

WAVES OF REPRISAL



MALCOLM LITTLE

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Prologue

“How many? How many were connected?”

“Preliminary figures estimate at least a half billion. Finals . . . could put it closer to a billion.”

A billion people. Dr. Gabe Picardo, the foremost roboticist of his era, was flooded.

He had trouble comprehending the magnitude of the recently murdered. He started to think about people he knew, visualizing their collective demise. Gabe wondered how many of his close friends and family had heeded his warnings to stay off the Combinet.

He shook off the despairing daydream and focused on the task at hand. There was no time for grief. There was not much time to do anything except ensure the plan was executed flawlessly and its assets were secured.

Figuratively buried in the subbasements of a top secret facility, Gabe and his protégé, Jennifer, were in the perfect place to guarantee the biggest contingency plan for the survival of the human race was enacted without fail. The distraught roboticist stared at his OHoP layout, which blinked profusely with red warning icons. He surveyed the primary screen, fixing his stare on the compiler that contained the executables list for the facilities requiring his immediate attention.

“Jennifer, route all bandwidth to the cache facilities network. We need to lock it off and separate it from the Combinet using the prescribed VPNs. Jen?”

Gabe’s young assistant gazed listlessly at her OHoP layout. She did not appear to hear Gabe’s second hail. Not the shouting type, Gabe trotted over to Jen’s desk and placed a hand on her shoulder. His assistant jumped at the touch. She looked up at Gabe’s concerned face, her countenance one of extreme anxiety.

“Jen, I know what’s happened is hard to fathom.” Gabe knelt down, placing his head level with hers. He grabbed both her shoulders and pivoted her body to face him. “But right now, at this moment, we both need to focus on the plan. We spent months discussing the potential threat, and now that it’s real—now that it’s happening—our actions are critically important. Your actions are critically important. We must save humankind.”

Jennifer’s eyes moved rapidly. Her troubled mind reprocessed her immediate environment.

“Okay, okay, I can focus. Wha . . . what do you need me to do, Dr. Picardo?”

Gabe slowly and explicitly clarified.

“Re-route all available bandwidth to the cache facilities network. Tunnel it through the dedicated VPNs so that there is no overlap with the Combinet.”

Jennifer nodded. She briefly wrung her hands, then gestured toward her holographic screens. Gabe watched her access the enterprise router splash screen and proceed to the input console. Content that his protégé was fixated on the networking tasks, Gabe returned to his computer desk, just as a message arrived from his colleague, Dr. Vernon Sawyer. Gabe immediately touched the icon to accept video communication. A static-filled video popped up in the center of one of his OHoP’s secondary screens. The visage of his middle-aged colleague filled the screen; Vern looked like he had been through an all-night bender.

“Gabe, I can’t believe it. We said it was likely, said it was brewing, said it was laced into billions of packets. But still, I can’t believe it.”

“I don’t feel vindicated either, Vern. All I feel right now is the need to carry out the plan. We didn’t beg for funding, oversee construction of the caches, and monopolize the genetic resources of an entire continent just on a hunch.”

“This wasn’t supposed to happen, Gabe,” Vern barked. “Our glorious leaders were supposed to recognize the threat and unite to stop it, or at least fucking mitigate it!”

Gabe shook his head and fixed his gaze on his exasperated friend.

“Fifteen years of pleading and flattering, and what did it get us, Vern? Fifteen years of feckless nonsense. Fifteen years of the national blame game. Heck, Vern, most of our funding was privately bankrolled from philanthropists expecting an ROI from all the genetic and synthoid research we were doing.”

“Think they’re checking their bank balances right about now?” grumbled Vern.

“I think they’re dead right about now,” said Gabe. “But our duty is not. I doubt we have much time for further chitchat.”

He looked at the Combinet bandwidth icon; its signal strength bar shortened by a hair.

“We must inform the facility managers to perform vital systems checks on their caches, then promptly inundate the structures before any physical threats beset them.”

Gabe’s balding compatriot perked up. “Speaking of which, have you read any of the AP reports choking up the remaining Combinet bandwidth?”

“I’ve been too busy making sure our systems were unaffected and that we have dedicated bandwidth,” replied Gabe.

Sawyer took a deep breath. “Well, the Caliphate is going apeshit, launching everything they’ve got at the Federation. Other reports focus on how global communications are crippled. Reporters can’t even talk to their counterparts across the oceans.”

Gabe shook his head and pursed his lips. In the past fifteen years, he had written many articles and blogs and op-eds on how the global and local dependency on a single communications technology network would be disastrous, especially if nefarious elements tried their hands at cyberterrorism.

The Combinet, a vast agglomeration of nearly all forms of communication, was ripe for ideologues to wreak untold devastation on. Supporters of the network would always point to the efficacy of security precautions, expounding on how breaches were statistically negligible. Gabe would counter with live examples of cyberterrorism perpetrated using the Combinet: the Rahat nuclear disaster, the Oroville Dam collapse, the Hadda airport attacks. Unfortunately his concerns were, more often than not, treated as hyperbole. The value of human lives did not seem to mean much to the powers that be, and his examples were typically downplayed because they ‘only’ resulted in a projected outcome of tens of thousands of casualties. Additionally, there was always a sectarian group to pin the blame on, regardless of actual evidence. He had worked hard to become a pariah amongst his peers.

Gabe wondered whether the loss of one billion and counting would grab the attention of the system’s supporters—if any of them still drew breath.

“What are the reports saying right now?” he asked his colleague.

The video feed cut out before Dr. Sawyer could respond.

“Vern? Vern! Shit!” barked Gabe.

“Dr. Picardo?”

It was Jennifer, standing halfway between her desk and his, her forehead imprinted red from aggressively brushing back her long brown hair. “I’ve routed all the bandwidth I could off the Combinet and through our cache facility VPN.”

“A bit of warning would have been nice, Jen. I was talking with Dr. Sawyer.”

Jennifer blanched. “No, that wasn’t me. I didn’t reroute any of our OHoP connections.”

Gabe looked at the Combinet bandwidth icon. It showed barely a sliver of signal strength. Another icon appeared on the window, blinking rapidly. He touched the symbol that floated in thin air. An audio visualization window appeared, tuned to the voice of his colleague; Vern had called back using audio only.

The colorful lines oscillated to the incoming voice. “Voice only, Gabe. That’s all that’s left to spare,” said Vern. “I caught your question before I was cut off. Quite frankly, there are no reports anymore. The last one I received on my feed was from forty minutes ago.”

Gabe stiffened.

“For chrissakes, Vern, we live right next door to the Caliphate. If they are going bomb crazy, how long do you think we have before they turn their launchers from east to south?”

A long silence lingered before Sawyer responded.

“Oh, I’d say minus ten minutes.”

Confused, Gabe asked for clarification from his colleague. Apparently, for the last ten minutes, Sawyer’s location had sustained earthshaking blasts and rumbles. With each passing minute, the bombing crept closer to his colleague’s office.

“Jen, go back to your OHoP. I need you to tell the cache facility managers to seal the chambers and flood them,” Gabe instructed his assistant.

“I thought that Dr. Sawyer was responsible for that,” said Jennifer.

Frustrated, Gabe smacked a hand on the glass of his OHoP desk. “Dammit, Jen!” He regained his composure before addressing her further. “Vern isn’t going to be able to do that. It’s critical that you send out the order to the facility managers now.”

Jennifer took a moment to compose herself before returning to her desk.

Gabe elaborated. “Send out a bulk communiqué to all of them, Jen. We don’t have much time.”

Placing his attention back at his OHoP screens, Gabe opened his mouth to address Vern, but his friend spoke first.

“Gabe, right after the bombing started—just before I called you—I sent the code word to Pavol.”

“You mean Pavol at the Gerlach bunker?” said Gabe, momentarily taken aback.

“Yes. By now the synthoids are probably in full trek-mode toward their various destinations.”

“That was supposed to be my job,” Gabe expressed in astonishment.

Sawyer audibly sighed. “Look, I know you were close to those bots, but the moment the shit hit the fan, I wasn’t going to stand idly by wondering whether you were wasting time with heartfelt goodbyes or not. The synthoids are the linchpin, Gabe, and they needed as much lead time as possible.”

The roboticist felt infuriated by the news that he could not personally deploy his company of synthoids. If the worst-case scenario was to come to pass, overseeing their departure from the Gerlach bunker where they were being trained was—in Gabe’s mind—supposed to be his final moment in the sun. Amidst the ongoing devastation, he doubted whether travelling the five-hundred-kilometer distance to Gerlach was possible anymore.

“I just hope they’re ready for it all, Vern. We’ve placed a lot of responsibility on their shoulders. If civilization can’t be restored, any future for our race is all up to them. Vern? Vern?”

The audio from Sawyer's feed was chaotic. All Gabe could hear from the other side was a gaggle of screeches and shouts. He could barely discern his colleague amongst the aural fracas. "Vern!" shouted Picardo repeatedly.

"I'm here Gabe, but it looks like not for long. It's like an electrical storm in the middle of a sunny day. Buildings are caving in all around the block," Sawyer explained, out of breath. "Gabe, listen carefully. The code phrase I passed onto Pavol for the special cache is 'fork in a lake.' You hear me, Gabe? Code phrase is 'fork in a lake.'"

Gabe was startled by a loud bang. The audio connection dropped.

Fearing the worst, Dr. Picardo frantically attempted to recover contact with Dr. Sawyer. There was no response on the other end. Looking once again at the bandwidth icon, he noticed the bar was now empty.

Gabe let his head fall. As he stared at the dusty floor, all the frustrations of the past several days, months, and years built to a crescendo in his psyche. He slammed his hands on his computer desk repeatedly, releasing his pent-up rage in a futile manner.

"Doctor, please," begged Jennifer.

Gabe beheld his beleaguered assistant as if with new eyes. He took a moment to center his thoughts, and, with nothing left to accomplish, addressed her.

"Fork in a lake, huh," chuckled Gabe. "Vern was always an obvious kind of guy. No subtlety. It's what made him a great geneticist."

"Why are you speaking about Dr. Sawyer using past tense?" Jennifer asked.

"I'm afraid, Jen, that, very shortly, we are all going to be referred to in the past tense."

As if on cue, a distant rumble was felt in the subbasement. Not believing his senses at first, Gabe stood perfectly still and listened intently for a follow-up reverberation. Several seconds later, a closer rumble was felt, then briefly heard, signifying the proximity of bombs being dropped. Gabe realized that he and his protégé may not have the ten minutes his colleague—his friend—Vern had before being snuffed out of existence.

The roboticist sucked in a deep breath before asking his young assistant a question—a question in which the wrong answer would figuratively kill his soul.

"Jen, did the bulk communiqué to the cache facilities get sent in time?"

She lightened up at the question. "Yes, and I've got lots of confirmation receipts. It looks like most of the facilities are enacting the plan as we speak."

Gabe let out the air he had sucked in and nearly collapsed onto his desk chair. He let himself smile at Jennifer's answer.

A blast from another bomb, this one close enough to rattle the subbasement, knocked Gabe out of his momentary euphoria.

Coming face-to-face with his mortality was an inevitability Gabe had pondered many times in the past few years. But now that death banged on the door, he did not feel any more prepared to face it than when he had first learned of the devious manipulations stirring on the Combinet. A deep-seated despair churned in his gut; he felt an anxiety he had never felt before.

He regarded his assistant across the room. Jennifer was eagerly checking the communiqué receipts on her OHO P. Gabe had dragged Jennifer into this mess with promises of heroic duties and recognition from peers. For that matter, he had used the same tactics to wrangle Vern's support. Even though the veracity of what Gabe had promised was, at its core, genuine, some part of him felt that he used these honorable people, and now they were being pathetically discarded. Maybe that was why he clung to the need to personally send off the synthoids. In the grand scheme of things, the humanized robots would be heralded by future humankind as the real heroes. Gabe, as their designer, wanted his connection to them to be a form of immortality.

Slowly standing up, Gabe deactivated his OHO P computer as another unsettling blast shook his whole body. He looked toward the elevator, pondering what to do with himself in what could be his final moments.

"Jen, I'm heading outside. I don't want to be buried alive in here. I need some fresh air."

"What about the bombing, Dr. Picardo? It feels like it's getting closer."

"I don't think it will let up until everything's ashes," remarked Gabe as he brushed a hand through his hair.

How would he continue if it did abate? Living in some dreary post-apocalyptic mess, scrounging for food and oil, dressed in leathers and chains? Global civilization was coming apart at the seams, and he had done his part to ensure that the accumulated human experience would not shred to pieces alongside it.

His greatest worry, one he had had little time to investigate ever since the troubles on the Combinet started, was that whatever agents or forces that had set in motion their plans for the extinction of the human race were possibly engineering their continued survival at this juncture. Whoever they were and whatever they represented eluded Picardo and his collaborators. All he knew was that they were clever, relentless, and covered their tracks exceptionally well. Perhaps they wished a communal suicide with humanity, but that was probably too good to be true. The alternative—that the unknown enemy or enemies planned to usurp global power—would potentially doom the plan, and doom the synthoids.

* * *

The elevator doors slowly parted, letting in the piercing light of the evening sun. Gabe emerged into the foyer on the first floor—or at least what was left

of it. He had to carefully tread around broken glass and metal fragments to get outside. He furtively glanced at the few bodies crushed under concrete rubble inside the spacious entryway. Gabe did not want to acknowledge them, lest he hopelessly try to render aid. There would not be any emergency services coming for them; those services were routed through the Combinet. It was another testament that upheld his criticism of single-network dependency.

Outside the skies roiled, yellowed clouds mingling with dark, rising smoke. The midsize town that his facility inhabited was virtually annihilated. Buildings were either ablaze or collapsing into heaps of rubble. Gabe caught glimpses of one or two citizens scrambling through the torn streets.

A noise from behind startled him. He turned to see Jennifer navigating amongst the debris toward him, clutching a flexipad in her hand.

“So much for fresh air, eh Doctor,” remarked his protégé.

Gabe chuckled. Even his assistant could find levity in the grim situation.

His thoughts, however, were consumed with the plan, specifically the safety of the caches. Doubts clouded his mind, particularly the reliability of the Clarite acrylic that comprised the cache structures. The manufacturer endorsed the novel material as having a viable lifespan of over a thousand years whilst retaining transparent clarity. They also harped on how it was age-tested against all sorts of bombarding stresses. But this was not a lab setting, and the chambers needed to endure, now more than ever.

“Doctor—” Jennifer began, but Gabe cut her off.

“You don’t have to call me Doctor, Jen. You never have.”

“Sorry . . . Gabe.” Jennifer absorbed the surrounding destruction, then continued with a stammer. “I just wanted to let you know that the first synthoid to leave Gerlach has transmitted back to us its route plan.”

“How did it manage with the Combinet down?” Gabe asked.

“I don’t know, but it managed. It also left a postscript message for you,” said Jennifer, handing over the flexipad.

Gabe scrutinized the details inscribed on the synthetic paper. It outlined a path through valleys and rivers, hills and meadows. He scrolled down to the postscript, which read:

Dr. Picardo. The entire X-series company is departing for their assigned tomb destinations. All protocols are in place. During sleep mode, I will reflect on our experiences together. I realize sleep mode renders synthoids inert, but I anticipate you will comprehend my sentiment. Thank you for your tutelage.

- X5

With a pang of sorrow hitting him, Gabe limply handed the flexipad back to Jennifer. X5 was easily the best and brightest amongst the synthoids he had trained for months at the Gerlach bunker. The company of automatons had grown on him in that time. They became an extended family, much to the chagrin of some of his more dispassionate colleagues. X5 had slowly taken on the role of the precocious leader of the group, regularly doling out orders and offering encouragement to other synthoids. The disparities in the intellectual growth amongst the AI-engineered androids made Gabe question the personhood aspect of the machines, and X5 was a prime example. Its message, coupled with its machinelike efficiency, renewed Gabe's confidence in the plan.

Another bomb detonated a few blocks away, briefly blinding Gabe and knocking him on his butt. The wind kicked up. Gabe closed his mouth to avoid swallowing the wave of dust spreading outwards from the blast. He glanced over to check on Jennifer. She was already standing over him, offering a hand up.

"Gabe, maybe we should go back inside," shouted Jennifer over the howl of the wind.

Just as they both stood upright, a brilliantly blinding flash illuminated the whole world around them. Surprisingly there was no accompanying thunder from an explosion. There was just the sound of a distant and continuous low rumble. Once the brightness of the flash subsided, Gabe looked on in stark horror at the horizon to the southwest—where a mushroom cloud, several kilometers distant, rose up to touch the stratosphere.

Gabe absently pulled Jennifer in close. His mouth was agape as he stared at the thick, monstrous cloud. Jennifer could not bring herself to look at the bulbous manifestation of their inevitable death for more than a second. "I hope the synthoids can avoid these nuclear bombs somehow," she remarked.

"Shouldn't be a problem unless one falls right on top of them. They can punch into the earth with amazing strength and speed if the situation calls for it."

A thick wave of ashen clouds raced toward the pair.

"Was it all worth it?" asked Jennifer, trembling as the destructive front of nuclear devastation charged toward them.

"They won't let it all die. It's in their nature not to," replied Picardo with his last breath.

Chapter 1

Kyron jostled Hanyma awake from her deep slumber. “Arise, my young flower. Today is not the day to sleep in.”

Hanyma weakly smiled at her father from behind tired eyes, still halfway in the land of nod. Rising to her elbows, she rubbed her face, took a second to center her focus, then promptly bounded out of her cot. With a passing kiss on her father’s cheek, Hanyma rushed into the kitchen where her mother, Shona, was preparing breakfast.

“What have we got to fill my belly, Mother?” asked Hanyma.

Her mother, a hand shorter than Hanyma, was busy organizing the messy kitchen. Her father tended to leave his metalworking tools lying about, much to the dismay of her mother.

“Well, there’s leftover trout quiche. Other than that, there’s some berry kaiserschmarrn,” replied her mother.

Intent on reducing her intake of all things fish, Hanyma opted for the berry pastry. She quickly devoured a piece of the delicious shredded pancake.

Living in a riverside settlement meant that fish was a pervading fact of life, but at times Hanyma felt like the smell was going to transform her into a mermaid. In her parent’s minds, avoiding fish seemed like an act of childhood rebellion. But Hanyma was twenty years old, well past her years of teenage contrarianism. Her growing distaste for fish was not because of the fish itself, but because there was little variety in Kepler, and the omnipresent fish symbolized that lack of variety. There were limited dietary options, limited vocational options, even limited mating options. As her years passed into adulthood, Hanyma felt increasingly that she was being shoehorned into a lifestyle she did not choose because there were no alternatives. At this moment in her life she wanted to strike out on her own—at least for a time—to see the continent outside of the Kepler village.

Of course her protective father eschewed that idea. He frequently expressed her duty to the village plus the dangers rumored to exist within the continental wilderness. As though channeling Hanyma’s thoughts, her parents started to discuss those dangers and the village’s defense against them.

“Three recent caravans in a row, all reporting destroyed settlements along their travels. Too much of a coincidence, Shona,” remarked her father.

“Maybe it’s a ruse designed to make us accept higher prices for their goods,” countered her mother.

“Their prices are high because there are less people alive to sell to,” said Kyron, busily organizing a metalworking tool belt that he spread on the dining

table. “In any case, the village meeting tonight will hammer out details for expanding the palisade—which, luckily for me, will probably include motions for more weapons and armor.”

Hanyma did not want to listen to the bleak discussion any more than necessary. Rapidly consuming the tasty berry meal, she looked around the room for her younger brother.

“Where is Rohan?” she asked.

“He left pretty early. Said he found a new spot to fish along the southern edge of the river,” her father replied.

A new fishing spot? Hanyma did not want her brother to hide that from her.

She abruptly left the kitchen. Returning to her room, Hanyma dressed as fast as she possibly could, spritely pulling her tunic on. She grabbed her rucksack and quickly exited her home, intent on finding Rohan and this new pool he had discovered.

“Wait a minute, Hani,” called her father as she stomped out of the house, but Hanyma barely heard him.

Outside her thatched home, Hanyma noticed an alarming amount of village activity, unusual for the morning hours. The bustle seemed to be centered on the lumber mill, where logs were hectically being cut to—what appeared to Hanyma—palisade height. It was a mostly cloudy and mild early summer day; the weather outside was quite agreeable.

Kyron rushed out to intercept her. “Wait a second, flower.”

“What’s all the commotion about, Father?” asked Hanyma, pointing at the mill. All sorts of people she knew whizzed by her on both sides, carrying various objects and resources to and fro.

“Palisade extensions, like your mother and I were discussing. Listen, Hani, your mother and I feel it’s time you found a mate. Our years are catching up with us, and your brother is enough to manage all by himself.”

Hanyma balked at both the idea of a mate and the suggestion that her parents energy waned.

“Father, you’re still lively. Your hair still grows as fast as mine. You’re still strong enough to do all your work without an apprentice.”

Kyron shook his head. “Rohan will become my apprentice soon, once I rein him in from all his headstrong exploring. And my hair is not like yours. Yours is golden and thick, mine is dirty and thinning.”

Hanyma grasped the ends of her shoulder-length hair in her fingers. She stared at it and compared it to her father’s.

“See the differences age produces?” her father continued. “You are tall and fit, and, even though I hate to admit it, a beautiful woman whom many in Kepler are taking notice of. You don’t want to compare to me, a drawn-out old man whose gut is widening, whose muscles are tired every night and sore

every morning. My hair's length is all that's left of any youthfulness I once possessed."

She looked away from her father, unsettled by his assessment.

"You're at a crossroads, Hani. You are of a ripe age to start your own family here in the village," said her father. "Whatever happened to Kelvin?"

"I saw him over there, at the palisade."

She waved a hand at a blond, lean young man who was diligently propping up stakes, but he failed to notice her.

"That's not what I meant," replied her father. "How come you two drifted apart?"

"Well, for one thing he got married to Rheya last summer. Don't you remember the festivities and the ceremony and the hundreds of pounds of cake you ate?"

Kyron looked at his gut. "It wasn't hundreds of pounds, Hani. But that's beside the point. Flower, if you don't catch and keep a suitable mate, they'll all pass you by and you'll end up a spinster."

Hanyma started to rant. "I just can't see myself stuck in a house, with a husband who toils in the village while I mill around, tending the children and trying to find interest in the mundane. I want to be a free spirit, an adventurer. No one in Kepler has gone more than thirty kilometers outside our village, and that's mostly for trade with the other settlements. I would be the first to explore the wide-open continent. I could find resources our village could exploit for ages. I could find far away settlements where they do things differently than we do, and then I could teach people at Kepler the new methods I learned for . . . for whatever."

Kyron's face contorted as he took in his daughter's ideas. He expertly smoothed his expression and replied with a diplomatic tone.

"Hanyma, I am pleased you have an independent spirit, but exploration too far outside Kepler is dangerous. There are reports from caravan traders that marauders are roaming around the nearby lands, attacking and pillaging other settlements. The traders are shocked by the ruthlessness and devastation they see left behind. I'm not going to discuss the details with you, but Hani, trust me when I say that I feel there is a darkness descending on the world. Life—youthful life—is needed in Kepler to push back the darkness. And you are one of the sources of that life."

"You're too superstitious, Father," chided Hanyma.

Someone from near the mill bellowed for Kyron. Hanyma used the opportunity the holler created to end the conversation. She bade her father good day with a kiss on the cheek and ran off to find Rohan.

"You're not slipping away that easily, Hani. When you get back tonight, we're going to have a talk along with your mother!" shouted her father as

Hanyma dodged through a maze of villagers and jogged toward the southern edge of the river.

* * *

“You’ve made an excellent find, brother,” remarked Hanyma.

“I knew there was a pool that forked off the main river,” exclaimed Rohan.

Her little brother’s cleverness impressed Hanyma. He had always been older than his years, especially when it came to fishing and its sundries. This deep pool that branched off a vegetated gravel bar was well covered by thick brush and trees. Hanyma wondered how Rohan had scouted it so effortlessly.

The pool’s water was murky blue, and the bed studded with cobbles. The trout were plentiful—packed almost densely enough to grab with your hand—but the depth of the pool allowed the fish enough room to dodge and escape any grasping hands.

They needed to be lured.

Hanyma searched inside her rucksack and pulled out her spool of reed fishing line. She wrapped a few lengths around her hand and bicep. Rohan then brandished his fishing pole, which was made of yew and curved to form, replete with a series of grooves where the fishing line snaked around in loops. He placed his worm bait on the hook and flashed his superior tool at his sister.

“Jealous, Hani? This is gonna bag me a dozen. You should seriously make yourself a rod. It’s much better than handlining.”

“I’m quite happy with my line techniques, thank you very much,” said Hanyma.

Rohan dipped his hook into the center of the pool. He did not have to wait long before a bite tugged on his rod. The spritely adolescent stood up and pulled on his line, at first conservatively, then fiercely. His brown hair matted to his forehead with sweat as he struggled to pull in the catch. The stress on the reed line became too much, and it snapped halfway up the rod. Dejected, Rohan tossed his empty rod on the grass.

“Hmm, do you have any spare line, Hani?”

Hanyma shook her head with a smirk. “Your fancy rod’s not all it’s cracked up to be? Shame.” Hanyma, willing to help her brother out, scanned around the bushy vicinity. “There’s some reed brush over there behind the cut bank.”

As Rohan went to investigate the reeds, Hanyma smiled at his back. Her twelve-year-old sibling did not tire or get frustrated easily. He would soon return, fix his rod, and likely bring home a larger catch from this new pool than she would. That did not bother her, considering her current distaste for trout.

The brief time alone gave Hanyma a moment to think on what her father had said. Not about getting a mate and starting a family—she has brushed that topic off enough times with ease. No, what concerned her was the recent hubbub about marauders rampaging around the region, killing settlers and

completely destroying their villages. *Maybe the culprits are actually a pack of particularly nasty wolves*, Hanyma thought. But then again, a wolf pack was not something the whole village would raise a stink over, no matter how fearsome they might be. The existing palisade would neutralize any wolf offensive against Kepler.

No, this was something else. If the robust activity inside the village that morning was a good indication, then Hanyma was beginning to think her father was right. There was some underlying threat coloring the air, like a gloom that acted as harbinger for dark forces.

Upon clearing her head of the dreadful line of thought, Hanyma realized that it had been awhile since Rohan had gone to acquire some reed line.

“Rohan,” she called out, keeping her eyes on the pool.

The only response was a faint, crying mumble.

Hanyma looked over her shoulders, but saw nothing. She reeled in her handline and headed over to where she had pointed out the reed brush to her brother. Parting the tall, thin green stalks, Hanyma discovered him trapped; his right foot had sunk into the ground, almost up to the knee.

“What happened?” asked Hanyma.

“My foot just fell in the hole. Didn’t see it,” said Rohan, wincing.

Dropping everything, Hanyma put her arms under his and tried to lift her brother up and clear of the hole, but he would not budge. She tried again, interlacing her fingers around his stomach and tightening the muscles in her arms.

Rohan remained stuck. Hanyma took a step back for a breather.

Just as Rohan pivoted to tell her something, the ground beneath him suddenly caved in.

The earth, like a camouflaged monster, swallowed up her brother, plunging him into a void of darkness. Hanyma let out a clipped scream as mounds of soil and brush fell into the void after him. Scrambling to the stabilized edge of the widened hole, Hanyma peered into the dark abyss, only to receive a face full of rising dust.

“Rohan! Rohan, are you okay?” Hanyma called out between coughs.

“I’m fine, Hani. Just clumps of dirt fell on me,” he responded.

His voice was close by, thus she concluded the hole was not too deep, and as the dust abated, Hanyma could see more clearly into the void. She noticed what appeared to be overturned chairs surrounding a long rectangular table.

“Hani, you gotta come down here and look at this stuff,” exclaimed Rohan.

The descent appeared to be no more than twelve feet. Hanyma carefully walked down the slope the slumped dirt created when it caved in.

She nimbly treaded downwards and emerged into an oblong room. She had to watch her step, as the floor of the room was cluttered with fragments of

wood, rock, and broken glass. The morning sun shimmered through the large hole formed by the collapsing ground, intermittently lighting the room as the rays pierced through tall trees and small clouds.

What Hanyma and her brother beheld in the room was astounding in its oddness.

The overturned, dilapidated chairs had wheels, arranged in spokes, fixed to their feet. The material their seats were made of was plush and leathery. The rectangular table in the middle of the room was mostly made of glass and rimmed with a smooth wood finish. Its embedded glass was shattered to pieces, but within the few intact sections were strange inlaid markings. Some of the markings etched into the glass were numbers, while others were remarkably similar to letters of the alphabet. Most words they formed made no sense to Hanyma, but a few did, such as 'Close' and 'Enter.' Her brother, caked with dirt from the fall, looked just as confused, but was far more enthusiastic as he eagerly surveyed the room's contents.

"You know what this is, Hani? It's a room the ancients built. I bet there's a whole building buried here."

"Unfortunately it looks like this room is all we get to see of it," she replied, pointing to the only other entrance into the room. The greyish door was off its hinges and rested on a tall mound of soil that filled the entire doorway. Adjacent to it, the walls had decayed significantly, revealing their composition; they were made of a strange white substance with a smooth texture. For some reason paper was sandwiched between the pieces of thin, boardlike wood that framed the walls. The material crumbled easily, and tasted to Hanyma like crusty salt.

Rohan, stumbling around the discovery with unrestrained energy, eagerly beckoned her to the other side of the room. Hanyma stubbed her toe making her way over to him, and felt the crunching of tiny glass shards shredding her moccasins. With the sunlight casting leafy shadows on them, Rohan handed her a page-sized object. It was designed much like the table's glass etchings, but made of something entirely different. The object was extremely shiny, extremely thin, and very flexible; Hanyma could bend it all the way around so that its top touched its bottom.

She did not notice it at first, but at the bottom right corner of the flexible, glossy page, a tiny red symbol blinked continuously. Hanyma glanced at a wide-eyed Rohan.

She rubbed her thumb over the symbol.

Instantly the rest of the page filled with words, numbers, and drawings. A portion of the page displayed words rapidly scrolling upwards, as though some invisible person was writing them at breakneck speed. The portion segmented the words into numbered paragraphs. Some of the words in the paragraphs

were recognizable to Hanyma, including 'the mountain,' 'cave murals,' and the cardinal directions of north, south, east, and west.

"These are like instructions. Travel instructions," murmured Hanyma.

"Let me see. Let me see." Rohan jumped, trying to snatch the magic page from his sister's grip.

Hanyma scrutinized the page further. She discovered she could use her fingertips to manipulate various page elements. Among the other displayed items, she was shown outlines of hiking paths and etchings of mountain ranges. Off to one side were strange, detailed drawings of blue-skinned people with ivory-white face paint.

What was all this, and where did such things come from?

Was Rohan correct? Were these blue people the ancients? Was this magic page a set of instructions to find their homeland, or to find something else entirely?

"I want it back, Hani. I want to take a look," said Rohan.

Hanyma shook her head. "This is something big, Rohan. What's on this magic page I . . . I need to take it to Father and show him."

"I found it. It's mine to show Father." Rohan reached out again, trying to grab the page.

"No, Rohan," said Hanyma, hiding the page behind her back, "I am the eldest, so it's my responsibility to make sure Father gets this so that he can pass it on to the village elders. You might lose it."

"But you can't just take it and not give it back."

"Don't worry about it. C'mon, let's get out of here and go back to the pool. I don't want you cutting your feet on the broken glass in here."

Rohan looked upon his sister with irritation. "I'm not doing what you say. You take things that aren't yours. You always do that."

Hanyma was taken aback. "I *always* do that? Since when have you been keeping score?"

A flustered Rohan did not reply. Infuriated, he pushed past his sister and quickly scrambled up the dirt slope and out onto the surface. Before Hanyma could do the same, Rohan had stormed off in the direction of the village.

"Rohan!" shouted Hanyma as she emerged out of the hole. "Where are you going? What about the fish in the pool?"

Too late. Rohan had already absconded beyond the thick brush of the riparian woods.

He was quite nimble for his age, thought Hanyma. Her brother would likely inform Kyron of what they had found, in addition to snitching about the magic page Hanyma now had in her possession. She did not know why, but Hanyma felt as though she needed some time alone with the page before handing it over to the elders of Kepler.

She laid the page down on the grass near the pool and began wrapping a new handline between her hand and bicep as she intently read the fascinating data displayed on it. The contents of the page distracted her so much that she had to restart her line a couple times.

Hanyma became engrossed in the magic page. Her fingertip manipulations revealed information about travel routes, some sort of ‘caches,’ and strange buildings located in places she had never heard of. She recognized that certain words the ancients used were just slightly different from her own written language. Many were spelled with just one or two different letters, and others were understandable in the context of the sentences they were used in.

As she sat on the edge of the pool, knees pressing into the soil, Hanyma started to piece together a theme amongst the details of the magic page. Before any deep insights were uncovered, she was snapped back to reality by a distant, loud scream. Thinking she had imagined it, Hanyma continued reading the page.

Seconds later a successive flurry of screams emanated from the direction of the village.

Concerned about the uproar, Hanyma deftly coiled her reed line back into the spool. She folded the magic page and tucked it into her tunic’s inner pocket as she hurried back to Kepler. The screams were unnerving, but her thoughts were absorbed with the ancient information she had just read.

* * *

As Hanyma trotted along the path, the din emanating from the village magnified in volume. Grey smoke rose over the treetops. The path widened and the surrounding brush thinned out—revealing a scene of total chaos and panic.

Many homes were ablaze. Many villagers ran in multiple directions. Screams and roars were punctuated by the clanging of metal, most likely from blades clashing against each other. A peculiar, threatening sound repeated itself in rapid, short bursts. Hanyma could not discern what was truly happening, but she assumed it must be an attack on the village.

Her immediate urge was to find her parents and brother and flee to safety, thus Hanyma dashed toward her house. Unarmed and uncertain, she moved into the village, using neighboring houses for cover. She rounded the corner of their herbalist neighbor’s home and nearly bumped into a mountain of a man. Before he could notice her, Hanyma darted back behind the corner of the building. Cautiously peering back out, she observed the huge attacker.

The character she glimpsed frightened her out of her wits.

He was a dark, colossal powerhouse. His hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and his profile revealed a bushy beard. The hulking brute wore leather pauldrons, with chains dangling and crisscrossing across his chest. His

maroon cloth shirt, torn at the edges, was splotted with bloodstains. In his hands, Hanyma could see him grasping two massive curved swords with blades longer than her forearm.

This behemoth could snap her like a twig, and he had the demeanor to match his formidable size. No one in Kepler would be able to match such a monster. For that matter, no one in Kepler seemed to have mounted any kind of organized defense. The palisade extensions were not even close to finished.

“Suraak, come see these two feisty ones,” bellowed a high-pitched voice. The voice originated from her family’s house.

The hulk lumbered toward the house, carrying himself with a mix of confidence and malice. Hanyma used the opportunity to dive behind a nearby earthen mound rimmed with thick reeds. She parted the reeds a little, only to see her parents being dragged into the front garden by another marauder—a particularly nasty rodent of a man—who threw her father and mother down to their knees near the rows of cabbage.

This other attacker, this rat-faced villain, was leaner and shorter than the one called Suraak. He was roughly the same height as Hanyma, but his comparative smallness hardly diminished his frightening appearance. A silvery mohawk topped his angular, rodentlike face. His cheeks had longitudinal gaps in them; they looked as though they had been intentionally mutilated so that his smile would reveal all of his teeth. When he smiled at Suraak, Hanyma could see those teeth in their full, repulsive splendor. They had been filed down to razorlike spikes.

The freak reared on her parents. “Settlers with guts, I like that. Too bad for you that your combat skills don’t match your grit.”

Kyron peered up at him, and the freak promptly struck him with a gloved hand. As her father slowly regained his composure, Hanyma noticed that his face had been slashed by the razor-tipped fingers of the psycho’s glove. Shona stared concernedly at her husband, then at the freak, who bristled his razor teeth at her.

“Tulock, you waste too much time when there are others to kill,” Suraak sighed.

Tulock grabbed Shona’s jaw and presented her face to Suraak. “But look how pretty this one is. I don’t think there’s a prettier bitch in this whole village.”

Suraak shrugged his shoulders in disinterest. The large brute left his compatriot to his own devices and moved off toward the center of the village.

“You’re going to miss all the fun,” hollered Tulock.

As if on cue, another marauder appeared in the garden. “Make sure she stays put,” Tulock ordered the newcomer, who stood hovering over Shona.

A fireball erupted out of the front door of their house. Tulock and the other marauder turned to see it, putting their backs to Hanyma and the mound. She was about to charge over the mound and surprise these butchers, but as she looked once more at her father, Kyron caught Hanyma in his stare. Ever so minutely, Kyron shook his head at his daughter, essentially telling her not to charge to the rescue, not to take her chances by attempting to save her parents.

Hanyma was briefly torn about what action to take and quickly lost the advantage the distracting fire created. Returning to Hanyma's kneeling parents, Tulock scrutinized Kyron's gaze toward the mound where Hanyma hid. Hanyma had to crouch lower behind it.

"Must be something terribly interesting over there, eh old man," Tulock screeched, his voice briefly cracking, "You know, I hate it when my subjects don't give me their undivided attention."

Tulock abruptly stabbed Kyron in his left eye with a razor finger.

Her father let out a wail, his head dropping to the ground. Shona tearfully called out her husband's name. At this point, Hanyma traded fear for rage. A fire was lit inside her, as if from a lightning bolt. Kyron slowly righted himself, his eye a bloody mess, his expression flipping between pained and stoical. He looked back at the mound Hanyma was behind and, with the slightest tick of his head, indicated for her to flee into the woods.

Tulock, disappointed at her father's courageous front, crinkled his face and addressed the other marauder.

"This Kyron bloke just won't learn. Well, he's got another one. Maybe I can dig it out and control it myself."

The psychotic freak pulled out his knife and ordered the other marauder to hold Kyron. Her father madly struggled to free himself, which made Tulock increasingly angry. After a few exasperating moments, Tulock stabbed hard into the right eye of her father with his knife.

This time, there was no wail, nor any pained expressions on her father's face. Kyron simply pitched forward, his dead weight collapsing in a motionless heap.

"Oops, sorry about that," laughed Tulock.

Hanyma was beside herself. Her emotions were chaotic. She could not center her thoughts.

She did not know what to do. She wanted to go to her father and collapse next to him . . .

She wanted to eviscerate the butchers standing in their garden . . .

She wanted to wake from this nightmare and go exploring with her brother

. . .

Her brother . . .

Oh lord! She had forgotten about Rohan.

Where was he? If he saw what had happened to their father, he might not be able to . . .

A screeching yell reached Hanyma's ears. She glanced over the crest of the mound and watched as Rohan hurtled toward Tulock.

Her little brother actually surprised the psychopath, clipping the back of the freak's knees. Tulock staggered down onto his hands.

But that was all Rohan could muster against the murderer. With one swift motion of his arm, Tulock knocked her brother aside, sending him sprawling into the rows of cabbage.

Hanyma decided it was now or never. She needed to save her despondent mother and her vulnerable brother from these raiders. Unfortunately for her a pair of them, flanking from the left side, were closing in on Hanyma's hiding spot behind the earthen mound. She had to quickly fall back to a denser clump of reed brush.

The retreat raised her anxiety to an extreme level. She could not see the garden anymore. She could not hear what was happening to her mother and brother. She could not do anything from her position except tremble under the weight of her indecisiveness.

The two other marauders came within a stone's throw of Hanyma. She hunched down among the reeds as much as she could.

As she regarded them, Hanyma deduced that Suraak and Tulock must be quite average amongst this group of raiders. These two, a man and a woman, were just as physically imposing and outlandishly dressed as the former. The woman wore a brown leather jacket with a fur collar, but underneath it she wore naught but a tiny halter top that covered just her breasts, which were quite small. The paltry top accentuated her rippling abdominal muscles, and sandy brown hair complemented her prominent cheekbones and thin lips. She was the most masculine woman Hanyma had ever seen. Fitting, considering the company she kept.

The olive-skinned man alongside the chiseled woman was as alien as any nightmarish creature Hanyma could conceive.

It was not his chainmail shirt that obscured flaming-skull tattoos on his triceps, nor the unusually sleek crossbowlike weapon he carried that disturbed her. There was something attached to his face—or maybe that was his face. This man, if that was indeed the best descriptor, wore a kind of armadillo mask that oozed a bluish smoke from a trunk where a mouth would usually be.

Hanyma eavesdropped on the bizarre duo's conversation:

“Fate is smiling on us, Travers. This cluster of settlements has made our jobs easier than I anticipated. Did you see the pitiful wall they left unfinished?” said the man. His voice carried a deep, soulless growl.

“I was hoping for a challenge. This was a cakewalk. I don’t think I’ll have any new scars to add to the collection,” she said, flourishing her midsection full of linear scratches.

“Not to worry. Word is that there’s another settlement but twenty kilometers due west. I might actually need to sleep after so many back-to-back sacks,” he said, chortling.

“You’re a regular poet, Malovane. So, what now? There’s nothing left of these people and their village,” Travers gesticulated at the devastated Kepler.

“Usual wrap-up. Have some disciples sweep the village perimeter for stragglers. Pilfer food and supplies from the houses that still stand. I want to leave within a couple hours and get the drop on the next village.”

Hanyma jumped at Malovane’s mention of having men sweep the village perimeter. The enigmatic leader of the marauders, obviously possessing a keen sense of hearing, turned his head toward her general direction.

Hanyma’s heart went into her throat.

Travers asked Malovane what caught his attention, but he kept quiet as he keenly stared at the reeds Hanyma hid within. With practiced movements, Malovane unclasped his mask’s straps and grabbed the cylinder extending down the front of it like a trunk. He rotated the cylinder, which was followed by a scorching sound.

The mask was removed, and Hanyma beheld Malovane’s terrifying visage.

She had never seen such a chilling appearance in her twenty years. Hanyma might have considered his face handsome, if she was not horrified by the brute’s countenance. The pupils of his eyes were tiny dots, and the irises were bordered in a black eclipse. They resembled target circles, searching for a victim to fill the bull’s-eye. Like a magnified beam of sunlight, Malovane’s eerie glare pierced into whatever it focused on.

Hanyma did not want to be such a victim. Exhaling in sharp, controlled bursts, she adroitly crawled away from the village as other marauders encircled her position. She broke into a sprint once she felt she was clear of their patrols.

As her tall legs carried her at full steam through the thick woods, Hanyma’s thoughts filled simultaneously with dread and failure. She ran to the only place that she could think of to effectively hide—the ancient room she and Rohan had stumbled onto an hour ago. Hanyma leapt over the fishing pool, slid down the dirt slope, and bumped hard into the glass table. Sweat beading on her forehead, she took a minute to catch her breath. Hanyma then began to sob

uncontrollably. She tried in vain to stifle the racking sobs by covering her mouth.

How could this be happening? She had left her family in the hands of those maniacs. But what could she have done? She had never felt so helpless in her life.

Hanyma sagged down and placed her head between her knees. Tired and shattered, she sat in the ancient, decrepit room, drifting in a sea of turbulent emotions. Her life was being turned upside down, and none of it was within her control.

* * *

The evening sun illuminated every detail of the devastated Kepler village. The fires had abated. Only thin tendrils of smoke lingered around the mill, fueled by unfinished stakes that had been destined for the palisade. Corpses lay scattered about, no care taken for the deceased—the slaughtered. Every building in the village suffered extensive damage. Structures had been obliterated and their valuables ransacked. The raiders were complete in their devastation of Kepler.

Hanyma walked listlessly toward her home. Every time she glanced around a corner or regarded the village grounds, she cringed. The faces of the people she had grown up with stared lifelessly at the sky or limply embraced the ground. Tears trickled down her cheeks; it was too much for her to handle. Coming upon her home's garden, Hanyma stalled, frozen, not wanting to confront the dreadful reality. Three bodies were sprawled across the garden. Hanyma did not need to examine them to confirm who they were.

After taking a minute to calm herself, she limped into the garden. She first checked on her mother. Since Hanyma had not directly witnessed Shona's demise, she had the pithiest hope that her mother may yet live. She gently kneeled down and turned her mother onto her back.

Hanyma retched.

Shona's neck was ripped open, as if it had been grated by numerous razor slices. "Tulock! That rat-faced psycho bastard!" spat Hanyma. Rage mixed with her tears.

Hanyma would never forget him, nor his bizarre cohorts. They were all freshly burned into her psyche. Hanyma had never killed another human being, but to her, those marauders did not count as members of her kind.

Her racing thoughts and emotions paused when her mother gurgled signs of life. Blood poured out of the gashes in Shona's neck. Hanyma cradled her mother in her arms, vainly attempting to comfort her.

"Hanyma, flee," Shona eked out. "Take . . . your brother . . . to safety."

"I can take you too, Mom," pleaded Hanyma. Fresh tears welled up into her eyes.

“No. No. Take care of Rohan. You can do that . . . for me.”

Shona coughed up more blood. Tears streamed down Hanyma’s face as her mother barely clung to life.

“Show Rohan the love that . . . we . . . showed . . . you.”

At the mention of her brother’s name, Hanyma’s eyes could not help but stray to his nearby form. She could not bring herself to tell her mother that Rohan was dead. If these were her mother’s last moments, they should contain a measure of peace.

Her mother’s eyes ceased to move, a lifeless gaze settling into them. Hanyma called out for her to come back, but there was no hope of return. She held her mother’s head to her chest and wept hysterically.

Amidst her turbulent state of mind, Hanyma’s mood gradually shifted from overwhelming grief to seething anger. In her head percolated a plan, a plan that—ironically and as a consequence—included exploring the continent.

The day Hanyma could truly be a free spirit coincided with the day she could not bring herself to look upon her slain brother. Why had fate twisted her aspirations into something so horrible?

Chapter 2

Hanyma paused at a creek's edge to wash her hands and face, and soon found herself reflecting on her recent pursuits.

For an entire year subsequent to the sacking of Kepler she had tracked the death squad, maintaining a safe spying distance as they rampaged across the continent and assaulted numerous settlements. Hanyma witnessed the changing of the seasons, travelling through new locales during each one. She watched the autumn leaves falling on freshly slaughtered corpses. She watched bloodbaths befall harmless folk, their viscera splattered across snowbanks. She watched considerable village defenses get demolished by Malovane's powerful and unusual lightning gun. The months that followed the decimation of her village amplified the cruelty of Malovane and his brood in Hanyma's mind.

Early on in her pursuit of the marauders, she had gone about planning her first assassination, though it had taken her some time to build up enough courage to commit to her first kill.

She certainly was prepared for it. Most of the important objects she had taken from Kepler for her journey of revenge were pieces of hunting equipment. Hanyma packed the family's short sabre, a slightly rusted silver blade with a central fuller. She commonly used string to tie her hand to the wooden hilt to reduce slippage. She also made off with a hand crossbow and its complement of bolts, courtesy of the village fletcher Wolfgang—bless his soul. Wolfgang's archer helm fit Hanyma perfectly; she often practiced tilting it forward to cover her left eye for one-eyed aiming, then tilting it back to rest on the nape of her neck, all with just a sharp whip of her head.

The *pièce de résistance*, though, was the spiked shrug that her father invented. The specialty pauldrons intended purpose was—as Kyron once described—to 'protect from predatory attacks from behind.' Visually speaking, the shrug was formidable, with foot-long spikes angling backwards and upwards from the shoulders. Together with the archer helm and her various articles of leather clothing, Hanyma exhibited an appearance that, coincidentally, resembled the typical garish marauder style. It was this convergence of appearances that allowed Hanyma to get the drop on her first target from the death squad.

On a particularly dreary autumn day, Hanyma had observed the squad camped in an elongated pattern. They were spread irregularly across an open patch of grass. This arrangement of marauder tents aided her in luring a particular brute who relaxed at the edge of the camp out toward her constructed stake pit.

At first she mimicked strange animal sounds to catch the marauder's attention. Her subsequent rustling of bushes slowly lured him down an animal path and toward the concealed pit. When she was within several feet of her constructed death trap, Hanyma revealed herself in the open to the marauder, intending to play the part of the damsel in distress and having him chase after her. Instead, the marauder—a bald, ugly weasel of a man with obvious eye injuries—confused her with another squad member and asked what she was doing so far away from camp at nightfall.

Hanyma quickly switched tactics. She banked on these brutes desire to please their charismatic leader, Malovane, so she informed the thug of a hidden settlement she had spotted a short distance away and beckoned him to come see it. Like a moth to a flame, the marauder followed her. She carefully ambled around the perimeter of the leaf-covered stake pit, took out her preloaded hand crossbow, swiveled around, and then shot the brute in the thigh. His initial surprise turned to agony, then quickly turned to rage. He lamely charged at Hanyma.

The charge did not last more than three strides before the brute crashed violently into the pit.

The gurgling cries of pain from inside the pit were too loud for Hanyma's comfort, so she quickly moved in to finish the job the stakes could not. Delicately crawling into the pit, she noticed one of the stakes had pierced through her target's side, while another had perforated his chest. His squirming was unsettling; Hanyma wanted nothing more than to immediately halt it. She took out a bolt, reloaded the hand crossbow, and aimed down the barrel, targeting the brute's temple.

And then Hanyma, committed for months to avenge her family, froze. She knew what she needed to do, not only for her immediate safety but to prove to herself that she could commit to her mission of revenge.

Buck fever took over Hanyma. She started to vibrate, losing focus on the target—the man. She questioned her resolve.

Why was there an issue? She had already sealed his fate by luring him into the pit. Why did she waver on the coup de grâce? These creatures are not human—the evidence for that fact was plentiful.

Hanyma feebly tried to force herself to pull the trigger. *It would be just a split-second of time*, she thought. Pull the trigger and end the life of this man who participated in the massacre of your village. Pull the trigger and kill this man who helped end your innocence.

Pull the trigger . . .

Pull!

With a snap and a click, Hanyma assured her bloodthirsty commitment to vengeance. After she had gathered her wits and checked on the dead marauder, she noticed her aim had strayed. The small bolt had pierced through the brute's eye.

She declined to retrieve it. It reminded her too much of her father.

* * *

The killing was always unnerving, and it was never enjoyable. But Hanyma was pushed into it, and when pushed, killing was as easy as breathing.

In truth, Hanyma did not care about killing anybody in the death squad except Tulock. She was savvy enough to know that orders flowed from the leader, especially orders to massacre a village. But challenging Malovane was an impossibility. He was too well guarded and he carried around his lightning gun with obsessive frequency. Besides, the prospect of a face-to-face encounter with the death squad commander terrified Hanyma. Instead, she sought a method of wiping out the death squad in one stroke, either by trap or by feint.

Such a method currently eluded her.

Additionally, her assassination efforts were barely making a dent in the squad's roster. Whenever she dispatched stragglers, replacements materialized as though discharged from a beehive. The new thugs always seemed to emerge from the east and were so single minded that they virtually ignored Hanyma as she stalked their arrival at the marauder camps. This clockwork replenishment of the death squad frustrated the young assassin to no end.

Finished at the creek, Hanyma checked over her rucksack supplies. She verified the presence of the magic page within by lightly rubbing its smooth surface, and then she headed southwest. She could not afford to fall behind Malovane's squad, lest she lose track of them in this unfamiliar country.

Removing her moccasins, Hanyma crossed to the other side of the creek via a shallow ford. The cool creek water invigorated her tired feet. On the other side, she placed her footwear back on her feet and proceeded along animal paths toward an open promontory. From the crest, she spied the band of brutes loitering inside a lavender-filled meadow.

It was quite the contrast of natural beauty and unnatural vileness. Tulock, with his erratic movements and squeaky voice, stood out amongst the marauders. Hanyma imagined that even among his companions Tulock was considered a creepy deviant.

Amidst the beautiful purple landscape, the death squad proceeded to erect their panopy of tents.

“They intend to set camp for the night. Perfect,” Hanyma said to herself.

It was a tad early for them to stop marching for the day, but Hanyma welcomed the opportunity, mainly because she identified a deeply incised gully adjacent to the meadow. It was the perfect place for an ambush.

She explored the vicinity and picked a patch of level ground to set up her own shelter. Briefly fishing down by a small tributary creek filled her belly with the flesh of a young, orange-scaled trout.

Confident with her evaluation of the immediate surroundings, Hanyma thoroughly examined the gully’s features. A few sizeable boulders were perched precariously on the gully’s upper scarp, perfect for a deadfall trap. She acquired a few sturdy branches and wedged them in pairs underneath the boulders. Her idea with the branches was that if a lured marauder approached from within the gully, Hanyma could either kick the branch propping up a boulder, or scramble up the scarp and utilize the other branch as a shovel to send the boulder hurtling down onto the poor bastard.

As twilight descended over the lavender meadow, Hanyma steeled herself, then returned to the promontory to check on the death squad. A bright, gibbous moon illuminated the meadow and surrounding woods. The young assassin took stock of the squad’s arrangement.

It was not ideal—the camp was well lit and arranged in a rough oval shape.

Hanyma did not want to abort the ambush. But what were the options? A fire would be investigated by too many marauders; throwing rocks at tents would be as well. Mimicking strange sounds would be tricky; if they were too loud it would raise an alarm. To make this ambush work, it looked like the young assassin would need to rely on subterfuge and a sprinkling of patience.

Hanyma rested in her tiny shelter until the deepest dark of night. Awaking amidst the inky black sky, she donned her shrug, tested her weapons, and tied her moccasins tight to her rested feet. Navigating her way to the meadow, the young assassin reexamined the camp, keeping her eyes out for the assigned night watchers. One advantage in her favor was that Malovane’s squad was complacent. They never set night patrols, and whatever few watchers that stood guard mostly sat by their campfires and prodded kindling. Tonight looked no different.

She picked out one tent that was slightly smaller than the others and pitched rather far from the nearest campfire. Slinking through the tall grass,

Hanyma crept through the meadow, keeping the chosen tent between her and the campfire's attendant. It hardly mattered, seeing as the inattentive idiot had fallen asleep on the job. Nevertheless, her every step was akin to a measured heartbeat until she reached the tent's fabric.

Ever so slowly Hanyma lifted the flap and peered into the dim space. She controlled her breathing until her eyes, finally adjusted to the dark, spied the outline of a solitary marauder. He was fast asleep, his snore barely perceptible. Time to commit, thought Hanyma.

She poked him.

The marauder did not respond.

She poked him a couple more times. Nothing.

She improvised: She lightly slapped his cheek.

The brute started, rolling onto his side and mumbling sleepy gibberish.

"Hey, you have to see this. I spotted a trader and his caravan," Hanyma whispered hoarsely, intentionally disguising her voice.

The marauder, still in the throes of sleep, lethargically grumbled a reply.

"Get somebody else."

Hanyma did not have much time to convince him, so she grabbed his collar.

"The trader might have seen me. Come quickly, before it's too late," she rasped.

This time she had his attention. "All right, give me a minute," he quietly griped and rose onto his elbows.

By the time the marauder emerged from his tent, Hanyma had sneaked back into the tall grass and up to the edge of the gully. She could not quite make out who the chosen brute was, as the campfire light silhouetted his face from behind, but she nonetheless signaled him over with sharp whispers and waving hands. He lethargically stumbled along while the eager assassin stayed ahead a decent span to avoid being discovered as a fraud. Despite his meager protests for her to slow down, Hanyma led him deep into the gully with promises of surprising the faux caravan trader.

The deadfall traps were near at hand. Hanyma's heart raced with anticipation. Her breathing tightened.

"Stop right there!" piped the marauder.

Time stopped.

She instantly recognized the shrill, high-pitched voice, and could not bring herself to turn around and face it. How could she have been so careless as to bait *him* out of the squad of forty?

"You might not know this of me, but I have keen night vision," Tulock stated. "I was hoping your sweet ass was wanting some kind of private tryst. But you're not DDS. Nobody in our squad has pauldrons like that. Nobody has such a sweet whisper."

Hanyma heard Tulock inch toward her. Her eyes bulged in their sockets.

The fight-or-flight response screamed at her to fly. She obeyed, sprinting forward into the dimly lit gully.

She passed by the first deadfall trap, kicking away the thick branch propping up the boulder on the scarp. The rock swiftly tumbled into the gully. Hanyma slid to a halt, glanced back, and, to her dismay, saw that Tulock had dived out of the boulder's path and was quickly regaining his footing. At that point Hanyma abandoned hope of a fresh squad kill. Hours of effort and planning had evaporated at the hands of her parent's murderer, and now she was a hair's breadth away from sharing their fate.

Her thoughts now absorbed with mere survival, Hanyma steamrolled out of the gully, cutting through the tangled forest of vines and nettles. The frantic speed resulted in her swallowing a couple disgustingly large spiders as she tore through their sticky webs. Tulock kept pace, his breathing balanced, his mouth snarling threats. The beleaguered assassin barreled through streams, thickets, and debris chutes, but the psychopath did not surrender any measurable ground. He was too fit and footsure to outrun.

At least until Hanyma unexpectedly rocketed over a cliff.

The edge came upon her suddenly, and she screamed heartily as she plummeted down into a dark abyss. Instinctively, Hanyma reached her arms out to grasp the barely visible cliff wall . . .

. . . and her hand found the thick roots of a tree that had made a tenuous home in the cliff's cracks.

The momentum of her vertical descent and the sudden clutch nearly tore her arms out of their sockets. The impact against the unforgiving rocky wall, knocking the wind out of her lungs, did not help either. Recovering her faculties, Hanyma quieted herself. She peered upwards at the plateau, looking for signs of Tulock. She could scarcely make out his silhouette in the moonlit sky, but he was there, on the cliff edge, scrutinizing the murky ravine his quarry dangled within. As the pain in her arms increased from holding her entire weight, Hanyma purposely muffled any cries of pain she might make.

"You dead down there?" bellowed Tulock. "Quite the shame if you are. But don't fret, I'll be back on the morrow to collect that fabulous, spiky set of pauldrons you wore."

The advanced notice made Hanyma's muscles tense up. Even if she survived the perilous escape from Tulock, the death squad would probably be—from this point forward—aware of her lurking presence. Malovane would likely connect the recent deaths and disappearances of his squad disciples to her assassinations, and he would brand her an agitator to be summarily dispatched.

Feebly holding onto the roots, Hanyma felt an odd sensation in her mouth. Alas, a meaty spider still lingered in her gob, not wanting to die as an accidental snack. The hairy arachnid was wanting out, scuttling around on her tongue with increased rapidity. She had to do something, or she would be bitten by the likely venomous beastie.

But Hanyma dared not make a sound, lest Tulock, looming overhead, was to discover she yet lived.

Hanyma opened her mouth and extended her tongue, hoping the spider would scamper out and jump to freedom, or at least crawl off of her. Feeling threatened by the open air, it scurried back inside.

The eight-legged creature's agitation grew. Hanyma had no choice—she hawked the arachnid out onto the cliff face, hopeful that the small noise would not prickle Tulock's keen ears.

Unfortunately the psycho's giddy screech confirmed it had.

"Unbelievable. You're made of stern shit. A saucy minx and a tough bitch . . . I can't wait to dig my tools into you."

His threatening words dug into Hanyma like a spear.

"If you're injured, don't fret. It's too dark now, but tomorrow my friends and I will come back and rescue you out of that ravine," said Tulock. "We'll nurse you back to health in no time. I'll personally see to it. It is a particular requirement of mine to have my torture victims at a hundred percent before the fun begins."

Tulock's taunting chatter sparked memories of her parents. Hanyma clenched her teeth at the unsettling thoughts. Images of that afternoon in her family garden flashed in her blinking eyes.

"Well, toodle-oo," giggled Tulock. The dangling assassin heard the marauder's footsteps recede as he strolled back into the thick forest, snapping branches as he sung an offbeat ditty.

The young, foiled assassin spent the next hour swaying on the cliff. She managed to stand on meager footholds, easing the strain on her arms. Once morning twilight provided enough illumination of her surroundings, Hanyma clambered down to the base of the ravine, which was, ridiculously, a mere ten feet from where she had hung out.

Her arm muscles were tender, but it was her legs and feet she needed right now. She could waste no time; Tulock and the death squad could be marching toward the gully at this very moment.

Surveying the cliff face, Hanyma determined the shortest climb out of the gully. Once atop the plateau, she stealthily retraced the route that Tulock had pursued her through. Exasperated, she kept a vaguely perpendicular trajectory, not wanting to bump into any marauders led by Tulock.

Back on familiar terrain, Hanyma returned to her concealed shelter and proceeded to pack as fast as she could, haphazardly shoving supplies into her rucksack. Feeling the glossy sheen of the magic page gave her pause. Driven by habit, she pulled out the ancient relic and scrutinized its shiny surface until the faint, distant crunching of boots brought her back to reality.

A dejected Hanyma put a kilometer—both horizontally and vertically—between herself and the roused squad. From atop a sparsely treed ridgeline, she observed their dissection of the deeply incised gully.

What the hell was I thinking? I could have killed the bastard in his sleep, right there in his tent. I was so fixated on using the trap I built. That fixation almost cost me my mission—my life.

The eagerness of their search, their strive to find her, fueled rage within Hanyma. If Tulock had any sway with Malovane, the squad would be more alert from this day forward. Hanyma's determination—her singular purpose—was slipping away, fading like her memories of Kepler village. Upon these reflections, Hanyma pursed her lips and howled a fuck-you out toward the gully. Not the wisest thing to do, but in her situation, she hardly cared about the potential consequences of her outburst.

* * *

Hanyma's fears were proven correct.

For weeks she was not able to penetrate the newfound vigilance of the death squad, a vigilance the inexperienced assassin had triggered by her folly. Regular nightly patrols, coupled with Tulock's incessant rearguard forays, forced Hanyma to increase the usual buffer distance between herself and Malovane's squad. The added gap made it harder for her to track the squad's activities, and impossible to ambush or eliminate any of them.

An ingrained misery started to swell in her spirit. Hanyma was fast becoming ineffectual, but in her mind she had nothing else to live for save a promise of vengeance. In a twisted sense, the death squad had become a kind of surrogate family who allowed the lone young woman to leech off of them. The new circumstances were, figurative speaking, a disownment.

On top of all that, another gloomy factor reared its ugly head one day when Malovane's squad surprise-attacked a village containing over a hundred settlers. On many occasions throughout the last year, Hanyma had been close enough to the squad to project their likely course and thus forewarn villages they were targeting. That prudence allowed the villagers time to mount an emergency defense. Sure, the death squad always prevailed in the end, but her intervention typically resulted in at least a few marauder casualties along with a smattering of settler escapees. Hanyma delighted whenever Malovane's usually unflappable temper cracked after a disorganized and contested offensive. On this day, though, she came upon the attack in

progress, unable to assist the unfortunate settlers lest she become a fatality herself.

During the assault, Hanyma relegated herself to observing the onslaught from atop a grassy knoll. A minuscule trickle of rain dribbled onto the scene, the overcast sky acting as a figurative cover that contained the furious violence. Hanyma evaluated the landscape and realized what a wasted opportunity this village was. The settlement's geography was highly defensible; it rested atop a sizeable hill with fairly steep inclines on the east and west sides, and its north side was a sheer cliff that faced a wide river. The only expedient way to enter the village was from the gently rolling south, which itself was cleared of trees for a good thousand feet.

Hanyma cursed under her breath. Her intervention here could have cost the death squad dearly. But instead the brutes barreled through these innocent rustic folk, cutting them down amidst sustained lamentations.

Not able to bring herself to glance at the blitz, Hanyma calmed her unsettled nerves by occupying her thoughts with the surrounding landscape. Her eyes lingered on a strangely shaped snow-capped mountain peak. Its horn drooped at an extreme angle, making it appear almost like a cat's claw. *Maybe it was just the way the wind shaped its cornice of snow*, she thought.

The moment of contemplation soothed Hanyma, and she once again dared to peer at the village under assault.

She instantly regretted she had.

Not five hundred feet from where she hunkered atop the knoll stood Tulock, smack in the middle of the deforested field to the south of the village. He stared right at Hanyma, his face frozen in a devilish grin, the daggered teeth he had filed down shining through the longitudinal slits in his cheeks. He did not move to intercept his quarry, but rather waved her toward him, encouraging a confrontation. The young woman scolded herself for her ineptitude. She was currently wearing her spiked shrug; she must look like a gigantic porcupine sitting atop the grassy knoll, standing out like a sore thumb.

Hanyma wondered why Tulock was not participating in the village assault. Was he that fixated on finding her ever since their nighttime encounter a few weeks ago?

This time Hanyma did not hesitate. She promptly fled back to a grove of thick spruce trees where she had left her rucksack and warm fur pullover. Sensing cold from the drizzle, she placed the pullover carefully over the shrug, ensuring the holes cut in the fur fit the spikes through it; she then wrapped it tight around her body. She had endured much colder days without utilizing the fur. Deep down Hanyma knew this particular chilly feeling was not due to the atmosphere.

Wishing the day to end, Hanyma robotically walked toward whatever camping spot she would stumble upon. Her instincts forced her to consistently glance behind to ensure she was not being pursued. The sprawling woods were thick, yet the dense canopy still opened in places to frame that irregular peak.

Hanyma did a double take. There was something about that peak she could not quite put her finger on. Where had she seen that shape—that outline—before?

It quickly dawned on her: She had seen the unusual mountain in a drawing. Swiftly dropping her rucksack, she rifled through it and pulled out the magic page. Her index finger promptly turned on the page details by tapping the red symbol in the corner. As if the page read her mind, the outline of the strange mountain and its curved horn materialized in the center portion. Directly below it were several paragraphs of instructions.

With little thought, Hanyma charged through the thick woods, now determined to find a decent camping spot. Discovering a level, open patch of ground, she haphazardly set up camp whilst remaining focused on scrutinizing the page's details. Her repetitive studying of the page throughout the last year had brought Hanyma a measure of fluency in the ancients' language, allowing her to bridge the gap between dialects. She realized that, even though some of the terms and figures baffled her, the instructions were essentially geographic directions with landscape features as markers. The complete set of instructions culminated at a final destination—a cave called 'Lascaux' near a settlement called 'Montignac.' Hanyma was unsure of the distances, but surmised from the detailed instructions that she could arrive at the cave within a week's hard travel.

The ineffectual assassin evaluated her situation. She was currently at a huge disadvantage. Fighting Malovane's death squad was impractical, given their sheer numbers and recent diligent patrols.

So what about what the magic page offered?

Hanyma considered that—if this remarkable page was typical of the power of the ancients' tools—perhaps there were weapons at the Lascaux cave that could destroy Malovane's marauders. She knew such a diversion would entail a great deal of catch-up to reacquire the death squad's whereabouts, but the less-than-ideal circumstances Hanyma was trapped in made up her mind for her. Thus Hanyma shoved the belongings she had unpacked back into her rucksack and immediately took off for the swamp described as the next stop in the instructions—the stop after the curved mountain peak.

The evening sun was quite low on the horizon, indicating the coming of twilight. Hanyma did not care. She wanted to minimize the probability of

losing track of the squad. If necessary, she would slog all night and all day to find something that would tip the scales in her favor.

Chapter 3

A week it was. Hanyma felt proud of her accuracy.

She could have arrived a day earlier, but the new sights and sounds of the unexplored continent she traversed through were too stimulating to not linger on. The young wayfarer encountered types of trees she had never seen before, some with trunks thinner than her yet with crowns that reached up to the heavens. Exotic flowers of all sorts of colors and smells enveloped her in a sense of serenity. Landscape features morphed into strange shapes and configurations. Valleys steepened and broadened. Rock formations clung together like interconnecting pieces of a puzzle. Lakes and ponds shimmered with the reflections off fine sediment grains. There were plenty of unique features along the journey, which made following the magic page directions an easy affair. Hanyma's only difficulties were acquiring food and water in the unfamiliar territory. But she managed. The color of the scales decorating the fish she caught were, like everything else, an exotic medley.

Yet one thing was unmistakably absent: people. Yes, Hanyma had spied a few loners over the days, always cresting a ridge or walking across a plain several kilometers distant. But personal interaction was non-existent. *That was probably for the better*, she thought. In this land, recluses had to be on their guard, as encounters between them were often standoffish.

Nevertheless, the lack of any visible settlements concerned Hanyma. Was Malovane's death squad truly sweeping the continent clean of all trace of humanity? Why, and for what purpose? Such thoughts occupied Hanyma until she arrived at the final destination, number nine on the set of instructions: the Lascaux cave.

The small, rounded cliff that the instructions pointed to came into her view after a strenuous vertical climb. A lifelike drawing of the area was included in the magic page, and it directed the user to search for and find a hidden access panel embedded in the cliff face. Hanyma held the page up and contrasted it against the real cliff face in front of her. Alas, a twenty-foot-high talus slope had buried the cliff where the page stated the panel would be located.

Hanyma set down her supplies and assessed the rocky slope. It was pretty stable; the rocks had reposed into a sturdy configuration. Yet Hanyma thought the arrangement of jagged cobbles *might* collapse if the base was weakened.

The intrepid wayfarer dove into solving the problem. She utilized the water in her water skin and moistened the ground underneath the cobbles at the bottom of the slope. She did not want to get crushed by the subsequent

rockslide, so Hanyma needed a way to pull the cobbles out from the bottom of the slope whilst keeping her distance.

Rope wined from the bark of nearby trees came to mind. Time for toil.

Hanyma spent the next few hours ripping and pulling at tree bark with her knife, peeling and intertwining fibers together. As it arced a course over the horizon, the sun cooked her sweating back.

Eventually she fashioned a twelve-foot-long bundle of rope that forked into five smaller lengths on one end. She tied each of the five small ends to different cobbles at the base that were in critical weak spots. Stepping back to a safe distance, Hanyma grabbed the convergent end of the rope, dug in her heels, and pulled with all her might.

It did not take much for the first couple of cobbles to yield. Hanyma's taut muscles strained with the effort, and the angle of her leaning body went nearly parallel with the ground. As if in a tug-of-war game back at Kepler that she desperately wanted to win, Hanyma grasped further up the length of rope and gave one last mighty tug.

The talus slope briefly heaved, then collapsed in a cascading tumble of rocks. Once the billowed dust settled, she could see that half its height remained. However, she could discern something not quite natural peering out of the top of the diminished slope.

Hanyma scrambled up to the top, her feet shoving loose cobbles down the slope. She squinted into a head-sized indent in the cliff. Removing rock fragments blocking the indent, the wide-eyed wayfarer beheld a kind of plaque with letters and numbers inscribed onto an arrangement of buttons.

This was the panel mentioned in the page contents.

She brushed off the accumulated dirt and debris that soiled the panel and hurriedly retrieved the magic page from her pack. With an edge of familiarity, she found the number code that was supposed to provide access to the cave: 314159. Hanyma returned to the indent and pressed the numbers on the panel in that sequence: 3-1-4-1-5-9.

Suddenly the entire cliff began to rumble. Hanyma bolted away from the rocky face as the shaking intensified.

"Is this an earthquake?" said Hanyma. She had heard accounts of earthquakes from traders that visited Kepler, but had never experienced one herself.

Unbelievable to her brown eyes, a perfectly rectangular section of rock in the cliff face shifted inwards. The block disappeared into darkness, exhaling a cloud of dust in its wake. The ground shaking subsequently abated.

Hanyma paused for a minute until she was content that the ground had settled down. The newly emerged black cavity, roughly ten feet tall and a few feet wide, looked strangely inviting to her. She glanced at the magic page,

looking for some additional directions, but the entire set ended abruptly after entering the panel code.

The resolved wayfarer rolled the page up and tucked it into her tunic's inner pocket. Faced with direct access to the ancients' work, Hanyma had but her wits to rely on from this point forward.

She took a deep breath, then leisurely sauntered into the cavity . . . and entered into the most fantastical, awe-inspiring cave she had ever witnessed in her twenty-one years of life.

Lamps filled with a soft yellow flame illuminated the cave walls. The ochre-colored rock displayed multitudinous drawings, etches, and carvings of hunting scenes, of migration scenes, and of various rite and ritual scenes. There were cows, deer, elk. Hanyma thought she recognized the legendary creature referred to as 'auroch.' Some of the horses were colored brown and some were—for some strange reason—colored with black and white stripes. There were numerous other gigantic animals with elaborate tusks and horns.

It was a colossal canvas of boundless artistry. The backdrops penetrated Hanyma's spirit, filling her with a stark sense of elation. If the ancients were this imaginative, Hanyma wondered how she would possibly converse intelligently with them.

That was not important, because right now, she was overwhelmed. Absently plunking herself down on the smooth stone ground, the callow young woman absorbed the panorama of pastoral life.

* * *

Hanyma was unaware of how many swings of her head she completed whilst admiring the murals. This cave, in her humble opinion, was far better than the dank, sullen caves that were adjacent to Kepler.

All of a sudden her study of the rocky canvas was interrupted by the ignition of tiny little lights on the ground. The small points of illumination trailed off toward a small chamber. Hanyma, a little unwilling to leave behind the beautiful cave, slowly and cautiously entered the chamber.

Inside, the wayfarer regarded a layout that starkly contrasted with the mural cave. The small chamber was replete with panels, sterile lighting, switches, dials, and screen displays that were strikingly similar to the magic page. There were smooth surfaces akin to what her brother had discovered in that buried ancient room from a lifetime ago. Hanyma tinkered with various buttons and dials to see what they would do, but none acted like the panel outside nor seemed to be part of an activation sequence.

Except for one button that consistently blinked at her like it was starving for attention.

She briefly hesitated before pressing it, knowing how pressing a button with the same symbol on her magic page changed the course of her life.

Expecting the unexpected, Hanyma watched as—much like the rectangular block that shifted to open up the cave—a section of the floor shifted and revealed a containerlike object covered in dust. The object, at first glance, appeared to be a type of coffin. It ominously rose from the hidden slot.

Once the coffin halted its rise, Hanyma moved over to it, brushed away a veneer of dust, and examined its construction. A peculiar, consistent beeping emanated from the container, but Hanyma ignored it, her attention rather fixated on the resident, a blue-skinned person with ivory-white face paint. The person was just like the ancient described in the magic page.

Hanyma smiled to herself. She had found someone she hoped would be her ally, would be *the* ally for all continental settlers who were yet to be brutalized and oppressed by Malovane and the death squad's reign of terror.

The incessant beeping started to irritate Hanyma. She looked around the coffin for its source. Moving to the opposite side, she spotted a set of red numbers counting down from thirty seconds.

"What the fuck?"

Hanyma panicked, fearing the worst possible outcome when the timer reached zero. She attempted to leave the chamber by the way she entered, but instead ran into a freshly placed wall that had seamlessly sealed the entrance. She could not find decent cover anywhere.

The beeping increased in frequency.

Hanyma, eyes bulging and feet scrambling, did all she could do inside the enclosed space: She crouched down, covered her ears with her hands, and placed her head between her knees.

The frequency became so high that the beeping merged into a shriek.

Then it stopped.

The coffin's lids opened up, two flaps pivoting from the middle.

Hanyma opened her eyes and blinked rapidly. She noticed the opened coffin and rebuked herself for her foolish panic.

"Get ahold of yourself, Hani. Did you seriously think the ancients provided all those directions to lure a hayseed like you into a booby trap?" she mumbled to herself as she strolled toward the coffin.

The blue-skinned individual shot up to a sitting position in the blink of an eye. Hanyma fell flat onto her butt, the sudden move scaring the wits out of her. The strange ancient sluggishly turned its head to meet Hanyma's gaze.

She could now appreciate the ancient individual in its full, stunning glory.

It was not quite human, at least not in the realm of possible humans that Hanyma was familiar with. However, the individual that gazed at her with intensely sparkling cyan eyes could, in Hanyma's opinion, only be described as 'perfect.' The ancient had a feminine countenance, with flaring eyelashes, a button nose, and firm, pouty lips. The ivory-textured face was flawless; it

reminded Hanyma of a polished, river-rounded marble stone. The only oddity was a cyan-colored circle centered on its chin.

Its body was something else entirely. Flowing black lines delineated its frame into segments, and there were more cyan circles on its sternum and where nipples would usually be.

Very peculiar, thought Hanyma. Whether the individual was man or woman, she could not be certain. The face would lead one to believe woman, but the chest— flat like a man’s—seemed to indicate otherwise.

The ancient being gradually opened its mouth, yet no words came out of it. After a few awkward seconds, a stream of incongruous sounds sprung forth. Hanyma would not describe the sounds as words of a human language. It was more like a thousand whispers jumbled into a cacophony of gibberish.

“Hello. I, uh, don’t understand what you’re saying,” Hanyma meekly replied.

Following a pause, the cyan person responded. “Hello. I, uh, don’t understand what you’re saying.”

It had a voice exactly like Hanyma’s. No, scratch that, it precisely copied what Hanyma said and perfectly mimicked her voice. The effect was like a mouth-swapping echo. She was already impressed by this ancient’s talents.

“That was amazing. But do you have a voice of your own?” asked Hanyma.

“Conweiter spereden,” answered the ancient, this time utilizing its own voice. The timbre and smoothness of it was pleasant to the ears, putting Hanyma at ease.

“I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“I sprach bitten continues spalking in ear dialectun.”

Hanyma frowned in confusion. “Did something bite your ear?”

The ancient cyan person beamed, revealing an immaculate set of pure-white teeth. Perfect, just as Hanyma had first thought.

“Dialect and vernacular resolved to within two standard deviations. Remaining vocabulary differences negligible,” rambled the ancient. “No, gentlewoman, I am fine. I simply required you to continue speaking in your language so that I could formulate translations.”

“You’ve learned my language quite fast,” said Hanyma.

The ancient briefly inspected the ground before it, placed its hands on the edge of the coffin, and leapt out onto the floor with acrobatic ease. It rapidly surveyed the chamber, then it rapidly surveyed Hanyma.

“Caucasian female. 177 centimeters height. Approximate weight of fifty-five kilograms. Ash-blond hair, dark-brown eyes. Approximate age of twenty-four years.” Hanyma blushed at the physical evaluation. “How may I address you, gentlewoman?”

“Hanyma. And please, don’t refer to me as gentlewoman. It makes me sound old. I’m twenty-one, by the way.”

The ancient grinned. "Of course. Hanyma. Hanyma." The cyan person pronounced her name a few times, getting familiar with it. "You have a slight Vitamin C deficiency, Hanyma. You should consider more frequent fruit and vegetable consumption. Otherwise you may experience joint and muscle pains, and have a diminished capacity to combat infections."

The unexpected dietary recommendation befuddled Hanyma.

"My designation is Androsynth X5," the ancient continued. "You may identify me by my georeference call sign: Lascaux."

The ancient's name surprised Hanyma. "Lascaux? The name of the cave outside this chamber?"

"Correct. Lascaux cave, located within the Dordogne department of Aquitaine," explained Lascaux.

The place names were not familiar to Hanyma, and there had not been a solitary soul in days who might have had knowledge of this part of the continent. Hanyma walked over to the panels and displays, gesticulating to Lascaux.

"This is where I pressed some buttons, and it seems to have revived you from your deep sleep."

Lascaux, fluidly but with a hint of stiffness, walked over and joined the wayfarer at the panels. In a blur of finger motion that Hanyma did not think was humanly possible, Lascaux tapped all sorts of symbols and buttons. Different texts and drawings appeared on various segments of the displays.

"Is there anyone else here with you, Hanyma?"

"No, it's just me."

The blue-skinned ancient glanced at Hanyma for an awkwardly long time. Hanyma felt oddly ashamed under the penetrating gaze, so she pulled out the magic page from her tunic's pocket.

"I found this page near where I lived. It has directions detailed in it that I used to find this cave."

Lascaux whipped its hand out, motioning for Hanyma to hand over the magic page. The blue ancient perused the contents of the page in the blink of an eye; Hanyma noticed Lascaux's eyes pulsating with light intermittently while examining the page.

Cautiously taking a step back, Hanyma checked out Lascaux's body. Her confusion only increased by doing so. Lascaux could not be a man either, as a critical component was missing from between the legs.

"Uh, Lascaux, I don't mean to pry, but are you a man or a woman?" she asked, embarrassed by her own question. Lascaux laid down the magic page and trained her majestic eyes on Hanyma.

"As a synthoid—an artificial construct—I am technically neither. My designer, Doctor Picardo, decided to feminize the X-series to facilitate

familiarity and increase ease when applying personal pronouns. Thus you may refer to me as 'she' when using subject, and 'her' when using object."

So Lascaux was a female. But a female what? Synthoid? Artificial construct?

"Okaaay. What's a synthoid again?" asked Hanyma.

Lascaux did not answer. She returned to tapping profusely on the panels for a minute, then turned to her guest once more.

"Hanyma, you are lacking geographic knowledge, you wear rustic clothing, you speak an unrecorded language, and you are technologically inexperienced. These factors concern me, especially because the computer's chronometer is inoperative. What is the current year, if I may ask?"

Hanyma felt a little insulted after Lascaux listed her shortcomings. However, she was an ancient, and, compared to Hanyma, seemingly superhuman.

"Do you mean calendar year?"

"Yes."

"Well, according to the village where I lived, Kepler, it's 217 VB era."

Lascaux quirked her head, obviously confused by the date. Hanyma elaborated.

"No, wait, it's now 218 VB. That's two hundred and eighteen years after our village founder, Von Braun, settled at Kepler. He did so after escaping a cataclysm. It was a flood or earthquake . . . I don't recall the details."

The synthoid, her mouth agape, looked away from Hanyma. "That is not a calendric system I am familiar with." She sharply whipped her glance back to meet Hanyma's eyes. "The computer console is substantially degraded, limiting the information I can recall from it. However, current evidence leads me to deduce that a great deal of time has passed during my internment. At least four centuries, possibly more."

"What's a computer, Lascaux?" asked Hanyma.

"At least six centuries," the synthoid replied.

The ancient synthoid escorted Hanyma out of the chamber and back into the mural-filled cave.

What followed for the next couple of hours was akin to a grilling. Hanyma was queried by Lascaux for every little scrap of information, knowledge, and experience about the state of the world that the rustic young woman possessed. It was a volley of who, what, when, where, and how questions, but strangely not much was asked about the 'why' of any topic. It was as though Lascaux was apathetic to any root causes after learning about everything that had transpired across the span of history she had slept through.

Trying to seize an opportunity during the interrogation, Hanyma attempted to focus the synthoid's attention on the particulars of Malovane's death squad. Unfortunately Lascaux consistently dismissed the marauders and their brutality as 'a symptom of the collapse of global society.'

Once Lascaux seemed satisfied from picking Hanyma's brain, she shared some of her ancient knowledge in kind. The lithe machine woman ushered Hanyma back inside the manufactured chamber and instructed the wayfarer on how to use the computer.

"I have coded a translation program so that you can peruse the few intact databanks to your satisfaction. Doctor Picardo taught us synthoids to reciprocate—'give-and-take' he termed it. Free access to the remaining databanks is my gift to you for your efforts in liberating me from a possibly perpetual internment."

Hanyma had to replay Lascaux's words in her head. The synthoid was certainly one for eloquence.

"Thank you. Right now, though, I'm getting quite hungry. I should go out before nightfall and find something to eat. I've exhausted the berries I had in my pack, so I might have to spend time hunting or trapping. I'll be back."

Before Hanyma could move a foot toward the cave entrance, the synthoid blocked her path. It was as though the machine woman materialized out of thin air in front of Hanyma. Lascaux's agility astounded her.

"There is no need for hunting or trapping sustenance. There are nutrient tablets in the chamber. A single one can nourish you for a twenty-four hour period, providing all the essential nutrients a human body needs."

The tablets themselves were simply designed and completely tasteless; they did not satisfy Hanyma's cravings. A few minutes later, however, her hunger disappeared and her energy heightened.

Thus the curious wayfarer turned her attention to the databanks, spending hours absorbing vast stores of the ancients' seemingly boundless knowledge. It was an overwhelming array of artistic, historical, social, technological, educational, and recreational facts. Hanyma diverged off on numerous tangents so often that she started to jumble details together into inaccurate mishmashes of information. There was so much to take in, but Hanyma refused to stop the educational binge.

Her weak human body was her inevitable downfall. She wilted at the console, exhaustion finally taking over. The dreams that followed were the most outrageous and imaginative her mind had ever concocted.

* * *

Awakened by a sensation of cold, Hanyma realized she was resting on the floor of the frescoed cave with her fur pullover draped over her. She had no memory of leaving the small chamber and laying down to sleep there.

She propped herself up on an elbow.

"Good morning, young Hanyma. I trust you do not mind my relocating you from the shrine chamber to the mural cave after you lapsed into slumber," said Lascaux, her back turned to Hanyma as she examined the murals.

“No. It’s fine, thank you,” replied Hanyma.

She felt a soreness in her neck. A bedrock floor was not the best mattress.

Aloud, Lascaux critiqued the cave walls. “These mural depictions of hunting scenarios and seasonal herd migrations are amazing, do you not agree? They were etched into the rock by a prehistoric peoples approximately eighteen thousand years ago. You, Hanyma, might refer to my contemporaries and I as ‘ancients,’ but these were illustrated by the collective ancestors of humankind. They are the true ancients.”

“I know,” said Hanyma. “I’m still trying to catch up with all the history in the databanks. In fact, I was just about to read about the weapons people created back in your time.”

Lascaux turned to regard Hanyma. “The computer is on standby. There is not much power remaining to sustain its operation. If you are truly curious about weapons, you might want to hurry.” There was a troubled edge to the synthoid’s voice when mentioning weapons.

Hanyma threw off the fur pullover and bounced up, eager to once again engorge her mind with fresh and exciting ancient knowledge.

Lascaux accosted her before she entered the small chamber. “When you are finished perusing the databanks, I must speak with you regarding matters I investigated overnight.”

Working with the advanced technology was akin to entering a lucid dream. It took Hanyma a minute to refamiliarize herself with the computer controls. Soon enough she resumed where she had left off, combing through the dizzying array of weapons that the ancients had manufactured and used in their various conflicts.

She was perturbed in seeing the rise in destructive power as the conflicts became more engulfing. It seemed to the wayfarer that the ancients had wavered across the spectrum of general peace to total war more times than one could fathom.

* * *

Even for an android capable of processing petabytes of data per minute, Lascaux felt overwhelmed by all of the new information she acquired. Her artificial consciousness had already decided her next course of action, but it simultaneously inserted ‘doubts’ into the decision-making process.

Lascaux was finding herself using more and more subjective, humanized terminology to describe everything that occurred around her. She certainly was trained, rather than programmed, to do so, as Doctor Picardo felt that hard-coding subjective expression into synthoids would undermine the ‘intelligence’ aspect of artificial intelligence. Lascaux found it easier to interact with humans when not using scientific precision, but rather using quick-hand generalities and sampled averages. However, she worried that such an

approach potentially undermined her objectivity. She had recorded a statistical increase in the frequency of using descriptors such as ‘feelings,’ ‘doubts,’ and ‘worries.’ They had emerged not just in interactions with people, but in her internal contemplations as well.

The so-called doubts were essentially variances that had arisen when assessing her probability of mission success. Upon examination of the facts and interrogation of her young female liberator, the state of the world Lascaux had been reactivated into appeared grim. If this Hanyma person’s info was accurate, she could not expect a shred of technical resources outside of the Lascaux facility, nor even a modicum of assistance.

She was on her own, which was a scenario that the X-series company planned for back at Gerlach, though discussion of rampaging barbarians steered Lascaux’s assessment toward a ‘worst-case scenario’ scenario.

“Lascaux!”

Hanyma’s eighty-decibel shout alarmed the synthoid. She darted to the shrine chamber. Inside, Hanyma was looming over a computer console with an intense glower plastered to the screen. She eventually lifted her head to gaze at the synthoid, her finger pointing like a knife at the screen.

“How in the hell could he have this . . . this gamma rifle?” snarled Hanyma.

Lascaux walked over to the computer screen to see what Hanyma was pointing at. The console displayed an animated schematic alongside a demonstration video of a typical gamma rifle manufactured by Fernax Ltd.

“Who is the ‘he’ you refer to?” asked Lascaux.

Hanyma continued in a frazzled voice. “You remember I talked in length about Malovane and his death squad? Well, the chief asshole himself carries one of these around like he’s married to it. I’ve seen him decimate entire village defenses from afar with his gamma rifle, and then his lackeys pick up the pieces afterwards.”

The agitated young woman’s vehemence concerned Lascaux. The story of her village’s sack that the young woman conveyed to Lascaux was indeed unsettling. Psychological assessment of Hanyma revealed her preoccupation with revenge, fueled by grief and isolation. Nonetheless, Lascaux determined that Hanyma’s assistance was a necessity, thus she could not afford to encourage any thoughts of aiding with a reprisal. The strong-willed woman standing before her had survived a devastating barbarian raid, single-handedly deciphered a flexipad relic, journeyed long distances through unfamiliar terrain, and cleverly uncovered Lascaux’s shrine. She was a resource too valuable for the lone synthoid to squander. Hanyma needed to be reined in, her desires steered toward helping Lascaux achieve the mission objectives.

“I cannot determine how a marauder would come into possession of such a weapon. He could have stumbled upon ruins that contained one, or possibly

the rifle was handed down to him from parental lineage. Such a powerful artifact would be coveted by brigands such as the ones you have described to me. As the most powerful brigand, he might have won possession of the rifle as a trophy.”

“We have to stop him. We have to stop their scourge on the continent,” responded Hanyma, obviously not interested in Lascaux’s conjecture.

The synthoid treaded cautiously with her response. “Hanyma, there are limited resources available here, and certainly no weapons. I cannot contend with a squad of well-armed marauders with my defensive features alone. Furthermore, I am not permitted to kill any human. I am only permitted to neutralize them if they are deemed a threat.”

Hanyma grasped her long hair in frustration. “But you can’t allow them to continue killing. Don’t you ancients have a sense of justice? Don’t you care about people’s lives?”

“I do care, Hanyma. I have no alternative but to care. To care about human lives is literally coded into my being.” Lascaux raised her hands up to calm Hanyma. “But the situation’s variables and the limited available resources must dictate the logical course of action in these circumstances.”

Her eyes darting around, Hanyma appeared exasperated. She raised her arms as if to smash them on the computer screen, but ultimately restrained herself. Hanyma’s shoulders slumped, her head lowered. She dropped to her knees.

“I cannot convince you, can I? I thought I could find something or someone to stop them, but all I’ve done is drag you into this hopeless, shitty world.”

The young woman was vulnerable. Now was the opportunity to convince Hanyma, to secure her aid.

“That is not true, Hanyma. There is something left. Something substantial. Something that, if successful, will initiate the restoration of civilized society.”

Hanyma, her hands on her forehead, combed back her hair and stood to regard Lascaux.

“What are you talking about?”

The synthoid elaborated. “Last night, while you slept, I ventured out of the cave and confirmed my location using the stars and constellations. It took some time, but now I can navigate without the aid of global positioning systems. Proceeding that, I verified my mission details. I have been programmed to find a critical site by first locating a set of symbols that will decrypt the classified coordinates of that site.”

A tad confused but nevertheless intrigued, Hanyma teemed with questions: What is a global positioning system? What were these symbols? How would the site help restore civilization?

Lascaux, bound by programming to answer any and all questions posed to her by humans, responded adroitly to the barrage of queries. Unexpectedly, though, the synthoid encountered encrypted barriers when attempting to explain certain details of the site's purpose and contents. Her explanation of these encoded restrictions seemed dubious to Hanyma.

"So you don't know what's at this site, or you cannot tell me?" Hanyma sneered.

"It appears I am not authorized to divulge certain details about the site," Lascaux replied.

Hanyma scoffed. "Probably because it has weapons, right? Like gamma rifles and the sort? You don't want me taking them and destroying Malovane and his crew, is that it?"

Lascaux shook her head. Hanyma kept trying to convince the reticent android.

"Look, you could follow me and use your technology to 'neutralize' them, as you put it. I can then swoop in and deal the killing blows. We could plan it for nightfall when most of them are asleep in their tents. I could set up traps. Then once I have my retribution, you can go find this site and bring back enlightened civilization. I'll even help."

"Not a feasible course of action," replied Lascaux.

Hanyma heaved a big sigh. Lascaux used the brief pause as an opportunity to persuade the despondent young woman.

"Hanyma, I do require your help here and now for my mission. What it entails is more important than exacting revenge on a pack of brigands. The stakes are bigger than any one person, and, as I previously mentioned, it will likely initialize the restoration of civilized society. Such an accomplishment will, given time, aid in restoring systems of justice. By assisting me on my mission, you will be helping to rebuild a world where brigands such as Malovane and his squad cannot destroy lives without swift retaliation."

Smirking at the synthoid's spiel, Hanyma raised her hands palm-up in resignation.

"I have nothing left, do I? If you are not going to help me defeat Malovane, I might as well help you with your mission."

Hanyma took a few steps toward Lascaux, then rubbed her eyes before glaring at the machine woman.

"I just hope these promises of restoring society and justice are solid, Lascaux, because I'm going to be the first to demand of said justice."

Stating her need for fresh air, Hanyma summarily departed the cave. Lascaux followed suit.

The morning air was musty. Dense, dark-grey clouds filled the troposphere, the occasional gap revealing a patch of ultramarine sky. Hanyma was busy scouting about the area for something Lascaux could not discern.

"Thataway," she pointed to the west. Hanyma reentered the cave, leaving Lascaux confused as to why she pointed in that direction. The wayfarer hastily returned, donning her spiked pauldrons, her rucksack clasped tight around her abdomen.

"I'm going to do some fishing. My instincts tell me that a river lies to the west."

"You are correct. The river Vézère lies a few hundred meters west of here, give or take a few dozen meters of migration over the centuries. But Hanyma, there is no need to fish. There are more nutrient tablets back in the shrine chamber," noted Lascaux.

Hanyma shook her head. "No thanks. I need some time alone, back in the world I'm familiar with."

She adjusted the rucksack wrapped around her abdomen and tugged at the straps of her shorts. Hanyma flashed a faint smile at the synthoid, then ventured off to find the Vézère.

Lascaux could not afford to leave Hanyma untended for long, but she was aware of the human need for solitude in times of friction. The synthoid returned to the shrine chamber and gathered what critical supplies remained in the few desk drawers.

There was not much that had not spoiled over the long stretch of time. A packet full of nutrient tablets was still viable, but unfortunately little else. Most of the crucial neutronium cells Lascaux needed to power her systems had cracked and dispelled their charges. Only two remained intact. Lascaux would need to conserve her power, restricting the use of high-powered functions which, troublingly, included most of her defensive subsystems. She would need to rely on solar power gleaned from the microfiber strips lining her body.

Organizing the objects around the computer desk, Lascaux spotted the crumpled flexipad that Hanyma had brought with her laying on a console screen. The reluctant synthoid proceeded to shut down all computer systems and consoles. The shutdown sequence started to lower her proverbial tomb back into its slot.

Lascaux's uninterrupted slumber had seemed imperceptible to her. It was as though she had blinked and the world changed from sophisticated and interconnected, from Dr. Picardo and Pavol, to the world of weeds and woods and the wayward souls that survived such a drastic transformation.

The cyan android peeked into her sarcophagus as it slowly descended. She quickly noticed some items tucked inside that she had nearly forgotten to take

with her. Before the coffin disappeared into the ground, she forced it open and grabbed her only personal possessions in the whole world.

How could she have forgotten these? Systems diagnostics revealed no problems. Was she losing her machine meticulousness as well as her objectivity? Lascaux was beginning to believe that Dr. Picardo's training regime took away as much as it gave.

Upon closing the cave entrance via the access panel embedded in the cliff, Lascaux tracked Hanyma to the riverside, which was situated approximately one hundred meters west of the cave. Such an easterly migration of the river was unexpected. The synthoid pondered how long her hibernation had truly been.

"What are you wearing?" sniggered Hanyma upon seeing Lascaux once again. The wayfarer had caught a sizeable barbel and had sliced the innards to remove the poisonous roe.

Lascaux crouched down at the stony riverside. "This is my felt jacket and hat, given as a gift from my designer, Dr. Picardo."

"I like them. They look very good on you. But do you even need clothing? You are an artificial construct, after all."

"That is true. I do not require clothing," replied Lascaux, flourishing her smoke-grey jacket. "According to our designer, they are intended to be an aesthetic addition."

"I don't think you needed any aesthetic additions. You're like an angel. It's hard to look at you and not seem inferior."

Hanyma bit savagely into the flesh of the barbel, but soon became self-conscious next to Lascaux.

"You see? You ancients have tablets that fill the stomach for a long time. I tear into a fish like an animal. Come to think of it, I'm not even really hungry yet. That's how good your tablets are." Hanyma tossed the gutted fish back into the river, "After all that knowledge I learned yesterday . . . I must seem to you like a child. Why do you even want my help?"

Lascaux detected the frustration in Hanyma's voice and saw it confirmed in her deep-brown eyes. She responded carefully, wishing to uplift the young woman's mood. She started by handing back to Hanyma the flexipad she had carried from her village to the Lascaux cave.

"Your fortitude and your aptitude with the wilderness would enthrall many of the ancients I was acquainted with. The majority of humans from my time were urban residents, inexperienced with life in the countryside. To them, wide-open spaces and greenery were quaint diversions, where wild animals shared space with endless fields of grain." She moved on to the point at hand. "Even if you are not familiar with the precise geography we will be travelling through, you are experienced in knowing what to expect and how to adapt to

it. Our mutual cooperation will fill in many gaps of knowledge and competency. That is why I wish for your help.”

“You sound like my father.” Hanyma smiled a little. “He was always praising me for my skills. To tell you the truth, the praise kind of grated on my nerves after a while. Then I got a little older, and he stopped doing it. The sudden stop irked me, so I started pining for his attention, brandishing my accomplishments at him. He eventually told me that he stopped idly praising me because he no longer expected anything less than extraordinary from me, and that the day he would start praising me again would be the day he had come to expect less from me.”

The synthoid was at a loss on how to respond to the anecdote. Fortunately, Hanyma trimmed the awkward silence that followed.

“So, where is this site? Where are we headed?”

“The site is one hundred and sixty kilometers Euclidean distance, on a heading of one hundred and seventy degrees south southwest.”

“Euclidean distance?”

“Straight-line distance,” Lascaux clarified.

“One hundred and sixty is at least a half week’s travel. Hopefully the terrain stays as low rolling hills,” said Hanyma. She checked her rucksack supplies, clasped it around her abdomen, and wrapped her fur pullover overtop of it. “We should get moving. No time to waste, right?”

Lascaux nodded in agreement. The young woman was correct. Time was a luxury that had nearly evaporated during her interminable hibernation. She had doubts whether the site was still unspoiled after such a long breadth of time.

Doubts. How many more of those would sneak their way into her artificial core?