but down by her side.

What she found was a fucking blood bath.

“Whoa HOLD IT!” she tried, drowned out by a woman's final piercing screech and BLAST of electricity forking throughout the space. The Deputy eased from her wince, and lowered her arm to find a now smoking Salette dropping a Witch's corpse to one side, and head, shoulder and arm to the other.

“Fffffuck,” the Deputy exclaimed, looking across all the singed bodies and blood.

Salette had stilled with the exclaim, and acknowledged the Deputy at least partially with a blank glare beyond her shoulder. She may have still been catching herself up a bit.

“... They attacked mee,” she finally spoke. “Self defence.”

Penpei looked once more across them all.

“... Yeah alright, Sally.” She lowered her barrel. “Me and Marsh are here now, so whatever you’re lookin’ to pull ain’ no longer an option.” Salette peered back more directly. “So how bout you just go home to your, cave or, whatever...” she ushered, and began her way back into the pipes. “Sleep it off.”

The Marshal meanwhile progressed along a tunnel of his own at a jogging pace, though quickly reined and ducked back as a gang of Gargantuns rushed past the end.

“C’mon let’s get the fuck outta here, Dude! I am done with this!” one spoke, clutching a bleeding forearm.

The Marshal stepped out in their wake, watching after them... and looked the other way to find the Transcendent standing now at the water. Several surrendered weapons lay scattered across the floor between them.

They watched one another... and Rennai just turned and dove into the ocean.

The Marshal made a slow approach to the gate himself as his First Deputy jogged up in his wake. He glanced to take note.

“What was yours?”

“Vampirella fucked up an entire gang of SinghDoh’s back there.” Penpei briefed, and nodded to herself. “I sent’err home.” She huffed the air, and looked back the way she came. “These sewers are gettin’ overdue for a good flush I think.”

She noticed the Marshal watching a figure climb onto a passing rubbish barge heading northward.

“So is that who this is all about?” she asked, spinning and holstering her weapon.

“And then some... Keep practicing that toolwork, Deputy,” Duman advised, and turned to begin the journey back. “Our job is about to get a whole lot more interesting.”

Rennai dropped himself back into the trash, sore and exhausted, finally able to rest.

The giant black walls of The Dome stood before him, the brightly lit Banyan and Strato-Tower both siring over that, and before them, the bright giant holographic Galilean, vivid upon the air, ever swaying, luring, calling him back to The Craves.

The barge was heading northward, looking to follow the city tree line all the way to this naval base the Marshal had suggested. The way Rennai was feeling, he came close to even considering giving the plan a try.

But that was never an option. They had been set up, and from the inside. He couldn't return to G-Com now and risk exposure, and he couldn't leave the team under threat another day.

Rennai watched the passing wall and forest city stretching endlessly beyond, lights and bustle shuffling between the trunks and leaves... He allowed himself to relax for just that moment, releasing a vocal sigh.

The thick ocean of green flowed mostly unbroken to the limits of the horizon, the jungles of the Amazon thick and untouched with the Capital's many platforms choosing to hover above within the clouds rather than intertwine within. There were towns and villages visible in places beneath the canopy or lining the river tributaries all snaking together to form the broad layered amphitheatre of lakes and waterfalls Rennai had looked down upon that day.

Sapien land, air, and river craft shuffled about on their own business below, in and out of the centre lake. Porcelain structures protruded from gardens about its edge. From within that otherwise unbroken mirror rose a tall slender white pillar, curving upward for hundreds of metres to form a long elegant dress. A twisting woman flowing up into an hourglass shape, where upon the apex a featureless head tilted back, poised to face ever upwards to the sky.

Rennai had watched that-sky scraping depiction of 'She' from his advantageous position floating about her shoulder level. He had been watching it for some time through the glass of the spacious office, ignoring the numerous rounded city platforms hanging in stillness on the air about her, each a town of its own. The diamond air bridges criss-crossed through the clouds from one to the next, and air-traffic transported the rest for some purpose or other.

But 'She' remained ever focused, ever driven, ever unflinching and ever hauling the Sapiens and kin on and beyond.

Sloping boxy armoured Imperial Corvettes stood guard upon the

air in ensured conformity, themselves dwarfed by the longer sloping rectangular armoured Frigate holding at rest within the clouds above, just visible via the bloom of the sun. Several patrols of the arrowhead fighter craft had crossed overhead as well, though Rennai had just spent the wait watching the Deitine, in all her assurance, with all her achievements, and her promise.

“It’s a go.”

He blinked, and found the reflection of Guardian Hages in the window before him. Rennai turned to address the splendid and decorated middle-aged Transcendent now standing in the middle of his own office, upright with hands behind his back upon the diamond floor as if the Amazon’s canopy were the carpet.

“The Presidium have assigned you all to me, including Enchant Tillam,” the bearded sandy-haired Caucasian informed, watching Rennai in simple observation, his Imperial Guardian uniform and long overcoat an array of colour, ribbon and chain. “And I release her to your care.”

He stepped aside, making his way aside for his large ornately carved wooden desk.

Rennai held with the sight the middle-aged man had left in his wake. An entourage of mostly women stood to stoic attention behind the office’s distant front wall of glass. Clean straight lines of ordered flat coloured dress, pure Transcendent faces wrapped and framed in ornate headdresses of platinum, diamond and gold. They stood at attendance, in stillness, awaiting the bidding of she before them.

The Enchant sired a foot taller than all, though at jaw-level of the two 8-ft giants standing to her either side in flanking guard, themselves enclosed completely and faceless within ornate armour. She made for the image of a statue of her own, long black curls heaped and contained high upon her crown within a curling platinum vine of golden thorns and diamond flowers. A sheer sparkling backless gown bunched at her neck and to her jaw, though simply draped to screen visible naked breasts and the shadow of her naked body highlighted by father Sol behind her. Her jewelled hands clutched one another before her stomach, and the shadows of her bare feet simply hung lightly crossed upon the air, the train of the dress hanging the rest of the way though too not touching the ground.

She hung there, vivid orange irises watching Rennai through the glass, a most subtle pleasant smirk upon her lips.

“She has invited you to spend the night with her, so that is not an invite. It is what you will do,” the superior informed as he sat himself at his desk. “And tomorrow, together, you can start to work the final details out with your team.”

“Yes Sir,” the young man replied, turning his attention bodily to him.

Hagess looked to her himself.

“You will protect and serve her with the entirety of your being.”

Rennai looked once more. No confirmation was required, and the men simply watched this being ever hanging upon the air, ever watching back.

The Apex team waited in the court in the distance behind the Enchant’s entourage, lounging about the white stone garden structures and making for a more lively, if out of place image to the refined and ordered residents moving past and about them.

None were in uniform, the men wearing simple shirts and pants of varying colour, Lahrel a simple short white dress to the tops of her bare glossy legs, long hair out about her shoulders. All had pistols and sword hilts hanging from belts about their waists, though that was the extent of the conformity.

The Enchant’s orange irises ever stared into him.

“Upon the initiation of this operation the Enchant is under your command, just another of your team. You will be too few in number to not adhere to tactical convention.”

Lahrel leaned forward to press something upon Mazon to her left, emphasising her tease with a playful narrow of the eyes and subtle shake of the head. He set for her and she attempted escape with a silent squeal, but was claimed about the waist and curled to silently laugh out loud.

The commotion sent a flurry of glances, startles, if reels from the ordered residents about them, and the Enchant herself broke from Rennai to look with a smile.

She soon however returned to original muse.

“I sense you have self doubt in this,” Hagess acknowledged, lowering the young man’s gaze, “and that due to your late arrival here, you’ve never felt truly a part of us.”

Rennai watched him.

“Well because of this, the target doesn’t know you, isn’t watching you, has nothing on you, and what little exists of you leads to dead ends,” the Guardian summarised with a narrow observation. “Many are

curious as to the source of your capabilities despite being so new to Imperial Guard systems, but I know enough of the world to ask no questions. I have, my suspicions... but they shall remain as such.”

The younger man simply watched.

“I also know she asked specifically for you, and that your team accepts you.” The superior looked for the group. “Her will shall outweigh my own any day... and though I would send her with no less than a Battalion in guard... this is what she requests.”

The beautiful figure ever stared back in endless patience, ever holding her entourage in the same.

“At the end of the day, it doesn’t matter how either of us feel,” the Guardian concluded. “In the name of the Deitine you will complete this task, and protect her at the expense of every fibre of your being.”

End Sample.