

A SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURE

EYSIN

ACE 301

NOT QUITE THE GLADIATOR

Silvi Simberg



OATHFEED

EPIC INDOORS EXPEDITIONS

Eysin, ACE 301, Not Quite the Gladiator
Published by Oathfeed
Pärnu, Estonia, 2023

Copyright © Silvi Simberg, 2023
The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Typeset in Tribute OT
Cover and logo type in Amiri

ISBN 9798510998092

TO PRIIT SIMBERG

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE: AN UNTITLED LETTER	
CHAPTER ONE: A CUP OF FUMES	1
CHAPTER TWO: SILVER WHITE	21
CHAPTER THREE: JOLIE ROUGE	39
CHAPTER FOUR: THE TITAN	61
CHAPTER FIVE: THE KEEP	85
CHAPTER SIX: THE PITS	101
CHAPTER SEVEN: SECOND WIND	117
CHAPTER EIGHT: SAVED FROM THE SEA	141
CHAPTER NINE: A FAMILY OF ONE	165
CHAPTER TEN: I COULD LEAVE	185
CHAPTER ELEVEN: TEMPLE GUARDIANS	203

PROLOGUE

An Untitled Letter

“Out of the blue, a beautiful fruit once fell onto my lap. My first instinct was not to bite into it, but to gift it to someone I loved.” - - - Father

Dear Eysin,

it was a pleasure to meet you. You are a fierce soul, and you are also gentle. The balance you keep is a pleasant spectacle. I recall all our days were spent well.

We had many pleasant conversations and meditations. If I have any regrets - it is that we did not record any of them. May our meditations return to you when you need them most - as one did for me tonight, which propelled me to write this letter.

It was good to see the colour returning to your face. And your laughter elevates like the pirate folk songs. It is only natural, that you get from them your rhythm - you must one day investigate the matter of your documents, for I found out they were not forged, they were reconstructed.

I did not wish to pull you into these Eesian affairs - a dark period has begun, and we expect war and instability. The heads that loom in Reval, groups forming and growing in size, again and again. Every time we tried to take them down, and every time we succeeded in doing so - another came in place. One ugly force that has successfully adapted against our pressures every time and will successfully evade or surpass us in the future.

I am not sure whether we are any longer in any position to try to keep Reval safe. There is another beating seed, cancer, growing on our Tree

of Life - and should it be so curious, that the cancer is not caused by our alien friends, but by the sickest men of our kind? The worms seem wiser than the men - but maybe it's simply so because their brains cannot be poisoned like ours.

You must reach out to a man called Vinu Laos - he knows of you, and he should be expecting you. You learned my code well - you have shown that you understand how it works - and by judging your character, I am confident that in time you will sort out what needs to be sorted out for your own good, and that you can be trusted to make good decisions with what I have entrusted to you.

I have made sure you have a place to go in Perona. Just so you wouldn't feel pressurised to take the other option - but I'd like you to join EESO. They will teach you everything to prepare you to live in the world that comes - and maybe you can teach them something, too.

Maybe you can be a good example of the kind of person that is capable of surviving in the world that comes. Carry our meditations with you, and maybe share them with others. You could be a person who will help others - those you'll come to consider as family and friends. I do feel a little bitter for not being a friend for you for a little longer - but what I do must be done, and after this - I'm out.

The plan was a little rushed, so I am sorry if it went off the rails and caused you any inconvenience.

Finally, whatever you choose to do with your life next, I wish you all the best and trust your decisions will eventually lead you to a life worth living.

*Farewell,
Andre*

CHAPTER ONE:

A Cup of Fumes

THE CAMPFIRE has relaxed, almost done burning. The dawn was near. Eysin was sitting near the fire, wrapped in a blanket, looking sickly. Calmly watching the flickers, as it was burning out. The old man, who had earlier introduced himself as Vinu Laos, poured from the thermos the last cup of tea and offered it to her.

“You saw him earlier today?” He asks.

“He asked me to deliver a letter,” with a shaky hand she reaches into her pocket and grabs a folded, crumpled envelope. The envelope has bloodstains on it. So does her hand. She unwraps it and lifts it between their faces. It’s still unopened.

Eysin handed the bloody envelope to Vinu, as if in exchange for the cup of tea. He takes it, opens it carefully and reads a few lines. He then folds it again and puts the letter back into the envelope.

“How are you feeling?” He asks.

She thinks about it for a little bit and comments, “I’m cold, burns here and there.”

“And how’s the wound?”

Eysin places her hand below her left ribs, she gently presses on it, all dry doesn’t feel anything. She pressed a little harder because it almost felt like it had never been there - and that wasn’t right - she’d been terrified about it past this whole night, “I feel nothing.”

“Then it’s done healing. Hadn’t he used the marbles on you...”

“What exactly healed me?”

“A small pink marble,” Vinu holds another one of them between his fingers, and then it disappears again. “Think of it like stem cells – your framework started building from that point, so, it was ready to work in that area...”

She can feel something move in her flesh, around her bones – sometimes it hurts, other times it simply itches. Sometimes it hurts like all her nerves are getting strong electric shocks.

“Once the red and the white have integrated, I am going to have to bother you again. The white marble was Andre’s computer, and it has some information on it that will help.”

“Help with what, exactly?”

Vinu didn’t know whether he should elaborate. She needn’t get involved, he thought. But she was involved already, so, maybe she deserved to know what she had been running for during the last day and night.

“RESO is compromised. Some of the upper levels of their guilds are infiltrated by a bunch of Nords. They are gathering information and undermining our region’s security.”

“Is that why Kamille was helping me?” She shakes her shoulders and raises her eyebrows, eyes stuck in the fire.

“She’s a curious case. I guess house Rozenbaers are looking to replace the Nords once they are gone,” Vinu shrugs.

She decides that she doesn’t care about those affairs.

“Andre has asked me to get you back to Perona.”

Without comment, she just drank the tea. It had a pleasant taste, but it had been better one cup before. When it had been hotter. Even so, it felt comforting. But she made the mistake of recalling the last time she had seen him. Andre had been shot dead in his workshop. “They shot him like some dog.”

“And you.” The old man says it without displaying any emotion. He tries to get out the last drops of tea from the thermos, right into his mouth, then closes it and puts it aside. “In any case, you shouldn’t return to Reval. Until we have flushed out all the Nords, it’s not safe for you, as they see in you an accomplice of the so-called crime.”

“Crime,” she mumbles to herself. She hadn’t done anything wrong. That Andre was dead – she had nothing to do with it. That she was being

chased in town - she had nothing to do with it. Eysin didn't know what she was involved in. Andre had spontaneously involved her in this mess.

And Vinu had thoroughly apologized for it, made her situation as pleasant as currently possible, and promised compensation. She'll have a place to stay in Perona, she'll have food, books - and at her own pace, she can return to something resembling a normal life.

"You can keep the place. Your service has been valuable to us. You've earned it, it's yours. There will be a contract to back it all up."

But it didn't look like the prize cheered her up in any way at all. She was experiencing a kind of a shock, because until that day, for the last two years - her life in Reval had felt rather peaceful, predictable and secure.

There was something else Vinu hesitated to speak up about for a whole half an hour. Soon it was dawn, the birds started singing - it promised to become a beautiful summer day.

"Alternatively, you can come with me to EESO," he finally offered. "Continue there what you studied with Andre, in RESO."

This offer seemed to do something else for her, emotionally. She still felt very sick, there was a silver tree growing inside her, after all. But she felt curious, and for the first time looked into the man's eyes. His eyes had silver scarring, much more intense than Andre had had. Vinu's face had the perfect tan, suggesting he spent quite some time outdoors. But not have many wrinkles, impressive for his age. And it looked like he shaped his white beard regularly - at this hour, it looked like he soon needed to get back to it.

"You'll have the framework fully integrated in a few hours anyway, and you have in your possession a powerful computer - which, no doubt you will quickly learn to use well. Should you choose to go to Perona, I'm going to have to ask you to never touch those things."

That Zerker could bend bullets with that armour, no one could ever shoot me like that again. Then again, I doubt any spaghetti-armed ragdoll like me could become a Zerker. I'd have to be born into it or something. At least that's what it was like for anyone in the soldier class in Reval. "Can't you remove them?"

"Not a great idea," Vinu rubs his chin and cringes.

"Andre removed them, somehow, didn't he... So, it should be possible."

“Oh, it’s not a question of possibility. You’ll be weakened for your whole life, I will not impose such a thing on you. Either way, this will stay with you. Your choice if you go with it to Perona or come with me to Oeselia.”

Eysin had heard a little bit about Oeselia. A large island to the west, a small state of its own, ruled by a bunch of rich people. Old money connected to the Baltic Pirates and new money largely owed to the various orchards. Famous food and drinks on the shelves, Winter Grapes and Winter Olives - right from Osel.

Otherwise, Oeselia was famous for their Eesian Temple and their rapidly growing army of Eesian Zerkers. EESO and the Brotherhood. But unlike the Reval gladiators, calling themselves a military and such, EESO and the Brotherhood preferred to call themselves Security Guilds.

She seems to give it a thought and then feels the heavy pull of this last night, she gently rubs the bandaids over her gunshot wound, “Think, I’ve had it with guilds and houses...”

“You’ll see, EESO is nothing like RESO. And Oeselia is nothing like Reval. I think you should come. Unless you have something you want to return to, in Perona.”

A few minutes later - her bones were hurting. The pain came in pinches and waves. She wanted to move, escape from her own body, and expel the bones from her skin. But the old man held her still, wrapped tightly in her blanket, “That’s the worst part, it’ll be over, soon.”

And soon it was, all the pain was gone. Her skin was itching here and there, and she scratched it. A speck of dead skin falls off, and a barely visible metallic dot would sprout in place. That’s the nerve-ending of the framework. The Silver Tree, something Eesians called the Framework. These tiny silver dots appeared, sparsely, on her hands, fingers, head, face, and everywhere.

For the next phase, her vision got blurry, and she could tell that something was happening with her eyes, but it didn’t hurt. Uncomfortable enough to make someone throw up - Eysin got spared that part, though, as she had not eaten anything for a while.

* * *

Two fully suited Eesian Zerkerers return to the campsite - one is bare in his suit - a suit that is very metallic and white - silver-white, and the other is wrapped in black rags. Some of the rags were torn - because they had been used to patch up Eysin. They bring some canned food and canned drinks, and a few more blankets for those who plan to stay there for a few more days.

“We heard of your daughter,” said the Zerker with the white suit. He had earlier introduced himself to Eysin as Bartel.

“Then you will stay in Reval and track her down.” Vinu said decidedly, “The Black Rain will offer their help, yes?” He looked at the other black-wrapped Zerker, and the Zerker nodded once, in turn. Koi JR, what is it, “junior”? Eysin had always been poor at remembering names, guessing she might meet them again, it would be polite to remember them. *Bartel from the Brotherhood, Koi Junior from the Black Rain, Vinu Laos - the big names of EESO, an advisor for house Atelbaer. Atelbaer - why does that name sound so familiar?*

“And has anything come to light about Hel?” He continued talking to the Zerkerers.

“Arkion sent a signal.”

“Arkion?”

“Yeah, they got held up in the east. A bear had destroyed his vehicle.”

“What the fuck were they doing in the east?” Vinu is applying some pressure to his temples.

“There was a worm,” Bartel shrugs.

“You think Arkion is into worms now? Use your head. It’s where certain plants bloom at this time of the year. So, he went there with Hel?”

“Yes, and he said they are on their way here.”

“Better late than never, I guess.”

Vinu returned to Eysin, inspects her eyes and sees that she has regained her vision, her skin colour has returned, and no more shivers and cold sweat, but she looks very tired.

“I’ll now extract the information from you and then you get some

rest. Sleep for a few hours while I wait on some news..." He takes her hand, and onto his arm, a silver liquid appears from the tiny metallic dots from his skin.

He quietly mumbles some words Eysin does not understand, as if, calls out something similar from Eysin's hand, too. It startles her, "Easy, I'm just taking the information we need..."

It only takes a few seconds. He lets go of her hand and helps her stand up. On her way to the tent, he stops her for a moment and puts the envelope back into her hand, "looks like he wrote the letter for you."

A few hours later, when she had still failed to fall asleep, she could hear a conversation between Vinu, a woman named Hel and a man they called Ark. Vinu tried to keep it quiet, but he was furious with them.

"Well, had anyone told me what this was about, I wouldn't have gone," Hel protested. "Why wouldn't you tell me this was nature..."

"Dear, none of us knew what this was going to be about. Andre couldn't tell what it was. So, I can't hold you to any fault either. Suppose I just need to rethink your degree of reliability."

"Did I get the meet killed?"

"She's sleeping in the tent. Listen, you best not return to Reval."

"I wasn't going to," Hel answers, "I've asked Arkion to take me to Germany."

Vinu sighs, "Arkion cannot take you to Germany." He turns to the man and reminds him, "You know it, boy, it's either Reval or you pick up the new class."

"Class won't start in another 3 months, I'll make it back on time."

"Now, if I'm not going to see any evidence of bear on your vehicle..."

* * *

A few months passed, and a question prompted her to think back to the day she was freezing in a tent. She was far from it now - cosy on a very much used leather couch, a warm fuming cup filled with red liquid, in her hands. The white fumes smelled of watermelon.

“So, why did you join EESO?”

Eysin couldn't tell the young Zerker the real story. She had made up a shorter one in case people asked, so, her answer would always be, “I joined out of spite. They wouldn't give me a promotion at RESO, so, I came here, instead.”

But the real story had been quite something else.

“You got in here through Andre?”

“Yes, he was my teacher back at RESO, taught me all the basics about Eesian. The language, code. And he was a damn good teacher, too.”

Eysin had met Andre under dire consequences. At Reval, in the darker streets - Eysin had no business being there, guaranteed to get in trouble - but it was the fastest way out of the city. Andre had been in the area on some strange sort of assignment of his own. He'd seen Eysin walk alone on the street, and anticipated if she went ahead, she'd be approached by the local thugs, so, he took it upon himself to help her get through the street safely.

So, an old thin man, hair browner than normal for a man his age, took next to her and scolded, although calmly, with a heavy accent, “It's not a good area, you will get in trouble.”

And while his accent hinted at West-European, her way of speaking was something of a local stray, “yeah, no shit, sir.” They kept pace and walked through the dark alley.

Andre was curious, “what are you doing here?”

“I'm leaving.” *Had it with this shithole.* “I'm out of leads, old-timer,” she sighs, “and I lost all my shit.”

Andre takes a closer look at her - a small woman, hair painted red, wearing black rags. Three pieces of jewellery stand out to him most - three thin silver-white bracelets.

“I could offer you a place in my guild if you like. I am a teacher, I can teach you about these,” he points his finger at the bracelets.

Eysin raises her hand to her eye level and suspiciously looks at the bracelets, “You're in a jewellery-making guild?”

“No, nothing of the sort.” He says with a smile, “What you wear are Eesian arm rings. You must have heard of it.”

“Eesian” was all over the news. Most news was about the catastrophe

around the Black Sea. The video footage and the photography of a gigantic fountain now in place of the sea - a large hurricane of muddy waters.

Millions of people were in exile, many hunting worms and laying waste on the temples they had built. And on the other hand - the bandits over the Silk Road are learning to use this technology to their advantage. The worst cutthroats and murderers on the continent were on their way to becoming the most dangerous force down in Evropa. The New Pulse.

And then there was more recent news of a rabid wolf monster, causing trouble at a village nearby, killing 34 people. It had licked the toxic liquid that the worms bring up with themselves. People who have come in touch with it say that it smells like fresh meat.

And the worms - now, they were something else altogether. A strange phenomenon that was attempted to keep hidden at first - a few hundred years ago, boring holes underground, accidentally creating sinkholes and swallowing whole villages.

Soon, the big worms - big as big apartment buildings - were revealed to the world, and humans began studying them with greater interest. Over a few hundred years humans learned a lot, and the possible applications around the worms all turned out connected to warfare.

They seemed to be of alien origin, but evidence also indicated they had been around this planet for thousands of years. For all this, while the humans were on the planet, in all the recorded history - the worms had escaped them. Or maybe someone had worked hard to keep them hidden?

These days, the only way the worms' existence and mysterious business would affect a layperson is when said layperson found an emerged worm on their territory, self-activated. They could sell off the marbles the worms carried for a small fortune. Buyers were guilds like EESO or FRSO - or any other Eesian Guild. Which usually meant: a guild rich enough to be able to afford running in the Eesian arms race.

And there of course were other parties interested in it, but without making it a fair trade - started raiding places where the worms showed up. That's the daily life of the Silk Road for you.

“I am headed to some friends, right now.” Said Andre, “I will take you to them and they will safely take you anywhere you wanted to go.”

They had made it to the end of the dark alley. Reached the edge of Reval. It was quiet, the wide, high road ahead, headed south, was empty, and the big lights were on - like a big stage inviting for a long walk.

The road south was one lifted above the grounds - because the grounds below had turned into marshlands - but the road itself had been important enough for hundreds of years to maintain it - even with a high cost as it was. But currently, the roads were quiet - no transit - there had been another accident that blocked off the whole trade route somewhere down in Latvia. The roads had been closed for a few weeks now.

Eysin didn't know if it was safe to go with this guy - to his friends, “Who are your friends?” But when she looked at that wide, dark road, disappearing into the distance - that didn't spell exactly “safe” either.

“A smaller security guild, the Black Rain, they call themselves. They often happen to help people find their way back home.”

“What business do you have with them?”

“I can't talk about that. In any case - I can't let you go out there on your own like this. So, please, come with me, you'll get home safe.”

Home - she hadn't been back home in years. Didn't even know if there was anything left of it. No contact with anybody, no news. She had no idea if her absence had even been noticed. *They abandoned me far before I had abandoned them.* She dreaded finding out she was not welcome back. These thoughts made her nervous and she wanted to get her mind off it.

Eysin started fidgeting with the bracelets. Compared to these thoughts, compared to the menacing road - this man indeed seemed like a lucky straw. “What are they?”

“They could be a few things,” he says, almost whispering, “they can be unpacked. They can contain information, they can be devices, and they can be parts of a larger device. There is a way to read them, like a blueprint.”

Eysin takes one off and hands it to him, “Can you read it for me?”

“I can try,” as he holds the bracelet, from a few points on his hand, a silver liquid starts surfacing, it flows towards the bracelet, moves

around, feeling what there is to feel, and then he hands it back, “it’s encrypted.”

“Can’t you unlock it?”

“I could... But maybe it is better if you do so yourself.”

“I don’t have that stuff,” she responds.

“I wouldn’t mind taking you on as a student. I could teach you.”

“Where do you teach?”

“RESO.”

Eysin knew what RESO was. A large guild at the other side of the wall in Reval. The other Reval. RESO was a guild that accepted only rich locals. Outsiders only if they were from well-known households. RESO was a guild for rich people, established by some of the richest houses in the Reval. But not rich enough to afford Eesian technology to the point that they could clothe their whole staff in it.

Even though there was a Temple on their territory, there was only one family that was taking care of it - the Rozenbaers - and even though they were interested in it, they alone could not afford Eesian technology, and the other guilds were being stingy - more interested in trade with the Nords and such.

In any case - there was no way for her or the likes of her to ever get over that side of the wall, and now, this man was offering just that. “I’m a stray, they’ll kick me out as soon as I get in.”

“I can get you to RESO, that’s a small challenge.”

* * *

All of that had taken place a couple of years ago. Eysin had accepted Andre’s offer and a few days after hanging out at the Black Rain holdout - where she also had first seen Koi Jr but didn’t care to memorise any names, she put on some rich people’s clothes and wore a classy looking wig. Someone from RESO came to pick her up from the Black Rain Headquarters, she got to take a ride in a cool car, and that car would take her to the other side of the wall.

Andre was there to greet her. The sights bedazzled her, however - the buildings were grand, and everyone looked so good. The streets were

beautifully maintained - full of flowers and exotic trees - and soon she found out that they persisted even through the winter.

“Reval Security Organ” spelt the monument in front of the building that they were going to enter.

“Hi, I am Kamille,” a tall woman reached her hand for shaking. She wasn’t so tall as she impressed Eysin with how she held herself and walked. Kamille looked like a goddess, and Eysin felt intimidated by it.

“Oh Andre, you think I cannot see through this little play,” Kamille turns to him, smiling. She had a strong Nord accent. “When the leading house finds out you bring in strays, they won’t take it well.”

“There’s got to be something we can do for her,” Andre pleads.

“Andre, there are thousands and thousands of strays out there, do you intend to bring them all in and teach them coding?”

“I can’t bring them all. But you know I would.”

“This isn’t EESO, you know the supremacist shit that goes on here. You are free to send them all to EESO, if you so wish, I heard they are still accepting new people. But when the shitheads here find out where she comes from, it’s not going to be pretty for her.”

“Her movements will be limited, she will not be changing any guilds here, I’ll keep an eye on her.”

“And when you leave?”

“She’ll leave.”

“Why not just send her to EESO?”

“Perhaps, in time.” EESO was also going through troubled times, Andre didn’t know whether he could entrust any student of his to go there at this time. For the same reason, he had recently left them.

In a while, Eysin integrated into this new life quite well, with the few other people in the guild - slightly younger men and women than herself, they got along well. One year in, she did run into a little bit of trouble, though - one of her guildmates found out it had been a wig all along, and that she even had some kind of a tattoo.

Soon, all 5 in the small guild, Andre’s students knew, and Andre knew they knew - but surprisingly, they made no big deal out of it. These people weren’t like their parents - Andre had spoiled them a little bit. By

taking them to the temple, in the evenings, offering them wine, telling them nasty stories and laughing.

Andre would never, but Eysin would - also take them on a tour to the dirty city on the other side of the wall. Clubs, drugs, black rags, insane colours of hair and make-up resembling more a tribal warpaint than something that was supposed to make someone look a little more attractive. Fun times and loads of innocent trouble.

* * *

Now, sitting there with this young Zerker who had introduced himself as Raynar, smelling the bottom half of the watermelon-scented cup of fumes, she realized, she missed these people, a little bit. But thinking about them had also made her bitter - even though they had fun together, she could never really join their world.

It had become apparent to her after a small flame with one of her guildmates. The romance she had with him was short-lived and not to her advantage. She'd never be accepted if her origins were found out - and he'd never leave with her. And that realization stung like a bitch.

That cut-off part of Reval had been romantic and beautiful. These people did not skimp on building their streets and houses. They had beautiful parades and theatre events - and these people could talk! You'd never run out of things to talk with them - for they had read a lot and they were skilled in keeping conversations interesting. And that she could never join it as her true self made it all the more frustrating.

Oeselia, too, was a cut-off part of the region. It was on an island, also titled the Westmost of The Regalion, because the next potential king lived here. The head of EESO - the man Vinu Laos was in service to.

And indeed, as promised, this place had been nothing like Reval - not in any part of it. Here they had managed to preserve very old nature, most of the land was covered by a pine forest, hundreds of years old. The fresh air, the small houses - and people all around who seem to know each other, and for the most part - get along well, too. Eysin's hands were stained blue - she'd gone to pick blueberries earlier that day.

Zerker Raynar said he came here a few years ago, and Eysin had been

there for just a few months.

“So, if you were in RESO, you’re a noble?” For a moment, the young man’s attention shifts from Eysin to the almost empty glass that he’s holding. It’s not releasing any fumes anymore, so he drinks up the liquid in the bottom - and his face immediately expresses regret. It’s bitter - he had expected it to taste somewhat as pleasantly as it had smelled.

“No, I had some documents forged for it.” Based on what she saw on his face, Eysin did not dare to drink up the bottom of the glass and added hers to the large collection of empty glasses on the table before them.

“What guild are you in?” He asks and then spots a woman coming in with fresh drinks on a tray, “Oh - hold that one - you liked the red?” Raynar got up and went to the woman. He smoothly picked a couple of fresh fume cups.

The red one - watermelon - has a delicious smell, she smells it when he hands it over to her, and answers his question, “Temple.”

“Aw, Leon...” Raynar is referring to the guild master.

“Don’t like him?” Eysin smiles an ironic smirk.

“You do? He is one supremacist shithead!”

No comment, but Eysin snorts a laugh. It was true - Leon had a special attitude towards those who did not come from any grand house.

Our conversationalists appear to be at a sort of large house party. Eysin’s bunkmate brought her to this place. As soon as she sat down on that couch, this guy just started talking to her.

Raynar, a young, strong man - silver scarring in his eyes - something Eysin kept seeing around the island - knowing they must be Zerkers, from the so-called Gladiator Guild - where they trained actual guards and warriors - the security that EESO guild was known for.

Raynar had seen her around with Denea - and they had arrived together, but Denea had disappeared right after, so, he thought he’ll get to know her a little, maybe she was someone interesting.

“What do people do at Temple Guild anyway?”

“Trying to study how they build all this, how it works.” The temples consisted of self-extracting blocks - the guild was studying how it’s possible, why some temples are different, and why and how some blocks are special. Unique blueprints exist - and one of the largest temples in the known world - the one in Paris, holds hundreds of them. “We use

these,” she raises her left hand and a silver-white glove appears on it - a liquid material coming out from a few pores of her skin, turning into a handy machine. “We take up a block... Or a marble with a blueprint on it, and sit with it...”

“You go in and you explore...”

“That’s right.” What the Eesian Scribes do - they sit with it - pick up the piece or touch it, close their eyes, and see what’s inside. Streaming as if a visual dream, thanks to an extra nervous system implemented within. “Which is pretty cool, but...” Eysin frowns now, “It’s slow and kinda boring after the first few times. I found it a little too manual. So - I figured out how to get the blocks done way faster - but Leon told me to scrap it... Which has turned me completely off...”

Eysin was quite disappointed - ever since she had joined, she had gotten ideas for experiments she wanted to try - see if she can capture a drone from the quarantine swarms by sending it some orders, hasten the block creation or copies, study more of the pinks and the blues - but soon she realized that no matter what she proposed, Leon blocked her. Eysin did entertain the chance that he may have had a little more generous reasons for doing so - but her primary suspicion was that he was a supremacist shithead and simply thought Eysin couldn’t possibly have the brain capacity to take on any serious projects.

Her few first months there had been beautiful, but also stressful. She had problems with sleeping. Denea had taken her to pick the berries thinking this would help her stress somehow. Eysin didn’t think it would do, but she went anyway because the berries tasted good.

She still had bad sleep and nightmares from her last events in Reval. She’d been sure she’d die - and those moments returned in her dreams very strongly.

“Thought to try any other guild?”

Changing guilds wasn’t an option in RESO. She assumed that to be the case there, too. She recalled what she had seen the Zerker do that got her out of the park - the suit stopped the bullets! No one could even lay a finger on that man.

“Do you think I could become a Zerker?” She asked.

Raynar pretends to take an analytical look at her.

She had found out that here it wasn’t considered a class, and Zerker

were all kinds of different people with different backgrounds. But they all were physically fit and strong.

The only way into the gladiator guild on RESO was if you were taken to that guild right at birth. Learning started in early childhood. But the early learning wasn't the most important aspect - these children were brought up exclusively by a house - to ensure their house was the only one they knew to be loyal to. Any outsiders would possibly get the idea to betray them, to return to their other homes...

Raynar shrugs, "Can't see why not. We could always use more people who know how to do the scribe stuff..."

Eysin snorts a laugh, trying to imagine herself a gladiator, a Zerker. "Even with the spaghetti that my arms are?"

"You'll train, you'll get over it."

"I've never trained. Last in class. No knack for it, sir." She takes a deep whiff of the watermelon smell and now thinks she may want something sourer, instead.

"I wouldn't worry about that. No one would expect you to become a combatant. You do know that Denea comes with us half-time, right?"

"Maybe. But she's physically strong, too."

"She wasn't like that at the start."

"Ah, never mind," Eysin almost changed her mind about wanting to join. She imagined the physical work she'd have to go through to get anywhere near Denea's level would be impossible for her.

* * *

But the stress and the nightmares kept her on her toes. She became more easily irritated and even more quickly fed up with Leon's attitude. It took only one more small disagreement with Leon to make Eysin change her guild out of spite.

She took a whole evening to mull over the kinds of disagreements she and Leon had. She started trying to understand what she was feeling at all - being in this place, and she decided, *this has been a real disappointment, so far. If things aren't going to improve in any way at all - I'm just going to leave and see what I'll come across while trying to retire in Perona.*

There is no way that I am going to feel any better in that particular guild... And if the dude said, and Denea confirmed - that I could apply to any other guild that I like - and I will most likely be given a chance to join.

So, what is there for me to choose from? Would I like to become a tailor? A shoemaker? A key master? An accountant, a janitor? A baker? A tree shaper? A forest guardian! Or... No, never mind anything that has anything to do with the sea. I do love to eat fish, but I'll never go to the sea for fishing.

If there was anything she could choose from - anything that there was to do in this little island society - what would she most likely enjoy? She tried imagining what life could be for her if she went to work for one of the orchards. She'd have to take care of the trees and the field and pick the fruit just when they got ripe. *There'd be a small community of us, caretakers, and we'd have a house of our own - where we live, sleep, dine and why not also have some fun, special events? Birthdays, births, deaths, funerals... Or drama between people - there were lots of potentials.* And she would have loved to have belonged to such a community - but for some reason, she thought she'd not be fit for it.

She was afraid that any community that she picks will end up disliking her. And in time - she'd have to move out because no one would rather be around her. The typical repertoire of dramatic thoughts for a stray. It's why the strays tend to remain strays - they don't like to take any chances. And they don't think they have the worth with them to be worthy of getting to bother a stranger - a stranger who has it all together.

* * *

"No, they don't always have it together. All these communities have their little problems. Between agreements, between people, due to the rules, due to any recent traumatic events... And sure, this place has seen plenty of trauma." She'd gone over to a bar that she'd been passing for weeks, now. She spoke to the barkeep. The barkeep seemed to have thought along, he seemed engaged enough to carry on.

"That's right, there are so many small communities here, little networks - you just have to find one that is most agreeable to you. Maybe you don't want to join the Orchards guild, because you don't

like their certain rules. For example, they have recently made a rule in which they forbid having romantic relationships within the guild - and they were also forbidden to have those kinds of relationships from some particular guilds. Their rivals, perhaps - either for capital competition - or maybe sometimes it's personal."

"I can't believe you have thought about that," Eysin shrugs and raised her eyebrows at her cocktail glass - as if she was showing it to some other character in the scene. It was a drink that was sweet and sour, and in the end, it also brought a spicy sting. She loved the taste. This barkeep was on another level.

"I could come to this bar, work here, right?"

"Well, not exactly - see, this bar isn't a separate business. I'm neither the owner of it nor a worker. This is a club - we don't usually welcome strangers, but I let you in any way because I heard you were thinking to switch..."

"Why is that so interesting to you? What does it matter to you..."

"See, we can talk to each other - I am having fun talking to you, you are having fun talking to me... You pick a guild, and you are still welcome to come here, but when you do, you also give me some information."

"What guild do you have in mind?"

"The florists."

"Excuse me? Really? You'd see ME becoming a dress-wearing happy flower lady?"

He must have tried to imagine it - it manifested and he just shrugged, "Can't see why not, but that's not my point. You will go there to inform me about some people who are in that guild."

"Oh? Are you trying to sneak your way into some girl?" Eysin slammed the unbreakable glass onto the table. As if she figured it out, she even pointed a finger at him, and bang. She would have snapped her finger, but she knew she wouldn't successfully make the snip now. Her hands were too moist.

"No, not me. I'm married. But my buddy is interested in one of them, yes."

"You'd advise me to pick my future calling just so your horny friend can get some..." Eysin looked if there was still anything to drink from the glass. It was empty.

And the barkeep noticed it and started making another cocktail. "This one will be a little more different." He starts making it, and in between switching the shaking, he comments on their previous topic, "Listen, pick whatever you like. Most will give you a chance. There are no safe or risky bets. It's all the same. What do you do?"

"I'd drop out from Gladiators..."

20 seconds and he finished to cocktail, he drops in a small olive and puts a tiny umbrella on it, et voila, Eysin has a new interesting drink in front of her.

And after taking away his hands from the presentation, "What makes you think that?" He didn't even pretend to be surprised, but he wanted her to say it out.

And she understood - she had to say it out loud just once, "I am a weak sack of shit." She said it with a big smile, and she was smiling at the cocktail - because it looked so pretty, and it was promising to be super delicious.

"But why would you want to join the Gladiators?" Another question is only intended as a neatly reflecting soundboard. He was good, slow and compassionate - a very interesting barkeep, indeed.

"It would be crazy... I think if it is going to happen anywhere - then learning what they do is going to make me as robust against the shit that's coming as possible... I need protection, I need to be able to protect myself." And she wished that one day there will be someone else she would want to protect or aid, too... "But physically - I am a weak sack of shit. The exercise was painful for me, I tried a few times - and right at the start - I was pushed to do so much that it broke me - physically. Day one, oops, hip injury..."

"You shouldn't overdo like that... That's why you need..."

"A coach? It was the coach who told me to not pay any attention to what my own body was screaming."

"No good coach would do that..."

"Well, he was a piece of shit rapist pig anyway."

"Condolences," the barkeep started cleaning her previous glass.

"And joining the Gladiators will not be like going to the gym with an idiot. I went to the gym for the looks, mostly... I guess you can't prepare for what's possibly coming in a dumb gym anyway... But a guild like

that... But I think I can't possibly qualify. My weakness has reached pathological levels - I can't get in the needed form... I wouldn't be able to participate in any of the drills, because I could die in them."

"Sweetie..." The barkeep raised his hand to stop her, "You will get a personal agenda when you join, and you will have proper masters - who are interested in getting to know your strengths and weaknesses and see what to boost and decide what to leave behind... The base training with others, of course, can be a little jarring - there indeed is a baseline... But see, you'll be formed into teams - and if your team has to carry you halfway back - and they successfully do so - they will have proven themselves good comrades.

You will personally meet some of the Exos and they will work out with you what you do. You said you're currently at the Temple Guild, and you have a computer... And the guild is looking for people well-versed in that. They have other applications on those computers that security can leverage well. So, you won't be the one who manages to keep running for the longest time or wins most duels, but you'll be taught how to usefully operate the computer - to guide your team, transpose the map, read the field. Maybe you won't be a good footsoldier, but they will have other good uses for you."

"I wouldn't even have imagined..." What she heard made her shy away from the guild, again. Suddenly - what the Gladiator Guild was about, seemed so much more impressive than she had suspected it to be.

"Well, do you have anyone you want to spy on in the Gladiator guild?" She asked with a theatrical low voice. She took another sip of the strawberry-tasting cocktail after that.

"The club you are in, sweetie, belongs to the Gladiator guild."

* * *

Eysin went to Leon the day after, to inform him of her decision.

Leon had a conflicting aura about him - half the girls in the guild saw nothing but genius, and the other half often had to bite their tongue, because they had pointed out something surprisingly hurtful to him before - and the consequences of that were never graceful. A strange

sort of an anti-charm.

To Eysin - that anti-charm felt concernedly familiar. Even the way he spoke, his accent - in some strange way sounded much like a man unpleasant she'd had to deal with in the past - even before she had gone to RESO.

But because Eysin had respect for Vinu Laos - and Vinu Laos had approved of this guy for some reason - there has to be something good about him, too, right?

And when Eysin told Leon of her plans, he burst into a loud, forced, and ridiculing laughter. After he signed the release document, he said, "Alright, see you back here in a month."

"Why'd I come back here?"

"You'll drop out. Look at you! Do you think you come from Reval or whatever place and know how life works? Do you understand what loyalty means? Will you keep hopping around places as soon as you feel things get a little too difficult for you? You, strays are a little too fickle to handle that kind of work. But that's okay, I'll let you back in." It wasn't his call, really, but he liked to say it anyway.

"No... I mean... What makes you think I would come back here..."

He snorts another laugh, puts away the tablet, and coughs, "Good luck with your experiment."

As soon as she stepped out from those rooms, a heavy burden as if had lifted from her, and on her walk towards the Terratorium - where older Security members were currently having a fun match, she looked down on it, and saw figures in silver-white suits running around silver-white blocks, shouting, screaming and knocking each other out - another weight snuck in.

She receives a message that her application to join has been approved, and the training starts in a week. *And so, bullets become a problem of history.*

And if you want to know how Eysin does at the gladiator guild - you're going to have to keep reading.

CHAPTER TWO:

Silver White

THE TRAINING was tough on her bones, skin, and muscle. But she wasn't rushed too much, and Denea kept her company after the tough days and nights, so she wouldn't have the chance to sulk at the difficulty. She successfully brought her mind to other things to make sure that the next day she'd wake up early and go at it again. The best part about it - already after the first day of training she was sleeping like a baby. She could feel her mind healing.

And after a month of regular physical training and getting used to their squads - Eysin had almost forgotten about the events in Reval. She was excited for the upcoming day, as they were finally going to be introduced to the Zerks. She was going to get her Eesian suit.

The whole song and dance around Eesian technology was no simple matter - even though its era and culture of origin were unclear, there were elaborate ceremonies around every progression one goes through.

Eysin had not participated in any of those rituals yet, and that confused some of the organizers because she did, in fact, already have the battery installed - the insane, secondary nervous system - and were curious to know how she pulled that one-off.

"I can't say," she'd always answer.

That all had to do with how her RESO period came to an end. An ugly one - as it got a little bloody, too. For the last half a year that she was around, tensions were rising and she could understand that Andre was involved in it somehow, too.

So, one Saturday morning, Andre looked ill, the silver nodes on his skin were bleeding a little bit, and he had a cold sweat and shivers. But he was still smiling and cracking jokes. Eysin had shown up at his workshop because he'd called her.

"I need you to deliver a package to a friend," he had said and wrote an address on a paper envelope. He handed her the envelope and two marbles wrapped in a cloth. "And I need you to go do it now."

She'd gone out from the walled city and found the address. It was an old ugly apartment building, she had to go to the 5th floor and found the door and knocked. But no one answered. Besides, the door fell ajar after the three knocks, and it became apparent that something strange had been going on.

Eysin felt afraid, "hello?" she gently pushed the door open and stepped inside. It was a beautifully furnished apartment, but she couldn't spot any personal belongings. Everything was very generic. She thought about leaving the letter and marbles there and then returning, but something felt wrong... Andre had been sick, he was giving her this strange assignment in this strange apartment...

And someone had been following her.

Just as a follower is about to lunge at her through the door, another stranger tackles him down and shouts to her to get out from there.

So, she runs - to her detriment, back to the way she had come from. No one stops her from entering the walled city, all the guardians appear to be gathered elsewhere. There had been murders.

She returns to the workshop and finds Andre on the floor - he had been shot. No one else is around, it's quiet - until some of the gladiators start showing up around the building and she decides it's time to get out.

Eysin manages to get out without being noticed, she sees Kamille entering and exiting the building. Eysin tries to stay hidden but wants to know what is going on.

She watches Kamille exiting the building - the tall goddess, but she looks rather distressed. She's on a call while she walks down the stairs, "they are locking down the city and they won't stop before they have found the marbles."

Kamille stops walking before she needs to enter her carriage, and listens to the response on the call, "No, the marbles weren't on him."

The only proof we have against those traitors has just walked off. Listen, I think he gave them to the stray, but our contact has gone offline. I'm not sure where she could have gone, because according to Vinu the Black Rain didn't manage to find her, either."

Kamile steps into the carriage while listening to a response, "I have a few ideas where it could be. They are looking for his students and friends now, I think they already busted down Black Rain HQ." The carriage takes off.

When Eysin turned around to try to leave the walled city, once again, she found that there now was a border control and they were scanning everybody who wanted to get through, with a strange device. She saw someone getting arrested for having some marbles on them - and that woman was taken away.

She couldn't return to the workshop, her home area was also surrounded - some of the students were placed under arrest and she saw them being taken away. The port was locked down and a large ship had blocked the way out.

She kept moving, dropped her rich person look, discarded the fancy wig and some of her uncomfortable clothing and dropped it down a sewer. She went to the largest park in the walled city - knowing it's usually quiet and maybe she could hide there. There was an old metro station somewhere, and she had heard there could be a way out. She wore herself out and sat at a pavilion, waiting for some kind of an end until it got dark.

Standing up once again, to keep looking for the old metro station, she felt the air change. Eysin felt like she had reached the end of the box called life. There was a suited man - one of the lifeless-eyed gladiators from town - holding up his hand, looking at her, emotionlessly.

He was holding up his hand, aimed at Eysin was a loaded gun. Why is he waiting, why hasn't he shot yet? Is he having doubts about doing it - or is he the kind of psycho who wants to look me in my dying eyes?

Bang.

She felt her back crash against the end of the box. The end of the box was the sandy floor of a large park in North Reval. Fluid came up in her eyes, nose, and throat, and she coughed - but as she opened up

the pipes - they filled up - as if she had opened her mouth under the ocean - blood filled her lungs perfectly, as it had been forever waiting to do just that.

It froze still - her body throws itself quickly a few times, and then she falls silent. Blackness, the end.

An echo of a sound. What kind of a sound - it's so full of dirt. There's only noise. So much noise that it has turned fully black, so much noise that the deafness rapidly grows into a screaming feedback loop.

Life is so loud. Bum, bum, bum - a low bass beat. No, it doesn't beat. It contracts. It can do it slower and slower and slower. She's turned around, on her knees and arms, and suddenly coughs up all the blood. Someone is there with her, holding her up.

She coughs and coughs and coughs, and when it lessens, the stranger lets her go and she falls on her side. Her eyesight is blurry, but returning. She sees that just a few meters from her lay the body of the guard that had just shot her. He was lying down - she couldn't see his face, but by lack of any movement, any nervous energy around the assailant - she could tell he was dead.

And she thought she had died, sat up and started looking for where she got shot. There was a hole torn by the bullet, and her clothes were super bloody, but she couldn't find a hole to stick her thumb in.

But she did find something - the spot where the hole perhaps just had been. She touches and it feels like there is a very heavy band-aid put on. This stranger had helped him, and now she needed to know why "Are you a friend of Andre's?"

"Yes." He keeps low and crouches around, looking here and there. Eysin couldn't make out who he was - because in the dark - it was difficult to make out someone who was wearing fully black. Even his face was covered up, she couldn't even see any eyes. "I'm going to get you out from here, but right now there are 5 more of those coming," he quickly returned to Eysin.

And she reacted in shock and jumped on her ass as that man reached her. Koi Jr, as he soon would introduce himself - did not look like a human. His face wasn't covered, and neither were the gloves - his face looked lifeless like an ancient marble statue. There was the shape of a handsome face, but when he spoke, his face did not move at all.

“That’s... Eesian gear?”

“Yes, sorry if it disturbs you.” He knew that some people felt very uncomfortable around Zerked Eesians - an unexplainable panic. “It will take a few more minutes for you to recover enough - you must hide here while I deal with the ones who are coming. Please, stay down and do not attract any attention. You can look,” he looked around and remembered that she was in a visibly difficult spot - even for himself - there’d be no way the gladiators can see her there, “but stay quiet.”

Not even a full minute later - he was completely gone from the scene.

Two gladiators arrived, running, gaze locked between looking around and eyeballing their signal screens.

“Fuck, it was right here?”

“Oh shit, Tommie is here!” They intend to rush to the dead body lying on the forest rubble, but are stopped by a stealthy ninja - Koi Jr drops himself down from the tree he was hiding in, quietly drops right behind him - he pulls back his right arm, and just as he pushes - a blade appears out from it.

The other guard reacts right as soon as Koi pulls out his blade from the now-dropping body. The gladiator panics and starts shooting him from an automatic, only three pinging sounds indicate that’s all that hit the ninja - the three softly bounced off him, and the rest of the metallic clacks went up to the trees.

Koi Jr punches the man in the gut, and when he pulls back his hand, once again, a blade disappears and blood splatters.

That gunfire sounded important to any other gladiator that was combing that park at that moment.

“Never mind 4 more, it’s more-more. Enjoy the show.”

The show smelled, and she was looking from a rather awkward position. But the performance of the man in a super-suit - sickeningly violent, but his control over the field - an unmistakable upper hand in any situation that the opponent can come up with - he “cheesed it”.

And for that night - he had not been shy to kill. That evening they had killed his father, and he was just paying his dues. Elsewhere, too, there was a sort of an uprising happening - a group of houses had united

to take out a certain person. These conspiracies had been running for longer than Eysin had lived in Reval. She just ended up being at the right time at the wrong moment - she got shot like a wild dog.

She'd died, yet she was there, watching something she had never seen before - a man with such control over the field that he could stop bullets from flying and raindrops from falling.

Eysin could feel the air vibrate around her when he moved closer - this thing had a radius of about 30 meters. *An incredible amount of energy, and what disgusting passion to kill. Now that's something I can't see alive.* A painful sting hits her, snaps like thunder - right where she had gotten shot. It strikes again, again, and again.

Her blood pressure rises, and her nose starts dripping blood, she's careful, not daring to take a breath - because last time the whole ocean collapsed on her when she tried to do that.

She refused to breathe and passed out.

Koi Jr holds her up to a tree, sitting, she can feel a terrible smell. She opens her eyes, and it takes a while for the blur to go out. She can tell the man is now without the mask - his face is visible.

Eysin had seen him before - he was there, showing her the places when she was staying over for a couple of days. The Black Rain - where Andre had taken her to. She notices that the stinging pain peeks growing and shrinking away - but sometimes it grows higher - and it never goes away.

"Are you feeling the stings?"

"Yes, is this because of the gunshot?"

"In a way, can you stand up?"

He helps her stand up, "Don't look that way. Just walk with me, we're going to the metro station."

Eysin had come pretty close to it, she thought, recognizing an old rusted street sign. "Why is it stinging so damn much?"

"It's not the gunshot. I put the marbles on you, it's trying to grow a framework, testing which ways it can grow."

"Wait, the marbles? Why would you do that?" Eysin refused to move, she was slightly crouched over, trying to handle the stings, the pain, "what is growing inside me?"

"A framework." The expression on Koi Jr's face turned into something

surprising. He looked embarrassed, “are you unhappy to be alive?”

“What?” Eysin felt cool, all of a sudden.

“Did you want to die? I wasn’t sure about whether I should intervene, I could have just taken the marbles and gotten out from there. My client is after the marbles, not you.”

“And oh look, now you have a human vessel to carry your damned marbles! Who asked for this?” She motions as if she attempts to feel around her chest if she could somehow remove them. She starts scratching her chest, and Koi has to intervene, hold her still and wait for her panic to pass. “I’m doing what you asked me 2 years ago - I am getting you out of this city. This is a good opportunity...”

“You’re selling me off like some mule?” She tried to struggle herself loose, but it only made more blood come from her nose - and her head was spinning around, and the pain kept reminding her as it came and went, came and went.

“If you make a scene here, more of those gladiators will come...”

“Well, so what, I go with the gladiators - they need the marbles, too!” She’s let go of the lock, takes a few steps back and looks at the man, accusing him of...

“They shot you!” He yells! “What do you think will happen to you here? You’ll get a hefty fee for being cooperative? They will shoot you again and you won’t be able to handle it much longer. And you won’t be able to handle your current situation for very long, either - we need to get the fuck out from here, and get you some help.”

She dared to turn around and stare into the darkness that was left behind - and she stared into it for 4 and a half minutes. Her box of life ended somewhere there. Ended with a sadistic gunshot - the fucker wanted to take in the sight of a dying person.

“It’s not even a balanced choice...” She chuckles, finally.

“Not if you are unhappy to be alive.”

“It’s not looking good, indeed. But maybe it can get better.”

Followed a few hours escape from the city. And what a sight it was, from a hill further away from the walls - the light pollution formed a colourful dome above the rainy city - and it turned for Eysin into a celebratory light show when the rainclouds got finally replaced by

those with thunder.

“I thought these suits were supposed to be silver-white.”

Koi Jr wipes his fingers on his shoulder - a pristine, silver-white layer revealed itself. Eysin realized that he had been covered in black ashes this whole while.

* * *

“So, you’ve missed out on two ceremonies, at least! Anyway, nothing difficult here - we’ll all be wearing these robes...”

The long walk, the Zerk ceremony. Eysin felt out of place, seeing all these people around her in robes, in candlelight, the seasoned ones doing all the chanting and dancing, parading their way from the training grounds to the temple up north - a long walk that took up a whole day. But looking at the other beginners, the ones she had known for a month now - they didn’t look any more comfortable with that situation than she did.

But the walk was beautiful. It had turned dark outside by the time she got rotated to the front - and for a moment there, got stunned breathless by what she saw: a long line of large candles lit up on the twisted road framed by pine trees, all the to the temple. A fire flickered through the forest.

By the time the initiates reached the temple, most of the parade had disappeared into the woods. Denea would reveal a day later they simply went drinking and doing other stuff, their part in the initiation was over. Just the initiates remained, and a few older gladiators walked the lot into the temple and guide them through the seemingly most meaningful part of the ceremony.

First, they enter a narrow corridor with a tall ceiling - and the walls are dusty, but you could tell, these used to be silver-white, as well. There’s moss growing on it, and occasionally other little wild plants have found it a fitting place. At the end of that corridor, they enter a large arena. As large as a large football arena. This is the Terratorium, a place where battles are simulated - the terrain can be manipulated

with the temple controls - and once you'd have the suit fully on (and getting there will take a while) - additionally to the physical terrain being malleable - the Zerk will also augment your vision, hearing and olfactory senses... Sometimes it might even out thoughts in your head.

But right now the Terratorium is set to zero - it's just a plain cold large hall with a very high domed ceiling - and still following the row of candles - they walk straight through it and reach the heart of the Temple.

A tall but relatively small room, initially you'd guess it's shaped like a box, but when your eyes get used to the darkness, you'll see that right above the middle part where there is a large orb and a narrow pool that surrounds it. High above the orb and a pool, there is a platform where some of the more senior gladiators have gathered to watch.

This room had looked the same back at Reval, as Eysin recalled - but Reval's Orb was smaller, roughly the size of a beach ball. This one here, however... A meter and a half in diameter, at least...

The initiates were all made to walk to the edge of the ground until their toes meet the pool - and looking down, it was filled with marbles. Mostly light pink marbles, many silver-white ones, occasionally some reds, coins, and strangely, a few plastic bottle caps.

Eysin knew they get there from the stream behind the temple - a source of water which is called "the temple well" - an unbelievably deep and narrow cave, in stories - dug by the Eesian worm that had started this temple who knows when.

They were reminded to be quiet, and as another chant started, the pool lit up and the Orb became wet, like a fountain, and as water flew through it, silver-white marbles and a few red ones started bubbling to the top of the water.

"You are to take what you need."

Eysin squats down to take a white marble, and as she picks it up, it turns liquid, and it does not drop off her skin, but finds the pores created by the red marble's new nervous system, and from there enters her body.

The initiates were initially too shy to get excited about it, but once someone did, it was as if it infected the others, too, and soon the whole small room was filled with giggles and delight.

The ceremony ended with a feast at the large Terratorium hall, at a

strangely small table compared to the whole room – simply to drill it into their heads that even though they now have at their possession one of the most intricate battle suits, they are still small, human, mortal.

The selection of food was heavenly, though. And when the feast ended, the only instructor of the lot who didn't bother to keep himself anonymous – unmasked – and also, apparently, the tallest of them – unceremoniously told that from tomorrow they will be training with them, not the regular sergeants and the time to get to the battlegrounds right here would be ridiculously early.

* * *

Having fallen spectacularly behind everyone else's capabilities already during the first week after the ritual – things got even tougher for her. Not only did she end up being the slowest runner and with the most minor stamina – but she also failed to activate her suit.

While everyone else was already sparring or doing their first Territorium simulations in suits, she was going without. There was no point sparring against someone in a zerk – so, for another week or so she was left alone to do just the hikes in the Monster Forest and regular strength...

Soon enough, the same incredibly tall Exo who didn't care to remain anonymous – and he introduced himself as Daegan – would catch up with her and suggest she try this or that, “maybe that could kickstart the suit”.

One of those ideas was even to go against another suited initiate – thinking maybe fear of getting hopelessly beat up would jumpstart it – but all that happened was Eysin getting beat up by a volunteer who felt rather triumphant after the fact. *What a prick.*

This is where I quit.

But she didn't, because Daegan would see her pain and try to coach her while the others were fighting. Focusing, meditating, explaining what he feels when it comes on, when it goes off, trying to describe what it feels like when it is on, how “your vision is completely changed, and your sensations get applied on things you wouldn't even imagine they

could,” but while it all was fun, whatever it was, it didn’t seem to have her progress along and catch up with the others.

Eysin couldn’t move the white inside her framework. Daegan even wondered if there could be something wrong with her framework if she had accidentally created a faulty framework - and he doubled down on that theory when he found out that Eysin had installed her framework by accident.

The other guess was that the white marble could have been broken somehow... He even asked at least three times if she was sure she had managed to absorb the marble at all. “I mean, maybe it fell back into the water?”

“Maybe we’ll make a bond and I take a look at your framework, just in case... Then we might have to start training from scratch or... Well, we need to find a way to override it.” As a last resort, he thought - because the bond he was holding at the time was a sentimental one to him, and didn’t want to give it up. “We’ll find someone else who can do it.”

But Daegan liked a mystery, and he enjoyed his power to revive Eysin’s faith in herself, so they didn’t give up. But none changed anything until another Exo chipped in - one of the anonymous ones, someone Daegan described as the best fighter he had seen, after himself, of course - and he came over to them one day when he got tired of coordinating the games.

“Daegan, your turn,” he pointed with his thumb over his shoulder, and Daegan didn’t protest. The anon sat next to Eysin while looking at Daegan go. He, unexpectedly, cracks a sentence that may be a joke, “Daegan doing a shitty job of a cheerleader, I see...”

Mood unaffected, Eysin only sighs, “I’m so tired of trying this...” She looked at the next match start and felt envy over those who could leap over the white blocks - and wondered what they were seeing - was it a jungle? A desert? An old city? Watching them from above made it look like moving in a zerk was so effortless - you could jump, you could climb, you could punch and take one, and crash to the ground - and it would protect your skin, flesh, and bones, you wouldn’t come out from it bruised or anything. “I’ve been walking and meditating and lifting the bar and reading the descriptions... It’s not cutting it... And it’s starting to bore me. I wish I could be down there.”

“I went in the bare ass a few times. Not fun. You don’t see what you need to see - and they’ll hurt you because they want to win.”

“Not fun... Well, it stopped being fun forever ago.”

“We can spar - for fun - if you want,” the Exo said and nodded towards an empty floor near them, large enough to do what they did back at the forest battlegrounds.

“With this on?” Not again, she thought.

“I can emulate a fair opponent.”

“How can you tell what’s a fair opponent for me...”

“We’ll play, we’ll find out.”

And on the way to the spot they were headed to, Eysin was thinking about needing to override her framework and wondered if that framework is anything like the Temple Blueprints she figured out how to make copies of...

So, in that proceeding fight, which the suited Exo took very playfully, Eysin, with a sneaky tap of her left hand, having readied the Kaestus, her mysterious computer glove - - she managed to copy that Exo’s framework configuration and his signature without him knowing anything about it.

So, they played a few more matches and the Exo let her win a few times, and gave her a few slightly painful lessons, too. It seemed to have lifted her mood more than the Exo had expected - he had no idea what she had suddenly gotten so hyped about.

They stayed longer a few hours, somehow the Exo and herself got carried away, learning and teaching some basics of hand-to-hand combat. With a very skilled teacher - learning is assumed with laughter.

It had been 3 hours past the time everyone else was having supper.

“I could keep teaching you some more,” the masked teacher said.

“You’re offering to tutor me in this?” She’s pleased, “am I that promising?” She does an awkward laugh - she felt she wasn’t - she was a slow-to-impossible learner. She wondered if the man was asking for something else.

“You are free to decline, of course.”

“Don’t you have guys lined up wanting you to teach that stuff? You’re a really good teacher.”

“Oh, thank you! I haven’t been advertising that I’m giving any lessons,

that is all. But sure, I have some students.”

“What will I exactly be learning?”

“Control.”

And Eysin knew he meant the kind of control she had seen Koi Jr possess. He didn't mean violent or even physical control - the teacher did propose to teach her the control of the suit... “I can't even wear the suit yet... I can't figure it out.”

“Well, when you do, come find me.”

Oddly motivating. And Eysin did think she had it figured out - even though the method felt unfair, dirty. She'd just stolen someone else's life work - and she couldn't wait to get back to the dorms to get to see what it all was about.

* * *

Back at her little sleeping room - and Denea had not returned from whatever she was up to, Eysin spent a long night studying the copied framework configuration. First, she had used the signature to remove from the configuration everything that was native to the Exo - and everything that remained was the nature of the Zerk, the suit.

The mode that the code was written in was certainly similar to what she had seen around the building blocks, but it was more nuanced, and there was so much more to explore.

But if it works for him, why wouldn't it work for me... Just to adjust our differences in personal signatures - something her computer could calculate with ease - started integrating this copied configuration into her framework.

And just when the last bit finished coding, she felt what she had felt when her Kaestus had first awoken...

And that had happened when she had signed the contract with Vinu - and he had noticed that it was there. “Not just a heart, you have a computer, too.” He gave a light tap on her shoulder and that made her body feel very strange and excited - she could feel something moving inside her arm, and when Vinu showed her what this was supposed to become - like a glove in her hand - she could bring it up.

Now that same was happening to her whole body - a great feeling of joy, a sense of invincibility tingling all over her chest, her toes, her scalp - and somehow, as if she had a grasp of her internal system, she could feel it like one can feel the texture of wood with the touch of a hand - but inside - a cold liquid... And just like that - she knew she could bring it to the surface now.

Silver-white liquid appeared on her skin and slowly covered it all. It makes her giggle, laugh, and roll around her bed - she stands up and feels how light she is, she smashes her hand back at the bed rail and doesn't feel pain, but it left a mark on the bed. She tries to gain more precise control over it and removes the zerk from her right arm - and uses her bare hand to touch the left - the silver-white skin is cold and smooth, and reminds a mushroom, but if she knocks at it, it's hard - more than a bark, a stone, like platinum.

The moment she gets over the new, intense physical sensations, she realizes is not using her eyes to see anymore - the zerk mask has been covering her face for all this while - and now she discovered she can see all around - her whole body is picking up light and warmth and all sorts of vibrations, and unless she focuses on one particular area or direction or point, in a strange sense she sees, senses the whole room.

When she moves and things around her come too close different colours alert her and grab her attention so she wouldn't collide with them. She picks up a pink marble from her table and feels it through the skin of the suit - and in a sense, it's no different than touching it with her own hands - but once again, it's lighter... And she gets an urge to throw it... So, she throws it up and catches it again... And observes it through the light. The suit is giving her some kind of cryptic information about the object - one kind if it is motionless, and another when it's moving in the air...

She also calls up the Kaestus on top of the suit - and it's fully functional. She gets information about the status of her suit when she places the computing hand on herself - she can see its information even without closing her eyes... *Well, because under here... My eyes are closed, aren't they?*

Through this strange vision, she also notices that the pink marble stands out more than anything else in her field of vision - it seems to

have some sort of a living aura - it's moving, beams and arcs, tiny and not so, make it look like a sun and a solar storm. She takes it closer to her blank face and sees that at will: more gibberish - untranslatable temple language... And keeps changing, as if the thing was chattering.

* * *

The very next day she walked in with a cheerier step, but just before she had made it there, something had happened between some of the other initiates, and they were making it ugly.

The Terratorium games had turned into a competition between the novices, a select few of them trying to outpace the others - a few of them even had a strange following - cliques had formed, and Eysin realizes she had missed out on all of that. Stepping in, she saw one of those pissing contest participants was the very one who mercilessly beat her up while wearing a suit.

He and another guy were nearly hand-to-hand with each other in the hall - one of them had left the Prick's team to start his own - and a third novice had to come to break it up.

"You stay here - and we will walk away, okay? We'll settle this at the match."

Eysin thought she had seen an opportunity and offered herself to join the prick's team, but the prick simply laughed at her, reminded her that she can't even get it up, and walked away.

Daegan had seen all that but didn't care to intervene. He found those self-serious punks amusing - they had many of them every year. So, he thought it was about time he and the other Exos did a nice run against the novices.

Without any niceties, Daegan now looked at Eysin as she was awkwardly standing at the entrance, and asked, "Anything?"

"Actually," she looked at him and smiled, "Yes!"

Daegan smiled, too. "How much?"

"I think I got all of it... Will I... Be feeling this hyped forever?"

"Yes, but you'll get used to it... But as soon as you forget, you risk becoming a dumbass like that one. Some people mistake confidence and

aggression... There's no time to bring you up to speed today, we were planning a surprise match against them - and we are a-you short, so, to celebrate your first day, you'll be on the teacher's side."

"Don't mind if I do... But I don't think I'll be much help."

"Don't you owe that prick some ass-kick?"

"I'm no match..."

"Well sure, maybe not today... But you have a Kaestus... See, none of us here thinks you'll be a good Zerker - but combine what you could potentially do with the suit and the Kaestus - you could become very difficult to deal with."

"That's like Denea..." Denea wasn't a very good tactician either, but she was well-known in the monthly matches - no one would ever turn her down from a team, and no one wants to get close to her during a match.

"Well, Denea is good in many things, I could say, and sure, she has a Kaestus, but somehow she wasn't blessed with one as powerful as you. You got it from Reval Temple, yeah?"

"Andre gave it - I don't know whether he got it from here or there... And... I don't think I was supposed to use it."

"It would never have integrated if it wasn't meant for you... See, when the Orbs dish out those things, they'll make it for you. So, every suit, every glove, every weapon ever created, built, evolved - is unique. Your Kaestus is something else, and I imagine if you keep looking into it... You'll get quite good at control."

"So why did Andre have something that should belong to me?"

"The orbs work in strange ways - Andre could communicate with them - maybe one of them had him send you that package. I am not sure, though - I've no idea how the Orb communicates... I do have a Kaestus, too, but - and I can read some things with it - but that's as far as I go."

"Where could I learn more about that?"

"Well, the only one I knew with as potent a Kaestus as yours... Are Vinu Laos and his daughter? Andre was the best at it, naturally... There's also an Exo named Agnes - she's not here right now, but when she comes back, I'll tell her to contact you... But you have to forgive me, she's a little weird..."

"Weird how?"

“Too into alcohol...” And sleeping with men while being married to another. But she has great sides to her, no need to gossip now, is it... “Ah, you’ll get along with her well,” *yup, she’s usually very nice and open to other women, I’ve seen.*

* * *

The Exo team with Eysin Eysin are moving around the field and swooping out 5 of the 7 newbie teams with ease. Eysin is not doing much, however, she is taking in the augmented version of Terratorium and is pleased to see that whoever built this system has put so much effort into it.

There are butterflies, birds, and a simulation of various kinds of weather, seasons, water, dry sand, cool winds, and slippery ice - all that is achieved through a combination of the Terratorium system and programmable geomatter; plus, the zerk, and the integrated extra nervous systems... It all looks as real as real life - even though they look more fantastic than the creatures one could see on Earth. She’s then informed that there also used to be a guild here, for building those worlds - but for now, they are using the services of Parisian map builders.

“Team Prick is proving to be a little more motivated than expected,” the mask of one of the Exos forms a grin on his simplistic mask-looking face. He’s saying this to Eysin to inform her why they have been standing still for a while. By the voice, it is the same man from yesterday - now trying to see if she could recognize his signature through the air, it indeed all feels familiar.

The 4 Exos surround Eysin, knowing someone is about to come at them, and figure she’d be the first they’d go after, so - they take on the challenge of keeping her in the game, too. “We’ll wipe the floor without any of us getting even a scratch.”

Eysin, done with getting stunned by the environment, now looks at her teammates and sees Daegan fully suited for the first time. He has made his suit a little more interesting than the Exo she had sparred with. And the 2 ladies in the group have also made interesting nooks, horns, strings, and accessories. They have paint on their bodies and faces.

And that's no normal paint - those are enhancements - colours from the powdered marbles - turned to a special paste - red, green, blue, sometimes just for show, and others can leverage it to boost their ability or avoid control.

Eysin sees one of the ladies wearing two thin silver-white bracelets. They looked very familiar to her - she'd seen such before but never connected them to Eesian tech. "Hey, what are those?"

"Artifacts, got them from the tournament last year."

"What's on them?"

"Guys, quiet!"

A hell of a mess starts and Eysin gets separated from the group for half a minute, but to her, that struggle feels like hours - because, indeed, she has been targetted, and the very prick from earlier is now coming at her fast.

And just when the sparring-Exo gets a sight of their situation, he sees Eysin getting smacked in her face. She flies to kiss the floor, but she doesn't stay down, and what happens next gets them all on an unusually high alert.

CHAPTER THREE:

Jolie Rouge

ALREADY SECONDS ahead, anticipating what's going to happen next, small beams radiate from the suit, and the Exo utters, "How the fuck..."

Eysin leaps back up, her mask of a face looking angry and focused on the prick. For a short moment - she appears to be growling. Deeply annoyed, but not at all hurt by the punch. Her suit flashes and *blink* - she's fast, back at his face, and the prick doesn't even know what's going on anymore. She manages to get out three incredibly strong punches before Daegan and her anonymous sparring partner pull them apart.

"You're out, buddy," the Exo says and lets the prick run.

While all this was happening, the rest of the prick's team was getting swiped out by the ladies.

Daegan had to hold her still until she stopped struggling. The beams stopped, she was coming off it. "We'll finish the match," the Exo says, "best take her to the pool."

"Going to be a hell of a hangover, I imagine."

The last group had been hiding somewhere, and they were only too relieved to hear that the match is over - but since they had not collected any flags, they weren't winning anything, either. Unless you consider titles a prize - because they got dubbed the Coward Club.

* * *

Daegan took Eysin back to the temple room with the orb and the pool. Just when they enter the room - as if reacting to their arrival - the lights change and the air turns red. Nearing the pool Daegan placed his hand on her face - a very specific spot between the ear and the eye and mumbles some gibberish. That little trick removed the visor and revealed her whole face. She looked lost, confused, and elsewhere.

“How the fuck do you go from not getting a suit on straight to trance...” He supported her walk, “Are you coming to...”

She heard the voice but couldn't understand the words. She couldn't make sense of what was happening, what had happened... She looked at him and recognized him, and tried to say something, but all that came out was a doubtful, “Aww...”

“We'll sit here until it wears off, okay...”

She only sat because she saw Daegan taking a seat - with his feet in the pool. He gently pushes her into the water, and she complies. She could hear all the sounds that he made but realized she still couldn't make sense of any of the words - and realizing that - a kind of panic started hitting her. She's lost her mind, she realized, now, in the water, she retreated close to the edge of the pool, planning to come out - but since the water was calming her body, she didn't want to lose that one last good feeling, either.

“One, two, three, four, can you understand me now...”

It felt like a hypnotizing song. 20 minutes straight, he asked once a minute, perhaps. But instead of starting to understand, it lulled her to a strange sort of sleep - dreaming but awake and aware that she should remain alert, as she was hanging out in the water and could easily drown if she forgot about it.

But in that dream - she was not there in the Temple at all. In a non-place, and then back at her Reval bunk, at Andre's workshop... The basement where they met with friends, years ago. Waking up with a man she hadn't seen or heard of in years. Assessing her life conditions, and as thought kept travelling, she noticed that darkness loomed over her - reminding her she'd lost the path and made many wrong choices.

She'd drifted so far off from where she had always thought she'd end up, and repairing all that has become an impossible challenge.

Lost in life, and felt like a plaything for others. Others may have been equally lost but found comfort in bullying others. Her view of her own life terrified her and depressed her. Until at one point, she indeed did hear, "One, two, three, four..."

"What the fuck?" She could speak again and immediately started crying. Not moving from the water.

"I don't know how, but you just experienced a battle trance..." He didn't seem to worry about the crying - the emotions around coming off the zerk, and the trance are all normal. Her entering the trance was not. The only thing he wondered about. He also knew it would take a good few other minutes before he was going to be able to have a conversation with her at all.

"No, worms." She said as if she had to protest against something Daegan had said. "Everything is worms. Little worms, big worms - it's disgusting!" She's talking nonsense, but has to start somewhere - the words are coming out again, and it's a relief! "I really would love to have some pancakes!" She suddenly says very cheerfully. "I love the colour red. They serve pancakes at the bar on the weekends - strawberry ice cream. Oh god, I hate what's happening."

Daegan had people behave this way before, so, all the nonsense didn't confuse him. He also knew better than to not try to make any sense of it.

She covered her face with her hands, rubbed her face, took some deep breaths, didn't speak for a couple of minutes, and then walked back to the edge of the pool, near where Daegan was sitting. "A battle trance..." Sounded as if she was stating, but was asking.

"Yeah... It's unusual for someone on your stage. Normally you'd be better prepared - we'd be better prepared. Anyway, I'll go get you a robe - you're going to notice that the high you get from shifting from normal to zerked has its equal counterpart, too. Coming off, after you have been in it for hours, getting used to the physics - your own body will seem kinda lame." He stood up and headed towards the stairs, "best I can tell you now - don't get too surprised by it."

That's why you rarely see any Exos taking off their masks - it is less about the anonymity - and more about the discomfort regarding

switching from one view to another - of course, everyone prefers to remain nimble, lightweight, and crazy strong - and retain the possibility to see all around... Personally, Daegan just had a different attitude - enabled by the fact that he had gotten unusually comfortable with the highs and the lows. Most never do. There might be only a few Exos who are like that, and they prefer to not show off.

He disappears for a few minutes and returns with a ritual robe. Eysin had seen those before, she had once stuffed the washing machines with hundreds of them.

“Coming off should be even worse if you have experienced the trance... So, best you take it slow - remain in the water through the whole thing, okay?”

“Did I fuck up bad?”

Daegan turns himself around, but doesn't go too far from the pool, sits on the floor, and starts smoking something. “I think you will have a difficult time with yourself... And you will take a week off.”

“Why, am I being punished?”

“No... You will just want some time off.”

* * *

Eysin returned to the dorms that afternoon and felt tired, slow, and heavy. And when she lay down on her little bed, a weight familiar from the dream-like state from earlier reappeared and started weighing on her soul. All alone in the world, disconnected from absolutely everything she had once been attached to, nurtured, developed, built... Ejected and rejected.

Even though she had physically come quite a long way - a few months of training already had made her so much stronger and more endurable. She could run for longer, climb over obstacles, and not get immediately worn out by it all. But she discarded all that and compared it to how she felt and could move with the suit - normally, she was a weak, useless maggot. It was so easily crushed.

And She dreamt, dramatized how everything she had built, nurtured - had turned out to be so fragile - and had turned out to be so exploitable,

or for someone else. She'd been a fool, and sometimes even a very dangerous one, at that.

"Come on, I'm not back here, am I?" She says to herself, eyes closed. *Did I screw up because I did something I wasn't supposed to? Poked around sensitive places that aren't meant to be poked around with? A puny, bad, rotten force in the world, exists only to irritate someone else's progress... Come on, I'm not back here. I have decided it before - my death would not improve a thing... I just have to stop myself... Oh, who the fuck am I to stop anything?*

For the next week - she slept 15 hours almost every night. During the day she wouldn't do much, either. Denea had recognized what is going on with her, though. She didn't know anything about the trance but remembered that the first time, after a more exerting match with the zerk - coming off it had made her somewhat depressed, too. She was out for a whole week, too. And the way she had a bit of support from her roommate back then, she offered to Eysin, too.

"We'll go take a long walk around the island, smell some tree bark and crumple some dry leaves. Throw rocks into the water and scare birds. Then you can come back here and sleep all you want, okay?"

They never talked much, but that one day at the sea, Denea thought it might help her know, "Most people are not ready to wear it, you know... The weight of real life - it's too soon. But I have seen from myself - and others - as we mature... We learn to accept the heavy stuff... Like lifting weights - we become accustomed to it - and can start lifting more."

"The problem isn't the weight of the world - but my relative weakness in it."

"Hey, none of us is meant to take on the weight of the world... And I don't think we humans were meant to take on the weight of our lives alone, either - we were, by design, meant to share it..."

"What do you do... When you shared it with all the wrong people... All in..." Eysin loses her thoughts.

Denea thinks of an answer. "Oh... Well, before coming here - I was in Reval, too. But you might not know - I wasn't a local, not even from this country. I was trafficked here."

Eysin knew something about trafficking. Hearing she'd been trapped in it in any form made her cringe. But she didn't want to comment.

Denea continues, "I am an EESO rescue... They set us free and let

us join here... So, unlike you - I didn't come here and start alone..."

"Who'd you come with, then?"

"Another rescue like me - my best friend... She's specializing as a medic here."

"How come you're not roommates with her?"

"Ah..." It didn't look like Denea wanted to get into that. "If you come alone here, though, it shouldn't matter - I made friends here, too. And they are good... Way better than I could dream to be... I was very competitive and defensive when I think about it now - I hate how I used to behave... But they accepted me anyway... And in time I started behaving more like them. And I think you will get to enjoy the same."

* * *

Before the next week started - on a Sunday evening - Eysin went back to the temple for a little bit, looked at a "fun" match by some older gladiators, and then went back to the hall with the Orb. She hoped to see Daegan around.

She stopped at the edge of the pool and stared right across - the large orb. She recalled that the whole room had turned red at that time - but right now it was orange and blue. "You can heal us, huh?"

And as she said that - the room turned red again. And a few moments after, Daegan appeared and saw that she was there - kneeling near the pool, trying to see what caused all the redness. The glowing marbles at the bottom of the pool.

"Are you coming back?" He yelled from the platform above.

Eysin looks up, "I've come with some questions."

* * *

"Battle Trance is a specific configuration for very high-stakes situations, it takes years for us to develop one... So, it surprised us all that you'd knock it out of the park here like that..."

"You call that a Trance? I lost my mind!"

“You sacrifice a lot of your normal senses to focus on one thing – surviving the situation – full adrenaline. If the instinct is to kill, you will have no use for words – so, that’s why you were experiencing aphasia.”

It wasn’t just the loss of meanings of words to Eysin that had made her feel uncomfortable – it made her experience the sensation one does at absolute defeat.

“Defeat? Well, don’t we all have some unresolved issues... Look, it takes a while to get used to this, and in time, the aphasic effect will also reduce – or at least you’ll get out from it quicker – or... You simply won’t be surprised by it anymore. Everyone who experiences it for the first time – even when they have heard what I just told you – absolutely everyone gets freaked out... But usually, we’re more prepared... We wouldn’t have anyone experience it during a match... There are rituals and all that...”

“Well, you shouldn’t let unhappy people wear these...”

“I’d say I healed my unhappiness with her help!” He pats his chest and then changed his tone. “But how you could figure out how to go to trance within the first day of wearing the thing – now that is a mystery...”

“It’s not a mystery to me...”

“I’d guess as much.”

“Hey, tell me, why is it glowing red now? I’ve not seen this before?” Eysin looks at the water and sees some pink marbles bleeding red light.

“Well, the orb always knows what’s going on – so, the assumption is – it’s trying to help you recover. Recovery seems to happen faster in red light.”

Eysin reaches into the water and picks up one of the glowing marbles.

“Hey, I’m not sure you’re supposed to be doing that...”

“It’s fine...” And it’s warm. And it does make her skin feel different. Any ache and stress that was – is now removed. “Hey, you ever carry these just around and have this happen?”

“Yeah, the medics have little devices that can achieve the same effect. But they are very... Intricate devices – difficult to use... They get special trance-like states like we do, too – but they use it to diagnose...”

The Crisis Mode.

“I’ll have you meet one the next week if you like – they can teach you a self-healing trick.”

“I have another ask... Can you show me what happens to trigger a trance? I want to know so I can avoid it - turn it off if possible... For the time being.”

“We all build our own - your logic may be very different from mine, so I would have to take a look at your zerk and the framework.” He readies his Kaestus for reading. “But I recall one of the Exos was interested in teaching you - and he knows everything about control.”

“You recall? And how did you find out?”

“We talk. He was asking about you, starting the lessons, I guess.”

Eysin felt a little reluctant to learn under that Exo - afraid that her small misdeed of copying his framework might somehow come up. *Would it be considered theft? Will I get kicked from the guild?*

Daegan takes her hand, ready to explore her framework. *The logic and shortcuts I see are usual for... A very experienced close-quarters specialist... And I have seen such a configuration before.*

“Can you show me how to control it or not,” she gets impatient, fearing that he’s figuring out that the framework wasn’t built by her.

“You’ll never have use for such an extensive arsenal... That’s damn rare stuff here, how the hell do you even have it? I know this can not be from Andre.” Andre wasn’t a combatant... But Daegan was already guessing where it was from - the arsenal looked familiar. There was only one man on the island who collected all these weapons’ blueprints.

“You would never be able to pull off these moves - these are not appropriate for your body - use these programs and you’ll simply pull yourself to pieces... How do you have another Exo’s settings, Eysin?”

Eysin slowly takes her hand back and lowers her head. “Should I even ask if you’re any good at keeping secrets?”

“I want to know, but not so eager to broadcast it.”

“I copied this Exo’s framework configuration and adjusted it to myself... I thought I had seen all that there was, and I noticed there were a lot of missing slots - but this one - the trance thing - I had missed...” And she had no idea what all the fuss about an arsenal was.

“What do you mean you copied it?”

“Back at the Temple Guild... I figured out how to make copies of blueprints - mostly to get done with the temple building blocks faster.”

Copies were used in other contexts, he had heard of it before - even

the very guy who collected the weapons - many of the blueprints he had owned had been copied. But he knew only that blueprints - the plans for something could be copied - not a live zerk, or a temple building block... Unless she has figured out a way how to make a blueprint of a live thing...

"I use my Kaestus for it - learn the code, the signature - and press it onto a blank - one of those pink ones - but you'd also have to account for counters... So, they'll be two blueprints to even out the intricacies someone's personal, genetic signature would cause... With temple blocks, there was no such problem, and the process was faster... With the framework - I needed his framework and his signature..."

"Oh, that is curious, indeed... You could copy an Exo's framework - and he has been developing it for many years..." Daegan thinks, and stares at the ceiling for a while. "The possibility to do such a thing has dangerous implications... You may have uncovered a serious security threat..." He falls silent, sights set towards the ceiling, but you could see from his eyes, he's elsewhere.

"Am I in trouble?"

"On the contrary, you've discovered something important."

"He didn't know that I took it..." She almost as if protesting against him telling about it to anybody.

"He won't have to find out, just between you, me - and Vinu, for now. And take up on that Exo's offer - he'll teach you some neat stuff that will take you to another level."

* * *

Not knowing what Vinu Laos would do about her discovery made Eysin nervous. She was afraid for the worst - that she'll have to return to the Temple guild - do more boring Kaestus-related work. Eysin could remember in her gut the feeling she felt each time Leon turned down each of her new ideas.

"I have an idea about the swarm," before even knowing anything about the Gladiator guild - she had gone to Leon with another idea to keep her stay in the guild fresh and challenging.

“The Frenchies had a lot of ideas about the swarm, and they spent a lot of money on it already - already 100 years before you were born, pretty. I doubt you’ll have anything to add. There’s some fascinating literature on it, though, but you must promise me you keep it to yourself.”

Eysin had accepted the documents and learned a few interesting facts about the swarm and its drones. They were likely invented by the Americans, and they are connected to the start of the new era count - meaning, they have been flying around, filling up the sky for some 300 years now.

It had likely been a United Nations project to prevent missiles from taking the air - and sadly, later, to also enforce worldwide lockdowns. To prevent pandemics, riots, uprisings... Which, in itself, isn’t a bad thing. Nowadays, people have gotten very used to the two-week lockdowns twice every year - it’s just a natural part of life...

Every time, just before the lockdowns - magazine sales went up - and Eysin remembered having capitalized on that very well.

But back in history - the swarm had gotten out of hand when one party started using the drones for other types of control. The zero-year world war... Ended up with The United Nations getting dissolved, all the operators of the swarm - killed - and the swarm remained masterless, hanging in the air even now, 300 years later.

Soon after, the Americans rejected all Eesian technology - preferring their production - full control and knowledge over it - and all the worms had either escaped to South America or here. Whatever it used to be before - the U.S.A. or something - now is unknown to the rest of the world - walled itself off, and is guessed to be an isolated, over-technologized society.

The author of the study didn’t seem to mind, though, ending the story with commentary along the lines, “At least they are not intervening in the matters of the rest of the world, anymore. Unless... They secretly are behind the drones, still.”

The Frenchies had spent a lot of resources trying to clear the sky and study the drones. It’s also partly why their knowledge of Eesian technology is so extensive now. But the Clear Sky project had been a big failure. Somehow they had managed to build drones of their own - ones that could take air and get close to the swarms - hoping to wipe

them out with a remote-controlled robot sky-war - but seeing just how many there were - billions and billions of swarm drones, refreshing every week... They simply had to scrap the project - the swarm outran their budget, and humans' dreams of flying a plane or sending a rocket out remained just dreams or a thing of the past.

But how could the Frenchie drones get to the sky? Why didn't the swarm take them down as soon as they were high enough... She needed to know more - if there were any of those drones still in existence, if there was any information about those drones at all...

Eysin had gotten in touch with one of her more neutral friends from the past and accessed the large, messy internet. It was filled with all sorts of fantastic stories about the swarm - conspiracies, fairy tales and the like - but one story stood out to her, most.

Behind the swarm had been just one man - who also was one among the first to have donned Eesian gear. Folk accounts had it he had been a cunning bastard. Tall, handsome, and extremely educated. And the swarm had been his idea to stop flight pollution, and space missiles and hastened the spread of various viral diseases. For what it's worth - he nailed the effects - after the collapse of the old world - those problems no longer existed. *Now we can busy ourselves solving these worm problems.*

Eysin returned to teacher Leon the next week and asked him a couple of questions, but he chuckled annoyingly once again, admitting that he had never read too much about the projects and had no idea. "If people smarter than us," Leon protested, "didn't pick up on anything, why would you and I imagine, we could?"

"They didn't drop it because they didn't find anything," she protested, "they ran out of money."

"That settles it even quicker, then. If the French can't fund it, how can we?"

"The point is to try to find a cheaper way to do it. Worth looking into, no?"

"Look peas, if you want to save the world, you've come to the wrong guild. I don't have the funds, you don't have the funds - and someone needs to clean 300 robes - and since you're the rokiest of us all - it'll be your turn all day every day for the rest of the week."

It wasn't the cleaning that had turned her off about the Temple guild, the hundreds of robes put into washing machines for the rest of the week. She liked the robes, the machines were hypnotizing, and the smell of the cleaner was pleasant. But she got turned off because she had, to her mind, found a good solution to the problem everyone had been focusing on in the guild now - making copies of the blocks quicker... We could take on any other project in the world! Why is he doing this? And Leon simply hid it under the rug.

That evening she had seen an offer for a position back in RESO - and guessing that the Nords that were chasing after she had all gotten caught and eliminated, she assumed it would be safe to return, and applied for it.

A position with good pay and a good title - the very one she dreamed of when she still was in Reval. And oh, even though her arms were in full raw pain from lifting clothes in and out of washing machines that day, she still would have had it in her to raise one arm for one more thing - to show the middle finger to Leon.

She didn't hope to get any response to the application at all, but they responded within the same hour - signed by a familiar name - Kamile. But the response was only half good news. The plan got cancelled by budget and they will get back to her in a year - to check if she'll still be interested.

Eysin snapped out of it and figured that getting out from EESO wouldn't be so easy anyway - the contract had been pretty strict, she'd have someone from Brotherhood hanging around all the time, and she couldn't even talk about or use anything she had learned here - no, that'd be difficult. Too difficult - besides, she'd rather just figure out how to get to work on a tad more interesting projects right there.

Not wanting to let go, she did manage to find more information about the French Drones from parts of the web not many knew how to look at. And there had been an artifact - one of those silver-white bracelets - that would hold the blueprint of the drone - but where was it now, nobody knew. Lost when the creator of the swarm allegedly got murdered and hidden.

A bracelet, just like that, huh? She recollected the images she had seen on the web - and was playing with the three she had on her own. She'd

not yet worked on decrypting them - and she was about to attempt it, but Denea entered the room and asked if Eysin would like to join a party. At that very party, Raynar asked her to join the Gladiators.

After getting reminded of those bracelets before she jumped into a trance - by that lady - she got right back to it - she had no problem finding those bracelets now - but she found that the way they were encrypted, would take a bit of time to figure out. Still too much of a rookie.

* * *

“Hey, can we discuss the spot in Titan...” Daegan pops his head in.

“I was hoping you’d leave that spot for Sylrissa for when she returns.” Without moving from his table, but visibly getting distracted by the visitor, Vinu now looks at the man slowly walking in. He remembered now, indeed, they had planned to meet and discuss something about the Titans and some novice.

“I barely have enough funds for one... I can’t afford her.”

“She’ll be for free, and you’ll continue to be exempt from having to pay anything for using the Garage.”

Daegan had reached out to Vinu, to have him approve Eysin into his guild. Things seemed to be going her way for once - she’d have access to more sensitive information, stranger projects, and technology.

In retrospect, this matter didn’t get enough attention, Vinu had gotten too busy - he had kept himself more in-tune with the people who lived on Oeselia, but ever since Theogenes announced he now has better hobbies to attend to than the whole EESO business and all the land they had accumulated - Vinu had stopped having all the free time had used to enjoy.

Vinu and Daegan had become close over time, and it all started at a social event - where Daegan had joined as a novice Eesian, and Vinu hung out just because he loved to take time for such events.

He used to know everyone in the guild, personally. But those times were now over - the guild had gotten bigger than he could handle - and there were no other old men like Vinu around.

It was not possible to prevent the novices from using drugs, or playing dangerous tournaments – occasionally, people died because of either. And when Theo had once suggested banning this or that, Vinu admitted that it would not help, “our fault lies in not being there anymore. Brother, it has fallen out of our hands where the guild goes – so we must seek ourselves a liability partner. And I propose them to be the Brotherhood.”

Theogenes ignored everything he had said and said what he was itching to say, instead, “Vinu, I’m thinking of going exploring again. Siberia is calling, the news about the site...”

“But they will hold the vote tomorrow!”

“I remember, Vinu, and I know...” Theo knew that he’d get voted as the next king. Theogenes was not too pleased about it, he wanted to move away from this place. A series of losses had finished him with a harder blow – he lost his son to a yellow marble overdose.

The king-to-be’s heart was broken, and he didn’t think he’d return from that again... Until he heard of the finds in Siberia. Something amazing had been found, something unheard of – a sunken city, thousands of years old – fully, Eesian technology.

He was invited to come and take charge – as he was the most experienced Eesian technology- and culture specialist in the whole known world. Theo knew that would help him move past what had happened to his family. A new purpose – away from where he had built a home, a house – and where it all had fallen apart.

“I don’t think you and Bratka will manage it, either.” He did hear what Vinu had said, though, and he finally responded – but only to convince Vinu that what he wanted to do, where he wanted to go, was the best way forward, “you are absolutely right, we have lost them – EESO is no longer ours – the young ones are taking over – and I think we should let it go in whatever direction it must... Besides, Dux August wants to buy.”

“He took your son’s bride and now he wants your life’s work, too? He smells like a crook, and you know it.”

“I have already promoted their ambassador as the head of Temple Guild for a show of good faith.” Theogenes lights a blunt, looks out of the window – knows very well this conversation will last for a while, and simply embraces it – and Vinu, as they come.

“And I wondered what the whole fuss about Leon was. Have you already made the deal? Without talking to me first? What the fuck am I here for?”

“You are the wisest advisor in the whole realm, my friend! Look, I sold him a small part of the land, and they own a humble 10% of the temple now. I mean... August wanted in so badly, I just couldn't stop wondering why... If a man is this curious to get in - why not let him have a look.”

“The land you confiscated from the boys? You didn't do it for the money - and you don't have any great feelings about August - so you made a really stupid decision just to get back at your only, last son and their friends? You focus on this petty shit, what's wrong with you?”

“I do realize it's my fault...”

A long pause follows, Vinu has no idea what faults Theo is currently admitting to.

“I mean, we let it grow too big. No longer as nice and warm and tight-knit as it was. And it was my idea - to bring them here from Reval, the orphans, the refugees, lost followers, and soon enough whoever the fuck wanted.”

“We have many skilled people, and the strongest force in the region, your decision made sense. You will be made king because of your decisions.”

“Oh fuck that! I thought it was the right thing to do - to have people like us make the school, the guild, teach our ways, our fathers' ways... So this region would be safe - from the raiders, from the Black Sea... Or whoever the fuck else might come. We were getting ready - and it was a good start - but it got out of hand. We should have kept it small, like Black Rain... You can see it - RESO is most likely suffering from the same problems we are - if not worse.” Being in the city, access to the underworld - as direct as it can get. “Ours are defended by the trees and the sea, no underworld here... Well, that's not true anymore, is it.” There now is an underworld on their land - they were not in control of it, “before we know it, Vinu, it will push us off from our little thrones. We are no longer in control of this.”

“I can't leave this ship, I won't. I need to find a way to be here for it in a better way - in the current form and size that it is - what is the best

way I can keep EESO on its original tracks - to prepare... And not go to war... I'll stay and make sure no one in this guild will rise to power only to abuse it."

Looking defeated, Theo lights another blunt, smokes it for a while, and then turns to Vinu again, "You and I are not alive to try to hold the whole world from falling apart, Vinu - who were we to take such ideas in our heads in the first place..."

"Well then, explain to me - what is the idea behind going to Siberia? What are you hoping to do, what are you hoping to find?"

"Peace... For me." He smiles but in a shy way.

"And you're willing to hang an axe above the whole world just to achieve what - inner piece?" Vinu was getting bitter. And to Theogenes - he had not crossed a single line - to another man, he might have responded with something cruel - but because he knew Vinu had been through the same - just before him - he must have been right.

"What about that, then, friend - if you still find the world so precious - I say I won't go to help the Japanese. I will go for us - we'll keep the territory to ourselves - we have the means to control it - they won't attack us - you make sure I will have people to come, man the site, and I will make sure that of any new information we get - EESO will be the first, and hopefully the only ones to know."

"I don't want EESO to know - what I want you to guarantee to me - when you go - and find something... World-breaking - you find a way to eliminate it - and not a single soul will know that such things are even possible. You remember if it's all just an accident - and our access to these weapons, purposed for whatever they could be - is accidental... If it turns out that they were not meant for us - you'll find a way to turn it all off."

Theogenes agreed with that and then turned around to ask what could be the most ridiculous clothes they could wear to the election the next evening.

He showed up like a very old and fancy time royal person - and as a result of the act he pulled at the event, he had hoped - the other houses would see him as if he had lost his mind, and hoped they would vote for someone else - like Dux August - but still, even after embarrassing himself - most houses trusted his position and power - and honorability - to take the place of the now-dead king.

* * *

The moment Daegan had stepped into Vinu's office, he had sensed this was a poor time for a longer conversation - by the way Vinu sat, arranged things on his desk, looked outside the window, and checked the time - it was obvious that he needed or wanted to be somewhere else.

It irritated him, but he understood - in a sense, even better than Vinu and the not-king - what was going on. He took his time to slowly pace himself to Vinu's bar cupboard, poured himself a drink, looked at the window, and noticed that a caterpillar had recently turned into a cocoon, hanging from the curtains.

"Hey, would you look at that," Daegan raised his glass towards the cocoon and directed Vinu's attention to it. Vinu stood up and went closer to see.

They stand still and observe it in silence for a moment. Nature. "Nice, but we better get back to it," Vinu mumbles, returns to his desk, and looks, impatiently, at Daegan.

And this makes Daegan want to slow down even more. "Did you know... That caterpillars keep growing in size - but their lungs always remain the same size?"

"Did you come to discuss biology?" He got a little irritated!

"They keep growing in size, but their lungs don't catch up... Which means - at one point - they suffocate on their size - they run out of air." He raises the glass towards the cocoon, again. "Their lungs do not meet the requirements of their fully grown bodies anymore - and that's when the moulting starts."

Vinu listened, and it made him tilt his head, "huh," he mumbled.

"You've been hard to come by lately. Busy with the preparations for the expedition?" Daegan sat down at the table now and finished the glass.

"Yeah, I'll go to Novograd, make sure enough people are allowed to pass..."

"Anyone signed up yet?"

"Nah, I'll have the assistant make some posters, we'll put them up so the people coming to the Pits this year might see it. Would be nice to have some of the Brotherhood or Black Rain guys tag along."

“What’s the pay?”

“No pay for you, Daegan, you’re not coming.”

“So, you’re leaving me to babysit?”

“I’ll be away just a few months, everything is arranged. And no, I’m not leaving you to babysit, Theo just doesn’t want you there.”

“So, the Grand Ass’s still pinning his death on me...”

“That’s the would-be king you’re speaking of, do not put me in this position...”

“But you like it when I’m honest,” Daegan smiles to himself. Vinu had always believed his story and still seemed to fully trust him - that he couldn’t convince the would-be-king in it - didn’t worry him so much. Of course, being on the right side of Theogenes would never hurt, but he was going through it rough - and there was no real use in trying to make their perspectives on reality seem more accurate than Theo’s.

“Hey, who was it you wanted to discuss anyway?”

“The one you told me to pay attention to. Ravana.”

“Ah, Eysin... How’s she handling?”

“She’s resourceful. Not much of a team player yet, but resilient - with a bit of help. A little dark-minded, but surprisingly sober...”

“Not surprising.”

“Isn’t it? For a young person like that, not to get her head hit with the power...”

“She’s had power, before.”

“Oh... Well, that’s what I’m here for - if you had any information on her... What else can I know about her - who is she, where did she come from? She knew Andre, that much I know...”

“The battery and the glove this woman has - were Andre’s. Now, what’s curious to me - how did Andre manage to scrub himself off the marbles to the point that someone else could install them...”

“How did Andre even find her? Some romance thing?”

“Doubt it. He mentioned he had taken in a stray, and before the shit hit the fan, he’d asked us to come and see that she gets back to Perona, safely. He had no idea who she was.”

Vinu chuckled a bit, going back to the moment and trying to make sense of what was happening. He had gone near Reval with the Brotherhood, and the brothers had gone in, to extract some people. Soon, Koi

Jr. and Eysin appeared at his camp, she looked sickly - and he knew what had been going on. She had ingested the marbles Andre wanted to be taken out from Reval.

They had been Andre's marbles - and they contained sensitive information about the current head of RESO. Vinu smiled, he was pleased that this problem had now been solved. But not so please that it was Dux August who had taken the place of the traitor. Dux August will possibly fail to do any better.

"It's Andre's framework and his computer that she carries."

In a way, Andre's coming back home... "So, what is her experience of power?"

"Completely unrelated to Andre or us. Have you heard of The Red Flag Group?"

"The communist magazine?" He couldn't help, Daegan snorted a laugh. "The Communist Magazine in which everyone used to be named Jolie Rouge!" Daegan recalled a picture he had seen reported in some old paper - a photograph of 3 young people, all with hair painted red and angry expressions on their faces. Except for the one with big tits and big, curly red hair. That one was smiling - very memorable - absolutely for the smile.

"Yes, the one... Many years back - the kids involved with that took down the biggest business abusers of the Reval system - through exposing them, spying on them - so, basically, they were a random bunch of hackers, journalists, infiltrators..."

"And she was one of them?"

"She was the original Jolie Rouge. The whole project was her thing, started and led by." Vinu said this with a surprised smile.

"So, Eysin is a little communist?"

"I don't know about that." He shrugs and takes a moment to think if politics ever came up with her, he couldn't recall. "The paper was different back then... What I take from her story," that he had read in another magazine, "however - she can be very resourceful, and she can take down a bad guy. I was going to take her in here one way or another - Andre seemed to have liked her, so, I trust that... But when I started looking into her - to make sure she's not going to get us in some kind of trouble - I found that she'd been involved in that. She started

that movement - and it changed the face of the city - for the better. An impressive force - and that's why I wanted you to pay attention to her."

"She seems quite humble now. She should be well known, yeah?"

"She has had her Humiliation Round, too... After taking down the Traffick Corp - the biggest impact one could dream of having against human trafficking in these parts - they gained a lot of popularity throughout the region. She wanted to remain anonymous, and the other Rouge, the one with the big melons - she wanted to get all the credit for the hard work they had done - see, they were all pretty broke, and none of them liked to work for a living - and guilds didn't take in people outside their networks just yet.

Eysin had later shared this in another magazine - why she got out from The Red Flag Group - and how it all went down. She had announced that The Red Flag is over - they had completed their mission and it was time to pack the bags - and would have printed this announcement the next day - but Erika, her partner at the time - the one with the big melons - stopped the press of that issue and continued to do without her.

But they started writing about something else - they had accumulated a large audience and started using that paper to broadcast Erika's... Whatever - communist philosophy... Eysin managed to convince the printer to stop working for the fake Red Flag, but Erika retaliated.

The remaining Red Flag started terrorizing that old printer but left him alone as soon as they built their own. For the next issue Erika made public the face and name of Eysin Ravana - the original Jolie Rouge - with all the accurate credit - but only to hurt Eysin - because she knew - no company would hire Eysin - and she'll wither and die without Erika's support in Reval...

Andre told me he had found her wandering on the streets, she had planned to return to Perona. He offered her an alternative."

Where she met Andre, and now she's here. "I'm asking her for my guild because she's started an interesting personal project."

"This to do with her interest in Clear Sky?"

"What? No, nothing of the sort. She has figured out a way to make copies of... Not blueprints - but frameworks, and more alarmingly - people's signatures. She copied one of the Exo's framework - without

him even noticing it - and said she'd done it back at the temple guild, too..."

"Curious... A copy... And it works? You've seen proof?"

"It worked on her suit. Her suit didn't activate at all - maybe because she was trying to run it on a completely scrubbed framework - but then she, how did she put it - copied another person's framework settings... Cleaned it up and used it on her own."

"This connected to that sudden trance case I heard about?"

"Yeah..."

"God, I'd love to have the time to talk to her myself. Fucking Theo with his fucking expedition... So, for now - take care of that situation... And please, keep Seals busy - and make it look like a punishment, okay?"

"I think what she can do could be a help to recovering the Titans."

Vinu falls quiet and thinks for a bit. "Okay, you can involve Eysin with the Titan Project - everything she needs to know - but you MUST keep a close eye on her - and these techniques of hers absolutely cannot leak."

They discussed a few more things about access and resources, and when exactly he will be back, and then their time was up. Vinu's comm started beeping a lot and that meant it was time to go.

"Vinu, one more thing - why do you think Leon would keep such a thing from us? Eysin had shown him that she can do this... Surely he must have noticed the potential of that technique... Or is he going dim?"

"He may have known, but kept it to himself." Vinu stands and they shake hands. "Keep this copy-ordeal under wraps until we've had time to think it over. Under no circumstances is she to reveal this to anyone. You'll be responsible for it if she does, get me?"

"Sir. What do we do about Leon?"

"I'll have Bartel check it up when he returns - you stay busy with the guild..." He looks at Daegan as he reached the door, and before he manages to open it, Vinu adds one more thing. "About your biology lesson, Daegan..."

Daegan had hoped he'd bite through the analogy, it made him smile.

The analogy had been simple. When the body of EESO had still been small, Vinu had a reach to anybody - and no matter how much he wished he still could, and it could grow endlessly - that phase was

done - and if Vinu wanted to remain a part of this... Organism - he'd have to find himself a new purpose. But just because he loved to have the occasional snappy last word: "I'm not a fucking butterfly lung."

CHAPTER FOUR:

The Titan

EYSIN HAD managed to damage her suit in one match, and Daegan used this as an opportunity to have her meet Asya. They stayed late in the Orb hall, practising a pattern on Eysin's sleeve until she got it right - her first own integrated technique to the zerk - when idle otherwise, she'll start healing faster, the suit started repairing.

"Always have extra pinks on you - no pinks, no healing," she reminds her before wrapping it up.

Eysin learned that the logic of healing had been very similar to her copy technique - which meant that she could teach it to someone else the same way Asya had taught the self-healing sequences to her.

She also got a good look at a healer's device - something they use to heal those who do not have self-healing protocols. "Why would someone not have them?"

"They want to focus on, say, combat - and some of these protocols start conflicting with each other. The fighters usually can't have these codes. As soon as they have suffered a bigger blow, the suit might want to start defending itself, triggering the healing right then and there... You can turn all that off, of course, but with many other programs - we have seen it turned on with something else... And that got people into a jam."

* * *

Eysin and the control-teaching Exo stayed late twice a week. Besides Eysin there was another young man who was following his movements and training. He shook hands with her, said, "Cassius," and wasn't particularly interested in hearing her name.

Cassius seemed bitter - he didn't even stay to talk smack with the masked teacher. But it was obvious that they knew each other personally, too. Cassius was no rookie. Eysin guessed he was partaking in this just for a means of therapy.

Every session had an hour of slow movements from one difficult position into another while getting a good feel of the Zerk. At the second session, the teacher was burning some herbs in the hall, and it was kinda smoky - and Eysin could feel that it did have some kind of psychedelic effect on her.

The teacher turned it into a guided meditation, explaining that the plant can help her get a good sense of the spinning magnetic spheres inside her body and suit. And after feeling all those points out, it completely changed how Eysin moved in the suit. She no longer used her muscles and body to move the suit - she used the spinning points - it would allow her to do things that her mere body wouldn't allow her to.

In a similar session - Eysin got to explore some more of those internal spinning centres and she was guided to the understanding of the battle trance. "You've already shown you can enter it - it's unusual for it to occur so early... So, I better teach you the basics. Do I need to go over the aphasic effects and all that, or do you remember from your first time?"

She remembered. And with a few sessions, she learned to control going in and out of the trance. It was frustrating at first - so messy that twice it even made her throw up - but once she mastered it - perhaps with tears in her eyes, on the edge to give up on it entirely - her experience wasn't exciting - but it was a relief.

Control.

* * *

Headed out from the temple, Daegan stops her. "Can you come here earlier, tomorrow?"

"How much earlier?"

"I'd like to show you some stuff, you can now become a part of my guild... I'm not going to ask you to accept without seeing it, first."

"Generous... By early you mean like, four?"

"Let's meet at the cross-road at four."

"I thought your guild things were also here in the temple?"

"They are, but we take a walk."

* * *

A cold, misty spring morning. The first flowers have started to grow. Eysin makes it to the crossroad and puts out her hand, to feel if it's going to rain. It's already bright outside, but the sky is grey. Indeed, tiny droplets fall, making the mist retreat.

Daegan doesn't come from the direction she had expected him to - but from a random patch of forest. "Good morning," he announces.

"A little early for mushrooms..."

"I went to the sea. The sunrise is nice."

"Sunrise?" Eysin looked up again, the sky was still grey.

"I'm just messing with you... I did take a walk, though. Listen, mine is a small guild, like an orphan... So, I don't have any rituals for joining, nor many rules... So, we walk and I will talk a bit... And you will think what you think. And hopefully, before the matches start today, you'll know it in your big heart - whether you're in or not."

Eysin shrugs and agrees to hear him out, and they start walking towards the Temple - but Daegan wants to go off the road, between the trees, and take a slightly longer path.

"But it's not just one way - I'll tell you everything about the Titan, and maybe whatever you want to know about me, should you find it important - I do want to know a few things about you."

She shrugs again and mumbles a sure.

“What are you here for, anyway?”

“What?” Her head went empty, trying to come up with an answer.

“Why did you come to EESO?”

“Just fate, I guess...” She gives up on trying to think.

“You had to want to join for some reason, what called you here? What did you want to achieve here?”

“I just thought it might be more interesting than what I had back in RESO. I had no idea what I’ll find here - or if I found anything at all... Just that where I came from - well, I think there was nothing there for me - and I just wanted to check out the next spot - maybe better, maybe worse - but different, for sure...”

“How long were you in Reval?” Daegan doesn’t buy that - he’s sure she must have been motivated by something. Did she see an opportunity here to... Help people? Harm people? Get revenge on her commie partner?

“Hmm, 10.”

“Years... You went there for a career or something?” He wants to direct her to talk about Jolie Rouge and hear her story from her. How does she tell it... Was she the victim, like in she was portrayed poorly in that old magazine article?

“Well, no...” She smiles, for the first time, “I went there because of a guy. And then stayed for another...” Eysin makes a strange step, swaying in a slow-motion way. “I went for a guy... I guess I was looking for a partner... Reval’s a big place, why wouldn’t I find someone there?”

“Oh...” He felt that the conversation had taken a completely different direction from what he had in mind.

“And as soon as I had that someone - well, I guess I found it wasn’t enough - and I saw something else to chase... So, I got very invested in a ridiculous project...”

“It was not ridiculous!” Daegan protested.

“What?”

“You are Jolie Rouge! How are you not proud of what you did? Why do you speak of yourself this way?”

Eysin stopped in her steps and was a little surprised that Daegan knew anything about it. Studied his face, which currently had a childish

expression on it. She let loose a long sigh, then awkwardly looked around, and... started noticing things. There are trees and moss all around, and it's soon going to get warm again...

The air was cold and dry, and it feels beautiful to her. "Hey Daegan, I think the fresh air is getting to me."

"Well then, go ahead and take it all in." He walked back next to her and wondered what had gotten into her... She'd been around these places for quite a while now - but maybe she never stopped to look at it for what it is... Something that's not worth doing in Reval - the life in the city had gotten so busy and messy and ugly that there hardly was anything there to appreciate...

Of course, in every part of the city, there were little neighbourhoods of people - and they remained intact because of their hidden kindness towards each other... But in downtown - where Eysin likely had lived - there was little kindness to see... So, it was better to ignore the surroundings - and for quite a while - until that day - she had done the same here - just to not get depressed by the darkness and cruelty of the world - but for it had missed how life on Oeselia was completely different.

The powerful forest, the forest that heals. People live here. Villages and private homes, the Aetelbaers mansions, and Vinu Laos' estates. The apple orchard and the insane parties people throw there, having a great time at good times. Most people here knew each other, and on most days were getting along quite well. There were no feuds - what a wonderful time to be alive...

And suddenly - she must have seen it. That she is now living in a completely different world from Reval. A place that pays attention to you and sees you for who you are... Maybe this is why, famously, the community hardly retained any people with ill intentions. Near the heart of such great technological power - the necessity to make sure that power remains in the hands of men who intend to use it only for protection - is the most urgent. People who lived near the Oeselien Temple and EESO Headquarters - must have been extra responsible and helpful people, she thought.

That's how Daegan saw it, too - Oeselia was a very special place. There could not be any other place like this in the world - and due

to its nature - it must be attracting the right kind of people - or must have some way to filter out the unfit ones - the spirit of this place, for some reason, is trying to defend itself - and we are here to help guard it.

Daegan had long believed he belonged to this very special place - that the spirit had chosen him to do a job - and he remembered that, and now felt the urge to say this to Eysin.

"I can talk to the Orb," he suddenly confessed, and they start walking again.

"Huh?" Not sure how to respond to this. What does that even mean?

"It can speak. The orb communicates. It is alive. The red marble in you, too - is alive. It is another being, an organism - it has a mind of its own. They are a race, and they have an agenda."

"What are you saying... Was I supposed to know that? Is this the accepted truth now?"

"No, EESO thinks that this technology is a tool. Like: weapons, vehicles, shelter... Just things of utility - but with what type of utility? The French refer to it, too - divine tools. This means they treat it respectfully, at least. Our rituals are lame next to theirs..."

But what I have sensed - these rituals should be even more elaborate, difficult... Challenging even - because the divine tools are not tools. They are simply... Divine."

Eysin was very confused about this situation. "Has this anything to do with what I will see about the Titan?"

"That's my take on it all, just wanted you to know." He specifies.

Daegan takes out a small metal case from his pocket and opens it - and inside, there are a few old white marbles that used to be someone's zerks. "They must have wanted to quit, and let go of their zerk - they weren't killed..." Daegan takes one out that looks cleaner and fresher, "Take it, take a good look at that one."

Following Daegan, she activates her suit, Daegan puts the marble in her hand - and dives in.

The last moment.

Two men are having a conversation in a small room. She sharpens her hearing, and the mumbling tones start making sense. Repeat. "I am sorry about your wife," the man says, raising his arm above the other man's table - and the image goes out, like a drop..." The last moment.

“Did I just see someone’s actual memory?” Eysin gets a little excited but remains worried about all the aliveness talk Daegan just held.

“That’s what they think it is... The gladiator who wore this was Koi, and he was talking to Theogenes. The event you saw there took place a little more than a year ago or so. This man is now in Reval, he’s the head of Black Rain.”

“So, you have access to all his life memories with this?”

“That’s what the most curious of researchers hoped. Andre - your teacher... He had started collecting them a long time ago - abandoned marbles. He found super old ones too - some that should date back more than 3000 years.”

“And we have access to their memories, too?”

“In a way...”

“What way?”

“It’s not Koi’s memory that you saw. It’s the zerks.” Daegan takes out another marble and hands it to Eysin, “As long as they are in this form, outside a human body - they sleep, stopped in time and space... But if you somehow manage to absorb it again after all this while - it would be alive again - with you, experiencing again - and making new memories to look back at.”

Eysin liked the sound of that, but she was starting to wonder if she had just joined the guild of a weird, lonely nut. And if true, why the hell has no one dealt with that? She started having doubts about the whole genuinely she just had thought about some 20 minutes ago.

She handed back both marbles, she didn’t want to look at them again. “You know, Vinu did tell me I can choose to believe whatever I like about the marbles... But that I shouldn’t hit my head with it. You’re telling me the sort of stuff that would drive sensitive people mad...”

“But maybe it will give you a better perspective on how to work with it, how to maintain and fix it... Sorry, if I freaked you out with all that. I love this place, these things - and I just wanted you to know.”

She shrugs and they keep walking - they can see the temple building between the trees.

“Why not tell me more about Jolie Rouge?”

“Oh...” Eysin remembered that Daegan had made a very surprising comment - now he suddenly recognized her? He had trained her for

a couple of months now but never thought to ask about Jolie Rouge before. “Why now?”

“What do you mean, why now?”

“What is it to you what I did anyway?” Eysin got a little irritated. She was bored to talk about it.

“I just wonder... What has hurt you and what can be done to make it better.”

Eysin wished she had heard that one right, but she’d never trust such bollocks. “I hope this isn’t an awkward flirt thing that is happening here right now... I don’t think I can beat you, but I think I can hurt you well with this,” Eysin waves her left hand.

“Hey-hey, nothing like that,” Daegan stepped back and tried to think fast about how to regain control. “Look, I’m just trying to understand who you are so I can know what to expect from you. I’m not looking to get into some, uh, particular situations with you. What good would that bring.”

“Ahh,” Eysin stretches her body and they stop before the terratorium entrance. “Look at us, talking all weird shit and not getting weirded out by it.”

“I am a little, but not sure what to do.” He starts walking again, “let’s go see the Titan.”

* * *

On their way to the room, trying to forget that embarrassing piece of the conversation, Eysin kept wondering what a Titan would look like and tried to envision something impressive in front of her eyes. Am I dreaming or guessing? Will the Titan be a large strong good looking human?

They had to go back to the front of the temple, “there is a backdoor, but it’s jammed right now... Another person will be joining the guild and it will be her task to fix the door. I’ll show it to you later.”

It was still early, so no one was hanging around the entrance or in the long corridor. They walk through it, it’s cold and unwelcoming, then reach the Terratorium arena - set to zero - all flat - and walk all across it.

To the left and the right end of the arenas - there were many small rooms - not sure what their original purpose may have been, but these days they are used as locker rooms. They've even installed water containers and showers into it.

It is an incredibly large room, the large dome above it all - such sizes shouldn't be possible... They reach the other end and enter another corridor - and soon Eysin will understand why it is not as narrow as the first one - she had been walking that hall for a long time - every time she came to the Temple Guild - but never thought of it before. She had no clue that there was something that they call a titan. And that very titan was supposed to be able to move through these rooms.

They reach the Orb Hall - and it too is empty. The air is lit dimly orange, but the water reflects blue. Now, Eysin knew that the rooms to the left from here were the rooms of the Temple Guild. Leon had said the rooms to the right are mostly empty, but sometimes students sleep in them - and have themselves a little party. But she had not witnessed any parties there. Possibly because it's not as convenient a party place as the houses back in the towns, mansions, and villages.

They haven't headed either left or right - they were going ahead - up the few stairs before the pool, and then to the stairs that were at the last wall. The stairs went up to the same place from both sides of the pool, but Daegan directed them to take the right ones.

Eysin had not gone up there before - the second floor, and now, for a moment, enjoyed the new perspective on the room. She saw the top of the orb and a better view into the pool. The room seemed even larger now than it had seemed from the ground.

The wall behind the platform turned out to be a door - and it opened when Daegan put his hand on it and mumbled something. The door slides open, but it is as dark as possible - it was impossible to tell the size - or anything else about it.

"See this small water hole at the ground on the platform? This is where one of the Titans would normally sit and charge. Eventually - none of them made it back to their respective holes."

They walk in carefully. "I call this place The Garage... Because well, we fix things here now. We've pretty much given up on the Titan, but who knows..." Still nothing, it's utterly dark. But by the sound, it seems

like another very large room. “The lights need fixing here, too - the other girl will handle all that... So let’s just get closer to it, I should be able to at least light up the Titan for a bit.”

And as they approach the approximate centre of the utterly dark room, Daegan holds his hand up to stop Eysin from walking into one of the legs and tripping over it. “Wait now,” he touches a large thing in front of them both, and with a weak flash, followed by a dim glow - a large object right in front of them becomes visible.

Had Eysin taken one more step - she would have tripped on one of its 4 long legs. Just one of the leg JOINTS of the leg looks to be more than two meters long. The legs lead to a big white ball with a diameter of about one Eysin - looks similar to the big orb in the other room - but feels lighter.

“That’s one of the Titans.” Daegan hums, looking at Eysin to see how she reacts to seeing it. “The Temple Guardian... There are more of them scattered on the islands - they broke down before they could be taken back to their charging points...” He walks over to one other “water hole” on the floor - “the Orb had reached to fix them here... Now, we can’t move them on our own - and in this form, they are very heavy - nothing on the island could move them... This one has been sitting here safe for two years now... It is also the one in the best condition - but not in a good enough for a rider to get in it and place it on the charging spot...”

Eysin walked around the creature once, and then looked at the “channel” on the floor - the channel is full of water - and it’s probably connected to the main pool in the centre. “Did you try bringing them the water manually? Like... Feed it?”

“What?”

“It’s this water that charges them, right?”

“Well, no. The water just carries the charge - the charge comes from the Orb’s energy source... And we must be very careful with what energy we attempt to feed it, too... See, the orb hands out very special wavelengths - each Titan has their individual signatures - they cannot charge themselves at the wrong pod - the Orb would feed them the wrong code, and boom... Just doesn’t work. If anything else attempted to charge these - well, it wouldn’t work. Send in the wrong power

length signal and you'll likely blow it and yourself up. Doing those kinds of experiments can mess with their code - and because they have horrible weapons in them - well - let's say we want to avoid irritating that system in any way at all... So, we can't hammer it into place. We can't feed it with a random battery charge... And we can't attempt to manually fix its signature."

"The signatures are broken?"

"They all missed their charging spots because EVENTUALLY they all were broken in a way that jammed up their - get-home-on-time ques... Each of them broke down at a very different time. And we didn't think ahead to make sure that we'll always have at least one backed up here - a one reference Titan, so to say - based on what we could fix all the others..."

"What a dumb system... Why would someone design it like that?"

Daegan pretended to think about it as if the more likely reason for this design wasn't so obvious. He didn't want to put her down. "Well, maybe... To make sure you use the Titans to protect the local area, not use it to go to war to some other place."

Alright, I get it, I get it - not dumb. I'm dumb.

"Fascinating stuff. So!" Daegan claps his hands together, "Why I asked you to come here - maybe you can help me figure out how to fix them enough so the pilots can integrate with them..."

"Hold on, they are not autonomous?"

"Well, let's leave out the part what I believe, and say that, no - they are vehicles. They need a human to integrate with - they usually prefer to use a certain host's battery to become operational. It is also unlikely that another human can use a Titan that has already been used by one." He looks away and thinks, and mumbles to himself, fascinated by it, again, "as if they play favourites." He coughs and speaks loud enough and for Eysin, again, "think of it as a warhorse - and this one here - he fell in love with Imogen."

"A horse... Well, I see a spider."

"Ever seen a spider with 4 legs?"

"No."

"So, a horse."

"Whatever, man! Hey, did you get to ride one, too?"

“No, I had a different speciality, never got close to them when they were still operational. But I did get involved with this project... And of all the people - Andre invited me.” He walks around the room and lights up some orange “beach balls” - the shape and nature of that room become better visible now. “He was studying them, and sometimes wanted a Gladiator’s perspective...”

Now that Eysin got a better look at the whole room - saw other strange objects and many marbles lying around, tables, and old chairs. And 4 little doorways, of which two were covered up with an old rag. When she stopped to inspect one of the sealed rooms, Daegan took a few faster steps and stopped her from getting closer. “That’s my room,” he quickly said. “If you want to, you can have your room, but it can’t be this one...”

“You live here?”

“Hey, cuts the cost of living... You know, you can pick a room to keep your stuff in or when you want to tinker with your projects. Or you can move here, doesn’t matter to me... The T.G. don’t mind if we use their facilities.”

“Alright, and that should be the back entrance?” Eysin referred to the biggest door in the middle - the right to the other side of the entrance they had come from. Unlike the other doors in the room - and the entrance - it was the only one big enough for the Titan to fit through. The light passed through - the door had failed to completely seal - but it was jammed both ways now.

Daegan nodded, “it’ll get fixed. She’ll come... Maybe next week, I’m not sure. So, if you want to pick a room before her, you better do it now.”

“Doesn’t matter to me...” Eysin does another lap in the room and keeps her eyes on the Titan. “So, they are locked to this place... But why this place? Or were there machines like this around Paris and Warsaw, too?”

“No, they are unique...”

“What is so special about this place?” She wasn’t asking, she was stating that she couldn’t see that the Oeselian temple had anything more worth protecting in it than any other known Temple in the world.

“We don’t know - and maybe we shouldn’t do.”

Eysin stops in place and cuts the whispers, sharp and clear - attempts to recap the pieces of ideas of this ridiculously early morning trek with

Daegan, “So, your theory is that this super-intelligent life form is hitching a ride on us and we don’t deserve to know what the fuck they are up to?”

He smiles seeing the playful challenge, somehow he managed to not take it as mockery. “Close, but it’s not really about what we deserve to know - the thing is - we wouldn’t even comprehend it.”

“Well, that theory of yours is a little hard to believe...” It spooked her out - the thought that there was someone conscious hitching a ride within her body with an unknown agenda made her uncomfortable. And before she noticed, she was already wondering, would it manage to convince me that the agenda it is after - is mine and good for me in some way? How come I got so obsessed with the swarm? What the hell got into me for wanting to join the gladiator school? Why haven’t I noped out from this weird guy’s wacky theory about Eesian tech?

Daegan saw that she was struggling, and allowed her the silence for a few minutes.

“Maybe it is better if you hadn’t told me any of that...”

“You asked me, and that’s what I think. The official story behind this - is absolutely nothing. The running theory about all this Eesian crap is that it’s all here for no reason - it’s a random crash. These things were not meant for us, we just happened to adapt them quite successfully - sort of like our brain was never created to be able to read - yet, humankind learned to write and read... So, here goes the EESO mantra, proceed with extreme caution, blah blah blah.”

“I don’t... How should I even take this in... I mean I was introduced to all that stuff like, these are building blocks, this is a computer, this is a glove, this is a suit...”

“Maybe it’s for the better if you keep viewing it that way. Don’t worry, it won’t hurt their feelings.”

Eysin sighs, too late, “I’m going to have trouble sleeping tonight.” She tries to distract herself and does another slow lap around the sleeping giant, this time she’s knocking on it, breathing on it, taking a look at it with her own eyes, and testing to see what she sees through the eyes of the zerk visor, “so you think I could get copies for parts that are broken here... Maybe from the other titans that are on the islands?”

“You’ll first have to see if it’s possible... Speaking Andre’s words, these

machines are more complex than the building blocks of the temples... And maybe even more complex than the zerk and nervous frameworks.”

“Is the one who... How should I put it? Rode this particular Titan still here?”

“Yes, that would be Exo Imogen. You met her once when we did the Humiliation round.”

“Right... Well, I’m going to need to get her framework signature copy... I think I want to make a map... I will read everything from this in and see how much it matches with Imogen’s - where she ends and the spider... Horse starts... And possibly will also need the signatures of the other Titans - to filter out theirs... Unless...” She smiles to herself. Unless what broke them were the riders themselves. Imogen or whoever - maybe her signature broke it... Maybe they just have an expiration date - they age like the rest of us... Anything as terrifying and huge as that needs to have a vulnerability...

“Do you want to meet with them or can we get those signature copies in some other way?”

“I can teach you... Your Kaestus should be good enough for it, too.”

“This? That’s a contract glove... It’s just a database.”

“Please, I know very well it is NOT just a database. You have a ridiculous program in there which tells the yellow marble to do some very... Specific things. So, I could teach you a pattern which will tell the pink marble,” she suddenly holds a pink marble between her fingers and places it into Daegan’s hands, “to do some very specific things.”

“Showing me a pattern is just enough?”

“It must be just like you learned the contract programs.”

“I didn’t learn them, they were already installed here by the Orb...”

“Oh? Well... Then pay attention.”

Eysin activates the pattern on her own Kaestus. Tiny red and white lights start shining - a pattern starts forming and Daegan watches it, and learns it - the start point, the sequence, and the final point.

“It looks very... Simple,” Daegan exclaims softly but with surprise.

Upon which she mumbles like a hypnotist, “The simplest things have the potential to become anything.”

Eysin stops the sequence, and Daegan nods that he remembered it. “I guess they do not need to know the details of what we are doing... You

absorb a blank pink into yourself and store it in a place easily accessible to the glove. Then you activate this pattern on your glove sleeve - contact the object - a handshake with this Imogen should do - or a tap, or a high-five, or whatever you like - and you'll have her signature blocks... The marble in your store will turn white and that's how you know it's copied."

"What if I accidentally over-write my signature with hers - I mean for you - getting an Exo's settings was a big step up, but I wouldn't want to lose my configurations to hers... I mean, she's great and all..."

"Well, you can't... That marble, not your framework, will contain her signature AND her framework settings - with that glove you won't be able to read, or rewrite it. It will be impossible for you to do anything with it that I did not show you - unless you mess up the sequence. Just get it, and I will take it from you, separate her signature from her framework, and then I can do my job."

* * *

When the training matches at the Terratorium started, Eysin saw the Gladiator from the mansion party way back - Raynar. They would occasionally end up in opposing teams. And when the day was without anything exhilarating, Eysin would spend her time at the workshop and try to get a better understanding of the Titan. Some days she found such interesting strings or blocks of code that she couldn't even sleep through the night - not until she had solved it.

If there were any matches the day after, she was sluggish and made an otherwise difficult run for her random teammates a nightmarish one.

A few weeks in, she's alone in the Garage, sitting by the Titan, and wonders what would happen if she attempted to read it as she had read the marble - its memories. She had not been able to do much since Daegan had not yet managed to get her a copy of Imogen's signature, so she was poking around what she could and occasionally picked up others' stuff in the dark room - to see if she could find something to work on.

So, she hits behind the sleeping giant, places her Kestus hand on it,

closes her eyes, and dives in.

Gunshots and a Nord yells. The spider gets on its feet, walks to the Orb Hall, and sees some seven men enter, all holding guns, pointed towards the Orb. They start shooting rat-tat-tat-tat-tat - and all the bullets either stop or bounce off. The Nord shoots for a moment and yells for someone to bring in the explosives.

As one of them turns to grab the devices from their backpack - the titan jumps down - right in front of the orb - the men all look stunned for a second, and then start shooting at it. As ineffective as it had been towards the Orb itself - it does nothing but leaves the occasional dust marks.

Eysin had seen the splatters do still exist both on the Orb and the Titan. When is this? The room around her looks different, the orb is significantly smaller...

Wave, pull... Snap - they are all dead - no action. The Titan had used one of its murderous weapons - a shockwave that pushes and pulls the air in front of it so quickly that it simply breaks every bone in their body, their brains...

* * *

The training at the Terratorium had fun days and terrible days. The best part of each day was the lunch - all the teams would sit together and eat. There was a lot of idle chatter, and laughter, guys who had become pricks were humbling down, and some more people found niches in which they had more talent. Some guys started focusing on weapons, while others remained hand-to-hand. Eysin was promised to get someone to teach her about the Kaestus' "control" abilities, too - but the person for it had not come to the islands yet, so she had to wait a little longer.

During one of such lunch hours Daegan showed up and sat next to her, they ate and he participated in the idle chatter until he sneaked a few pink pearls to Eysin. "Got three, I hope they'll do."

"Thanks."

"Hey, Daegan," one of the other novices suddenly asks, making sure

everyone else at the table pays attention, too, “what’s this rumour we heard about the restructuring?”

“It’s a longer story, you’ll all hear it next week.”

“Come on, we pretty much have heard it all - we just wanna know what parts are true? Are Vinu and Theogenes leaving EESO for good?”

“Is Dux taking over? Will we be merged with RESO?”

“Alright, no. Theogenes, for now, is focusing on his expedition - he is not leaving us. Mr Laos will function as the acting head... And most Exos will lead smaller guilds from there on - how you guys will choose which you go might much depend on your specialities.”

“Why is this happening?”

“We’ve grown a thousand per cent - the way things used to be organized no longer works at this scale, that’s all. This is all a very normal process... In the end, the idea is to make it better for everyone who stays and has chosen to come here. Our goals are still the same, nothing changes there.”

“What’s wrong with it now?”

“You’ll see, soon - as soon as this training ends - you’ll go to your specialities - many of you to such niche ones you won’t have 5 friends to dine with - you’ll have many lonely meals. Which, in turn, might motivate you - without you knowing it - to get into something shitty.”

“What kind of crap this that?”

“EESO is getting too big to see itself as a family, that re-structuring aims to help, that’s all there is.”

“What about Dux August and RESO?”

“He just has a stake in the Temple Guild. The only place you might see RESO is at the Pits, this year.”

* * *

Some dives into the Titan’s memories were deeper than expected. She could watch around the room and try to make sense of the light and soundwaves as they were coming for minutes - and mistake it for a very strange music video. And when she remembered - she was there to look at what else it remembered...

She saw a woman named Imogen sitting next to one of the small doorways. A bottle in her hand. She had a lot of eyeliner smudged all over her face, and her face was otherwise pale. She'd been crying a crazy lot.

And Imogen is talking about something. Confessing. The bottle then changes hands and another person comes into her visual.

Leon looks tired, worried, lost...

Without understanding the dialogue, but sensing it - the conversation had been of a failed pregnancy. There would have been good reasons to abort, but Imogen had wanted the baby... But eventually, the pregnancy failed anyway. This had been the day she found out it was done.

She and Leon? Really?

* * *

For the next couple of weeks, when she had her time off, Eysin'd sometimes try to get a good look at Leon. What is he up to, what is he thinking, what is he doing? She got interested in who he stays in touch with on the island - who he dines with, so to say... And found out that mostly no one. Leon kept to himself.

* * *

Another memory revealed something more interesting about Imogen and that child. Leon had nothing to do with it - he had been there to listen to her and maybe to advise. It made more sense after Eysin found out Leon had been sent to EESO as an ambassador from RESO and the Rozenbaer family... And it came as a surprise to her that he was a sister to Kamile - the Vinu of Reso.

In another memory in that very garage, she saw Imogen again, and she was beaming, bursting with laughter, and headed into one of the rooms with some guy. There were many similar memories like it.

That guy was Arthur. The dead prince.

Arthur had been set to marry another lady - one of the Rozenbaer

sisters. But Arthur had eyes only for Imogen, ever since they met, ever since she joined EESO. Very many memories point out to the two spending their nights in that garage.

Then came tough times when many people died of an illness. So did the Rozenbaer bride - and Arthur took his newfound freedom and offered his life-long partnership to her, instead, "Will you marry me?"

And as she hears those words, something in the real world changes. Someone's here. She snaps out of the memories and looks around. It's quiet. It's cold. It's 3 AM. Her body is exhausted - and a match is coming up the next day - she will be terrible at it.

As she stands up to go to her cosy bunk for the night, it becoming the first time she stayed over at the garage, she noticed Daegan wasn't in - or at least his usual dim red light was off, but the door to the Orb Hall was open. And she heard a melodic sound coming from that direction.

She realizes it's some woman singing, so she continues to head towards the hall very quietly - not to startle her. She gets to the door and sees someone from behind - dark long hair, good figure, a high-grade Kaestus - she is facing one of the outer corners of the hall and just sings with a beautiful high-pitched voice... And strangely - the room learns the song - and as she continues, it starts adding harmonies. It goes on for half an hour, and Eysin enjoys the whole secret concert between the lady and the orb - then it stops, the lady leaves through the front door - and Eysin remembers to go to sleep.

But she just lay at her nest, eyes open in the dark. Singing in the hall, and the orb singing with the lady - there was something familiar about that. And something so moving. She couldn't fall asleep, so she went down there once again, jumped over the water to reach the Orb dry, called up her Kaestus, and placed her hand on it...

Se-pa-poi-sid, se-pa-poi-sid, tee-vad-tööd, tee-vad-tööd...

A memory! In a hall and a child, singing this... Repeating and repeating until the orb started singing it along, repeating, always a step behind, creating a beautiful cacophony.

It shared a memory!

And when she went back to bed and fell asleep, in her dream she realized it was more than just a memory of the orb. It was the orb saying, *I remember you.*

* * *

Roughly a week after the soldier training had ended, forgetting that the counted number of lessons with the Control teacher had concluded as well, she'd gone to the training grounds and found a casual sight. Nobody was training there, people were having hot drinks and watching the snowfall.

She stands still, looking at the training hall she, the teacher and Cassius would come there twice a week. There might be strange sweet smells in the air. And silence. Because they all were listening to each-others breathing. And the low-voiced, calming instructions of the teacher, every now and then.

“You have to stretch your leg further back, way further.”

Damn, I couldn't even say goodbye. She hoped to have seen the two again - but they weren't there. Just some other rookies and younger gladiators. “What's going on here?” She asked one of the girls sitting on a window, drinking cocoa.

“Ah, there will be an open-mic show starting in 20 minutes.”

She saw the poster on the wall. Indeed, some community event was about to start. She looked around - and no one was alone there - everyone had come with somebody - so, she decided, she won't enjoy it here.

Curious, she inspected another fresh flyer. “What's this?”

“Flyers started popping up all over the island, announcing that the boss of EESO - Theogenes - is about to set on an expedition to Siberia. To find out more about the “recently discovered” anomalous area thought to be an ancient remnant of a similar situation to what is going on now around the Black Sea,” said the cocoa drinker.

Malfunctioning Eesian technology and its peculiar consequences - and it gets strange enough even without the masses of people turning against the Eesians and starting a continent-wide worm hunt.

“You wouldn't be accepted,” a familiar voice hollers.

The pay had been the part that had caught her attention - she was short on money - and couldn't afford any personal projects due to it.

“Why would they not accept me?”

Raynar stops right next to her, “They are expecting more seasoned guys to join... And they place it up now, and show that it starts after the finals of the Pits - possibly to attract Pit attendees from outside Oeselia and Ceremony, too...”

“They won’t need good scripties?”

“I think they do - but listen, it’s rough.”

“I thought I would be given a chance to do anything on this island.”

“You took a chance - you’re a wittle gladiator now. I was going to go see the show. Care to join?”

She joins, they watch the fun but don’t partake.

* * *

“What do I do now that it’s over? Take the patrol job?” Eysin had felt a relief - the training was over and she could now focus on her new speciality - but there had not been any surprises for a while and it did not look like she could make her projects progress any faster. And Daegan wasn’t paying much - Eysin could hardly pay her part of the rent in Denea’s super comfy room.

“Short on money?” He guessed - he knew most guilds were paying pretty badly.

“Yeah, how do you get by anyway? You’re full-time in Imogen’s guild now - how much do they pay you?”

“Not more than they do in the other guilds. Only when we take on tasks... But I was thinking something different - if we do mediocly well for just a month and a half here - we can feed and clothe ourselves for the rest of the year easily.”

“What are you talking about? Some short job? Are you talking about something illegal?”

“Oh no, no. I’m talking about the Pits.” He points his finger on a wall - there’s the event poster for “The Pits” - read closely, it’s a tournament. “Pretty much the same games that we had in the Terratorium. There is another hall like that at Ceremony - big. Way bigger. And I am here to ask you to join my team.”

Eysin couldn’t believe it - why would he ask her? “Hey, hold on now,

you did play against me and saw how I kept failing... I only did well when you were there to help out.”

Raynar smiled, “Yes, that’s the idea. You are the support. You do a specialist thing - and we take care of the rest. You can track the artefacts with your machine, and you can decrypt some for us for extra points... But leave the guarding and fighting to the rest of us.”

“I’m sure you could ask someone who can carry their weight better. I mean what possible use can you have for my skills - it’s not like I can do anything that another scriptie couldn’t.”

“Hey, you want to earn the money or not?”

Eysin wanted to earn the money. Resources were thin and Daegan couldn’t support Eysin’s private curiosities - but said he allowed her to take on her projects in the garage - if she gets the funding for it somewhere else. While half an hour ago she had thought that forget about it - I’ll just fix the Titan and do something else on the side - her outlook now changed. The prizes on the tournament poster made her think about the Swarm again. Eysin had a hunch that she could figure out something with the swarm, and the hunch was that it had something to do with the blue marbles. And blue marbles cost a lot of money. She wanted blue marbles AND to afford to pay her rent and eat something nice, for change...

“Well, okay. What’s next?”

“I was thinking about getting the team together and all going to Ceremony. We’ll stay a night in town and go see the arena, talk with the team, and see where everyone is at... We can use the Torium here for training, just need to book it right...”

Sounds too good. “I don’t imagine I can just walk in a tournament, risk nothing, and get paid like that...”

“Yes, the entry will cost some money - and I know you don’t have much on you. But I’m willing to help out and borrow - we are sure to make all the money back and earn some extra, too. I mean, it’s like I said - even if we do averagely well, we’ll get paid enough so we can live out the rest of the year without any worries... We get paid per game, with a minimal fee if we pass, extra points for any decrypted artefact... We’ll get paid for being entertainers... But if we do extra well, we get prize money, too!”

“I don’t think I want to take a loan like that... I mean, I have no idea if I want to get into that.”

“That’s why you should come with us to Ceremony. I’ll have the guys tell how it was for them, the last time... And you, as I said, I can help you out a bit. I pay your fee for now... You’re just going to pay me back from the earnings, later.”

“You could ask someone in a better position to take that risk, I don’t feel like I can get into that.”

“Listen, sister, there are no risks - as I said, we’ll make it back easy if we stay in at least 5 games. That’s just 3 weekends.”

“Well, what if I don’t show up one day because I fall ill or break a leg or something?”

“That would be a damn shame!” Raynar laughs at it, maybe sincerely.

“Maybe I’ll chicken out... Or maybe you’ll find I’m not that fun a teammate to have... Then I’ll owe you and we’ll never set it right again. I’d just not like to get into that.”

“Just come with me, tomorrow, and decide after that.”

* * *

A few hours after Eysin had gone to sleep, Denea showed up. Denea had been outside, and she was a little drunk. Unexpected, and waking Eysin up with it, she snuggled up to her. She seemed to be crying. Sniffled and sighed, and finally whispered, “Can you tell Daegan that I miss him?”

Ah man, what am I getting into?

CHAPTER FIVE:

The Keep

WITH THE training she went through in the last few months at the gladiator club - her suit had started to grow and evolve. Rare nuances, as if the suit itself was starting to show some personality - nowhere near close to the elaborate scars and branches that you can see on some of the Exos or older students - but it's still something. The whole progress with the suit has turned into a pretty spring flower, now peeking out from the snow, at the first sight of the sun.

A harsh winter had passed, the last snow had melted, days grew longer and lighter, and there were many fine days with fine sunshine and a few with light rain. The smell was incredible.

But like that peeking spring bell, or other early flowers, now struggling to get out from the mud - so had become her zerk. A growth, similar to the manner of plants and mushrooms. She sits, up early morning, awake in her room, and studies it. Looks at it closely and try to make sense - *am I wearing a plant? What makes mine grow in this particular manner?*

Some of the other gladiators had developed curious kinds of elbow-, knee- and shoulder pads - they look exactly like large tree fungi! Yes, you could even see the frills at the underside, where the cap is loose from the skin, giving the gladiator the freedom to move - and offering a bit of buffer when something hits or hits against something.

These kinds of mushroom pads were hard as hell - gladiators who prefer to brawl in close situations made good use of it - knee kicks,

punches, elbow slams! And all this made sense – these mushroom-shaped modules grew as if a reaction to the preferred activities of the zerk.

Eysin's growth was largely tied to the use of her Kaestus – the floral-looking growth sprouts around her head were an indication of a lot of calculating going on. The result of having to solve puzzles at the training games – but it may also have to do something with studying the Titan and sneaking around the insides of other Eesian technological pieces.

So, to do everything she can to get ahead, she accepted Exo's proposal to study under him, and Eysin studied her growth on her own and in her way. She did figure that she could technically manipulate how the zerk grows. If she were to, say, learn karate, too – she'd have less stuff growing on her head, but more around her joints and limbs. But she knew it – and the suit must have known it, too – she was not the karate kind of girl anyway.

A fascinating, powerful technology. For what other purpose than war? And does anybody even know what we're preparing for? Surely this all can be here merely to defend ourselves from the Nords – or push back the raiders from the Black Sea – if anything, this technology was the whole reason these regions got so hostile.

Stuck in lands plagued with shortages, unfertile grounds, but swarming with worms... Not fit for a human anymore – not because the worms came – but because deranged humans sucked that part of land dry in all the ways they shouldn't have. The worms went there as it was good enough for them, and no one bothered them there, much...

An infestation, they call it... The worms might as well have highways and clubs under the earth – living parallel to us – occasionally bringing us gifts – the marbles... And occasionally they build these temples – and these temples are kind to us, and in a good size to us, and offer us the means to get prepared...

Get prepared against something we have no way of guessing. An intelligence, or a life form – in a form that is completely incomprehensible to us – or maybe it will be someone with four limbs – arms and legs, eyes and ears – and a nose and a mouth – just like us.

But the worms seem to see such a creature dangerous enough to see fit to arm us against it. So, are the worms simply using us – because they are fleeing that creature, perhaps their creator – or are they here to help us – help us survive the incident... An incident they may have been responsible for igniting, perhaps. They either are

trying to fix up a mess or prevent one from happening - but what fool would bring such powerful tools to humans to prevent bad shit from happening?

I'm sure they know us well, better than we know ourselves... So, they must be here because it is a last resort. Will we be under-prepared? Or is all this random - and absolutely nothing is coming...

Or could this be the attack? I have this zerk - it could potentially be intelligent with its agenda. And the collective that is EESO, and other Eesian organs on the planet - was just their clever way of taking over... They take over... And are heavily armed... They must know there is something else out there that all this should be effective against.

And based on the terrifying possibilities with these weapons, what they can do - do we need all this just to overcome someone... Careless enough to take us out? And would I ever want to meet such a terrible force... I will get killed. And possibly in an embarrassing way.

Maybe I should go back to the City and find a job programming children's games.

But instead, she stays and is even a little excited to attend a competition. And this probably isn't just a tournament. *We're practising.*

* * *

There was no shortage of drama on Oeselia. Even before the tournament began, Eysin started paying more attention to the connections that have formed in the place. Who goes out with who - who are friends, who are rivals... And could there be any group where she is missing from and would happily welcome her?

That was something she had longed for - human interaction - with mutual interest.

As for those people who she already had met - to Eysin's mind - Daegan had lost it. He was handsome, undoubtedly intelligent, a magnificent fighter - but in one other regard - a very weird dude. He was a little awkward when talking to her - and even more awkward when talking about these ideas about Eesian technology... And their conversations did remain only a few and equally awkward.

Daegan had gotten her all the signatures that she needed for the Titan blueprint building. After their initial talk - and him going all strange

about the life form that is Eesian, not a technology - it had been quite a relief for Eysin to find out that he doesn't hang around the garage at all, and that she won't be challenged by his insane theory, again. It had made her feel thoroughly uncomfortable, and she couldn't say why - something is off here.

Having been in the journalist domain for a while, and having hung out with all sorts of people who enjoy seeking patterns and busting conspiratorial activities - wacky theories weren't anything that would surprise her. Whether the suit is alive as much as her - and has a mind like her - she figured after a bit of contemplation - wasn't the part that had made her feel uncomfortable.

Was it in the way he spoke about it? Or the timing? There certainly has been some kind of a shift in his vibes...

Another morning - Daegan passes her in the garage as if ignoring her presence - not even a "good morning" - it got Eysin curious about where he was going, and what is he doing during the day. And eventually, she followed and saw that he spent quite some time hanging out with some other people from the Gladiator guilds, at a gladiator club bar that Eysin, to her surprise, was welcome to enter, too.

She was once again invited in by The Keep, the bartender, at the door of the bar that was a Gladiator guild club. He announced for her a happy hour - hoping he could offer something to Eysin that would make her a more frequent visitor. Besides, now she had enough credit to experiment around a bit, but eventually, it would come from the cost of ever achieving a number on the account with what she could afford to buy another blue marble. *I haven't forgotten about you, swarm.*

Eysin had already decided that she'll join the tournament with Raynar - so, she reasoned, she has the budget to have a bit of fun with this bar and what it has to offer - and for a couple of weekends she indeed did go there on her own. Sat and The Keep would serve her all kinds of different cocktails. She was trying to determine which is the best - trying to find a cocktail that she would order a second time.

She liked quite a few, and the bartender, of course, always said that this is his favourite, too.

Going to the town like that, even without interacting with any of them directly, she saw the social currents. She noticed who hung with

who, who went where, and what sorts of problems or privileges people seemed to have. For many, she made up her names and elaborate stories. And always kept asking herself - *do I find this person promising enough to make me stand up and go introduce myself to them? Just like that?*

Eysin saw many people she would have loved to go introduce herself to - but she didn't know how to. *How can I step up out of the blue?* A leap, a free fall - I don't know if I can do something like that. So, outside the preparation training for the Pits and trying to see what can be done with the Titan - she kept to herself and often found herself in the company of someone that was not her friend - the bartender. The Keep.

"I think I have a crush on my anonymous teacher." She'd confess to him. "Why do they mask themselves like that? I'm so curious... Yet, too afraid to ask."

"I heard it being explained like this," the keep says, "those who teach masked - are teaching what they learned from their teachers. Those who teach without - are teaching what they have learned on their own. The masked teachers are representing much more than just themselves - that's the face of EESO."

"Did anyone ever count on the mystery effects when they thought it up? This is killing me..."

"I'm sure they are well aware of the other effects."

"You are an EXO, you could tell me who he is."

The Keep was a little surprised that she knew about his level. But he just slowly shook his head - not because he wasn't allowed to tell, but simply because he wouldn't know - it could be anyone out of a hundred seasoned guys on the level.

Daegan often met some people in town - some of them may have been from Gladiators, but many of them didn't even seem to have zerks on them. Sometimes Denea was hanging with them. Daegan and Denea had had a romantic issue between them, and after Eysin had forwarded Denea's drunken message to Daegan, their things may have picked up again.

A part of Eysin did wonder what all this was about, but she had shut all her way into their ordeals when right after relaying the message to Daegan she added, "I don't care about any of this, so I would like you

to not use me to send a message back to her. And I won't be taking any more of her messages to you, either. Sort it out on your own."

She drinks a slightly bitter, orange drink - one of the cocktails she will not have a second of, and confessed this to the bartender, "It annoyed me... It annoyed me because I have never had a situation like that - and it feels that because I haven't - I have missed out on something amazing."

"Do you find emotional problems between people amazing?"

"Emotional problems are as good as emotional solutions or whatever - IF," she stresses, "the alternative is an emotional nothing-at-all. I'd rather have uncomfortable conversations than no conversations at all." And Eysin thought she was pretty good at it. She missed having a person besides her - a friend, a partner - and the friction and the fun that usually comes along with it. "I miss working out the friction to get some more fun."

"I'm afraid I can't offer you any friction," the bartender sighs.

"I recall some 10 drinks that I did not like. And I was honest about it. And you accepted it like a man. We're having plenty of friction sorted out..." But she knew better - a bartender is not someone you get intimate for real with. She knew she was nothing special to the bartender - there must have been 17 other young zerkers with Pit loan money whom he had such degustation sessions with. And even though the bartender was the only person Eysin felt she could talk to about whatever she felt like talking about - this little feature didn't make him all so special either.

* * *

Over the two weeks before the pits and some during - Denea and Daegan both started seeming weirder and weirder to her - it looked like they were hanging out together a lot, but not doing anything... At least not on the surface of things. They were up to something, and with each passing day, Eysin started wondering more about it.

Why would I go there with another person every single day just to sit... And talk about whatever? Are they that happy to just hang out or talk all the time, or are they doing something else?

* * *

The training sessions were a good change of pace and atmosphere. Raynar's team had booked the Terratorium, and they practised some serious, very difficult confrontations against another Eesian team that was going to be participating in the Pits, too.

"Here's what the tournament is about," the leader of the other team - Cassius - took it upon himself to make sure everyone knows what the tournament is about and what their best path forward is. Keeping the EESO flag up high was in the interest of any participating team. "It is very much like our training sessions were here. But we will be five teams of five people - each has a collector to keep safe - in our case the scripties. The goal is to gather and possibly decrypt the artefacts - as many as possible..."

"No," an unexpected comment from an unexpected direction, a man speaks, "your goal is to keep the scriptie safe," someone had been listening in on them. The man appears from behind a terratorium block, walks, and stops between the two teams, next to Cassius. "Yes, you pass to the next rounds based on the count of artefact points - but if you fail to take care of your scriptie - you have zero points no matter what. Make sure you don't fall out of the game even before they lay a hand on their first artefacts..."

"Hi..." Cassius looks at that man with a smile, he seems pleased by his presence.

The man has long hair and a rather tired look. He is smoking some sweet-smelling herbs. Could be one of the Exos, enjoying a day off, hanging around the blocks. "It gets trickier around 20 minutes..." He takes another whiff of his herbs, thinks about phrasing, and continues, "If you have accumulated a lot of rings, your scriptie will become a very delicious target to the other teams - all they need to do is take out her - you will lose all your points - and the lucky enemy has all the artefacts you found..."

Cassius nodded, the delight in his eyes showed that he was excited to have this man talk instead of him. Must have been someone he admired.

"Once we bullied a RESO team so bad..." The man stretches, locks

his hands behind his neck, and seems to think back, “We took away all their rings, but let their scriptie go back to her team. Guess what? They very quickly started gathering and finding more of the rings...” He looks at the people looking at him, listening to the story, and sees that none of them understood what it means, “we waited a bit and took their rings again.”

Everybody starts laughing. The man chuckles for a bit, too, “Yeah, laugh all you like. Just remember - if you let down your scriptie even once - it’s over for you. And some ass will exploit that if you don’t understand that your team doesn’t have what it takes to get through. An enemy will take advantage of that...”

Everyone gets serious again. The man takes the last puff of smoke, looks all the gladiators in their eyes, commanders their attention for another short moment, and before heading towards the exit where there’s a bin for his blunt, he waves his hand, “Alright, see you around, lads!” He walks away as calmly as he had appeared.

“Who was that?”

“One of the best brawlers around. Another Exo, don’t know his name.”

* * *

Something else Eysin trusted to tell to The Keep - she thought of Raynar as handsome, and he had a nice charm about him - he was a good fighter and confident about it, too. Her initial impressions during the first preparation matches - it was nice to work with him within a team - he seemed very patient and supportive, and occasionally even barked at the other teammates when they started showing some kind of impatience with her.

He often liked to paraphrase the man who had talked to them on the first day, “The scriptie cannot carry us, we must carry her, basically, so instead of whining about her, adjust!” While it was nice, it also seemed a little cheesy - it made him look like a wise-ass boy.

She had thought for a moment that he would stand up for her like this was kinda sweet. So, Eysin wondered what that could mean. He wasn’t white-knighting to impress her, neither could it have anything

to do with her decency - it was something else.

"It seems to me that Raynar wants nothing else but to partake in that tournament and make some good money - but what is a real big mystery to me - why was I the only one he wanted to ask?"

"Maybe he likes you?" The bartender suggested, but of course, just to flatter his visitor.

"Doubt it. Maybe he senses I won't protest too much when he wants to replace me for some other scriptie for the finals."

"Why would he do that?" The bartender looked puzzled - and for that time - genuinely so.

"There's nothing special about me, Keep. I'm new here, and that may leave the impression that I don't know how things work. I AM," she stresses, "new here - but I'm not new, period. But... I don't belong to a circle - so when he wrongs me... No one will be there to hold it against him in any way - because I'm not connected to anyone here... I'm like a disposable wipe..."

"Are you talking about his worth or yourself, lady..."

That's right. She didn't think too much of herself. She believed that there was something good and promising about herself - especially if she was to compare her health and strength to how she was half a year ago - but her faith and physical progress did little to show any satisfactory results in real life. "Something tells me I wasn't invited there to potentially become one of their group. I was invited there because... Temporarily - I will not cause any fuss in there otherwise... Complete group."

"Do you know some person you think he would want to replace you with?"

"Haven't seen her, yet." *But I feel that there is someone. A rival.*

* * *

"Listen, I'm going to take that loan from someone else, Ray."

"Whatever you like. Who will give it to you?"

The Keep had suggested to Eysin once he had heard she doesn't feel Raynar is very trustworthy, "heard I could convince Bratka to give me

a loan with no interest and cover a large part of the entry cost... If I chip in my rings to the game.”

“You have rings?” Raynar stretched out his arms as if to say - why didn’t you start there?

“Yes, I have 3.” Eysin takes from her bag three thin silver-white rings. Raynar takes a closer look, just trying to convince himself that yes, these are the real deal. And her idea seems promising. He always preferred to not have anyone owe him, so, for a little bit - that was a relief.

But what are those arm rings or bracelets, anyway? In this part of the world, they are called Artifacts. Some of them are blueprints, some of them are objects or sensitive ancient records - which absolutely no one on the planet can read or comprehend - most of them are difficult to crack. The bartender had seen Eysin carry them on her arm and knew what they were - and as she was telling him how the thought of taking a loan from Raynar made her uncomfortable, he laid out that idea about going to Bratka.

Bratka. “Go meet Bratka - he is the host of the event. He is the Vinu Laos for the Brotherhood. As warm and friendly as our own man. Three bracelets should cover you a minimum of three rounds - but there will be 10 events held altogether... If you fall out in the first week - you’ll get a good refund for the potential 4 other rounds that you missed. Hells, you could make a lot of money just by selling them and not participating at all...”

Raynar agreed to take her to Bratka. And they crossed the channel with a rented Amphicar, went to his large, dark house on Ceremony, and met him at his office room - large, dark, filled with old books - he was sitting behind the desk like a don. Dressed well, a little serious - but visibly in a very good mood. He smiled broadly when they entered. Before them, there had been two other people who went to him to get a loan for another scriptie. And possibly - after them, there would be people with the same idea on their minds.

“I can offer three bracelets to the game.”

“Have you tried cracking them?” The Bratka-don asks.

“Cracking? No... I have no idea what’s on them.”

“Where did you get them from? Have you or someone you know participated before?”

“I got it from home, I have no information about this.”

Bratka rubs his stubble and seems to think. “You don’t seem to know enough about those things, so, I am afraid that after a while you will regret that you gave them to me – and the only way for you to get them back is if you somehow manage to collect them during the game – and you keep them, giving up the points you could gather with them... But if you fall out sooner and you will never have a chance to see what’s on them, again – you will accuse me of cheating you out of your treasure.”

“I have no attachment to them. I can sign something to commit to it in the future – or anyone in this room – have it be known – I am offering these of my free will – will you grant me the funds to enter and a loan to cover what the rings don’t?”

Bratka, somewhat hesitant, agreed to it, and they worked out some more details about who gets paid when and under what met conditions. The deals seemed good enough – even if they’d fall out the first round – she’d get so much money for simply having introduced her own three bracelets to the game that she’ll be paying her rent, drinking more cocktails, and eating good food for a long while.

* * *

The first evening of the tournament came unexpectedly fast. The whole team moved from Oesel to Ceremony on a boat, they spent a lot of their idle time together that Friday afternoon. They figured out where they were to be housed over the weekends – and they made sure they were going to be comfortable, because the plan was to watch all the other matches, too.

Friday at five every participant had to gather at the Pits area and the draws were called. A colourful bunch of over a hundred contestants, clustered, sticking to their groups, eyeballing each other, gauging, assessing their strengths, and weaknesses, laughing at posh looks and embarrassing flexes, or hugging old friends.

Some of the teams looked way bigger than five people. They had some technical support with them, and fans and cheerleaders, girlfriends, and occasionally – even a few kids. “Support off the territory is allowed – we

will hopefully get a few Exos to give us tips, too. I have asked Imogen to give us the feedback after our first,” Raynar says.

Raynar’s name was called and he had to go in front of the big board where all the team progressions would be marked out, and he had to put his hand into the basket and draw a number. That number would tell which bracket they would be placed in: 4

Raynar’s name was added to the board - to the very end of the list. “We’re up next weekend, Saturday,” he says when he returns to the team. “This means - we can enjoy THIS weekend at Ceremony without stressing too much! I think this is perfect!”

“I would have preferred to get over with it today, to be honest,” one other teammate sighs.

* * *

“How do we get to the stadium, do we have to buy a ticket to see the show?” Eysin wondered, now kinda short on her budget, afraid of having to pay for anything else for a short while now.

“No, we have free access, and we can observe it from a little cosier spot. The green room. It won’t start until 10, though, so there’s nothing much to do around here until then.”

“What are you going to do until then?”

“I promised to meet someone, I’ll go do it today. See you back here later, okay?”

“Whatever you say, boss,” she sighs. She was a little disappointed - she didn’t know what to do around Ceremony all on her own, and the other team members had already taken off, too.

“You can go back to the hotel if you like. Or go see the Pit market, they started setting it up already in the morning - to see where they sell the stuff you were hoping to get from here.”

* * *

Eysin had a couple of hours to kill. First, she walked around the stadium backend, saw where the lockers were, saw the green room, and saw some other contestants - and when they looked at her, they assumed she was lost (not a contestant) until they saw the participation ribbon.

She felt a little nervous, and now a little hungry, too, so she found one of those machines you put coins in, select a product, and get a pack of dried bacon and a cup of cocoa. Ah, a vending machine. She sat near one and enjoyed the taste of the bacon, and the slightly minty taste of the cocoa... But all that fun didn't last for so long, so she got up, looked at the time, and decided she'll kill more time by going to see the market.

The marketplace was filled with tents and what looked to be thousands of people. It was set at a point Eysin had previously seen as a very large, sandy, and dry parking lot (with hardly any cars ever parking in it). Now it was filled, lit up, lively and loud! There was live music, circus games, showcases of strange gimmicky Revalian technologies... A whole booth playing a theatric show - a story about someone's conspiratorial theory about what's going on in America...

Because Eysin had the right kind of ribbon on her hand - she could enter most of these places without having to buy any tickets. One place even offered her a free cider - "You're a competitor. Competitors drink here for free!"

And then she finally found the merchant stands. The ones she was looking for. A long narrow street, shelves, and tables covered in little things - one of such shops was even selling some of the cracked artefacts from last year - this is one other place mine could end up at.

The arm rings that contained something that resembled music - were considered trash. Alien music - it simply didn't touch anyone - or they couldn't stand listening to it without getting bored and disconnected. There also were some quite classical-looking weapons - something that resembled humans' swords and maces, even slingshots and bows - and these kinds of artefacts were super expensive. Even more expensive than the one thing she was hoping to find. So, she's trying to see if there is anything about their outward appearance which would hint at its value

before decrypting it - but they all looked the same.

You can only know what's in it when you break the lock and have a Kaestus to read it.

The Blue Marble. There they lay, in the middle of the table, manned by a thin old bearded guy. She snuck just close enough to see the price tags and made some quick calculations - how much can she buy when they drop out after the next Saturday... How much, after 2 matches, after 3... And potentially how many if she were to even get through the finals? She had seen nothing yet that would discourage her from entertaining such an outcome.

But having paid attention to the people earlier - when the posh people were posing - even though their flexing was rather ridiculous - these groups looked strong - and they looked like they belonged together. When she started to compare how her team looked with the rest - she forgot about the finals rather quickly.

* * *

During the first game when she found her team's designated spot in the green room, she saw another familiar face - the young-ish man she had seen back in Reval, that was hanging around with Vinu. A Brotherhood member - Bartel. And Bartel noticed her, too - and he walked over to her, seeing she was at her team's spot, still alone, and they made some small talk.

Bartel was surprised Eysin had joined the Pits and impressed by how much she had changed, outwardly. When Raynar and other members arrived, one by one, Bartel politely introduced himself to all of them and made polite small-talk to each.

The boys were cheering, "Denea, Denea," but her team was one of the first ones to be taken out.

"In this round, you gotta keep your eyes on Jelena. She's a treasure hunter from Novigrad, crazy good - and she is sure to make it to the finals," he tips to the team and parts by saying that it was a pleasure to meet them all, and hopefully they'll meet again - inside and outside the tournament.

Of the five teams, Jelena's is indeed one that stands out the most - they found one RESO team to bully the treasure out from, and they smacked out two other teams - Denea's and the one in the round by the Brotherhood. The one other they left alone was a rather weak team - they were slow enough to collect to not make themselves seem like a threat - but finding out that Stephen's team from Black Rain was the first-year students - they were impressive, all things considered, too.

"They are not going to be a problem in the next round, either," Jelena would later confess.

Raynar and the team went to the after-party when the match was over. They got a chance to talk to Jelena.

Raynar is curious about her impressions of the competition, and that's where she explained that "But there is no way for me to know what the other matches will be like."

"You're a treasure hunter - you hunt the rings?" Time for Eysin's question. That woman looked amazing to her. She even thought the idea to herself, would treasure hunting be something that interests me?

"Today I hunt the rings. I have a client who wants one particular ring - and it appeared in the list of the finals this year."

"Oh, there was a list?"

"Yes, the collectables are part of what pulls people from outside your cute islands to join these matches. Now, my client participated in her many years ago, but she is no longer able to, so she had me come for it. She sponsored my entry, I earn good money and get some fun out of it, too. Great deal, I say."

"What's the ring she's after?"

"One that she put in the game here many years ago. A family thing. She now regrets having given it up and wants it back."

Eysin mumbles, "I put mine in the game, too..."

Jelena laughs, "You're going to want it back. Not knowing what was on them - if it was anything related to your heritage - will most likely pain you like it pains my customer. Best get them back while you still can, good luck."

* * *

The first afterparty of the event had always been known as the wildest and hardest. And then everyone learned from the headaches and hangers to take it easier on the rest of the event evenings. Most participants sweetly slept through the Saturday and only got up later - to see what was moving on the marketplace or start getting ready to participate in or watch the next match.

The match was exciting even without being in it - from the side-lines - the close calls, the jumps, the steals, the finds, the chases, the pressure, the strange techniques, and weapons people were using to try and give themselves advantages - the minor injuries, and the spectacle of Eesian nurses softly running around the field, tending to anyone who may have gotten a dangerous hit, to make sure no one dies on that stage.

* * *

It's Tuesday. It used to have been a control training evening, but since those no longer happened, and the mystery teacher was nowhere to be found, Eysin visits the Keep, again.

"So, how does it feel after looking at those matches," the bartender asked.

"There were more flex and fashion than actual skill - I think we can hold up pretty well."

"What about your arm rings?"

"One of them was added to the finals list... So, I guess I have to make it to the finals, somehow."

CHAPTER SIX:

The Pits

“WHEN’S THE last time you saw Daegan?” A tall, blonde woman was looking around the Titan, seeming to spot all the places that were now fixed – as if she saw the difference without her visor on. She looks cold but tries to smile politely. Eysin recognizes her – it’s Imogen.

“I haven’t seen him for a couple of weeks now.”

“What about Denea?”

She has been home a lot more now. And she has changed a bit, again. She’s become cleaner and seems to try to keep sober. They haven’t talked in a while, either, Eysin kept going back to sleep very late in the night – and sometimes she now even slept in the garage.

“She’s been at the dorms... Is he in trouble?”

“Hmm... Let him know we’ve been looking when he’s around, okay?”

* * *

That special two-evening weekend – the air was different, Ceremony was full of people – they had all come to see the matches, make their bets, eat their street food, maybe meet someone new, or someone old, and have a good time on their bit of time off.

Walking towards the entrance to the arena felt like going on stage – the tension was very high – and everyone wanted to make a nice entrance.

Over the other entrances, where there were teams who already had experience doing this, they were hyped - ready to jump in and start looking, running, dodging, escaping, attacking...

The corridor towards the entrance Raynar's team was in had a slightly different mood, though. Eysin was new to this - and she was a little scared. The lightless walls and ceiling became bigger than they were, and anxiety snuck in - she started hearing sounds and seeing things she normally wouldn't pay any attention to. And above all these sounds, these lights in pressure, as seen through the zerks' visor - a red light was pinging her. Badum, badum, badum - her heartbeat. They are waiting.

Still, a few minutes until the horn blows and the doors open.

Everyone loved it having the crowds root for their team, gambling on them, wanting to take pictures of them - because the higher the bets - the more people got bought into the games - the bigger the reward. The crowd was lively, and everyone who wasn't participating that day where there, watching them all from the green room.

The guys start talking about yesterday's match, and Eysin starts replaying it in her head. Things had gotten pretty messy very early on - two teams decided they will hunt down the scribes before they manage to dig up anything - so, she imagined a similar tactic unleashing as soon as she steps on the eesian soil - she won't even have a moment to take in the kind of map they have built for this time - because of the possibility of their team getting targeted right from the start - another team dashing at them quickly.

Horn. Doors open - and like water, without any effort on their part - they already run in, and keep running - they look around and assess the environment - some messed up cliff grounds at the edge, and a multi-level forest at the centre.

"Stay low... We head to the woods, someone's going to think last night was funny, bound to happen again."

And indeed - two teams were trying to pull the same tactic from last night - another team three doors down started coming at them and everyone in between, and then another team that came from the opposite end.

Hearing shouts and hustle from the approximate directions of other

teams, in both directions - Raynar's team all stopped for a few seconds to register what could be happening - and without even needing to give out the order - they started rushing quickly towards the Leveled Forest.

And as they got closer to the forest, 2 people from the pursuing teams started tailing them. "Find a place to hide, Eysin, we will take them on ourselves - they are trying to wear you out!"

As if only a few seconds later - the team got scattered in the first level of the southmost forest.

At that brief change of pace, Raynar already managed to think it was over, but the team managed to shake off the pursuers - the chase had taken so long that the pursuer teams told them to stop chasing rabbits.

"They must have found a patch, they're gone..." She hears one of her teammates comment on the comms in her skull.

"Eysin, you okay?" Eysin recognizes Raynar.

"I'm okay..."

"Are you hiding?"

"Not really - I think I'm seeing something. Do I go?"

"Go, but slow - it's unlikely someone is in this patch - it's levelled... Unless they already got up there, there's no way they could climb to this section... Only from where we came."

Separated from the rest, cluelessly walking through an alien-looking forest, Eysin then suddenly stopped, to listen.

Everything had stopped moving - no noise, no movement. No one was after her anymore, and she had gotten away. She finds a booth.

"A booth is here..." She comments.

"Yeah, should be about right... That's where you take the rings when you get them."

"We don't want to keep it for decrypting?" Another member asks.

"Let's first see if we can even find anything..." Eysin answers annoyed. "Are you close yet?"

"We come slow, need to make sure no one is sneaking up on this part. You stay alert, just in case... If you can keep looking - find the artefacts, there ought to be some around."

Changing the view and looking around, she now saw there were plenty of spots where the artefacts faintly gave off their signals.

But she followed the one that shone most familiarly to her - and it

was quite close, too. The familiarity made her guess it must have been one of her bracelets.

She found a hot location - soft ground, and patted her foot on it, "do they bury them here?"

"Yeah, they can bury or place it on a tree or whatever. They can be anywhere."

She sunk her hand into the ground and pulled it out - but the bracelet was connected to a thin, unbreakable chain - the artefact was stuck in a math trap that she had to solve. Getting lost in the puzzle for a moment, she surprised herself with how fast she got it open. Right after unlocking it she sensed someone around, and duck into the bushes to make sure she was still safe.

She lost guard in the bush, though - trying to quickly decode the bracelet to understand what it is - and then needed to proceed to find another artefact - and pretend she never found the first one. Whatever is on it - it came from my family - I should never have put it here. She started solving the encryption, then took another look around to see if she sees any other familiar signatures - and then... BING! It unlocks - her first bracelet is a blueprint.

A pole? It's a weapon, a pole... But, incomplete... She is a little disappointed, what's the other half? A mop? Great.

She kept it anyway - to study it further on her own time - to see if there might be anything on it relating to why her mother would have had it. "Was it one of you guys near me?"

"Depends where you are."

"Yeah I think it was you," she responded to the teammate. "I can see at least a dozen of those glowing around this area. I'll start cracking them off the ground."

When she had cleared the area, and everyone had regrouped, they were ready to catch up with what else was going on, on the field.

"I think we have enough, and this place is silent, we should stay safe and hold out until the end."

"It's not safe to stay here - if there was no one but us here so far - someone successful on the field is sure to come to look here, too. And best if he doesn't find us here..." The member looked in a north direction, "There was a staircase... We can move up, to the next level. Get some more."

“Someone might be waiting for us there... Ready to take it all away from us.” Eysin complained.

“Well, I don’t think 12 artefacts are going to do...”

Raynar suggests, “We could hand them in at that booth and keep going - this way they can’t take them away from us. And we can get more... If they didn’t dig it all up already.”

“Some of these seem very promising, though - I tried cracking them, but they are tense, complicated... I can do it if you give me more time... And a cosy place to sit at...”

Raynar thinks, “Okay, so, keep the ones you want to crack and turn in the ones you don’t.”

They did that and headed towards the next level - a steep climb of stairs. The temperature and humidity change. As do the sounds... Signature movements... “Someone is here...” Eysin comms.

And as soon as they took another step on the new level, they got under attack by another team - 3 defenders got knocked over, another one knocked back down from the stairs, and one of them started pursuing Eysin - Eysin deliberately dropped her rings, hoping he would stop chasing her and stop to pick them up - and as he did so, indeed - Raynar rushed him over, they fought - and the enemy escaped.

Eysin returns to where she dropped the rings - and found that two were missing.

“Fuck, can anyone check the time? How many do we need?”

With the deposits, the time was shortened from 40 minutes to 30 - which was never reliable information on what the score could be.

The level they were at was now just at their mercy - but they could only find 4 more rings.

For the last 10 minutes, every team must have been rotating - the land was empty - no more flickering flames giving signals, come dig me up, come pluck me down. The only way to get more rings at this stage was to raid another party - and Raynar didn’t feel like he could handle it. Besides, his best fighter had a limp from the fall.

Indeed, later that match was remembered as “the carousel” - one team moving faster than all the others, taking out the remaining teams’ artefacts one by one - Raynar simply got lucky that this hell of the team never caught up to them - the time ran out before it could happen.

* * *

Eysin spent the whole next day hanging in the cosy hotel room, relaxing in the bath or on the couch while trying to decrypt some of the rings they kept, hoping to cash it in for extra points.

“Koi just turned in Black Rain rings... 768 points...”

“Fuck, we’re nowhere close to that!” Raynar is keeping this chat off Eysin - no need to stress her at this moment. “I hope we get something really good.”

“Anyone else counted yet?”

“No... But I found out Dorpa is 0, Reso had only 5 artefacts and they are trying to decrypt them all. Koi raided them all...”

“Well, we have 60 points for sure... And what, scriptie has 8 on her?”

“Which means... The minimum we can get is 2 points from each... 16... So, we have 76 for sure.”

“How did Kalev do?”

“No information... They were pretty aggressive, too... They were the fuckers who pinched us!”

Meanwhile, Eysin has managed to decrypt 2 so far, and they seem quite valuable in her eyes - but she has no idea how many points they would bring. The deadline to turn them in is Sunday at midnight... And she also gets curious - how are the others doing?

“I need a break, am I allowed to take a break?” She comms Raynar. Of course, he allows it and she uses it to go take a walk outside, stretch her leg, get something to eat, and casually walk into Bartel, and they walk one lap of the town together.

“How is it looking for your brother person?” She asks him.

“Kalev?” Bartel indeed understands - the scores are the most interesting topic for her. “They haven’t turned anything in yet, but what they kept from Koi... And stole from you - they are holding 12 pieces. No idea what’s on them. They are very protective about it.”

“Damn... There’s no way RESO or Dorpa can get ahead of us, but 12...”

“Well, RESO can get lucky and get a jackpot from their 5... What have you got?”

Eysin squints her eyes and smiles, “Not sure if I should say!”

“It was hilarious how you threw him off with the bait, though!”

“I was praying hard that Raynar would come after him!”

“The crowd loved it! They love funny.”

Eysin now thinks back to that moment - and it may have been a funny sight to see, indeed. She wasn't running off like an elegant lady or a swift assassin, as she had imagined herself in the role - she was more like a drunk monkey dressed in a clown suit, confused, running about, making noises that resembled yodling, jumping like a hallucinating gazelle and “where”, made it rain rings. “Oh man, wish I knew how to handle it with class.”

“No, it was great! It was sincere!” He chuckles at it. “No need for class and sass. You do you. Genuine - just seems to work here.”

They finish the walk and part ways with small niceties, Eysin returns to the house they are staying at and sees the boys getting a little nervous.

“Are we getting anything?” One of them asks impatiently.

“I've decrypted 2... 6 more to go... But they are tricky... No one is easier than the other...”

“Just focus on trying even one more - just pick one and go at it - we won't bother you again before 11. Then we go turn in whatever we have.”

And the boys kept their word, Eysin managed to crack that one open in that time, but 5 remained a mystery. They meet at the front of the house and head towards the Pits area together, going to the Cauldron - where many other people have gathered, too.

The Cauldron looked straight out like from a sorcerer's story - but it wasn't black. It was platinum, like most Eesian things. It was big - bigger than the orb, smaller than the Titan. And it had a small opening - small enough to put a fist into it, and drop the rings...

Next to the cauldron stood an EESO scriptie - possibly one of the senior ones, wearing a very nice robe with a large hood. Next to her, there is a large blackboard with yesterday's participants on one side, and Friday's on the other.

The score on the blackboard announces:

Koi Jr - 768 - complete.

Damien - 56 - complete.

Kalev - 40 - *counting.

Dorpa - 0 - complete.

Raynar - 60 - *counting.

Kalev's and Raynar's teams were the only ones who hadn't turned all they got, in yet. "He has 12 on him... 24 points if he got nothing counted..."

"But he probably did... Just go turn them all in, we've done our best."

As Eysin starts walking towards the cauldron - a scriptie from the Brotherhood team makes it there, first. Eysin stops to see how it's done - and more importantly - what will the score end up being.

The scriptie steps up, the senior scriptie nods to him and he puts his left hand into the cauldron. Clonk... Clonk... Clonk... The rings fall.

"12 rings..." The senior announces, "Thank you, that's 78 points - 10 encrypted yielding 20, one decrypted yielding 24, another decrypted yielding 34. Your score," the senior scriptie hovers towards the blackboard and changes Kalev's score, and before she wipes off the old number, she turns to him and asks, "will this be all? Or have you more rings to turn in?"

"No, this was all."

"In this case, you stand at... 138."

The score looks good for them - their team and some of their supporters get excited about it. But none of them dared to pop the champagne just yet.

"Raynar's team around?" The senior now shout, "We're about to close up and assume you wanted to keep the rings instead, seeing you can't win!" She taunts!

Eysin steps up and thinks about it... "I don't have to turn them all in?"

"You don't have to turn any of them in. You guys have earned it." A smile flinches from under her hood.

"Okay, let's see how this turns out." Eysin puts her hand in the cauldron and drops... Clonk, clonk... And takes her hand out again.

The senior walks over to read the score... She chuckles. "I'll be damned... 48... 31..."

Eysin steps down from the cauldron's stand, and asks, a little demonstratively, "Can I turn in the rest at the next round?"

The elder chuckles, and walks over to the board, "No, you cannot - you want to keep them, keep them." She turns around and announces the scores, "of the two decrypted rings, Raynar yields - 48 from one, 31 from the other. Placing them one point ahead of the current second."

Raynar and the guys jump to the sky, throwing fists and shouting oh yeah!

Kalev and his friends play the close-win gestures but don't frown about it a lot. "The paycheck is still good," he says when he walks over to Raynar and hands him the champagne bottle he had been waiting to pop. "Good luck to you guys in the next round," he wishes.

* * *

"Keep, the semi-finals are coming and some of my team members don't feel very confident in my ability to keep up."

"But you got them through the first round. You did. Even when you snuck one bracelet to the side... Can you tell what was on it, by the way?"

"A stick... Maybe a part of a weapon. I haven't had so much time to try it out yet. I'll spend some time with it tomorrow... What else do you think I can do to not let the team down?"

"A stimulant might help."

"The yellow paint?"

The barkeep shrugs, "Many use it, it's allowed."

"So why isn't everyone using it?"

"It's a show of pride, you know. I don't need it. I can do without it. But no one will mind if anyone does want to use them. It boosts you in some ways... But will take from some other department... For some people it doesn't work out at all - it simply makes them feel drunk... It helps to zone into control mode - you'll not wear yourself out so quickly."

"I don't think I have a problem with control..."

"Yes, you have a stress problem."

"They let me keep the other 6 rings, you know... It's kinda exciting. I didn't manage to crack any open yet... But I wonder - what can be on there? Of course, they did ask to share the buck when I get something expensive..."

"I'm sure these will help you learn a lot."

* * *

Still, half an hour until the match starts, Eysin is sitting by herself in a resting room, and a familiar face shows up. The blond woman who was looking for Daegan, “Hey,” she says over the door. “Where are the guys?”

“Here in 10 minutes or so. Said they’ll be a little late.”

“Right... They invited me to come and give you some feedback on your performance last Saturday...”

“Why aren’t you participating?”

“We made a deal among the Exos - we don’t participate. Neither do any seniors from Brotherhood or Black Rain... You lot would never get a chance at winning if you went up against...” She smiles and then reminds herself to not get carried away, “Mostly we stopped going because some of us were bored to support our end - especially the Black Rain guys - so, the runs became very... Unfair. Some Exos would be happy to participate, I guess...”

“Any news about Daegan?”

“Listen, I have an idea for you... People out there - they like you. But your suit is forgettable... People did like you last week and remember you - you could be a real darling here - at least in our part of the crowd - play it more out, make yourself memorable - they’ll cheer harder.”

“I’m feeling more like I’m getting in the way here...”

“People don’t care about your skill level when they watch this shit. The most “successful” contenders are the most boring ones - they win matches, but fail the people’s hearts - they are not interesting or theatrical - they don’t let themselves be seen as if what they do is in any way difficult... And that’s boring. I get you must be here to earn the buck - so have more people place money on you. Faster, cleaner matches bring in less money.”

“So, you’re here to teach us branding?”

“No, the branding lesson is just for you,” she winks, “the boys have their techniques messed up and they start chasing idiots, like true idiots.”

Shortly, the boys appear. Imogen talks to them for a bit and then leaves. And after she’s gone, one of the guys comes over to Eysin and

shows her the yellow paste she's soon to have on her silver skin.

"You said we can use some other colours, too?"

"Just cosmetically - the effect won't change. I have some paints that you can use to cover it after you have applied the yellow. What do you have in mind? It's not viewed well if you try to hide that you're using stimulants, though - if I were you, I wouldn't cover it. Where do you want me to put it?"

"Can I apply it myself? Just see that I am not putting too much."

She puts some of the yellow paint on the chest and sides, and while the teammate takes a minute to paint something on himself, she takes his cosmetic red colour and wipes the topside of her mask all red. "We'll get more bets on us if we're more memorable, right?" She says this as if she's asking that question from the teammate, then comments, "I'm sure at least some of them would remember Jolie Rouge."

- "I thought you left Jolie Rouge because you were against exploiting that name?"

"What?" Eysin turns around and wonders how he would know about Jolie Rouge.

"What?" He asks, puzzled.

"What did you just say?" She repeats.

"I haven't said anything." Looks like the guy is done applying his paint, stands up, sees that Eysin is done with her art, too, and puts it back together.

"Ohh..." She felt the effect of the paint coming on and realized just now where that voice had come from. "It's... I can hear my thoughts so loud, wow."

"Oh, then you've had enough... You're a little sensitive I guess... But I promise, if you find something to focus on - it'll stop. I was the same the first time. It'll be alright."

Now, instead of being nervous, Eysin couldn't wait to see what happens when they go outside - how the land is shaped, where the first obvious Artifacts will be, where people will clash with other teams - where they need to be extra defensive not to get wiped out right from the start...

* * *

Back at that good old door. “We gotta watch out for Koi’s guys... No use becoming the 2nd best here!” Raynar repeats, sort of awkwardly. He’s nervous.

“You have any hope of beating them?”

“Well, it’s either today or loser-rounds - we aim for the finals, right?”

The doors open and then flow into the stadium as if they were water, flowing down a drain.

Right into a forest... “It’s levelled,” the scout looks ahead, noticing how the terrain must be dropping a couple of hundred meters below their current level, near the centre. “What’s the plan, boss.”

“We kiss the wall, move counter-clock, away from Rain pals.”

That match is different on a whole other level - and they are now going against a little more skilled and organized teams.

Bartel was around - and putting pressure on Koi - he managed to help Raynar get away without losing any rings to them. “Don’t think of him as a friend - he’s protecting us to make sure Koi can’t get ahead of them too much... We’re just fodder at this stage. It’s either going to be Bartel and Koi or Bartel or Hela - we can only dream.”

And they came across that other Black Rain team - led by a tall woman named Hela - and this was the one instance where Eysin’s stimulant use saved her - she had enough energy to keep evading them, and captured a few rings on the way.

Surprisingly, nearing the end of the match - Hela handed over all her rings to Koi - and Koi turned them all in right away - cutting the match short enough to end it there.

Without even going to see the scores - everybody knew - the finalists were Bartel and Koi.

Still, hopeful at the next day’s score counting, the senior scribe advised Eysin to keep all the rings, as they have no chance to pass any scores - unless she had managed to unlock something very rare, worth 200 points or more.

She had not - the stimulants had made her thinking difficult. She was useless in solving the puzzles, she was useless in thinking about

the encryptions...

But the boys had almost as if expected this would happen - and they were not in any way in a bad mood over this.

"No-no, don't worry, we all expected that this would happen. There will be second wind rounds the next week - all loser teams get re-matched. Then there will be a semi again, and another team will win access to the final round."

Jelena already was set to participate in the finals - their playmate Cassius had reached the top already as well. Bartel had also made it, as well as Koi Jr.

My budget is at a point where I can afford one full-blue marble.

* * *

Eysin took a detour and went to the market - to look for the vendor that would have any of those blue marbles for sale. The vendor did, and she could buy one - the rest of the money she kept for rent and food. *I'll get more after the next round...*

She returns to the bar the guys had gone to. And their opposing team was in there as well, and they were all getting along fine - no hard feelings. And finally, the handsome Koi Jr, a man Eysin had already met some months ago, approaches her and buys her a drink.

"Almost didn't recognize you," he raises a glass to her. "You having fun here?"

"Right now, I am!"

"I'll be on Osel sometime next week, we could hang some if that's fine with you?"

They exchange contacts and return to their teams to continue the celebrations. The team's extremely good mood infects her again and joins them in the celebration by drinking so much absinthe that... Well, she may never have drunk so much absinthe before.

And that led to another strange situation in the morning. A hotel room that she did not recognize, uncomfortably naked, blatantly hungover... Next to a deeply asleep Raynar... Who was not equally naked, but who knows what that is supposed to mean anyway?

She'd never experienced that one before. She had never drunk so much that she'd forget. *Absinthe - never again.* A super quiet mission ahead - she got up, got dressed, made sure she still had all her things and escaped the room to go to her own.

She washed and tried to remember the evening... But the hangover had her so sick that she couldn't even think. *How can a drink be so bad?* And then she remembers - it's never the drink, it's the quantity.

The plan for the end of the week was for Raynar to drive her back to Oeselia, so she still had her chance to ask if he had any better take on what had occurred on that night.

And once she got in the car and saw that none of the other guys wasn't ready to go with them, yet, she brought it up, "I have gaps..."

"What do you mean?"

"I must have gotten too drunk, I don't remember..."

"Are you wondering what business you had in my room..."

"...Yeah."

He seemed to recall to himself and he chuckled. "You didn't drink much. You didn't seem drunk at all... I think it's because you used the stim and then drank that stuff... They don't mix well - it might come back to you when you feel better."

"I mean I need to ask it straight if I want to know, right, did we fuck?"

He chuckles, "We did not!"

"Then why was I..."

He shrugs like it wasn't a big deal, "We made out a bit, that's all, what about it..."

"Was that my idea?"

"Uuh... I would say it was mutual effort..."

She remembered later - indeed they had made out, and that's about it - but it had been fun. And when she remembered and thought back about it a few times, she started enjoying it more. How an insignificant, maybe even an accidental physical brush can start cascading - from a handshake, a hug, or an arm-wrestling - into a dance that lasts an hour or more - and then into privacy - without much effort at all.

Recovering from the hangover, she wondered if she liked Raynar enough to make things ever head in that general direction again... Thinking about it made her skin only hungrier.

Recovering, a slow evening, dreaming, she had a hope Raynar had not asked her to join the team because she can be replaced easily should the need arise - she entertained the thought that he indeed might just like her.

* * *

Tuesday. When she steps into her room back at the EESO dorms, she sees Denea is home, and someone is there with her. Denea is having a conversation with another woman, and they don't seem to pay any attention to Eysin, at all. Soon they both stand up and get out - so they wouldn't disturb her if Eysin wants to get some sleep.

When leaving, Eysin recognizes the woman, but nobody says a word - she was Asya - the one who taught her the healing tricks.

* * *

On Thursday, Eysin returns to the temple to keep working on the Titan - but now, also she can start testing out some things with the blue marble. Try to call down one drone - she had read somewhere it has been done before. Just to study it closer.

And when she entered the garage - the lights were fixed and all on, and someone was making noise in the back. A girl grunting and throwing a tool that would be equivalent to an Eesian crowbar.

Eysin carefully called out before she could see her.

And another woman's voice called bad. "No, no. No Daegans here." The mystery woman steps out to show herself to Eysin, "Oh, hi, you must be Eysin." She comes over and they shake hands, "I'm Sylrissa."

"Well, you must be wondering - who is Sylrissa and what is she doing here, huh? I'm officially your guildmate... I got left with some lame tasks to do, so I won't get in your way... But... If you want - I know a bit of this encrypting stuff... And I've been playing around with the Titans for a bit - if you need a second brain - let me know."

"Yeah, okay..."

“So, what’s your plan for today?” Sylrissa asks, injecting a cheerful mood.

“Well, I need to get to one of the few remaining Titans here on Osel... Do you drive?”

“I-mighty-do! Which ones do you need to go to?”

She shows her the map. “Give me another 20 minutes so I can finish up the door - and we can go, okay?”

Eysin looked at her, returning to the door - about her height, great energy and she smelled nice. Wonderful hair - long and dark, with a fashionable purple stripe in it. Her lips were also painted purple... And her beady brown eyes were heavily stained with Silver.

She’s been around for a while.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

Second Wind

On Thursday, she had gone and done the round with Sylrissa. Was nice of Sylrissa to drive. Driving was something Eysin couldn't do. It helped get the job done faster - she had the chance to create some kinds of copies from two more titans, and she worked on trying to make something out of them until late in the evening.

When she went back to the dorms, Denea had Asha over for a chat, again. Eysin goes to her bed and tries to fall asleep - and even though they are talking quietly, she hears it... They seem very happy and amused and talk about old times, some people, giggle, sometimes excitedly raise their voices, and then quickly lower them, again.

The chatter is beautiful and gentle. Yet, it stings her. Stings her so - she doesn't have such fantastic moments, and thinking about it made her bitter.

Eysin gets up and shows up at her bedroom doorway, watching them.

"Sorry, are we disturbing you?" Denea asks, as quietly as she was speaking.

"Do you want me to get out of the way so she can move in?" Eysin asks, with a dead look in her eyes.

"Where the hell is this coming from?" Denea took it as an accusation. "You sure the yellow shit hasn't made you a little weird in the head?"

She was looking at them, Denea looked irritated, and Asya was a little worried. Eysin turns around and walks back to her corner, "I'm moving out."

She's up the whole night, having rubbed some more yellow on herself to power through - packing her things, moving, and settling into that small spare room in the temple. An old mattress for a bed, a large chest for clothes, some shelves, a rug... When the first sun rays hit the roof of the temple - she was done packing and crashed into the bed.

* * *

Wednesday - Sylrissa possibly came around 10 AM and started shifting things around in the main room, and at one point came knocking behind Eysin's tiny room curtain, "Oh sorry, you were sleeping here tonight? I wasn't in yesterday - could have helped you! Do you want me to make some good tea? A friend makes these..."

"Yeah, I thought something smelled nice."

Around noon Imogen is around, but she goes straight to Sylrissa and they disappear for a while - go on a long walk in the more unoccupied hallways of the temple.

"Listen, how tuned in did you manage to get here before he left?"

"I didn't see Daegan at all... I got a memo from upstairs that I am assigned here for the next 2 years, so that's that."

"So, you have no idea what he could be up to? Or what about the rookie, would she know anything?"

"I've been watching her, not leaving the islands, staying where she needs to stay... And moved out from Denea's too..."

"Really? That's curious - I know Denea was hanging out with Daegan a lot - but she's been avoiding me... I didn't think she'd get involved with the pirates - her background considered, but who the fuck knows these days?"

"You think Daegan went off with the pirates?"

"I guess he had a price, after all."

"Aren't you a little quick to judge? Maybe he found something... And is doing this for a good reason?"

"Daegan is your garden variety sociopath - see, when Arthur died, his hopes for high positions, once we scramble - poof..."

"Was that why you got close to Arthur?"

Imogen has to restrain herself quickly to not slap her for having said this. “Keep on high alert... Soon enough the news will come that Daegan is now considered a deserter... He’s betrayed us and probably collaborates to sell something off from us.”

“Like what?”

“The word on the coastlines goes that the Nords are interested in buying an orb.”

They return to the garage and Imogen has a brief exchange with Eysin, too - about the Titan.

“If all goes well, and I get lucky - I will find the remaining missing pieces from the Titans on Ceremony. But that’s... I don’t see that happening this week... Neither is the next one. So, maybe in two weeks you come over and give it a go?”

“You really can fix it?” Imogen went close to it and touches the giant with her glove. “Wow, it... We should be able to move it! We could...” She jumps in and heavily moves the limbs... “Ohh, it won’t stand, but maybe we can move it just enough...”

The body of the Titan shifts and rotates for a bit until a loud but pleasant sound of a click pops. She placed the Titan safely in its pod - now the Orb can help fix it, too.

* * *

Imogen wasn’t the only visitor to the garage that day. A few hours later Koi Jr showed up, had a small chat with Sylrissa and then he turned to Eysin. “Come, I’ll buy you some cocoa or something.”

They were walking around the temple area, drinking hot beverages, and talking about this and that until they walked into a small training session. Eysin’s mystery teacher was there, guiding two other suited Exos. The room had a strong flower smell.

“Come, join in,” he calmly said to them between movements.

And they did join in. And after half an hour of feeling out their internal spinning centres, the teacher instructed the students to play a game. He picked a piece of chalk from a shelf and drew a one-meter diameter circle on the floor. “Don’t be moved from here,” he put Koi

at the spot. He called one of the Exos over and told him the goal was to get Koi out of the circle.

No one could stay in the circle - not one of the 4. Eysin was the last to try and fell out, the Exo who was matched against her didn't even have to do a lot of work for that. And when it was Eysin's turn to push Koi out of the circle - she saw that it wasn't much work too. "It's a stupid game. It's impossible to stay in the ring."

The teacher calmly steps into the ring and calmly says, "Try me."

Three quick times in a row, the teacher threw Eysin out of the ring - and he didn't even shift in his feet. "I see, you're still using your muscles and bones. And I'm not - like this none of you won't move me from here - not even if you come all 4."

They may have tried it and failed at it, but no one would ever want to speak of it.

"I've lost my edge," Koi admitted when thrown out for the last time. "Or maybe it's just this room, pressing on me." He had found it easier to use the spinning centres when he knew there was a lot of room around. Indoors he just felt stunted.

"But you didn't feel that way just when we were doing the movements," the teacher points out. But the teacher also knew what had recently befallen that man - that Koi Jr had suffered considerable losses in family and fortune, due to what was happening back in Reval. He had known the man, and he'd seen he's changed.

It had gotten late and the teacher called it a day.

"Wait here, I'll be right back," Koi had excused himself for a few minutes, and that allowed Eysin to ask something from the teacher.

"So, uh," but she couldn't get anything out.

"How are you?" He asks, "You didn't sleep last night..."

"Creepy..."

"I can tell just by looking at your face. But I did hear you moved to the temple now. Being close to the orb might be interesting for you."

"Right."

"Is this guy bothering you?" He refers to Koi.

"No, not really, we were just hanging."

The teacher seems to shake his head in disbelief. "You take care of yourself, okay..." He walks over to one of the shelves, picks up a small

metal box, picks from it a small bag of herbs and hands it to Eysin, “You make this into a tea, it will help you sleep.”

But indeed, when Eysin and Koi were moving back towards the garage, Koi was curious to hear that he was welcome to stay over. And the question had made Eysin anxious, “It’s not exactly a very private place.”

“We could go any other place, then.”

Eysin sighs, “Look, I like you, and I remember you as a hero. You saved my life. You just didn’t turn up at a good time.”

“Oh, you’re seeing someone?”

“Not exactly, but sure, there is something.” She had an interest in getting closer to Raynar. She’d been thinking about it ever since they left Ceremony.

And Koi took it well and calmly. “Very well, in this case, it’s a good night. Good luck with the Second Wind, and thanks for the training session.”

“Well, it wasn’t MY training session...”

“It was your foot in the door,” he winks, they hug, and he walks off.

* * *

That night wasn’t over for her yet. She made it back to the garage and got reminded they had made a crucial change to the Titan’s conditions. New checks, new tests, new copies were in order - she forgets about the concept of time and studies and works on the giant deep into the night - until it was early morning, Friday. *Damn, and I didn’t even get to check my swarm project...* She falls, crashes, and sleeps.

* * *

And wakes in shock - she has not had nearly enough hours to sleep to be able to be any good use at the match later that night! Oh, right, we’re matched on Saturday... But she was interested in going to Ceremony anyway. Maybe Friday would be a good night to give another look at

Raynar, from a more personal angle.

Suddenly, she has all the energy to doll herself up - she decides, she'll take a nap after lunchtime when they have made it to Ceremony, then they'll watch the evening match, have an easy Friday night - and who knows what could happen!

Every remaining Eesian in the tournament had been invited for a small celebratory morning right there in the temple. And because the tide was going to be low that day - some Eesians had organized a march of some sort - they'll walk over the channel. Eysin was sure Raynar would show up as well, and they could maybe go from there to Ceremony, together.

It's about time the meeting starts - she has finished packing her things, and as she steps out - so does Sylrissa. "Good morning," she greets, "you go with the march, too?"

"Yup, that's the plan..."

"Oh, if you like, we can stick together."

Eysin had forgotten her rings - she wanted to take some with her in case she wanted to solve them before the next match. "I'll catch up, go ahead."

"I'm going to go find my boyfriend, when you see me, come to us - we can go together."

When she gets out of the garage - she gets a great view and sees a nice mass of people that have gathered in the Orb Hall. There's a lot of chatter going on - and a strong smell of herbs and coffee. She's trying to see from up above if she can detect where Sylrissa has gone - once she spots her purple strain of hair - she knows which direction to start going in.

She pushes through a thick mass of people to get closer to the exit door, and she saw Sylrissa must have stopped right behind a fruit cart... She walks up to it, around the corner - sees Sylrissa. She sees Sylrissa throwing herself into Raynar's arms - they kiss and are happy to see each other again.

Eysin stops in her steps and is about to take a few steps back, whispers "awkward" as she bumps into someone behind her who thought the flow was headed in the opposite direction. The bump is smooth and when Eysin turns, she sees a guy holding two cups, she looks proud about not having spilt any.

And he whispers, “Double-awkward... Are we moving?”
Did he just wink?

“Not so sure this is a good spot anymore.” Eysin wants to walk back but there’s nowhere to go, the mass is set and ready to get moving. The overall atmosphere changes as things in the first rows of the mass have started to move out.

“I’ll make it worth your while,” the tea-guy hands her a cup, “enjoy it, but don’t lose the cup, I’ll want it back...” The man then walks to the front of the cart, and with some other man - is that... The Keep? They pick up the holding sticks for the fruit cart - and start walking.

Cassius appears out of nowhere, takes a whiff of Eysin’s tea, and they keep walking, “you know, they lost a bet!” He says proudly. “That’s why it ain’t the rookies carrying the cart this time - I may have saved you, Eysin!” He jokes.

“Well, what was the bet?”

“Tea Sensei here believed my party wouldn’t pass! Jarre The Cocktail Boss made a bet that Raynar’s - would! Hah, ha, suckers!”

Jarre... That’s his name huh? “Hey, we might still win...”

“Looks like your nightmare is also coming true, huh?” Jarre - the man Eysin so far had only known as The Keep - nods towards a few rows ahead of them - referring to Sylrissa and Raynar.

“I don’t even know what to make of that... I’ve not been kicked from Saturday’s match - as far as I know!” But she felt afraid - that she was going to get replaced with Sylrissa. She was a stronger player in this. And that it was Sylrissa! She had sensed there had been someone, but that it was Sylrissa, which made her feel extremely sorry for herself.

Tea Sensei said something to Jarre and then looked at Eysin and Cassius. Eysin looked back at him with a crooked eyebrow - and recognized that it was the same man from before - the Exo who was smoking back when they had their first meeting with the teams. The long-haired herb guy. “Isn’t that a nice opportunity for Gina, then,” Tea Guy says to Cassius, “You said she can’t get out from Reval for the finals... Take Eysin - she’ll do good.”

“Nah, I’m confident Raynar will make it to the finals. And maybe he isn’t that big of a dickhead to throw someone out mid-season... I mean he has to know that’s a bad look.”

“Not a bad look if he manages to make it so that I will want to leave...” She mumbles.

“Does he have any reasons to do that?” He asks quietly.

“I guess... It wouldn’t be anything personal.”

When the top of the caravan reached the sea, they made a small stop. Fruits were passed along to those who wanted to eat - and more tea, and coffee. “Hold on to the cups and bring them back to the card when you’re done, don’t throw them all away.”

The weather was great - warm, calm, clear - energetic! A while after she had finished her tea, she thought the colours had become more vivid - and the people around them started showing more nuance - their faces were all so different from each other - their hair, their bodies - but their mood was all the same. Everybody became good-looking. The strange circle she had been in - at one point or another, she had seen all of them drinking that delicious tea... With a slight effect.

“There was something in this, yeah?”

Tea Sensei smiles, “Just some herbs, nothing you should worry about. How are you feeling?”

“Great!” She stretches. The man takes the empty cup from her.

“You want more?”

“I shouldn’t! Maybe later!”

Eysin leans on the empty cart - the number of hours slept was letting herself on. Tea Sensei leans on it as well and starts rolling some kind of a joint. After they have completed a bit of a small talk about the weather, he comments, “You’ve got yellow in your eyes.”

She takes out a mirror and takes a closer look. Not sure what to make of it.

“Take it easy with the yellow, it can start messing with your head...”

“And these herbs don’t?”

“Never in this way. Usually - for people who have had the yellow turn out in their eyes this way - their trance trips, and sometimes stimulants, too - well, they get very... Creative. You are very sensitive towards psychedelic effects... Now, it’s not a bad thing if you’re a pacifist clergy or a village shaman... But I’m afraid it can potentially fuck you up on a field... You should try to do without. It’ll make you ill... And it won’t do no good to lose you to a stimulant problem.”

Jarre the Keep joins their small circle. “The highs go higher, the lows go lower... How’s Missy been?”

It was almost strange to talk to him without having an alcoholic drink at hand. “Missy has reached some of the lower lows, I guess,” she sighs. “I moved out...”

“At the temple now?”

“For now...”

“Why? So much work?”

“If felt in the way at Denea’s... And now... falling out with Raynar seems inevitable, too.”

“Did something happen?” Something Jarre didn’t hear about, yet?

“No... Never mind,” even though she thought she may have told this to the Keep, to Jarre, she wasn’t going to say to these strangers that it was inevitable because she had spent a night with him and had different expectations for the future.

Tea Sensei offers her a smoke, saying it will make the yellow recede in her eyes - and indeed, when she looked into the mirror again after a whiff - the yellow had disappeared altogether.

“If you want to get into those nautics... Well, you can’t figure it out on your own. If you want to use stims, you need something to counter-balance... If you want to do Crisis in your brain - you need a sober friend by your side... Best if you don’t get into it without a master who knows what they are doing.”

“I don’t see you offering an apprenticeship, so, you must be saying I should stop.”

“Yes, you should stop.”

* * *

They crossed the canal and made it to the town.

“Which hotel are you staying at?”

“Oaks... We’re all headed in the same direction.”

She slept through the day and got up for the evening. When she went out, Jarre and Tea Sensei were at the lobby, ready to go, and invited her to hang with them - and they waited for a bit more. Another woman

showed up - a bronze-haired woman they called Agnes.

And she also seemed familiar, somehow. Imogen showed up, and she brought along with her Cassius. Imogen took the Tea Guy to the side and they talked about some private things throughout the whole way to the arena. Meanwhile, Agnes, seeming a little drunk, was trying to pick a fight with Jarre, and Cassius was just quiet and relaxed, keeping in step with Eysin.

As they look at the Friday game unfold, Cassius does remind her this, "if your situation becomes any more clear before the final - and you want to join - come to me. Otherwise, I'll turn to someone else... But the call is yours. I mean I hope you figure out the stuff with your team and all..."

"Oh, well, thanks."

She couldn't concentrate on what was going on in the match at all, though. That whole evening, from the corner of her eye, seeing the Tea Sensei - she could not think of much else but getting to drink that delicious tea, again.

* * *

Saturday evening. Stakes are higher this time. Before the match, she's still putting on some yellow and it helps her wake up.

The beginning of the match was forgettable, and about halfway through - as it is the last chance for her - at Eysin's line of sight is another of her lost arm rings. At such a point during the match, she freezes, and panics. She becomes very aggressive and surprises everyone by dashing right through an enemy team. Anything it took to get ahead of everyone else to get that particular ring.

Eysin retrieves her second bracelet and keeps it, she runs off and after a minute, the rest of her team catches up, too. They settle at a spot not bothered by other teams and dig up some more.

Raynar asks about the particular ring she went for, and she refuses to decode it to convince Raynar that it's not worth turning in. "Look, we get many other rings here, and I will decode some of them while we wait for the time to run low - then we will turn them in - there's

plenty good looking here to get us ahead phenomenally.

Raynar gets upset that she wouldn't sell that one for points, he keeps arguing with her while she is trying to decode - attracting other teams to try to come to steal them from, and not letting Eysin do her work. Escaping from one such attracted conflict, they do quite impressively - and Eysin manages to defend herself with the help of her new stick weapon from last time.

They scatter and get together again, and now the whole team is angry, one siding with Raynar, two with Eysin, guys shouting at each other who should shut up until they attract another team to their new location, fail to pick up more than 3 rings from there and have to leave it to them - the other team was just better organized.

"Never mind, we have enough rings, let's keep moving and I will decode as many as I can."

They move around as Eysin manages to decode quite a handful of them. They even get surprised at how fast the decoding happens that night - Eysin considers it luck - and some of the rings are quite much worth, too - weapons, old vehicle blueprints...

Just a minute of a match remains once they have turned in and got their many points from the rings - she's still holding a bunch of rings, and that makes one other team go after them. Just a minute of the sprint - the team scattered again - and Eysin couldn't help but once again enter her unofficial trance state so she could keep it up.

* * *

Eysin was still a little terrified of her non-trance trance-like situation after the match. She wants to stay away from Raynar because he seemed very explosive at the time - and her theory was that the intent was to make her quit. She goes to the green room and sits to see the show they play after the match - some people dancing and singing, playing with fire.

There are a dozen people there, some of the same people from the fruit cart, earlier - and who sees her, smiles at her.

"You saw a ghost?" Tea Sensei sits near her, holding more cups.

"I didn't fall into a trance. Yet, I lost control over myself all the same way."

"Fear can make us strangers to ourselves. Did you know - some people, going to battle - die out of fear, without any other wounds? Fear is a very strange emotion... A very confusing one. The trance experience in our suit seems to exist exactly for the purpose to avoid having us confused - it keeps us focused and puts the part of our brain that fears - to sleep." He offers her tea - a different kind, this time. It relaxes her.

"Looking from up here, though, it looks like your team did well - you're passing, for sure."

"It wasn't just the fear of battle... I know what's coming... He is picking fights with me - so I'd leave on my own accord."

"Are you sure?"

"I've had that experience before... He wants me to leave, but he won't say it to me. So, he makes my existence in that band an unbearable enough experience to eject myself... This is not a new thing for me... I just hoped I'd never had to experience this cowardly teenage shit again."

"What was the first time?"

"I can think of two times. My first boyfriend! He became so obnoxious - only to make me leave... Because he couldn't dump me by himself! And the other occasion was way later - I was involved in a journalist group..."

"You mean - you led a journalist group," he smiles and lights up one of his sweet blunts.

"You know about that, huh..."

"Jolie Rouge brought some exciting developments to Reval. I was around, at the time, curious to see if the houses would get affected... Would have indicated who is or isn't in cahoots with those scoundrels... You left them, then?"

"Eh, Erika wanted to make it into her own thing, and started playing politics with me."

"And indeed, now it has become a political thing."

"I haven't looked," she smiles. "Was a hell of a time while it lasted, though. Hot blood, mania - taking down terrible people for crimes we've never seen them commit... Based on a word of another journalist or a hacker - you know... Sooner or later it was going to happen - someone will tell us, such a thing happened, and here is the proof, and this

person needs to be exposed for it - and after we're done - we'll find out none of it was true - but the damage was already done, and no way on earth to restore it... I didn't want things to get there... And they wanted to start outsourcing information..."

"Must have been difficult - all your work, taken from you..."

"The first thing I thought when starting that thing - it needs to have an expiration date. Learning from history. I was prepared for it to end from the day it started."

"Clever," he mumbles, thinking about it.

"The harder part was finding work after... All my connections were now cut off. I guess they never really were my friends - and that realization hurt me. And being on my own in Reval... That city can start getting to you when you have got no one to share it with, you know... Of all the places, though, RESO guild took me in. Life got a little nicer."

"How are you doing here? Not getting overwhelmed with all this? How do you do that, Security must be very different from what you did in RESO..."

"Did you ever have to re-invent yourself?"

He shrugs. Maybe he has, maybe he hasn't - he either hasn't or doesn't want to talk about it. "I know what you mean."

"If you do it enough times, you figure one thing out... You get a better sense of how much new information you can process at once... So, it has been gradual, getting here... First the island - a very different place from the city. Formed some connections with people - as little as I can manage... Or get a chance with! Then - I try something a little familiar, get used to the other stuff around me... And then I got invited to security... It was rough! I have never been good with physical challenges... But the maestros were patient and helpful... And kind - like you! Offering me tea, all that!"

He pours her some more.

"Where do you get this stuff?"

"I make it."

She widens her eyes, completely surprised, "You make it?"

"Yeah, you know, I like to mix herbs... Taste a bit of this and that... Add a bit of effect."

"Are you around, much?" She tried to remember if she had seen him

around before, other than the day back in Terratorium, and now.

He thinks about it a little bit, “Well, mostly I’m in Reval... Rozenbaers are paying us for some services. Guard duty, mostly. Then, there’s the expedition coming, and looks like I can’t avoid it.”

“Going for a full year?”

“Hoping to come back after a half.”

Raynar comes in and looks like he has been looking for her, “Eysin, we need to talk.”

Eysin looks at the Tea Sensei and bottoms up her drink, the Tea Sensei shrugs, they wave goodbye, and off she goes.

* * *

On their way back to the hotel area, Eysin and Raynar argue about the number of armrings they are supposed to turn in, and he is mad that she is “slacking off” and not working on decrypting them. Accusing her of not doing enough to ensure the team gets to the next round, and that she’s been keeping too many rings for herself - which was not a problem so far...

“We don’t need any more points. I decrypted enough during the match and we turned them in. We’re way ahead of the others by score.”

He falls quiet, but not strategically. He needs to think.

Eysin helps him out, getting the ball rolling, “are you trying to piss me off?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Why did you suddenly become SO fucked up against me?”

“I’m not fucked up, you’re imagining things.”

“No, something is going on after your girlfriend returns. Is she aware of what you were up to, last weekend?”

“You better keep it to yourself, nothing happened,” his eyes almost as if lit on fire, saying that.

“What if I don’t? Are you aware she and I sleep next door to each other? I can go and tell her now.”

“You’re not going to tell her shit you crazy bitch.”

“You can’t stop me...”

He is trying to look less irritated and his angry expression turns into a ridiculing smile, “Why do you get so excited over sharing a bed with someone? Has your dry season been so long? Nothing happened. And who gives a shit about this - you make sure the score is above others.”

Eysin takes off all but one of the rings she still had - hands them to the guy, eight of them. “You know what? You go cash them in or do whatever you like with them, I don’t give a shit.”

He throws up his arms, not wanting to take them, looking worried, all of a sudden, “Well, you gotta decode them first!”

“No, Raynar, I’m not going to decode shit. Your entry to the next round is pretty much guaranteed anyway, but I’m leaving the team. As I understand, you already have a replacement. Now, fuck you and goodbye.” She starts walking back towards the Pits area, but she’s still stopped for a few more seconds.

“Hey, hold on now...” He grabs her by her shoulder, a little violently, even.

“Do you need it on paper or what?” She pushes him back and shouts at him. “Just leave me the fuck alone!” And she keeps walking... She doesn’t even know where, but she just didn’t want to keep walking in the same direction with him.

And when she walks, from the other direction, the Tea Sensei walks towards her, and he has company - there’s Agnes, holding on to him. She seems drunk and in a... Slutty mood. And Tea Sensei forms a message in his mouth, read his lips, you can see, he’s saying help me!

Eysin goes over and hangs onto his other arm, “Hey, you guys going back to Osel tonight by chance? I’d just like to get back home as quickly as possible...”

“Sure, I can drive,” the man says.

“Noo, we were going to...”

“Agnes, this is the plan - I make sure you get back to the hotel safely, and you will go sleep it off, and I’ll be taking Eysin home. You will wake up in the morning, talk to Jarre and see that you do everything you can to make things right again, is that clear?”

“If you’re not up to it,” Agnes steps away from him, “I’m gonna go find someone else!”

The man snatches her from her hood before she manages to walk off

and locks her back into holding onto his arm. "You could get in trouble, let's just get you to sleep, okay?"

They make it to the hotel Agnes is staying at, she goes in alone, and they wait around for a while to make sure she doesn't come back outside.

"How'd it go with Raynar?" He asks, starting a new smoke.

"Fuck Raynar. I quit."

"Good for you."

"Everyone's so damn hostile, how the fuck does one get on in this life?" She shouts. "Do I have to start playing the same fucking game with them? How the fuck do I stop being an expendable piece of shit?"

"Hey hey hey," shushed the Tea Sensei.

She caught her breath, closed her eyes and let everything fall into silence for a short moment. But she still looked upset. These feelings weren't going to just disappear. She was infuriated.

"You know what?" The Tea Sensei touches her shoulder with a fist, trying to get her back into motion. "That team was complete garbage anyway. No discipline. Raynar is an incredibly talented fighter, but that team just didn't work."

"We got the score high enough... Worked fine enough."

"Go to Cassius' team, you'll know what I mean." He offers her to smoke his thing, too.

Eysin doesn't like how that one smells and tastes hands it back and coughs a bit. "I need to sleep on it... Maybe..." She watches him inhale the thing and it looks like he likes it, "Hey uh... Never caught your name."

He kills the butt of the blunt, throws it in the bin, rubs his hand into the side of his pants, and his hands together, stretches and puffs himself up, and finally, extends a hand to her, "I'm Arkion, nice to meet you." He slightly bows his head.

"Alright, Arkion, nice to meet you. I'm Eysin." The next thing Eysin wants to know is, "How long do you want to wait here?"

"We don't have to, at all... Not our problem," he shrugs, "how about we meet at the lot in an hour, I gotta go check out, too. And find some car."

"Wait, you weren't going to go if I didn't ask?"

"I'll use every opportunity I can, to drive. I'll get you back home, just

meet me at the lot and I'll take you back. Or, well, if you change your mind and wanna call it off, speak now or text me later - up to you."

She didn't want to run into Raynar again, and she surely would if she'd stayed in town, in the hotel, so, "no, we're going for sure."

* * *

They meet at the lot, Arkion has arrived with a car that can take them over the water. They get in and get going - take the wide road through an old park filled with pines. It's a dark, but clear night. They make it to the shore, the dock area where the road kisses the sea and they just drive into it. The vehicle changes its mode from road to water and goes like a good old motorboat.

Halfway through the canal, they see some strange activity ahead. He immediately kills the engine and switches off the lights. The head part of his zerk takes over and he is trying to focus on what is going on. Eysin does as he does, looks through the eyes of the zerk, focuses on the activity ahead...

There are two vehicles - one boat, one car - and about 6 people. They are exchanging some packages, loading some off from the boat, taking it to the car - and taking something from the car in exchange. Two of the people seem to have a very animated conversation.

"Pirates," he mumbles. "Looks like strangers came to trade... They're not EESO or Brotherhood, so..."

"Pirates?"

"Yeah, they are spotted around here often... There's an island in the Baltic..."

"Right, that's where the traffic goes through, I've heard... You have been there?"

"Yeah... Maybe we'll take you there, someday..."

Eysin recognizes a pattern in the flickering lights that indicate the presence of humans, "but one of them is EESO," Eysin points out - she singles out a signature and highlights it for Arkion. "It's Daegan. Should we pursue?"

"Hmm... Not our problem. Don't want to intervene in Imogen's

business...”

“Wouldn’t it help her if we caught him?”

“Don’t know... I think Imogen wants to know what he is up to - but he wouldn’t say... Besides, I don’t like our odds. I’m too tired for this... And as soon as you turn to trance your stim hangover will fuck you over... We better wait until they are done and gone.”

Ten minutes passed. They are now both just waiting, bored, no longer looking, but suited in case they are spotted and pursued. Arkion opens a window and starts smoking something. These herbs smell sweeter, and he doesn’t even share!

Eysin yawns and attempts to disguise it as a question, “Wonder what they are trading?”

“Food... Probably winter olives, winter grapes... Directly from Vinu’s yards.” He guessed because it was the most traded food around these parts. “Ah fuck, It’s almost as if they are trying to get caught. What’s taking so fucking long?”

They had to wait another 20 minutes. During this time Eysin got the idea that Arkion wasn’t worried about intervening in Imogen’s business - he may be in on what Daegan was up to. So, she probes, “Do you know Daegan well?”

“I thought I did.” His look changes and he’s leaning forwards, now, “Oh, look at that,” he nods, referring to the two lights that come from the other side of the exchange - another car trying to pass the canal.

3 of the people at the boat and the car - go into hiding, 1 of them starts walking towards the approaching car, and 2 people take the wheels of their machines.

Arkion thinks, “We can listen...”

“Listen to what?”

“That car probably has their radio system on - and the ships and the smugglers didn’t - try to catch a wave, listen... Activate some blue, it will amplify...”

Arkion and Eysin call their suits on, she activates some blue and falls very silent to focus on the air around that area.

“Sorry, sir, we fell into engine trouble and we’re trying to start it up...”

“Do you need any help?”

“No, sir, we got it under control, you can just pass by from the right

side, the road is wide enough.”

The approached car starts again and drives past the dealers, Arkion starts his car's engine and slides, without any lights coming on, off the road, into deeper water. This makes Eysin fairly nervous and she clings to the handles to her right and left.

Arkion seems very focused, grins and mumbles, “Can't be just food, then...”

“A broken engine?”

“No, forget about the engine, they are negotiating a price... That's what's taking so long. Now I'm curious.” He slowly moves the car forward in the deep water. “We're gonna take a closer look,” and as he says that and looks to his right to see her - Eysin looks terrified. “Hey, you alright there?”

“Just not very comfortable in the water,” her jaws don't move when she says that.

And when he looks beyond her - into the darkness of the sea - he sees something good - a lot of mist is coming. This means we can get even closer... And read the vapour. “You don't swim, huh?”

“I'm the best at drowning, you'll meet no one else like it,” her jaws still don't move.

The mist takes them over and keeps getting thicker as they get closer.

“Damn, they didn't forecast this for today,” one of the guys says.

“We'll be fine, anyway, if we can get just ONE more person on the inside, we'll give him the package and all he has to do is to deliver it when and where we say it. Wear gloves and all you want - no prints, no way to get caught.”

“No, there's no one else ready to get involved in this,” they recognize Daegan. “Just me will have to do.”

“But how can we execute our plan when both of the packages need to be placed at the same time? It simply won't work!”

“How can it not work, can you not do a timer?”

“They do have a timer, but the way we have set it - the timer only starts at the correct proximity - that's the best our scribe could code it.”

“Can't your scribe try harder?”

“She's not around, gone back to Reval, and not coming back. And we won't find anyone else within the next two weeks - unless you offer

someone - but you keep saying..”

“No one else gets involved.”

“If you want to convince the lot to invade the Temple - their ONLY remaining demand - lose the Titans. If you can come up with another way to get rid of them and make your raiding party feel safe enough - I mean, more power to you.”

“Fine, I’ll think of something.”

The doors close - the ship sets towards the Pirate Island, and the car sets towards what could be the mainland. Arkion starts the engine again and they continue driving quietly, without any lights.

“What do they want from the temple?” Eysin is curious, puzzled...

“They’ve raided temples for marbles before, but we don’t keep the valuable ones there anymore, so, not sure... Unless they figured out how to move an orb... And there would be plenty of buyers for an orb.”

“But can they even raid it? I mean it’s guarded all the time, right?” The thought of a raid spooked her - just now that she had moved in to live there. “When was the last time it was raided? Does it happen often?”

“Not sure... More than 4 years ago, I think... It is heavily guarded.”

“Why do I get a sense that I must find a new home, quick?”

“You’re staying at the temple now?”

“Yeah...”

“Ah, right... Well, they are going to need a very clever plan or a very large raiding group to pull it off. But the way they were placed there like this... Can’t help but wonder... Were we supposed to hear this? I mean, it’s Daegan, after all... They would have done it at some other place if that wasn’t the case... Fuck... We’re following. Off on a small midnight adventure, I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not like I can walk from here!”

“Sorry about that. You can stay in the car if you like, I won’t let trouble get you, okay?”

He starts to boost up the engine, leaves the lights off, and starts tailing the ship that Daegan was on - with 3 other people. They are headed straight towards the pirate island, through the thickest fog packed into the darkest night.

After some 40 minutes of driving in the water, quietly following the ship, and they make it to another small island, get on the land not far

from where the ship docked.

Arkion called his full zerk on and took his clothes off. "You can wait here, make sure we still have a car when I come back. Stay in a zerk, in case someone finds this... Say you're here to trade, no one's gonna hurt you."

He gets out of the car, ducking over, looks towards the docks, sees things through the fog, and starts moving closer.

The group Daegan is with set the ship to the docks and head towards the forest, inside which their little village is, somewhere. Arkion follows them by staying next to them on the road, and one point makes a clicking sound, trying to make it natural - but it was a noise Daegan should have known.

"I gotta take a leak, I'll catch up," Daegan said to the other guys and walked towards the clicks. The other guys leave without suspecting a thing.

And there they stand, straight, face to face, both fully suited - and Daegan's suit has changed colour - it's dark blue. Arkion had never seen something like it, before - he wanted to ask about it - but there seemed to be even more pressing matters at hand.

Daegan was ready to fight, but he also hoped he had just come there for questions.

"The fuck are you up to?" Arkion asks, like an old friend, looking out for a brother.

"I'm looking for the murderer... And trying to find out who's the buyer for the orb."

"So, you're helping them raid our Temple?"

"EESO is done, Ark... It doesn't matter what happens to the Temple. If they can move Akasha, I say I won't stop them. But I will make sure it won't fall into the wrong hands."

"What wrong hands? The Nords?"

"See, I don't think the employer is a Nord... Well, he is, in a way."

"You have a suspect?"

"Dux August."

Arkion cringes, "he doesn't have the buck nor power to pull this off. Only if he has promised it to the Nords."

"Yeah, he can get a good cut. For some reason - he wants to be king

so badly... He has to hurt Theo - he'll take from him what remains of EESO... And you all start serving him, instead. I can't see that it should be anyone else, organizing all this. Besides, if it's not going to be him, Alexander is next in line."

"The Nords broke their orb - maybe they just want to..."

"The Nords have no direct access to this... Dux does - we have no idea who among Eesians he has bought off. Gen, Cassius, Leon, Sylrissa, maybe some of the new ones who came from RESO - I can't pay attention to everybody - so I try to tackle that problem from this angle."

"What are you trying to achieve with this?"

"Just want to make sure Dux won't be at the receiving end of the transfer of power. We have to remain in control - or it all dies with us. It's too dangerous to let anyone else have it. They won't know what they are dealing with." Daegan looks nervously behind him, towards the village, "They'll come looking if I leak for too long, you either come with me and we have a drink, or you go back to where you came from." That choice must have meant something more to him - and understanding whether Arkion trusted Daegan's plan or not.

"I'd love to have that drink, but I didn't come here alone."

"Someone else sneaking around?" He squeezes his eyes and looks around to see if he can detect anyone.

"She's back at the car. One of the new ones from RESO - so I'm guessing you'd rather not have her around."

"Just in case..." Daegan agreed to that.

"Alright, I'm taking her back to the temple... Are you planning to raid the temple?"

"I can't say when, but yes, th... You can't tell anyone... And I'll tell the guys the deal is off when anyone in the temple gets hurt."

"Sylrissa is there, she's going to put up some resistance, for sure..."

"I'll have them plan around that... She's not there all the time. Who else moved to the temple?"

"Your protege."

"Hmm, so she's no longer at Denea's place... That complicates things. Anyway, nice seeing you, Ark, catch you later."

* * *

Meanwhile, while waiting in the car, Eysin had decoded her second ring. It's some kind of a blade - but it has no hilt - so it seems broken.

She sees Arkion return, he doesn't comment on anything but says it's better if she forgot about all this and she has no need to get involved. He takes her back to the Temple and crashes into Sylrissa's bed himself.

The next morning, the short conversation they had was the last, for a while. Arkion disappeared for the next two weeks.

"I gotta go talk to Gen," he commented in the morning. "You heard - they plan to raid the temple... So I go make sure they are closer here for the coming times, so they can respond faster should there be a need. Best if you both find some other place to move from here... Sylrissa has a home, see if you two could go stay there."

He leaves without saying goodbye!

As for the accommodation problem, Sylrissa had heard the news from some other channel, and two days later, when she invited Eysin to have lunch with her - to propose a new living situation - Eysin didn't take it well, at all.

The offer was good, but she hated that girl.

Sylrissa and Asya both had come out of nowhere and knocked her off where she stood. Eysin felt she was getting in the way, and that feeling irritated her - not being able to find a place, a role to play. Her involvement with Raynar and Denea, no matter how superficial it had been - for it being nothing more, she became bitter and jealous.

Sylrissa, not knowing about anything that had occurred between Eysin and Raynar - or that she had a difficult time understanding Denea - AND that she was all worked up as a side-effect to the yellow stimulant - found it rather puzzling. But she was patient, she took it like a mystery, "Something's bothering you, and I seem to be connected to it somehow - tell me, can I help you in some way?"

"Just leave me alone."

"Has this anything to do with Raynar asking me to join the remaining matches? He told me you left... But didn't know why. Why wouldn't you tell him?"

“I can tell you why,” she hisses as if Venom is about to come, “I’m afraid your boyfriend hasn’t been very loyal to you.”

The expression on Sylrissa’s face is looking for the appropriate one, she was surprised, puzzled, but also amused. “What did he do?” He asks with a smile. “He fucked you?” And as she said that, without waiting for any response - she started believing that. She walked out and Eysin didn’t see her for another few days.

But she didn’t feel too worried about the security situation around the Temple - she knew even more fighters had moved in closer and were keeping watch... So much that if an enemy scout - or Daegan - was watching this - they’d surely call off the raid.

So, what could Daegan be thinking, and did Arkion meet him, and what did they talk about, Eysin wondered, and what if all this will just blow over like it never happened? A catastrophe averted.

* * *

For the remaining one and a half weeks, Eysin was training with Cassius’s team for the finals. And it was like Arkion had said - this team had supernatural synergy - the help they gave to her, moving around, protecting her, chasing off the practice enemy - made her feel more powerful - she could help herself better, getting out of a ditch - and she could decode more rings during the game, like this.

Their practice partners weren’t exactly Black Rain and Koi Jr. - but even so, Eysin felt she had a chance to end up in a good position with this team - and maybe even retrieve her last ring - listed as one of the “rarer” ones for the Finals.

Until the next strange event, she didn’t see Arkion again. But he was often on her mind, he seemed very interesting to her and wondered - *is there a way to meet him again?*

CHAPTER EIGHT:

Saved from the Sea

SIRENS, SIRENS, sirens. The night is dark, and there's mist all around. Chaos and destruction. When the finals had ended, two large explosions happened around the tournament area. All buildings in the vicinity got blown to rubble, some people got injured and lost.

Sylrissa is at the wheel. A man is trying to hold Eysin up in her seat while also trying to calm down Agnes. He tells Sylrissa to drive right into the water, and "head towards the temple".

"What happened?" The explosions had Agnes confused. As did the alcohol circulating her body. She was very drunk at the time it happened. She'd been trying to sweet-talk the man into going to places with her. And now the man was using Eysin as a human shield to protect himself. At least that's how Agnes saw it.

Agnes felt so numb all over that she had already forgotten her right leg got injured. When it all blew up, something had flown right at her and Arkion.

"What happened to her?" She looks at Eysin, passing out in the middle seat. She has no visible injuries, her zerk is active., Red paint is running all over her body, dripping to the seats. Agnes' question gets ignored, and she looks at Arkion's face. He looks irritated but keeps his cool. His long hair is wet, he's got his zerk on, but not on his face. Eysin's red paint has dripped on him, too. Red, and yellow. "You should... Wipe it off..."

He looks at his chest and wipes the yellow droplets off with one swipe. "How's your leg?" He finally looks at Agnes.

“My leg?” As soon as she thinks about it, she feels it. A deep cut. There was blood all over her jeans, but the bleeding had stopped. Her zerk had reacted, built a cast around the wound and stitched it together. Her last remaining pink marbles were attempting to fix it.

She remembers Arkion got hit with it, too. He had reacted fast when the explosion occurred, she'd never seen someone's suit come up so fast. Had he not spontaneously reacted - slammed down the piece of roof flying at them - they could have gotten decapitated. “I've enough pink to heal it... How about you?”

“I'm out, gonna use the pool.”

“Why are you wet, what happened to you? What happened to her?” she asked quieter, and seeing that she'll get ignored again, she backed off completely. Agnes pressed her forehead against the ice-cold window of the car. She looks out, into the intermittent mist and darkness. “That's no way to attract a man, is it,” she mumbles.

Eysin was half there and half elsewhere - what had happened to her was a whole other story. After wiping his suit, Arkion started noticing more spots of yellow on her. He wiped off yellow dots as they appeared on her face and chest. They kept coming out from the framework's pores, her system was rejecting them. She must have had some pinks left, and they helped.

Arkion couldn't tell what kind of pattern this yellow poison was launched with. He couldn't know, so he hoped it was just a large amount of a silly hallucinogenic. But feared it may have been the Death Sentence sequence.

Daegan had a poetic flair, after all. The spot was the same, the confrontation in the same context - and his name had come up. Arthur.

Half here, half elsewhere, when Eysin came to, she desperately wanted to open her eyes but noticed she was still fully in the suit, so, somehow, she moved her half-dead hand to her face, and the man tried to stop her, but finally let her do it - she removed the visor... And as she did that, she started coughing. She stopped and noticed that her eyes were hurting badly.

She started coughing again, so bad that she was almost going to throw up. Water came up her lungs, she could taste the sea salt in her nose. A few more coughs and something else came up. She spat it into her hands.

A liquid of yellow mashed up with pink. She looked at it, confused, and when the man saw that, he grabbed her hand and used some tissue to wipe it off her.

Arkion put his visor on and looked at the mixed yellow and pink. Indeed, the pink was eating away at the yellow. "Regen..." He mumbles. But he couldn't still make out from that view in what configuration that liquid had entered her system. Not knowing was rather irritating.

Eysin sits up and sees she's in the middle, on one side there is a bronze-haired woman. She's seen her before - Agnes, the same woman she'd seen Arkion with, before. The woman is weeping, looking out from the window. Sylrissa is in the driver's seat. And looking out the front window - they appear to be at sea - and it's very dark. And - the one who had been fighting her hands. She recognized from the sweet smell of herbs - especially strong now that his hair was all wet - Arkion.

"You told me to get off that shit and now look at that," she's in pain but is trying to make light fun of it.

Arkion wraps the tissue up and puts it into the door's pocket. He looks into her eyes to see if there's any yellow in them. "Do you feel anything weird?"

"Everything hurts. Especially..." She had received a very strong blow right into the centre of her chest. She recalled everything in front of her eyes turning yellow. "My veins are all drying up..." She lifts her right hand to look at it - and she can't control it, it shivers. She tries pressing her fingers together. Tries to rub her hands together - "I have control but my nerves have gone completely numb..."

"The yellow is eating away at your framework... It is slowing down now, but you need more pinks. You have a rough night ahead."

* * *

It had already been a damn long night, she knew it was time for bed - but her eyes and brain were hyper-awake. She felt a little confused about how they had gotten here. Why were they taking a taxi back to Osel?

She could smell blood in the air. And seawater in her mouth. She touched her hair and felt no texture. Her nerves had gone a little weird

on her – but she could understand that her hair was wet and cold.

She had fallen to the sea.

She put her hands back on her lap and looked at the prize she had allowed to keep for herself. They had not won the finals – Koi Jr. did, of course. But they had collected quite many bracelets and decided to keep them all. Eysin had found 3 – and after the match, she had met with Jelena. Jelena had found her last bracelet – and Eysin had found the one she had been looking for. They traded.

The other two rings Eysin traded for a blue marble without even bothering to decrypt them before.

She sighs, a small victory amid that mess – the match had gone well.

Working with Cassius' team had been a delight. She had first imagined they had good synergy with Raynar – but Cassius' team was on a whole other level. She could focus on her job, and others kept her safe. She felt that with this new team, she was operating at some 400% capacity. By the finals – she felt secure enough to take part without any stimulant use at all.

She felt the effect of Cassius' team already on the training. They had a more serious mock match while the Second Wind teams were going against each other. On that mock match, she realized, indeed, that there was no need for this stimulant. The only reason she had to use it before – was that the rest of the team couldn't do what they needed to do.

She'd bought the blue. About to leave the marketplace, Sylrissa reached out to her. They had some emotional conversation and decided to put it aside. Their next plan was to go grab the last remaining Titans into copy marbles. Then came the explosions.

“Did they get Daegan?” Eysin asks the man.

“No, he got away.”

“You could have gotten him... I was fine.”

“Well, maybe you were, maybe you weren't. But in this case, it sure sucks that you are the world's greatest drowner.” He remembered. And even if he hadn't – the hit Daegan gave her would have rendered anyone useless in the water.

“Might not get a chance at him again...”

“Listen, don't worry about that, it's Gen's problem now.” He's trying to study Eysin's face to try and see how she's doing. But she keeps

shifting in her seat. Trying to get the feeling back into her hands. Looking outside the windows as if there is nothing to see besides the mist and darkness.

Daegan used his Kaestus to blast a terrifying amount of yellow marble poison on Eysin's suit. That punch had pushed her into the water. And the water near the docks they had stopped at, was deep.

Something similar to this had happened once before. Arkion had not been present, but he had heard Daegan's accounts. At the time - Daegan had been in Arkion's position. In Eysin's position had been Arthur - who also got hit with a blast of yellow, but unlike Eysin - he was left unattended. Daegan had chosen to chase the man in red, instead of attending to Arthur. That night still haunted them all.

When the car reaches the ground, Eysin passes out again. Arkion tasks himself with holding her in the seat as they ride through the terrible terrain. They find the nearest terrain that has a resemblance to tire tracks. Continue their way towards the temple.

* * *

The Ceremony, late-night market, post-pits. The explosions. Wounded Daegan, limping - and his suit is dark blue. A dusty Exo follows them to the docks. The docks. The dusty Exo. A clever trick with the expanding pole. Boom, splash. The water.

Drowning. Dead. The end.

This terrible dream keeps rotating in her head and stops when the car does. She cannot see, but she thinks she has her eyes open. She can hear the doors of the car open. Suddenly, there is a whole lot more room on that seat, but the guy pulls her out of the car. He throws her over his shoulder. He walks and she can feel him limp a little.

It takes a while for her to understand it's Arkion carrying her - and not Daegan. For a moment there she thought she's been taken to the Pirate Isle. *No, this was home.*

She remembered Arkion's leg had gotten hit with that piece of a roof. It had been impressive, how he had knocked down it mid-air, just when it was about to slice himself and Agnes into two. Partly, the

roof shattered. A punch that discounted death into a minor leg injury. Easily reversible with the power of pink marbles or the red light and the pool over at the orb hall.

It's cold and damp around. She can't see, but she can feel. The dampness indicates that they are close to the temple well, and the deeper, older part of the forest. There's always some kind of fire in the front. They are stepping up the steep stairs built for the Titans, Sylrissa uses her glove, knocks on the door and it opens.

* * *

"I'm gonna go make sure they keep a clear path through the 'torium." Sylrissa runs ahead to make sure the other injured people who are bound to come this way will have good access to the pool.

She expected to see a lot more people. Terratorium was set for an emergency, but there were just a few dozen people over. Most didn't seem concerned about the event at all. They had clumped into a few small groups and are talking about the explosions over the channel but without any terrified or excited emotion. They will possibly offer some soup to each other and then return to their homes where they'll enjoy the rest of their night on whatever generators they have it running. The explosion had done nothing but shook some glasses and pushed over one of the power rods. The ground under it had become a little watery already months ago. Nothing else broke - but everyone could hear and feel that something big did go down in Ceremony.

Arkion carries Eysin through the garage room and stops when Agnes calls out his name.

"You think they mind if I crash here?"

"Your leg okay now?"

"I'm fine, yeah... This is Eysin's room?"

"Yeah, you can crash there," Eysin responds. They didn't expect her to. She even shows her an okay sign with her hand, while hanging over a shoulder.

Agnes responds same sign and then disappears into her dark bunk.

Arkion walks down the stairs and seeing that she is awake enough,

he places her into the pool. He seems a little surprised that no one else is there yet. He sits at the edge, then sees there's more yellow and red on himself, dips in for a moment, too, and sits back at the edge. He's taken some sort of a bag with him, from the car. He sorts around the contents and starts producing a blunt for himself.

Right before he is about to light it up, another team of people burst in through the garage door. Now the hall is full of noise.

"HOW UNHOLY OF YOU," a woman's voice yells. "SHUT THE FUCK UP!" She adds. "Bring her down there, find as many pinks as you can - we might still be able to regrow." Asya is organizing some guys carrying Denea. She's knocked out. And she has lost her left arm.

Asya walks to Arkion, and it amuses her that he sort of is trying to hide the blunt, and sort of isn't. They had smoked there before - but the way she had just raised her voice had startled him. She calls her visor on and jumps into the water. She catches Eysin right as she is starting to fall over. She helps her stand up, "I'm going into crisis mode now, I will see what he put inside you and see how you're doing, okay?"

Asya was holding Eysin's head very gently. It was a pleasant feeling. Eysin could feel a kind of pressure - and then followed a terrible shock. She suppressed a scream. More yellow burst out from her framework pores. As soon as the liquid reached the water, pink marbles in it started rising and eating away at it.

Eysin wondered how long this is going to last, this crisis mode of hers - was there going to be more shocks? Right now she wasn't feeling any pain or stress - she felt very light even. Partly, she thought the reason she felt this way is because of the pressure Asya had placed on the sides of her head. She imagined that's what kittens may have felt like when their momma carried them around. Teeth sunk into their necks.

"Yeah I think I got all of it," Asya says immediately when she's done, she keeps holding her head and keeping her up. "Arkion, that smells about right - give her some, helps her heal a bit. I removed all the yellow I could from her system, it had progressed quite close to her heart... We got lucky here. Her system is trying to make sense of things for a minute or two now. Making sure it can stop trying to eat away the poison... And then she'll regrow the nervous system."

"Ouch," Arkion winces. He has had the pleasure. And he knew that

this will also make her pass out - the pain is a little too much to comprehend. Arkion lights up the blunt and hands it to Eysin. She takes a hit of that sweet-smelling, tasting piece of... And she can feel it being taken off her hands.

A presence of kindness, warmth, and gentleness. She's gone outside from her body, somewhere more comfortable, for a little refuge.

"So, you keep her in the water and see that she doesn't drown." Asya hands Eysin over to Arkion. "Stick close to the edge, if something weird happens, call for help, okay?"

She feels real arms around her now and a strong smell of the herbs. She can feel a calmly breathing chest, a slowly beating heart. She can feel vibrations from his chest as he speaks up, perhaps talking to Asya, but she cannot make out any words.

But she can make out the tone. He sounded very calm and patient. *You don't need to be doing this, or you could be colder about it.* She can feel a strange energetic bubble burst in her chest. The same feeling a person gets when something *moves* them.

"She's coming back," she can hear Asya's voice. "This could shorten the terrors, but don't give her too much of it."

Eysin turns around and presses her face onto the man's chest. She's happy about him not protesting against it at all. He even sets himself up so they can hang around there more comfortably.

"What's happening to me?" She asks.

"I have no idea," he calmly says. "Describe it to me."

"Why am I feeling soooo good?"

"Well, it works like a painkiller, among other things. Who knew, some people feel great when there's no pain bugging them for a while."

"No, I don't think that's about pain..."

"What is it about, then?"

Eysin tries to stop herself from becoming sentimental with the stranger, but the mellow sensation is so overwhelming. *A stranger, or a hero? Maybe he'd be delighted to hear it.* "I feel blessed, somehow."

"I'm in no hurry, just so you know - but if you'd prefer to stand on your own now..."

"Am I crossing some line?"

"Oh no, this is fine," Arkion says.

She exhales and embraces him more liberally. The contact feels great. And the way he keeps holding on, even more so. She thought about wanting to push it even further, but her sober side questioned her - *that's highly inappropriate, girl.*

"I think I am... Crossing some lines here." But she wasn't too quick to let go of him, either.

"It can indeed have such effects, I won't take it personally."

"Personally?"

"I'm not going to take advantage of your drugged state..."

"So, you'd turn me down?" A smile of bitter defeat, being playful and stupid at the same time.

"No."

"What's the difference, then?"

Arkion is a little amused by this, "I'll only be flirting with you in words, for tonight, that's fine?"

She laughs with delight as she hears it. *But maybe it's like he says - nothing personal.* A sting of disappointment, a thorn in her throat. She liked it but decided to not take it personally, either. After all - they might never meet again after tonight. He'll forget about her, and she...

Eysin has been weeping for a while, Arkion gently caresses her head. He can feel she's unhappy but has not the slightest clue what it's all about. But it felt nice to hold her. Another human body welcomes his support. She was small, like a sleepy kitten, and not in any hurry to get anywhere.

And he had been wondering for a long while - how to introduce himself to her. Way before all these recent events that somehow brought them together anyway. Before all this, he just couldn't come up with a plan. Besides, the situation between the two was quite unusual - because Arkion knew quite a bit about her, but she had barely even seen him. A stranger, at most.

He guessed she had something going on with Sylrissa's occasional boyfriend, but by what he had seen, it looked like Raynar was just playing around messy, taking a rough and sudden exit. The poor feller was still hopelessly chasing after Sylrissa.

And how maddening it had felt for Arkion to see how delighted she

seemed to interact with Koi Jr. He was aware that Koi was the one to help Eysin get out from Reval – so, their bond made sense. *But had I made it there on time? She'd never gotten hit. It's possible she'd never even come here.*

She's pressing herself against him so tight that he can feel her breasts through the two suits. He'd heard these herbs might have such effects – make people a little horny, but he'd never experienced it by himself.

“Ought to be more polite, indeed,” he mumbles.

She passes out again and the man holds her up. Arkion calls up the visor to see if he can get any clues about how she is progressing. And how much longer he needs to stay in the water. He could feel that his leg had already healed. He feels can hold her above the water quite comfortably. So, he grabs his neatly rolled herbal blunt, leans to the edge, checks again that she's not breathing in water or anything of the sort, lights up and enjoys.

As he smokes, he thinks what he has seen with his visor – was oddly familiar. People's frameworks and zerks have personal signatures – the way they grow, the way they build. Sort of like handwriting. He didn't recall having taken that kind of a look at Eysin before. He couldn't tell what about her signatures was familiar – but it rang some odd bells in his head.

Arkion killed the blunt halfway through and called up the visor again to take another look. The shapes of the pathways that were forming, he observed, were very different to what remained from the parts of the framework that were untouched by the yellow. As if she was wearing gear built by someone else. The familiarity of it triggered this strange feeling within him that there was something on the tip of his tongue, but he couldn't see it, taste it, feel it, read it, comprehend it. He then took a glance at random people's zerks to see if maybe everyone was like that. As he was looking, he was starting to feel the odd effects of the rare flower he had recently added to the mixture of that blunt recipe. No, everyone had their builds. And they looked consistent – even those who had scarring from yellow – the parts they rebuilt were the same. But that was not the case with her.

Arkion looked back into her. It was unusual to see so many pathways within a novice zerker. He remembered he had had to work quite hard

to reach a certain density in pathways. Could it be that she's been using all that stuff for longer than she's letting on? It's odd.

"How come you already figured all this out?" He wonders out loud. It sounds even like a little protest, but quiet enough to not bother the other bathers and healers around.

"None of it is mine..." She mumbles. Eysin could sense she was being watched and wanted to respond, but her neck, head, body - everything felt limp.

"Oh, so, you're awake..."

"Do absolutely not let go of me, I can't feel anything."

He tightens his hold around her to make sure she's not slipping or anything. But he wasn't intending to let this one go - very interested to have a conversation about this. "What do you mean it's not yours?"

"Apparently... The battery I have - belonged to a man named Andre. So did the Kaestus - so, it's not like I'm starting from scratch."

"Andre didn't leave with a zerk, how did you grow so fast?"

"Not allowed to say. But I have a feeling - in time, everyone will know anyway."

Eysin fades in and out of a dream-like state. Going and coming to a place she has learned to identify with her inescapable condition of getting left behind. Thrown aside, her current state and belief conflicted with the choice this Exo had made. Who is he... She somehow manages to open her eyes. Looks at the man she couldn't identify from all the dirt before. He had washed off all the market dust now, and his face was visible. First, the bright reflection of the silver in his eyes. The orb flickers, watching at her, curiously - he wants all the answers, yeah.

But right then she'd rather focus on things like his head being covered in dark spaghetti. His face was very familiar to her. It was comforting. *Arkion, what the fuck are you doing here? Does seeing you comfort me because you sort of rescued me? Or is that just a feature of your face?*

He started looking ridiculously handsome to her. So much so that it became a little difficult to hold eye contact with him. Her attention turned to the piercing silver stains in his eyes. An indication of very long time use - or a very intensive kind of it.

There seemed something else familiar about him - not just from the times they met before. She felt as if she had seen that face before. Not

here on Osel, but earlier. But she couldn't place him anywhere in her Reval memories... Neither Perona.

Isn't he a true model gladiator? Now his gaze is wandering elsewhere. Seeing she was ignoring his question, he must have gone somewhere in his mind. He looks very strong, defined, light, and laconic yet cheerful... Cheerful - he'd either gone past the highs and lows that come with the suit... Or maybe he has achieved this only thanks to the herbs he carries around. She could smell it now, sweet and herbish. She liked the smell, but she wondered to herself if she would have liked it if it wasn't for this particular situation.

He's looking into emptiness, and she's looking at him. And he might feel that, and then looks at her. And when he does - she pretends she wasn't looking at him at all.

Eysin looks at the ceiling as if the fractal beams turning into arcs at the junction of it all were the most interesting thing in the world. And for a moment there - she wondered, that in fact, they were pretty interesting. But not as interesting as making this otherwise awkward situation into a tad sillier one. His slight playfulness in this situation had amused her very much. She would be smiling if her cheeks didn't feel cramped.

She shot her gaze back into his eyes, and he masterfully switched back to looking into nothingness. As if he had never looked at anything else. She's starting to regain a feeling on her face. Not a particularly pleasant one - it's sort of like a cramped feeling, but it changes. So, now there was nothing she could do to suppress the amused smile that was forming.

They switch who is being watched and who is the watcher. Eysin manages to press her lips together tight, she looks very silly. And Arkion won't suppress his snickers, seeing that silly face. She quickly looked, AHA, and Arkion played busted. It was comforting to see someone going along with a small stupid game, and having a little laugh about it.

Eysin thought he had been very kind to her - so, maybe everything that she was experiencing about him at this moment - her mind simply connected to the kindness... Two words started forming on her tongue and the silence begged to break it, too.

"Thank you."

He looked at her again, and very faintly - he could have been tired,

too - smiled. The warmest smile. A true one.

I am enjoying the shit out of this, ain't I? Her wandering mind looked at the skin, and it looked good. *Then again, everyone looks better in red light.* Maybe it was the red light that was having such a handsomising effect on him? But one thing the red light failed to paint was the silver in his eyes. Lots of it. *How long has he been involved with this? Five years? Ten? Twenty? EESO was the perfect water for the fish of a beast he was.* "Hehe, fellow, I think I'm really high right now." She finally confessed. "Like... I can see Mandelbrot."

"The mathematician?" Arkion was poking fun at her, but he knew what she meant.

"Everything is moving all the time, I should just..." She intends to close her eyes to get some rest.

"Do not close your eyes," he says with a nervous laugh. "You gotta keep it real, you got your face back, try to feel your other body parts so I can get out from here."

"Right," alright, she thought, one by one, does she know where her neck is, her shoulders, her arms? She is trying to move her fingers, and they do move. She wants to avoid feeling her chest - she assumes it's an instinct - it'd still be in terrible pain if she were to regain it. She wiggles her toes and moves her feet, her legs are back. She tries to stand and manages to, but she can understand she wouldn't be able to get out of the pool just yet. "I think I can hang here by myself, you can go."

He carefully lets go of her, pulls himself out from the water and sits back over the edge. "Wasn't going anywhere." He takes his half a blunt and lights it up again. "I could make you something to tone down the trip, no anxiety stuff, would you like that?"

"I'm not anxious... I just see things and get... Thoughts."

"Oh, are thoughts a new experience to you?" He smiles, pretending he is proud of his joke and starts rolling a different kind of a blunt.

Eysin turns around and hides her face. And she falls back into these new thoughts. Assessing the man making little jokes. Is he flirting or just being nice? He is complete - regardless of some of his rough features - visible asymmetry in his face, the slight crookedness of teeth. A good chin, maybe unshaven for a couple of weeks. He had lines running down his neck, tattooed on him. He was smoking, smiling and making

a thing, he looked relaxed and even a little happy. He was wiggling his toes in the water.

If I ever had to sculpt an Eesian Gladiator - it would have to be him.

Arkion finished rolling the herb cig, called her to come closer, lit it up, took a whiff himself, judged it was very good, and then handed it over to her. They smoke it between the two of them in silence and then stick around for a little more.

While smoking, in his head, Arkion was tracking back to that messy night. The market. Agnes trying to persuade him into... The fantastic hit on the piece of flying roof. He closed his eyes and clenches his fists, thinking of that victorious moment. Even mumbles an indistinguishable "Oh yeah" to himself. Then, the insane amounts of coughing in the dust. Imogen yelling something over the comms. Daegan's name popped up here and there. Chasing him through the forest.

And everything until then and after was pretty standard stuff. He then remembered a moment before leaving that he had picked up Eysin's weird stick and it had turned into a bracelet - he now removed it from his arm and handed it to Eysin, "dropped this." The girl thanked him.

But one thing that was completely new to him was the colour of Daegan's zerk, so, Arkion asks. "You don't happen to know why Daegan's suit was blue, do you?"

* * *

The finals ended. Eysin had scored quite some nice points and recovered the last of her sacrificed bracelets. She rushed to the marketplace to buy some blue marbles. Sylrissa ran into her there, "sister, there has been a misunderstanding!"

Eysin wasn't too happy to talk to her, "Leave me alone. Seeing you at the temple every day is about as much as I can take it." She started walking in a direction she hadn't planned to, but she wanted to move.

"Okay, fair enough." Sylrissa walks along, not wanting to let her go. She had felt they could talk things out and get some good work done. "Listen, about work - let's talk about work then." She gently grabs Eysin by her hand and manages to slow her down and stop her.

They notice a few meters from them Arkion is having some kind of comical struggle with Agnes. Looks like Arkion is having a very strange sort of dance with a kite in stormy winds. The crooked smile on his face indicates he is a little amused by it. And Agnes looks like a cute angry person, but drunk enough not to be able to coordinate her limbs very well.

“The two titans here - why don’t we go get the copies tonight?” Sylrissa takes Eysin’s attention back on herself, “So we get over with it - and get to work on the missing bits the next week?”

“You know where they are located?”

And right when Sylrissa said “yeah”, and pointed a finger “there,” right from her pointed direction - a massive explosion.

Everything started shaking, the wind took up from zero to a hundred in a moment. A very strange loud noise - not something you would hear during a conventional explosion. Everyone who could, at that moment, got their suits on and tried to shield those who couldn’t.

A second explosion, right after a few seconds. Coincidentally - from the other location Sylrissa could have pointed her finger to - but she was now busy shielding a tourist couple from all the flying rubble.

The dust wouldn’t settle at all - as if it was stuck in the air, and visibility was horrible. Judging from the moans and calls, a lot of people had gotten injured - but most were only shocked. What little you could sense through the dust - everything was messed up like a garbage dump.

“Sylrissa?” Eysin called out, not too loud - as just a moment ago she had been right next to her.

“Yeah I’m here, I’m alright,” came her voice from a confusing direction. The ones she had shielded, also seemed alright.

Looking around, Eysin noticed, a woman had been taking cover behind her, too, “you okay?” The woman was all covered in brown dust, but she could make out a nod. The woman reacted to someone calling out to her - and poof, she was gone into the dust, in the direction of the voice. But the voice seemed a little strange to Eysin right now. The directions were all messed up, the visors visibility kept jumping along with her heartbeat between focus and area, and she felt a strange pressure in her real ears.

“Sylrissa, Sylrissa,” another woman’s voice cried, “are you here? I

don't understand what's going on!"

"Agnes? Where's your suit?"

"She's drunk." A man's voice says. "The car is right there, we should get you guys out from here."

"Ark, you're wounded."

"Yeah, got it on a moment too late... Ag got hit, too!" He had been shielding Agnes from the rubble... Eysin can see his shadow in the dust, he stands, quiet, and tilts his head - looks like he's listening on to some comms. "Help is coming. Sylrissa, can you take Agnes to the car," he throws his car remote to Sylrissa through the air, "We need to get you guys out of the way so the rescue can help those who need it..." He disappeared deeper into the dust.

"Ark, where are you going?"

"Gen needs help with a thing."

Eysin finds Agnes and Sylrissa in the dust - and they are all covered in dust. Sylrissa is pushing the button on the remote a few times to understand where the signal is coming from. "There, there... Eysin, will you help me with her? It looks like her foot got injured..."

So, they carry Agnes woman towards the car, open the door, and put her in it.

"Hey Ark, do I go without you?" Seal seems to be on a call with the man. "Okay, I'll wait."

After they put Agnes into the car, Eysin looks around trying to make out what's going on behind the dust. She's starting to get a better grip on her senses again, "did we get bombed?"

"Are your comms off?" Sylrissa asks.

"Everything is messed up for me, I can't even hear properly sometimes."

"Planted bombs, someone blew up the Titans."

"What, how?"

"Too soon to know... But it looks like we're safe, for now."

"Should I go help?"

"No, we're not properly equipped for this... We don't have masks or anything with us that would help them... Or water... Help is coming, don't worry about it."

Someone is calling out in the dust, and Eysin walks towards it as if hypnotized, "Maybe I can help lift the rubble..."

“Oh, fucks sake...” Sylrissa wants to follow, “Hey you’ll end up hurting someone there. Help is on the way! Eysin, get back here!” She’s unsure about going or staying. Arkion needs her by the car, she stops pacing and rubs her zerk face. Carefully tries to take a big breath, afraid that somehow the dust would get in through the seamless mask. She can feel her body is shocked, a little excited, she looks around and the dust doesn’t seem to want to settle at all. It’s getting quiet.

Silence. No answer. She’s gone.

The dust is not settling, and the calling ended. There is noise all around, a similar amount in every direction. Eysin gets a little lost, and stands still, unsure which way to go. And even unsure which way was back. It’s all dust and darkness.

And then someone approaches her from the back and grabs her by the arms. “Eysin, can you help?” Eysin turns around. And even though he was covered in dust, she recognizes the suited Gladiator. “Daegan, what’s happened?” She looks at him from the top to the bottom and finds that his arm and leg are injured. “Oh man, sit down for a sec, I’ll give you some pinks.”

“No, we can’t stop here, we must keep moving, get to a safe place and then deal with that, come with me, please.” Daegan nudges her to move - and seems to orient very well between the rubble - and seems to be locked on a destination.

They walk quicker than it would seem possible for Daegan in his current condition. They make it out from the market’s dust cloud and step into a forest area. It’s all full of branches - but the trees are still standing. “No-no, we can’t stop here, we must keep moving.”

She understands that there is something strange going on. And even if she attempted to protest going that way, she wasn’t going to get her way anyway. She also realized that someone was following them. Brushing some dust off Daegan’s suit - she sees that it’s all very dark - his suit had turned dark blue.

“Daegan, what is happening?”

“Ah, you shouldn’t worry about that... You won’t get in trouble for this, I promise you. Right now I only need a little bit of your help.”

They reached through the short patch of forest and make it to the shore - there was a dock for a ship and a dock for swimming cars. They

head towards the ship dock. But because there is no ship there, it makes Eysin very uncomfortable with this situation.

They stop at the end of the dock and Eysin gives away her pink marbles. "I am being held hostage, yeah?" Right after she handed them over to her, Daegan takes her into a lock, both facing back at the forest.

As the Exo that followed, approaches - Daegan calls up his Kaestus and lights up the largest amount of yellow any of them has ever seen - for a warning.

The dusty Exo walks close enough to be able to talk, he un.masks so Daegan can see his face.

"Among many others, the red man - he killed Arthur!" Daegan yells like a madman. He yells and shivers, he is excited. "But only when it was someone from the big house, big daddy took notice. It had to be his son to kick the bucket for him to acknowledge the problem!"

Arkion walks slower and calmer, his voice is low and calm. "Daegan, he wouldn't have ordered us to catch him that night if he hadn't taken notice of the kills..." He stops, stands still and seems to think about it a little, "I know, he wishes he hadn't - but he did... And made us pursue the shit head so hard we lost track of..."

"The man in a red suit - someone you all were so certain must have been the one luring us all to desert this base! Well, guess what - I have now mingled with the deserters for a while: and he is not there!" He tightens her hold over Eysin, as it started to feel like she was starting to wiggle her way out.

Arkion raises his hands, and continues with a low, calm tone, "How can I get you to let Eysin go?"

"None of you seemed to see that he was more a brother to me than he was to you or anyone!" Daegan keeps yelling, "We were more a family than he ever had anyone in the house! The bastard ordered me to ignore what had happened here and go after the red man at all costs! Do you recall... The shouting, AfTeR HiM, after him..."

He keeps cool, "I'll never forget that night, Daegan."

"And regardless of our efforts - he got away, didn't he..." Daegan's voice toned down. He seems to fall into thought but is still fully alert.

Arkion felt a bit of guilt about that event, too. He knew he should have given him time to think, but he couldn't stop himself from talking

- he could stay cool, but what would that matter, "listen, Arthur said he was fine when he got out from the water, there was no way any of us could have known..."

None could have known that he had a large dose of unprogrammed yellow marble poison in his system. Only Daegan had seen that. No one guessed he'd fall asleep on his back that night, suffer the consequences of an overdose, and suffocate in his vomit.

That's how Arthur died.

But Theogenes had not wanted to take the blame - it was him, after all, who had given the order to follow the red man. He could not accept what had happened. Theo made up versions where his son was an addict. They'd used the drug for the Pit finale that night - exactly two years ago - and Daegan had been responsible for it.

Theogenes, indeed, believed for a long time that Daegan - the orphan from Black Rain, a very talented fighter, a political guest in the house and guild - had been a bad influence on his eldest. The same Theogenes who was recently elected to take the place of a king of the whole region, since the last one died - was a simple emotional man like the rest.

"I did not find any man in red among the deserters, and most of them had even heard of him... Bought off by the Swedes, Ark. Which means - he, or she - is someone here, on the islands." Daegan's calm tone turns into a nervous, accusatory one, again, "for all I know, it could be you, Ark!"

He remains calm, a little nervous, now that he had said a few too many words, still hoping to turn around, "How could I kill..."

"Oh, you had plenty of reasons to misplace Arthur, don't lie to me! I didn't see you a single time that night, where the fuck were you?"

This stung him, he winces, Arkion is starting to lose his cool. He'd been in some trouble with Agnes. Not something he'd like to admit out loud. His tone suddenly turns defensive, "Well, I'd never! And my suit does not turn red, does it..."

To Daegan this response meant that Arkion was broken now. Daegan grins, and responds, "For all we know, anyone could use many suits..."

Arkion tries to shake off the loss of coolness, and returns to a cool voice, "Daegan, what do you want? And what do you want with Eysin?"

"I have brought Eysin along, so you will have the chance to not repeat

my mistake.” He says this with a self-congratulatory tone, “I bet Gen is yelling into your ear right now - SEIZE HIM, seize him! But... You will let me go because you will be getting her - because as far as I remember, she can’t swim.”

An extending pole pushes Eysin apart from Daegan. She turns and holds it, trying to push him off the far end of the dock, but he grabs hold of the pole and pulls her close. She gets off her balance and Daegan punches her in her zerk face. That knocks her over - and just when she rolls over her head, lands on her feet. Planning to get up and take control of the stick again, Daegan shows up already next to her, and with his Kaestus glove, does a kung-fu right to her diaphragm. She flies with the yellow glowing colour right to the side of the dock, into the water.

Daegan dives to the other side and is gone right by the time the unattended stick falls on the concrete.

It all happened so fast Arkion couldn’t even pitch himself in, “Ark, did you get him?” Buzzes in his ear - Imogen, as Daegan guessed. Gen yelling the orders, but he is now solely focused on bringing Eysin out of the water.

* * *

The bracelet, I finally got my bracelet back... It was the right thing to do... Am I sleeping? Why is it so cold? Am I breathing? She opens her eyes and sees nothing but liquid waves of darkness, tiny bubbles floating away from her, she can sense the silver skin taking a different form, changing its affinities, and fins grow on her - it’s adjusting itself for the host to swim, and be agile under the water... But she cannot swim - she couldn’t even if she wasn’t paralyzed the way she was now. She couldn’t move anything at all.

Her chest was in pain, *am I suffering a heart attack?* It wasn’t just the biggest cramp, it was like there was a big rotating potato stuck in her breathing pipes. She felt that part of her was also burning, her skin was on fire - and not just her skin - she could feel the zerk’s skin suffering something like a burn. It was digging in like minuscule knives, acid.

Her lungs were in shock, reacting to something. Some of the water

must have gotten in before the suit started changing. But the suit couldn't let her cough. She could feel the yellow blast burning through her silver skin and her skin, drilling in. Even though the water was helping to wash some of it away - most of it was still stuck. *It's going to kill me... What a useless way to die. Regen... Regen... Little heart, make some red light, maybe it can help.*

Regen kicks in, and she remembers she might not have enough - she had given away all her unused pinks. She loses sight of the dark, waves. Sinking deeper, and deeper until her heel touches the messed up bottom of the rocky shore. A light impact, but she could feel it in her back and at the top of her head - it felt like someone threw a brick at her head.

Lifted from the water, a sudden hopeless gasp. The underwater suit starts feeling very uncomfortable without all the water. Her shocked body jumps out of the hands of those who had come after her. But when she slips back into the water, it's not so deep anymore. She has been brought to the shore, and she slammed her body into the water just a few centimetres deep. The ground was solid - it was the road for cars.

Oh damn, it's so painful! Arkion stands over her for a moment, trying to make sense of what's going on with her. Then notices the scales on her skin. He squats and comes close to her face, places his hand with the Kaestus on her shoulder, mumbles some magic words, and the affinity changes again. The pain stops. No more scales.

"Sylrissa, come to my location, pinging now."

Eysin is still squirming around in shock, slowly understanding that the pain from the strange affinity is gone, but now the yellow paint is piercing through again. She stops on her back and wants to wipe it all off from her face and her chest. Ark, having gone to the docs for a moment, now comes back to her and helps wash it off with the cold seawater.

"Maybe better if you go to trance at this point, it's not going to be pleasant..."

Eysin wants to start coughing again and flips on the other side, on her knees, deathmask staring at the waves, mouth open. But the visor stops her from coughing, "How the fuck could I go to trance, this shit will kill me."

Arkion tries another pair of magic words on her visor and she collapses into his arms. Her breathing changes, immediately, and her body temperature - all of it. She can stand, she can walk - but her mind

has gone to a sort of sleep.

The car shows up, Arkion supports her walk to it and they head away.

“How can we find our way in this thick fog?” Arkion looked back at the sea and got a little surprised at how foggy it had suddenly gotten. It was as thick as the dust had been at the marketplace.

“Look up...” The light in the sky above the temple was there - dimly, but there.

* * *

“I didn’t ask about the suit, sorry...”

It had gotten quiet and a little darker at the temple. She was hanging on to the edge of the pool and was paying attention to how her body was healing. It had finally started feeling a little ticklish and pleasant.

Arkion had been sitting nearby, and it pleased her that he stuck around. He could have gone anywhere. She loved having his company.

“Who killed Arthur?” Eysin is relaxing in the water, studying the face of the man.

She heard all that huh... “No need to get involved.”

“But I am involved.” She thumps at her chest to check if the pain is still ahead, and she starts coughing. Yup, not ready yet.

“You’ll be okay... I’ll see you through it.”

“See me through what?”

“Well, the best we can do now is make sure you don’t fall asleep at the wrong time... We’ll stay up for a couple of hours... I’ll give you some more herbs.”

“What time is it?” Her body was so confused that she couldn’t tell - and there were no windows in this room. She felt like they had been there for hours.

He closes an eye and looks like he’s thinking about it, “Around three.” It had become quiet in the Orb room, most people had left - many of them up to the garage room to spend the night there.

Quiet. Peace. Ark was smoking, lying on his back, waiting for her to start feeling anything different. He offered another blunt to her, but she turned it down, “It would only make me throw up at this point.”

More long silence. Maybe another hour passed.

She couldn't keep the silence for long, though. This man obviously knew something, and she wanted to know.

"Arthur was going to lead EESO..."

"That's right."

"Why would someone kill him?"

Arkion doesn't respond. He seems to be thinking, but Eysin is impatient. She starts bombarding him with more questions, "Someone else wanted to lead EESO? Someone wanted EESO to not have a leader? Why'd he say it could have been you?"

"They were good friends. Had nothing to do with him becoming some kind of leader. His death bothered him more than most, I guess."

"So, what do you think, happened?"

"I think... The one Daegan referred to was here for someone else... More people than that got killed that night - but strangely enough - everyone only speaks of Arthur. He just got in the way and didn't take proper precautions after. He died of yellow poisoning. Probably the sleep killed him, all the vomit just made it uglier."

Eysin started feeling sick, she tried to imagine what it must have looked like. She remembered she had seen Arthur's picture in a gossip newspaper at some point. The story was something ridiculous. Something that offered amusement to stray folk like herself. An arranged marriage deal between him and a Rozenbaer woman had gotten cancelled because the bride's older sisters had died. And the younger sister had been rearranged to Dux August. Now she imagined that handsome man dead, alone in his room, cold in his bed, full of puke.

She thumps her chest and tilts her head in surprise, it's done. "Hey uh, I don't think I need to be in here anymore..." She was looking towards the garage room door, longing to go to her room and get some privacy and maybe sleep.

Ark then takes a look towards her with the visor on and shakes his head. "No sleep yet... But you can come out if you like. Take some pinks with you just in case..." He picks up some for himself and checks again that his leg has healed.

Eysin climbs out from the pool and stretches. "Can I at least take the suit off, I'm tired of it..."

Ark, sitting on the floor, turns around on his ass to look in a different direction. Ss if she was about to do it right there, “doesn’t matter to me.”

“Not gonna change here, dummy,” Eysin starts walking up towards the garage door.

“You’ll go change and then come back here. I think Aag has occupied your room anyway.”

“So, we hang here for the rest of the night?”

Ark scratches his head, and thinks, “Dress for the outdoors.”

“Outdoors?”

He turns around again and looks at her, “When’s the last time you saw a good sunrise?”

CHAPTER NINE:

A Family of One

EYSIN SNOOPS around in her room, trying not to wake Agnes and others that have stayed overnight. Arkion passes the door and tells her he's going to the car to change, and that they should meet at the back when she's ready.

Feeling around in the dark, she finds where she had thrown some of her casual clothes. Puts on some pants and a shirt and a thin jacket. That's all she has. One other thing that she picks up is one of the rings she had left behind - the hiltless blade. She puts it on her left arm, where her latest find is, too, and remembers that she must have left the other one back at the docks. She had used it, trying to escape from Daegan...

Eysin sneaks out from the garage door and sees that it is starting to get light outside. It's cold and damp, the sky has occasional clouds drifting over it. It's peaceful - because many birds singing. It's springtime.

Eysin sees Arkion at the back of his car. The car looks like a muddy mess - the seawater had only stained the dust from the marketplace. The trunk of the car was open and he was trying to find something from it. He had changed into some trousers and a t-shirt, but he was shifting in it as if it was super uncomfortable.

He seems to find what he was looking at, then glances at approaching Eysin takes off his shirt and intends to switch it for another. "You're going to be cold like that," he says while whipping the uncomfortable shirt in the air. He'd forgotten to take it off the last time he was trimming his beard. Now it was full of tiny hairs that won't leave it. It had

felt super itchy.

“Well, my only jacket is now lost to Ceremony,” she didn’t seem to have anything else to wear. She stops a few meters from him and tries to make sense of the motives tattooed all over his upper body and arms. He stops whipping the shirt, throws it back in the trunk and takes another one from it. Pulls it on and appreciates the softness of it for a short moment.

“Okay, come here,” Arkion takes a jacket from the trunk and hands it to her, “I didn’t wear it yet.”

The jacket has EESO Expedition insignias on it. Eysin puts it on and can feel how in two points it hooks to her framework nodes. It’s a special jacket made especially for the expedition’s rough and volatile weather. It somehow adjusts itself to the wearer and the weather. Helps the wearer cool or warm up by assessing the temperatures. She gets it on and sees that it’s a little too big for her, but it’s very comfortable. So comfortable it makes her smile.

“Hey don’t like it too much, I’m going to have to take it back, later.” He picks for himself another, older jacket - a red bomber, puts it on and keeps looking for things. Eysin doesn’t dare to look into the trunk - she can see it’s a mess from the way he is looking for things in there.

“You were flashing your tattoos,” she comments while waiting for him to put on some more clothes and boots. “It looked very interesting, does it mean something?”

He seems a little absent-minded, “I’ll tell you all about it.” He pulls on the boots and then walks to the front of the car, taking something from between the front seats. A thermos. He returns to the trunk, takes a metal box, opens it and picks a small bag of herbs. Then he pours the whole bag of herbs into that warm water in the thermos. He takes a whiff of the calming steam and nods to himself. “I’m set, you’re set? We’re headed that way,” he points with his hand towards the forest. They were going to walk in the opposite direction to the temple.

* * *

So, they go, side-by-side, first they find a wide hiking road, and at a random spot, they take a left - walk over a thick, soft moss. Snails crack under their feet, and they express a bit of guilt on their faces every time it happens. On the trees and the moss, they can spot some hoarfrost. "Must have spiked cold tonight."

"While I was relaxing in a warm bath..."

"How are you feeling?" They slow down and try to spot snails before stepping on any. They almost stop and become so quiet that they can only hear the birds singing their morning rituals, now. They keep moving quieter and then encounter a crow, saying a long, ominous kraaaaks and then flies off.

"Pretty good, actually." She thought about noticing more details around her and being more present than usual. Her mind was calm and something prevented her from thinking about things in the usual, anxious way. She thought about it and she chuckled. She felt like she was tripping. And refused to think that this will come to an end, at some point. Maybe, while they are out there... The floodgates would open and the itchiest corners of her soul were going to make themselves acknowledged, again. "Is that why you hang with me?"

"That-why-what?" He had no idea. He picked up a herb joint from his pocket and lit it up. He wants to pass it to her, but she declines.

"I think I'm on some sort of a high right now... But considering what we've been through - that's going to pass. And I might not take it very well."

"You've been using the zerk for a while now. You should be more or less used to the fluctuations, ups and downs. Although yes, what you have experienced tonight may yet prove to be more traumatic. If you want to discuss that, I'm here now... If later, pick it up with Vinu, I'm sure he'll find some time for you." He stops and raises his arm to have Eysin stop walking too. "Look at that," he whispers.

Eysin looks in the direction Arkion is pointing at, but nothing stands out, at first. Only when Arkion mentions a deer, the shape draws itself out for her. Indeed, there is a quite majestic deer nibbling on the

branches of young pine. Not wanting to disturb it, they take a few steps back. Arkion finishes the smoke, then pours some tea from the thermos and offers it to Eysin.

They stand still, drink, and appreciate the surroundings. "We're going to go on a platform, I hope we can make it there for the sunrise."

* * *

They reach a large wooden viewing platform. They climb the stairs to the top. There's a solid roof above their heads, and they can lean on the edges. The sky is already changing colours, it's getting lighter, the stars, wherever they could be seen between the clouds, stop shining... There are tall pines below them, stretching in every direction - and further ahead - there's the sea.

The mist and moisture in the air, the smell of pines, clouds - moving away faster and faster. The sky comes to life with light, and the first beam shot right at them from the farthest edge sea. How the beams come and go, playing with the tops of the trees, creating shadows which in turn play with the mist. Tiny ice crystals from the cold pinch at night create a glitter above it all.

A show of superb witchcraft, why has no one shown me this before?

She forgets she's there and stays alone with the show. She's warm in the jacket, but still feels cold and shivers. Excited, she remembers being lost, confused and very lonely - but now - that piece of nature in front of her - is welcoming her into her arms.

I wish... I wish I belonged here. No longer do I wish that I belonged anywhere - it has to be here. And as soon as Eysin thinks that, she's afraid this place, too, would reject her - she's not what this place needs her to be. Like any other, she fears that either she will fall short or the place will impose a role on her that she is uncomfortable with.

The travel companion notices that she weeps, maybe having a good moment or a bad one. He'd seen all this before, he grew up around these parts - to him - this was normal. Yet, he did think now - the times he had to wake up in Reval. No access to this particular tower, or the shore, or the other better places there on Oeselia. He'd felt out of place. Reval

made him irritable. “Hey, Eysin, you okay?”

It bursts her bubble but she pretends there never was one. She’s about to wipe her tears into the sleeves and then remembers she’s wearing someone else’s jacket. So she wipes her face with her hands. “It’s a good place,” she likes it.

“Yeah...” He pours the remaining half from the thermos into cups and shares it with her.

* * *

“Why must you smoke so many of these?” She assumed he was addicted. His image looked like it – the tattoos didn’t help.

“I damaged my framework some while ago, couldn’t remember how to get into trance, so I abused it a bit to get out of a pinch. The herbs help heal it.” He wouldn’t be offering those to her, otherwise. The little damage the yellow has been having on her can be helped, too.

The yellow could turn ugly. Most people don’t use it during matches because they get very hideous cramps. Eysin felt her face cramped, but it didn’t distract her from the game. Other people had it worse.

“You come here often?” She asks.

“I like a good view... Here, or over the villages further east... There’s another platform – if you look carefully you could see it from here. But on that other platform – the village lights play at night. And some strange light plays in the forest, some friendly phenomenon, a strange anomaly...”

“You prefer to do this by yourself?”

“No, it’s always better with the company.”

“I might interrupt your dreaming...”

“That’s alright,” he smiles.

“Who do you come here with at some other time, then?”

He seems to think back – the last person he hung out here with, on one of those mornings – was Daegan. It had been the very morning Eysin first saw the Titan. They had not talked much, just a bit of this and that about the expedition, and how the last run had been for him. The expedition was rough even with these many comforts.

He had confessed to Daegan that he was not particularly happy to go and now repeated these very words to Eysin. "But if I stayed, I'd have to do something even more annoying. Compared to which... This expedition is going to be like a cute field trip to the wild. "

"What's the alternative?"

"I'd have to go back to Reval..." He smiles, "Hired guard duty for the Rozenbaers and Dux August." His smile seems bitter.

"You're working closely with RESO, then?"

"To an extent..."

"How come I never saw you around? I was in RESO."

"I've never been to their HQ... I was mostly around their house and the Black Rain..."

"You hate Reval so much that you'd rather go out there into the cold to freeze your balls off?"

He shrugs, turns out so. "I'm extending my break from Reval as long as possible."

"You were going to tell me about the tattoos," she reminds him.

He seems to think about it for a bit, looks into the distance, then looks at Eysin and nods. "Listen, it's a long story. A long story."

"Do you want to tell me or not? Is it a secret?"

"Some of it is, some of it isn't... The images, the ink, the story - they are not mine, you see. So, there are two stories - one in ink, the other the reason I even got them..." He starts rolling another joint.

"Hey, how many of you do these a day?"

"Plenty good for magnetics..." He says.

"Roasting your brains and lungs..."

"Hey, it's not that dramatic..."

"I don't know if I should keep pressing for an answer..."

"Ten years back, maybe more," he starts, eyes locked on the blunt he was rolling. "I went to this old artist. And when I say old - she was OLD, ma'am. I told her, give me a personality," he smiles, he'd been itching to tell a story. "Most people I brought back here from Reval when the eco-terrorist group was over. They never knew who I was... And most of them still don't. And I don't dislike it because I want people to know. I dislike it because I could never connect with any of them. What I do has been bothering me - and maybe you can understand."

“Ecoterror group... That was before I came to Reval. The disappearance of that group was the reason I judged Reval to be safe enough to go,” she smiles. “You were involved with that?”

“I was,” he nodded, “and some other Eesians, too. We were a lot fewer back in the day, but a considerable force. We infiltrated the group in Reval, got our way up, chopped off the before things would have gotten out of hand.”

“They were out of hand... Thousands of locals were being trafficked.” Eysin thought that part of the business was the most despicable one.

“The traffickers come from elsewhere. Big groups just tend to lend them a hand... You should know that better than most, Jolie Rouge.”

“You’re now referring to why you think I will understand you...” That name was now like a morning alarm to her.

“We have somewhat similar experiences. And there is something about that experience that still bothers me. And you may have figured it out.” He’s done rolling the blunt, lights it up, and this time, when he passes, Eysin accepts it.

She smokes it, looks at it, and looks way more serious now. “What exactly bothers you about it?”

“Maybe it’s a stupid thought,” Arkion says, still looking into the distance. “But I could never really reflect on it, I never knew anyone who might have the slightest idea. How to deceive a bunch of people and then sleep sound after.”

Eysin felt a pang of hollowness inside as he said that. A thorn in her throat, she smoked some more, and thought about the feeling, looking into the same distance as he was. “She had joined a company under false pretences. People did attempt to pull her into their social circles. She did join their parties and did her very best to make them feel she was in it for real. “I remained very generic with them, with the boss. But I could be more of myself with the background operation. I was completely naked to those I worked with - Erika, Cleo, Ralph. There indeed was a time I shared with Erika every thought I got. I fell in love with one of my fake co-workers and she knew about it. The fake co-worker affair was also something that helped me keep my cover. The crook boss concentrated on that and not the fact that I wasn’t there, in his company as who I presented that I was. He pointed out so many flaws

in me..." She had known it was all bullshit, but it got to her, regardless.

"You had someone to talk to, through your operation... That's good, I guess."

"I don't think I could have pulled it off at all if that was the case for me. The group - and what we were aiming to do - that all helped justify the fake shit I was doing." Apart from breaking the heart of that guy. She liked him a lot but had to leave him behind. He was a good guy, just a little clueless about the dark shit under the hood of the company... "I tried my best to not hurt anyone else. But The Red Flag Group did trouble my sleep for a long while - just not because of the... Deception I engaged in."

"What was the trouble?"

She clenches her jaws and presses her lips together, she doesn't want to weep about that. She can feel that Arkion is looking at her, now. She looks back, and he looks curious. There was a nostalgia for this situation. "You look at me the same way Erika was looking at me," she clenches her jaw again and looks into the distance. She sniffs but holds the weep in. "I trusted everything to her because I believed she was genuinely interested in me like another human being. I saw us as a pack. She had all this... Emotional information on me, and what do you think she did?"

"She betrayed you." he knew the story, to some extent.

They stand and stare into the distance for a minute or few. Eysin tracks the story back to where Arkion had left it off. He had trouble with his deceit. "You had no one to talk about it. Even if they ended up betraying you with all that information in the end - the sounding board must have helped."

"Possibly." He looks at her as if trying to assess whether he should tell or not. "You were asking about the tattoo... I was told to get the tattoo so I would blend in better. Strays get tattoos, so, they suggested I get one to make them think I am one."

"Strays get tattoos, but not expensive ones like that," she pointed out right away.

"Yeah, in fact, another person pointed this out to me back then. But she was an ally. And it was fine - you wouldn't believe how many house people were at the movement.

Anyway, the old lady artist who did this first asks me if there was

anything in particular that I wanted. I was impartial, so she proposed this picture by herself.

It had been a piece of work she had dreamt of inking on someone for a long while. So, for the next few weeks that I was visiting her, she was telling me some stories as she was putting them on me.

The stories of these beautiful creatures and the curious servant and a king. The odd selection of these stories had come to her with her bloodline. She said these three main stories are meant to be told in such order to demonstrate in full a very certain natural property.

How fragile, strong or thriving things are in the face of the stress of time.” He points to the lines drawn on his neck and pulls the neck of the shirt enough to show that all the lines end with swords. “Damocles’s sword portrays the meaning of fragility. Phoenix,” he pulls up the sleeve of his left hand, revealing a part of a flaming plume, motives of smoke and ashes, “the undying, persistent. And the Hydra,” he pulls up the other sleeve, revealing motives of water, waves, a tsunami, scales, and the limb of a dragon, “things that require stress to grow.”

“You cut off the head of the dinosaur and many will grow in place.”

“I remember her stories, she told them well. And these stories I will remember for my whole life. But they have no personal significance to me.”

“Apart from the reason you got them for. The adventure that followed.”

“Yeah, that is the other part of the story, but I’m going to leave that for another time.”

“Am I untrustworthy or you’re just trying to keep me hooked?”

“I believe,” he responded, thinking about it a bit, “I live in a world where trust is possible. There’s a lot I’d like to share. Not just like - I think we humans need this sort of thing. A sort of a reality check, to see if my experiences and thoughts check out or are completely nuts.”

The weather is picking up in speed. The wind is cold. Blows right into their faces.

“Wish I could help you with your deceit-sleep problem. I guess our operations were too different, after all.”

“But you did help... Our being may be good at deception doesn’t necessarily make us bad people. The way your experience differed from mine seemed to be the missing link. Even though I see that despite having

confidantes at the time - it didn't turn out too well. And our operations weren't different in ways that matter. Both our targets were exploiting lost people. I didn't or don't care much for the other goods they traded." The cocaine, sugar and spirits - municipalities can get even worse than that. "How'd you get tangled up in it anyway?"

"There is a possibility that I and other people like me could get trafficked, that I could not stand. I was in a position to take down a very large local node from their global operations. At the time, it looked like no one else was going to do it for me. My safety was under threat. I didn't do it for others. I did it to prove... That I live in a world where someone can and will do something to keep people like me safe. What EESO had done back then inspired me. But this time around, I bet not even EESO could know what was going on. These organizations seem to grow smarter and smarter. These fuckers are like your dinosaur tattoo - chop off their head, and they grow a smarter one, in place."

All the world's trade routes were dirty. Large cities got infested with their crimes. Only when the cities had a strong presence of some more or less moral actors. They kept their operations small, and just to pass by, they were forced to pay a large fee. Currently, the Headmaster of Reval Underground was such a tax collector.

In her head, she went back to Reval and thought about the Headmaster. "There's no way the Headmaster will let our people have their tongues cut out and the backs of their feet riddled with glass. But I am uncomfortable with how she's been growing. She's reaching a size good enough for those operations. And she has a terrifyingly strong grip over Reval - she can lock down the city within minutes if she needs to..."

"You've met her, too?" Arkion is curious. And the way Eysin seems to want to not respond indicates she might even know her well. "She has offered you a job..."

Eysin sighs. She doesn't know if she could trust this man, some Exo in EESO, but she does want to say, does want to test her ideas like Arkion himself wished to do. "I've had an open invitation for three years now, which I never intended to accept. I know she would take good care of me, she has helped me out before. But I also have quite a good idea what working for her would do to me."

The way Arkion looks at her now has completely changed. She's

not as green as she had seemed to him. Despite knowing some details about her Jolie Rouge life - it started to look like this rabbit hole went a whole lot deeper.

She looks at him and smiles, "She has complimented my skills as a tactician. And that was all before this! Based on my work with the Red Flag Group, she said she loves the way I think, and act... What would she say when she saw me now?"

"Yeah. You've become quite dangerous," he nods, but approvingly. "You think she'd make you kill people?"

"I'd become a happy little butcher..." Her tone turns bitter. "I'd be more than happy to serve a purpose with my rather exotic skills. And counting on what seems to be happening all around us, I am a little confused about what I should do." It's all been at the back of her head, but she has not had anyone to talk to about this all. Finally, there seemed to be a man who is ready to do that.

She takes a breath, thinks, and lets out the first part, "I'm afraid it won't be too long before my tasks go from indirectly harming the region's enemies to directly harming or harassing someone who may be nothing more but a mild discomfort to an ally that pays us well."

Arkion thinks along, understands, nods and starts rolling another blunt.

"I believe Vinu Laos is a good man and I would never see such a turn of events under his hand and rule. But I also have a feeling his rule won't outlast me. However wonderful EESO may have been in the past, up until now - it seems to me it's suffocating."

"You nearly got killed by someone you trusted to be your teacher," he says. "It bothers me, as well."

And it bothers her. She tears up a little. She had not expected Daegan to behave this way. And worst of all - the pain she was feeling from that betrayal was a familiar one. One that threatened her that she can never trust anyone to be on her side again. She looks at her hands, they are shaking. She's trying not to start to cry. "I'd love to be loyal. To whatever Vinu stands for, what EESO stood for, but does anyone else..."

"Within the last couple of years," Arkion finishes rolling it, but doesn't light it, sets it aside, between himself and Eysin, "it's all turned into a business. As our power and reach grew, so did people's interest in it.

So, your intuition is correct - EESO, the houses here, hell - the whole federation is crumbling. I can completely understand the urgency to pick a side. Reval Underground, as long as the Headmaster is in charge - will turn up pretty well."

Eysin nods, they have ties to most parts of the world, "I serve her for a while, and earn a card to anywhere I want."

"Where would you like to go?"

"I remember seeing a good picture book of Sri Lanka. They had a collection of incredible ancient trees. The weather is pleasant. Men who had gone there said they did quite well even as homeless. And yes, I am aware that this won't be the case for a woman, but maybe I could earn enough for a small home... Or meet someone who'd love to go with me." After a bit of contemplation she seems to change her mind about it, "But if you were to present to me this option right now... You say that we can get in the car right now and go off to Sri Lanka..."

"You don't want to go..." He understood - had she wanted something like that, she would never have joined EESO. She'd be serving Reval Underground, working for it. Sri Lanka was a dream, a postcard, and not a serious desire. "It's a lovely option, but she can't offer you what you desire."

"What I desire doesn't matter much, does it? I have to pick a side, and not just for the shit weather, but to remain loyal. No escape from it. Now, the only question that remains - what kinds of concessions am I willing to make, choosing a side."

"What other sides are you considering?" Arkion picks up and plays with the blunt. Gently knocks it on the handrail, and then puts it back. Not yet.

"I sent an application to RESO before I joined the gladiator guild. But it has the same worse parts as EESO. It's becoming the same company... Just that their location is more populated. Which is a bonus."

"You'd choose Reval over this?" Arkion takes another look at the magical forest below them. They both take it in for a minute.

"I feel that this place is no less hostile than Reval was. But from Reval, at least I have some good memories. Andre had no problems getting to know me better, and he let me pretty close, too. I felt great in his company, and now I miss it. I'm afraid I'll never find something quite like it again."

"I don't think any relationships between two people can be replicated between others. But who's to say you won't do something great here?"

"There are over a thousand times more people in Reval," Eysin explains herself, "this means I am more likely to find someone for myself there..."

"You are also more likely to run into some complete dickheads, there."

"Look, I don't feel safe here." Currently, Reval seemed like the safer option of the two.

"Listen, Daegan has completely betrayed your trust. What he has done broke my heart, too." He looked a little helpless, now, and I can't stay to help you sort it out, either.

Eysin looks at the insignias on her jacket sleeves, "You're set to go on the expedition. Which sucks... I thought we were getting somewhere."

"I thought so, too." He smiles, but feels a sting in his throat and then quickly picks up the blunt and lights it to conceal the grimace.

Followed a silent minute.

"So, here's what I thought," Eysin continues, "I don't feel safe here, EESO doesn't feel reliable in a crisis - and one is coming. And the one guy I'd give a second look at is leaving!"

Arkion snickers. He took it for the fun intended compliment it was.

She doesn't let him comment, so she continues her rant, "My prospects here are slim and of little interest to me. Sure, I'd love to work on the swarm and tinker with the other toys, but I will get pulled into some war or vendetta shit. And possibly die for some cause I had no business dying for." She tears up again, "Here I'll die alone and childless."

Another silent minute. Eysin was thinking about what she had just said. Something she'd never said out loud before. At the bottom of all things, she had refused to admit to herself throughout all these years. *I'm afraid I'll never find love, a family and bear children. End of the line.*

He stretches the silence on his part, holds in the smoke and thinks about what she had been talking about, too. He looks into the distance and tries to see what exact parts of it seem familiar to him. "I could love you," he says with a shrug.

"Based on what, the total of... 10 hours we spent?" Eysin feels a little insulted. He's tossing around something she had had a very difficult time admitting to.

“Eysin, I trained you for months.” He wasn’t supposed to reveal that, but it felt like it could help. “I know what you’re like when you’re agitated. When you’re extremely agitated. I’ve seen you break down, I’ve seen you mildly upset with yourself, or others. And I can also recall you laughing at yourself with ease. You’re fun to be around. We played, I remember every single match. Now, there are plenty of things I don’t know about you, yet. Which is why I hope you’ll still be here when I return. I’d like to get to know you a little better. We can drive around, and dig our hands in some dirt somewhere. We’ll have many suppers and lunches around the same table.”

She shuts her mouth and looks elsewhere. Confused about whether she had misunderstood his initial comment or misinterpreting everything he is saying now. This became unbelievably uncomfortable for her. She wanted it to mean one thing but feared that it most likely means another. But another realization made it all irrelevant anyway, *he was one of the Exos that trained us. They never took off their masks, so I couldn’t have known.* She realizes who it is.

“Arkion... Earlier you asked me how come my zerk is so advanced.”

He’s a little surprised by the change of topic.

“It’s like this because I copied it from you.”

“What do you mean you copied it?” A few more ideas hit his head at once, and now he somehow understood how Eysin had managed to enter trance so early in her training. The complex yet eerily familiar pathways, all of it. “A framework needs to be built from the ground up,” he seems to be protesting, “how can someone else’s specs and programming even work on you?”

“Well, most of it didn’t. You have a very impressive weapons collection, indeed - but I couldn’t get my hands on any of it.”

“Of course, you need the rings,” he’s trying to comprehend the news.

“I could create new rings, but I couldn’t replicate any of your weapons - and oh, believe me, I tried. Most of the pathways that I got from you remain unused - they will fade out over time, and be repurposed when I trigger the growth of my own. At the time I had no idea about the trance - or whether there are other... Universal skills that I should be aware of.”

A few other functions ought to be accessible for her. The trance, crisis,

synergy link, stonesskin. “The Arsenal is a library, you’re going to have to populate it with your weapons. I have a collection. Yes, they are bound to specific arm rings that I have collected over time.” He raises his left arm and shows, he is carrying 8 rings, “what you collect and build, only you can use. How did you copy my framework?”

“It’s a technique I developed...”

“Is it difficult?”

“I’ve been asked to not share any of this. I wasn’t supposed to tell any of this to you.”

“Okay, got it...” He seems bothered by it. He has suspected it had been something along those lines, but he didn’t know to what extent such a copy would be possible. She had cracked a big secret - he knew it was possible, now, and she couldn’t elaborate any further. “Vinu knows this...”

“Yes.”

The air suddenly gets cold and unwelcoming. A sign that the best part about the sunrise must be over.

He finishes his blunt in a sulking manner. “Listen, I gotta start moving soon, I hate to end this here, but we’ve got to head back.”

* * *

They walk back towards the temple. They both keep quiet for a while, a little hunched, struck by a negative surprise. Eysin shook her head to get it off and tracked back to what Arkion was talking about before she told him about the copy.

“Why tell all this only now? I saw you around a couple of times, and you looked like someone who never even noticed me.”

Arkion stretches up again, a welcoming change of topic, to his mind. He tilts his head and chuckles to himself.

“Safer now that you don’t have to follow it up, huh?” Eysin teases, she wants a real answer.

He doesn’t blush, but the confused expression on his face is quite informative, “I wanted to, but I really couldn’t figure out how to best approach you.”

Eysin laughed and tackled with her side into him, “Really? What did you think, that I’d tell you to piss off?”

He puts an arm around her and rubs her cold side, making it a little warmer, “I couldn’t come up with an excuse.”

“An excuse? Hey, how about - I’ll take you to town, we’re going on a date!” Eysin roars. She does blush, but her expression is rather amused, not cute.

“Thought I had to make up some other excuse. I couldn’t figure out what interested you, you know...”

“Hmm, I might have an excuse for asking you, actually,” Eysin stops and steps out from his gentle hold. “The Arsenal was yours, so. You know a lot about the weapons, then...” Eysin takes her 2 rings and turns them into weapons. The hiltless blade and the pole. She hands them to Arkion who then takes a good look.

“Beautiful markings, these are old stuff. Where did you get these?”

“Long ago from home. Mistook them for regular silver bracelets.”

He looked at her, smiled, and then looked back at the weapons, weighing and inspecting one and the other. “These have pirate origins, the handwriting of these inscriptions. From before anyone settled back in these parts, just at the start of the Eesian boom. You have something legendary,” he takes the two pieces and clips them together, “it’s a shifter polearm that belonged to a pirate lord. The forefathers of this place had travelled with him because he had a rare gift.” He points to a part of the inscriptions on the pole, “Nebula, they liked being friends with this Pirate because he could call the shrouds. They travelled with a thick mist around, so the other seafarers would not have the possibility to attack them. Why did you have these at your home?”

“They were just bracelets in a jewellery box,” she took them when they started sharing around the whole lot of nothing her mother left behind when she died.

“Three...”

Eysin raises her arm, with the third ring, “I haven’t cracked that one yet. You think there is a 3rd part to the weapon?”

“No, nothing indicates that,” he hands the weapon back to her, “it’s a shifting polearm - it means if you gain better control, you can also control the form, the shape it has.”

She cannot resist giving it a silly swing around for a few swipes, “Could you teach me to use these, when you come back?”

“Well, first of all, you hold it badly, and if you want to swing it like that, you make the pole shorter, and scale the blade for best balance... I’m not an expert in polearms... But I’ll play with you any time you like.”

She calls them back in and then they keep walking.

“Your weapons had names.”

“As does yours.”

“I must have missed it.”

“Blindside.”

* * *

They get back to Arkion’s car and walk up to the trunk, he opens it, and Eysin throws in the jacket.

They both feel a little upset. Arkion takes off his red jacket and puts it on Eysin. “Lost yours to Ceremony, expect there will be a little more cold weather coming, maybe this helps.”

She accepts it, puts it warm and cosies herself up. It smells of herbs. It smells like him. And it amuses her, makes her smile. He then takes the man’s hands into hers and leans to give a kiss on his cheek. He seems a little surprised. Blushing, even, she then steps away and takes a step towards the temple, planning to go see if she can go sleep somewhere.

“Hey, listen...” He stops her, and walks up to her, holding his metal box of herbs and looking a little lost. “I can put a word in if you want to go to RESO. You can expect another offer from them in a few weeks.”

Eysin opens her mouth to say something, but he stops her, “No, that’s not all, let me speak. If you want to return to Reval, you will be free to do so, and I wish you all the best. RESO, Reval Underground – I’m sure they offer you some nice options. Now, let me offer another from EESO, then.” He picks up her hands and holds them gently like she had held them just before, “how did you like Andre?”

He had been the best damn teacher she could never even dream of, “I loved him. As a teacher. As a person, he was a little... Hmm, quirky.”

“I know what you mean.” He remembers and it makes him chuckle.

Andre would have made a hilarious clown. He was often very funny when he didn't mean to be. "Andre was my teacher, too, for a very long time. And he was also a teacher to Atlas." He looks up and thinks how to phrase this, "Atlas is the man who will one day when Bratka feels he is ready, lead the Brotherhood. I am telling you about him because one option I'd like to offer to you has to do with him. He happens to be a big fan of polearms. Go to him, and he will teach you, and you will see that he is as enjoyable as a teacher as Andre was."

Eysin feels a little pressurized. She liked the polearm, and the magical story Arkion told her about it - made her even a little curious about how it had ended up in her mother's jewellery box. But some part of her had already gone back to Reval. Gone back to doing something that has nothing to do with weapons or war. To program children's toys or something. "I want to go back, I felt safe there, and I don't feel safe here," she whispers, trying to disguise her upsetness with a smile.

"I swear, you are free to go and do as you, please. I will have a word and make sure you will have all the freedom to make yourself feel safe and liberated from all this, as you wish. Just hear out my offer, okay?"

"You are trying to convince me to stay, and I don't like it," a whispering protest on her end. She had a difficult time believing what he was saying was genuine. Daegan and Erika were up and about in her mind and heart, hurting.

"What I said before was not some joke, I wish you felt you belong here."

"Why don't you spell out the offer and we'll go our merry ways?" She loosens up a little, understanding that she is still free to opt out and that he is offering her the freedom to leave, too - even ready to help her do it, "I go learn under Atlas?"

"You do that just to pass time," he smiles, "you do whatever interests you here, I just thought the pole-arm suited you." He has a hard time getting out the words he wanted to say, too. So, they just stand there, holding hands and a metal box filled with herbs. He's in though, searching for something to encourage her to stay... He had a vague idea of what would work, but he didn't want to do that. It seemed a little... Deceptive. "Try another year," he said, finally, "stick close to Sylrissa, make friends with Atlas. He has fun dogs... And children, he's a good family man, and he will accept you into it if you are serious about

learning. I think you would like it.”

She responds just to get over it. “Okay, I’ll consider it.”

He smiles in response and now looks at the metal box in his hand. He gently shoves it into Eysin’s, “It’s good tea. I’m not going to be able to take them with me, because some of them have some effects... But you can enjoy them here. I’ll make more when I come back.”

Eysin takes the box into her hand, another still held in Arkion’s. “That’s a long-winded goodbye, huh?”

“Could be the last time I see you.”

“Yeah, it could be.”

Arkion playfully pulls her slightly closer and gives her a little kiss on her mouth. She doesn’t seem very surprised by it, they are equally amused, but she quickly turns her back anyway.

“Hey, if I crossed some line...”

Eysin turns again to interrupt him, she smiles, “You didn’t. But what if, indeed?” She looks him in the eye, and he appears to be blushing.

“I’ll take a slap in the face now, rather than a knife in the back, later.”

“Is this your philosophy?” She turns to head towards the temple, holding onto his box and wearing his old jacket, now intending to get some rest. “If so, I’m glad this is how we roll here.”

“I’ll see you in,” Arkion says, locking his car again.

“Hold the line, mister, that’s fine, I can find my way.”

“It’s not the way I’m worried about.” He chuckles, he wasn’t going to send her in with any other ideas.

“So, what worries you?”

“You have lived through a traumatic night, Eysin. You shouldn’t be left alone. I’m taking you to Sylrissa and tasking each of you to look out for each other. Is that fine with you?”

CHAPTER TEN:

I Could Leave

AFTER A few days, the temple was cleared out of all the people. Eysin and Sylrissa had returned to Ceremony when Imogen had summoned them, asking if they could still salvage anything of the remaining parts of the Titans that were blown up. “Maybe you can make out what happened here?”

Eysin picks up a shard that once was part of the dome of the titan, and weighs in it her hand, “I should be able to get something from here. If not to make out what happened, at least find some fixes... The Titan in the Temple is about fixed. Could I also get some piece from the other one?”

They walk their way through the park and back to the Pits Terratorium wall. A large hole had blown into it. They could see into the Pits from where they stood. It was all full of sand and dust. People were in there, trying to clean up and see if they can get it back to work.

Looking around, the atmosphere was pretty grim. It was still that time in Spring when trees were sleeping. Now the one bit - the grass, that had been green - was covered in muck, too. But the weather that day was spectacular - the sky was speckless, and the sun was intense. They could feel how it was roasting their skins.

“Wonder if that’s what it looked like back in the start of A.C.E...”

A large-scale experiment had gone wrong - someone came up with an idea to put a lot of chalk in the air, attempting to dim out the sunlight. Had the swarm come around sometime earlier, this could never have happened. The experiment took an unexpected turn, and the chalk in

the air turned into a strange kind of blob. The whole region became a lifeless spot of muck.

And it had been the worms that turned the tides here - they'd gone to Siberia and sprouted a very fertile forest, a very large patch - this, in turn, started gathering a lot of water, and finally, that water came back to this region, rained down - very heavy rain - and washed all the muck away. Nature was healing, people could return.

Then this whole swarm and lockdown thing started - twice, every year, no one can walk outside, 2 weeks in the spring, 4 weeks in the autumn. And another one of those was going to start within the next week.

"We're staying in the mansion near the Temple this year," Imogen comments, "you guys are welcome to join if you like," she tells Sylrissa and Eysin.

"Who else is going to be there?" Sylrissa had a very specific person in mind, and Imogen must have guessed what that was about.

"Well, yeah, Bartel will be there."

"And there's your answer. Eysin, you can still go, if you want to."

Eysin was looking around the ground, trying to pick the best piece for the job. She wasn't paying attention to what they were talking about. "Nah, I'm good," she mumbled.

"It'll be fun, we have a whole programme worked out for the 2 weeks!"

"Oh, for the lockdown?" She stopped looking for the piece, looked at Imogen and weighed whether she wanted to get involved in some programme. She knew there'd probably be really good food, because before they met with Imogen, she had met some pirates, and these pirates were bringing in some exotic foods. There would probably be some music and talking, a warm bed to sleep at, and drugs and alcohol. "Nah, I think I wanna work on the Titan..."

"Then we'll stay in the Temple, together," Sylrissa picks up some piece and shows it to Eysin. "This any good?"

"This looks perfect."

"Well, then you better get out from here now, no one can know I gave these to you. If you can, please, find out who else besides Daegan was here - because it took two to do this... And still, if you guys happen to change your mind about the lockdown, you're still invited. I promise you, the food will be great!"

* * *

A few hours later, Eysin and Sylrissa have made it back to the Temple, they are setting up the garage for work, stacking up on some canned food. Sylrissa also insists on bringing some candles and some extra nice soft blankets - so, she disappears for another hour and brings them. When she returns she offers some of her stuff to Eysin, and she accepts.

The blanket is fantastic, so soft and pleasant. But she didn't return alone. Half an hour later, from the other side of the temple - he must have walked through the whole thing - Vinu Laos appears.

He does a slow lap around the garage room, looks around, thinking of something, knocks on the Titan and then stands in front of the door. He was happy to see that it was fixed. "Did you know, I was the one who broke it?" He said, meant for Eysin to hear.

Eysin hadn't noticed he was there, she got startled for a bit, then stood and attended to him. "How did you break it?"

"Took my hand away too soon. When I put it back, it wouldn't move anymore. Some strange bug. It was this way for a long while. It's good that it's fixed now." He fell back into thought, took a look at Eysin, nodded for a greeting, and finished the slow lap around the room. "I heard you were interested in returning to Reval, Eysin."

"Uh..."

Sylrissa pokes her head out of her room, sees him, heard what he had just said, and then raises her eyebrows in surprise. Vinu nods for a greeting, "good to see you," he says.

But Sylrissa puffs up her cheeks and blows out some air, and returns to her room. A strange situation. Vinu only seems amused about it.

"Come, Eysin, we have a walk, and we'll talk about it."

* * *

"Some while ago you applied back to RESO."

"Yes, sir..." She was now afraid that he might interpret this application as a betrayal.

“Well, they need someone with your skills, and they are offering you a position with a considerable paycheck. I thought it best if I handed it over to you in person... Because I have something to say to you, too.”

And because Vinu had said it with a kind smile, Eysin felt delighted at the offer, even before she had opened to read it or see what else undesirable terms there would be in there... She felt like she had won the lottery - and she got the offer she had so far only wished for herself.

“I wished for it!” She cheers, unexpectedly.

Vinu is a little confused by this reaction, he was about to say something else but now got a little confused. They walk down the stairs around the orb room, and he doesn't speak until they have reached ground level. He is curious, “What's there for you in Reval, Eysin? Did I take you away from something that you held dear, and now wish to go back?”

Eysin stops and tries to understand what he was asking. They stand near the edge of the pool, eyes gazing towards the Orb, but not really looking at it. Eysin was trying to make sense of the answer she was going to give. “If things have changed in RESO, and I, a stray am a welcome sight, there... I'll take that generic life over what I have been going through, here. I don't think I fit in here, sir.”

“It hasn't even been a year, yet. It can't happen fast,” he jumps to defend. But then realizes he shouldn't - he should let her speak. Ask questions, dummy, don't sell.

“It's true... It has not been such a long time. Now, after the events on Ceremony, however.” She stopped thinking, held her breath, and turned her sights on Vinu, and the old man was looking at her, curious and worried. “This place isn't safe for me, not the way I am. I wish I could remain loyal to house Atelbaer and all that - but alone - I don't think it's possible. In Reval, I'd be an independent contributor, on a salary, in their closed town, safe...”

He wanted to point out that no place was safe anymore, and that at least here she could build herself up for the threats that are coming - he wanted to point out that Reval was not going to be unaffected by any conflicts that come, and the safety she felt in the menial work of Reval guilds was only illusory. Beautifully decorated walls, fake plants and smiling managers did nothing more but distract people's attention away

from what was happening underground, on the sea, over the sea, and in central Evropa. It was going to catch up with them - and those hiding in the comforts, fragilizing their bones with this terrible processed food would possibly be the first to die.

She did feel uncomfortable and anxious. And she hated that she had to justify her position now. She just couldn't put her finger on it - the way things were, felt wrong. "I just don't feel safe here. I think I will do better in Reval." She was getting a little upset but did her best to keep herself from crying or yelling.

Vinu saw and understood the struggle just well. She wasn't the first person he was having this same conversation with. His kind smile returned - it had always worked when there was a need to make a person feel more at ease. A genuine smile, the warmth of the heart, and sometimes even light jokes. But he didn't find an opportunity for a joke - and it would have seemed inappropriate anyway - she had confessed she fears she won't fit in.

"I was going to ask you to stay, because we need you, here. You took it all in so well... You integrated with the technology, like a natural. You discovered techniques unknown to any of us before... And there surely is a lot more to come... You can surprise us... And I sincerely do hope - that we can surprise you, too."

What she heard, strangely strangled her soul. It felt uncomfortable to keep eye contact. So, she looked away and put some distance between herself and Vinu. She walked closer to the pool, and sat down, putting her toes into the water. She tried to repeat in her head what he had been saying. It had been unexpected.

And when she went through it once again, she felt it less like a strangling and more like a hug. Emotionally, this was a completely new experience for her, she didn't know what to make of it or how to act. It also made her cry, so she kept sitting near the water, put her hands in her face and processed it for a while.

Vinu sat on the stairs and let her go through what she needed to go through.

"This place, compared to Reval, is very up close and personal," she said through sniffs and wiping her nose and face. "It is very intense."

Yes, nothing like that in Reval. Everything and everyone is generic, it has

become an expectation – the larger the town, the organization, the guild – the more generic they expect you to act. And this genericness also was like a safety shield. You can't bother anyone with your true personality, or quirks if you act, talk and operate the way everyone else does it.

“You in Reval is a waste,” he says. “I don't expect you to change anything about what you do to fit in here. From what I've seen – you are a good person, and we need more good people, okay?”

Eysin thought these people are unusually adamant about this. She'd thought about her last interactions with Arkion, too. Not for a second did she believe this man had been sincere with her. *Why was he trying to convince me to stay?* “What are you getting out of this?”

He could have said this has nothing to do with his interests, but arguing against having any in her alliance would have made it seem like a lie. He crosses his arms, looks up and seems to think for a while. “You were interested in the Swarm, yes?”

“I've been trying to look into it, but it's expensive.”

“And if you figure out what you wanted to figure out under EESO sponsorship, you would share that knowledge with me, is that correct?”

“Sure, I would, but there are no guarantees I will ever figure anything out. I know I can read them with a blue, but I need to test things, I need to build some kind of a device... But experimenting with the blue is difficult, and it's expensive. I earned some in the tournament, sure, but... The rudimentary device I have made just sucks it all up and accounts for nothing more than a fart in the wind.”

“And you still ask what I'm getting out of this?”

“I don't guarantee you any good news, Vinu. What's that worth?”

“More than enough. I'd rather you do it here and with us – regardless of the outcome. What can I do to make you feel safer here, then?”

She did not like that question at all. Right now she just wanted to go back to Reval, dust off her tiny apartment, and forget about all this. Her sigh expressed it accurately.

It made Vinu a little impatient. “You integrated here, bit by bit, not too much novelty at a time – make sure you can handle it. But this event must have knocked you out of whack. Now – you're not so sure anymore. I can understand that. You are not the first person to be in a similar situation.”

“Did you convince all the others who were, to stay?”

“Sadly, no. I can’t convince for shit. I can offer what I have to offer, and you’ll either be satisfied with it or not. It looks like you need some kind of security.”

“That’s right...”

“How can Reval offer you that security?”

“The shielded city will keep me safe, I won’t go looking for trouble.”

This conversation wasn’t going in a productive direction, “Okay, look, you will be free to go to Reval, we won’t bother you anymore, but the price for that - you hear me out and think about it. Okay?”

“Not a terrible price,” she mumbles, a little tired of all this pressure.

“I think we should keep walking, you take in what I have to say, and then you’ll come back and do whatever it is that you were doing, you sleep on it. You’ll have a whole lockdown to process this because you can’t go right now anyway, how about that?”

She shrugs, stands up and they keep walking. They go to the right-wing hallways of the temple.

“You asked me if I convinced the others to stay - I tell you again, I did not. I’m just a guy who oversees things. Even though I try to participate in these wild suppers as much as I can, I cannot replace the function of your fellows. I understand you fell out with your Pits group, but I also heard you found another. And as I understand it - Arkion made his introductions, and he’s sure to return. Now, why I am saying all this - yes, this place is up and personal, as you said. Back in Reval, do you know how they attempt to ensure the loyalty of their soldiery?”

“They are brought up at the respective houses that they are to guard, fight and die for,” she remembered.

“Do you think it works?”

“Have there ever been any breaches of loyalty among their rank?”

“Not that I know.”

“But these... People seem soulless. In that regard, I’d say it doesn’t work. I’ve met your model gladiator, Arkion - and he was quite the opposite. “ She thought of him even as “incredible”.

Vinu smiles and nods, “I don’t do the convincing because it has to be him, or Cassius, or Sylrissa - or whoever you have allied yourself with here. In my years here I have seen something interesting play out.

There are many Zerker here who are locals, and they tend to keep to themselves. And some while ago we took in many people and schooled them into Zerker, from Reval. They also tend to keep to themselves. The outsider groups and the locals even have some antagonistic relationships with each other.”

“That can’t be good for keeping Osel safe.”

“You’d be surprised. None of those groups is particularly loyal to house Atelbaer or the Regalion. If Theogenes attempted commanding them to go die against the Nords, to stop the invasions once and for all - they’d not go because he commands them.”

“The Regalion dodged a bullet then, huh?”

“Well, Theo would not have had any significant influence as a king in any case. But indeed, those who voted for him were under the illusion that he was commanding quite a large army.”

“What’s the use of an army that can’t be commanded around then?”

“Every member in that Zerker army has made this place their home. They don’t give two shits about house Atelbaer, apart from their funding - but most have been crafty and found other sources of income, anyway.”

“Can’t be commanded, and likely disloyal, too. Sounds like the West-most of Regalion has become utterly fragile.”

“You’re not paying attention, are you? The small groups that have formed within the Zerker army are the key - a very passionate camaraderie within the teams. Each member has a home to protect, and within, almost organically formed teams they have learned to collaborate in ways the Revalian soldiery can’t even dream of.

You find yourself a place here, within a team. The Zerker wouldn’t die for Theo, but they’d do it for you. That’s how we roll here.”

“Yeah right someone would ever...” What she heard the man talk had always seemed like something truly unattainable to her.

“This is about the people... You don’t like the people here?”

She had a bitter expression on her face. “I do like them...” She cringes, and tries to hide her expressions from her, “but they all also seem settled.” Everyone seemed to have their place, and when she should try to find hers, there are people actively fighting against her to make sure she won’t get there. She couldn’t remain with Denea, Daegan was way fucked up, and Raynar has some long history with Sylrissa.

“As discussed before, we agreed that integrating takes time. It hasn’t been painless for anybody.”

“Everyone here nearly lost their lives, trying to?” She thought she was a different case!

“Well, no... But it hasn’t been peaches either. Yeah, there are small feuding factions forming - people who came here 10 years ago, people who have always been here, people who came 5 years ago, people who come now. I wasn’t initially happy about this fragmentation, but as I just explained - this is how it works. Besides, there’s nothing I or anyone can do about it - trying to force people to drink and fight together just won’t turn out the way we intend to. So, we must allow for some kind of freedom. You are free to associate with whom you want, and you are free to not associate with whom you don’t want.”

“Well, not anyone would accept me...”

“Hey, their loss!”

“Can’t think of myself that highly.”

“Why not?”

She has no answer. “Just a habit, I think.” But that’s not what she thought. She thought of herself this way because of her experiences with people. But it was complicated and gloomy, she didn’t want to bother the wise old man with that kind of problematic thought. Best to go back to a generic life - the best way to not end up in anyone’s destructive path.

“I can’t imagine what it is like for you, or any stray, what makes you think this way. What experiences brought you to such conclusions - I think, even if you told me in detail, I wouldn’t know what to make of it. But okay, if it feels wrong for you to stay here, you must do whatever your gut is telling you.

I am handing you a document - the offer I am forwarding from RESO. I hand it over to you, and it is up to you if you sign it within... The next two weeks, or never. You are free to return to Reval if you so wish, but I prefer that you’d stay.”

* * *

Three days into the lockdown. Eysin and Sylrissa sit behind the titan, a large candlelit between them, facing each other, eating some canned beef. They discovered that it doesn't taste all that good. They thought back to Imogen's offer and fantasized about the food, they had some regrets. And then Sylrissa remembered why she didn't want to go, she cringed and threw the empty tin can to a bin, with a rather disgusted expression.

But she kept sitting around until Eysin was finished eating. "We should eat together," Sylrissa had already proposed on the first evening. "Eating alone is so fucking useless I'd rather not eat at all." And she even put some effort into each dinner to make the atmosphere a little nicer.

"I'm sorry about this whole Raynar thing..." This one had been nagging Eysin.

Sylrissa thinks, and then smiles a bit, "Do you like him?"

Should she be polite or open? She thought for a while, looking like she can figure that one out. "Eh," Eysin shrugs, she didn't have any strong feelings. "I don't care to make this about him, really, just to clear the air between you and me."

Sylrissa sits up more straight and now looks into her eyes, more investigating. "I wasn't mad at you!" She blurts out and rambles, "I thought I was a little mad at him - and he never even fucking told me! I never asked about it and he never brought it up! Like it's a no big deal he aims to bang some other chick when I'm gone?"

"Am I not equally to blame..."

"I didn't even know you existed, lady!"

"Why are you making up excuses for me..."

Sylrissa pulls back and makes herself smaller, falls into thought, and gaze stops into the candlelight. "Well, it's not about you or us, it's about Raynar."

"He's a great fighter, isn't he?"

"He's a great this and that and got a big chuck too, but you know what he doesn't get? A decent fucking personality. He is such a dickhead!"

"Did you... Break up or something?"

“There is no formal relationship between us, I was just being a little, hmm, adventurous one time... And he’s just... Stuck with me like bubblegum.”

“Why not just break up?”

Sylrissa now turns her head up and gasps for air. “Not for a good reason.”

Eysin doesn’t interfere.

“It seems to annoy Bartel.” And that makes Sylrissa giggle a little insane.

Eysin stretches the silence.

“He and I were arranged,” Sylrissa adds, now becoming a little more distant. Her colour disappears, “and I don’t know what got into me...”

“You didn’t like Bartel?”

“No, not that... What’s there not to like... He was awesome. I don’t think that he liked me very much, though. So, why bother?”

“Did he say it?”

“No, you know, but you can tell.”

“He was avoiding you?”

“Sort of felt like that, too, sometimes, yes.”

“Maybe he was just scared of embarrassing himself in front of you...”

“Hmm...”

* * *

The next evening Eysin takes out the metallic box filled with teas. Sylrissa was unusually happy to see it, she dove right in and picked up a small package. “Ha, I knew it!” She handed it over to Eysin and told her they should drink that tea.

Eysin inspected the package and saw that these were not dried plants. These were mushrooms. “Eh, why not?”

Some hours later they walk to the big hall. “Hey, do you know how to change the Terrain?”

Yes, Sylrissa does. “can we do something?”

“Can you focus enough to get your Kaestus out?”

She does it swiftly like it’s all very natural... It was a part of her now,

a part of her body and mind.

“Let’s try building something,” Sylrissa sits down and places her Kaestus against the floor. “Do as I do... And dive in, through the floor - you’ll see the backend, fidget around a bit, get the feel...”

Eysin sits down like Sylrissa, places her Kaestus on the ground and dives in.

Lots and lots of light and lines, bubbles and melodies - she looks around and nothing makes sense. No patterns, no idea where to push or pull, and nothing stood out to her in particular.

“I think you scaled in too much,” she hears Sylrissa’s voice in the air... She realizes she can also feel present in the body - and only what was in front of her eyes - was different. Okay, scaling out.

Ah, nodes become apparent. The vision started resembling something like a piano - each key controlling a particular effect - offering the capacity to create a whole landscape - as if one was playing the piano.

“Come, try making a cube...”

Later that day Sylrissa realized it is not maybe the greatest idea to introduce someone, who is tripping balls, to the Terratorium Generator. She had helped her return to her bed, but in her head she must have imagined she was still in there, pushing buttons and manipulating landscapes... Sylrissa got a little worried but also thought it might be a typical paranoia, the beginning of a bad trip, thinking Eysin might never come out from that, and she will be forever responsible for putting her into that strange prison! “No one ever dared to look into tricky technology when neurons get a little too active... They’ll see things they can never come back from - and it drives the few who try it - insane. An instinct tells them not to do that - warning - that it can break them. Incompatible, broken by brute force. I hope I didn’t screw up your brain, Eysin.”

“Well, there has been schizophrenia in the bloodline...”

“Let’s hope you didn’t catch that strain of genes then.”

* * *

Not long after Sylrissa left Eysin in her bed, she gets up again and walks to the Titan. She sits down and places her hand on the floor just

as she had been instructed to edit the Terratorium. A few hours later Sylrissa starts thinking about it, she hasn't moved.

"You've been sitting here like this, a lot... Do you wanna go back to the Terratorium?"

"No, I've got it all up here. I'm just practising it in my mind."

"You sure you're alright?"

This strikes her, "Am I?" This distracted her from the strange editing that had been going on in her head, and she started thinking about herself. What about her was alright, and what about her wasn't?

"It's cold, why don't we get you to bed?"

Sylrissa takes her to her little room. She helps her get to bed and puts on the blanket. It feels nice, to see someone seemingly be pleased about it. She seems to think about something for a bit and then cuddles up next to Eysin. "Are you going back to Reval?"

"I can't think about it, not yet..."

"Or don't want to?"

"What do you want..." Eysin got annoyed at this question.

"Just a conversation," Sylrissa feels bored, too.

"There are things you don't want to think about..." Eysin was taking a guess there, "So you come here and try to distract yourself from them. Care to tell me that story?"

"What story?"

"Who are you, Sylrissa? Why did you come to this garage? Why are you here?"

"I didn't come by choice, if I may say so... I fled this place some while ago. I went to Reval... Then got in trouble... And The Brotherhood came retrieved me from trouble... And now I am here, and am being punished for having run away..."

"What did you expect to find in Reval?" Eysin thought, maybe this is a familiar situation.

"A beautiful surprise... A life I could never even dream of here."

"And... Did you?"

"No, it was pretty damn horrible. It was the worst!"

"What drove you away?"

Sylrissa thinks for a long while. "I used to like it very much. Things started changing when we started taking in more of those fucking

outsiders. This changed so much for me that it became unbearable.”

“I’m one of those outsiders... Do you hate me?”

“No, nothing like that. It started earlier. And it’s not really... I don’t think I blame the outsiders. See, I was arranged to marry this awesome guy. I liked him a lot, but I was left with the impression that he didn’t care much about it at all... Then came all these beautiful, interesting girls with exciting lives from Reval. Bartel seemed to like some of them. It felt disgusting, seeing him have the kind of fun with them he’d never have with me.”

“Slept around?”

“I don’t know about that. But unlike me, he felt very... Free to talk to them at all. I’ve never even had a proper conversation with him.”

“Maybe you should drink that tea with him...”

Sylrissa snorted a laugh and then thought about it for a while. That’s what Arkion had suggested to her when he had helped her escape. But she had been emotionally so freaked out - all she wanted was to experience some imaginary Revalian surprise. It should help her become more like those girls.

* * *

They got bored of waiting around in bed, got hungry and started preparing for another nice evening meal.

A candlelit evening, the crew of three - Sylrissa, Eysin and the Titan had started making some strange kind of bleeps and bloops after Eysin had sat behind it, trying to modify it like she would have to edit the Terratorium.

“Did you access the thing through the floor here?”

“It seemed to have worked. I think it’s booting up.”

“Jeez, no one even thought to do that...”

“This whole building is like the Terratorium... It’s all connected. It’s a lot to take in... I don’t think we’ve even scratched the surface of the whole thing... I saw some pretty weird stuff!”

Sylrissa leans closer to check her eyes - her pupils were extra-large, “for all I know, much of it could have just been you tripping. Looks like you’re still not done yet.”

* * *

They are eating salted peanuts. Amazingly nostalgic. Going to some dark casino backend room with dad, everybody is smoking, the guys have beers, and there are peanuts. They always have peanuts! “What for you, little lady?” The old bartender lady asks. “Salted Peanuts!”

The old men were usually playing billiard or poker, some were smoking herbs. Daddy never did, he felt it never made him feel better and was afraid they could damage his throat. He’d had problems before. The old lady was always flirting with them, but it was always for fun. They talked fun smack at each other, there was a lot of laughter.

Sylrissa asks, “Eysin, do you want to play cards with me?”

“Peanuts and card games just go together.”

As soon as they start laying out the cards, they hear steps from outside.

They both stop moving and sit completely still, heads tilted, listening to the steps. How the fuck can that be?

That’s impossible. It’s still in lockdown.

They can hear the Titan Garage Door squeak. Sylrissa instantly blows out the candle and soundlessly hops up, touches the wall with her Kaestus and instructs all the lights to gently fade out. She signs to Eysin, while the lights are still dimming, to slip back into her room, and to copy her - they called their suits on.

The door screeches open, lighters point in, they keep their sights on the titan and 5 people rush in. Sylrissa is paying attention to all that, listening to the steps, seeing the change in the air - where they are, how many they are...

Could they be here to blow up the Titan? Sylrissa calls up a whip and engages them. Disappears into the dark, back and forth, knocking them out with a small surge of yellow to put them into a nice little sleep, one by one.

She finds that the last one she knocks over is carrying a strange torch... “Eysin, come see this!” She calls her. Eysin sneaks over, meanwhile trying to listen to if there’s someone else around, and sees it.

A Rod of a kind, she touches it, reads it, “It’s an umbrella... They figured out how to bypass the swarm.” She finds some blank marbles

around, picks them up and starts making a copy of the rod, right away. It goes fairly quickly, hands one to Sylrissa and makes another one for herself. She hands one of her blue marbles over to Sylrissa.

Preparing to run off to the mansion, Eysin stands still and tilts her head. Fully suited, she starts seeing some very interesting signals. "They weren't the only ones to come here. There's more entering from the front."

"We will use this device to get to the mansion," Sylrissa reminds her, "we'll tell about this to Imogen, and she'll decide what we should do." Sylrissa turns around to see if she is ready to leave and sees that Eysin has instead gone to the Orb room. "Shit..."

* * *

As long as you have stood here barefoot, we are connected. Old friend, this temple is in danger. They want to do to me what they did to the Titans. They imagine they can make a copy of me, but the result will be the same. It will destroy me.

Eysin is standing in front of the orb, listening to it, through the floor.

You can control the house from here... When they reach the Terratorium, trap them in a box. That should buy time for the others to return.

"Why don't you do it yourself?"

I am not in command here, this isn't my temple.

And what the Orb told that would happen - did. 2 more bands appeared and Eysin trapped them both into the Terratorium. She had to actively keep the walls up, though - because she didn't know how to save the shapes.

Eysin managed to hold it up only until someone approached her. The intruder was about to smack her head into splinters with a heavy weapon - her suit as if reacted, calling out her polearm and blocking the hit. She rolled back, landed on her feet, dodged a few more slings - and realized that against her was one of the people Sylrissa had knocked out - they are waking up.

Eysin had disconnected from the ground and the orb - the other 2 parties must have gotten loose, too - and most likely were headed in this direction.

Eysin leaps towards the Terratorium and has the sleepy intruders chase her. That's just another way to buy time. She reached the Terratorium, recognized the landscape setting and made her way to a safe spot where she could catch a breath and attempt to screw with the two bands for a bit.

But they quickly lost interest in her, and she had to start provoking them more aggressively to prevent them from going to the Orb hall. She held up a remote wall. They figured it out by discussing it among themselves and started looking for her, again. She trapped them for a while and could hold it up until someone else caught up with her and was about to kill her.

Eysin escaped the approaches, and this repeated for several rounds. In what seemed like a whole hour, someone made it near her hiding spot and flushed her out one last time. Another chase began, and after a few minutes of running and jumping, she could sense that 12 people were chasing after her, from different sides. They've trapped me like a game. I am finished! She stops running because she can also feel someone approaching her, pretty fast.

One of her chasers from behind catches up and confronts her. Eysin surprises the pursuer with her disappearing and reappearing polearm and manages to knock him out. They are all approaching, I could handle one, and I got lucky - but I can't handle more.

She sighs and moves away from the body she knocked out, a small patch of artificial moss and spring-like sunshine. She sits down and thinks about what she'll say when they catch up with her, the door is open, I won't bother you anymore. She had nothing else left.

Then a strange, rustling sound comes closer, the big steps of a machine, and in the artificial woods from the direction of the Orb Hall, she could hear a scream. The tops of trees start disappearing - the terrain is falling over as the machine approaches. Guessing what it is, Eysin gets up again and starts running in that direction.

* * *

Sylrissa moves around like an Amazon acrobat, she's using a strange whip to trap and knock out, strangle a few of the enemies, and she approaches Eysin just a little ahead of the falling trees. Then cheek-cheek-cheek, stomp stomp stomp. The Titan, with Imogen possibly sitting inside it, walks over them both, stops just before another treeless patch ends, takes a strange pose, and bursts out a frontal wave. Everything in front of it starts collapsing. The Terrain dematerializes and that situation confuses the intruders.

Sylrissa grabs onto Eysin's head to make sure she hears every word she says, "It's not safe here, get back to the Orb, help control the room for us."

When she returns to the Orb Room, another intruder attacks her. That person appears significantly more skilled in combat than she is. Or maybe she's starting to get worn out. The enemy is leading her closer to the edge of the pool, she slips into it and he intends to keep her underwater until she's drowned.

But as she struggles, her suit is changing form - fins grow on her - and soon it becomes apparent to the strangler that she might just be pretending to struggle. To make him forget that he is under the water with her, too - and likely to run out of air soon enough.

But as she waits for him to pass out, the chokehold stops her blood circulation and it makes her pass out, too.

Temple Guardians

THE FIRST sight out of the window suggests it will be hot mid-summer weather, completely cloudless, windless. And a weekend, Eysin was expecting company. Imogen had called and wanted to meet her - and take the Titan parts from her that she had gotten from Ceremony, after the explosion.

“I don’t have them. They’re either at the Temple or Sylrissa took them somewhere else.”

“I’ll check with Sylrissa.”

“She’s coming here anyway, just as her to bring along the parts.”

“Good, there was another thing I was going to discuss with you anyway, Eysin.”

The clothes on her couch are no good. She packs them up and prepares them for the wash house. She’s got a few hours until they arrive. It gets a little stressful when there’s nothing to wear, so, anxiously, she opens up another box which contained some of her older clothes, and clothes she had put aside for the warmer weather.

Open the box, the first thing she picks up in it is a big old jacket. Belonged to Arkion. On a closer whiff, smelled like his herbs, too. Those damn teas!

Eysin had somehow managed to learn to associate these teas with the terror that had occurred at the Temple. They had gotten invaded by a more recent group that had joined EESO, they had been after the orb, and they had been connected to the explosions of the Titans, but who

paid them or why they were doing this at all remained a huge mystery.

While Eysin had passed out, Imogen and Sylrissa were unleashing hell in the Terratorium. As soon as Imogen had passed Eysin and left her to Sylrissa's hands, she had blown the whole terrain to bits and in the floaty dust, all the intruders were left open.

The Titan did incredible leaps - it could jump 10 meters across and above, and it was incredibly quick and terrifying. Imogen put extra effort into making it extra soundy - it made hideous sounds of metal creaking, screeches and bangs - just to try to terrify the enemy. With a flash, it would appear near one of the intruders and effortlessly pierce through the leg - not even the suit could stop that - slow and strong enough - even the zerk had its limits.

One by one, and not for too long, Imogen took down more than half of those lost in the 'torium.

Sylrissa pulled back anyone who tried to follow Eysin, she whipped and turned the thing into a leash, pulling the intruders back through their necks, shooting small darts with a slight yellow glow, and putting them back to sleep.

Meanwhile, up in the garage - 3 more friends of Imogen's were waiting, and they didn't notice the fight going on in the Orb room before Eysin and her assailant had been underwater for a whole few minutes.

They hadn't paid any attention to it as the assailant had been one of Imogen's - and he had assumed Eysin was one of the enemies.

But when they did notice the two bodies in the water, they rushed over and pulled them out. Apart from her neck swelling up and growing massive bruises, Cassius needed to be reanimated for a bit.

He survived.

The partial trance-like state, quick assumptions - Eysin didn't feel great about almost having killed someone who could be a good friend. And Cassius wasn't all so happy with that situation, either. He had been terrified, "but never let me use that as an excuse."

"Friendly fire happens, it's quite normal" Imogen had intercepted later, "you both should be happy this didn't end any worse for either of you. You both are excused from the cleanup - get back to the mansion, we'll take care of things here."

"How did I not recognize you?"

“Maybe you got so used to seeing me painted red?”

No hard feelings from either side.

Eysin found her large jacket and Sylrissa escorted them back to the mansion. She helped Eysin settle in somewhere. A healer was there - one she had seen before, repeatedly - Asya - and she helped heal her throat with the pink marbles and the red light.

Sylrissa returned to the Temple and they had to clean up their mess. The Terratorium was reset, and the wounded intruders were imprisoned in small separate boxes right there. Imogen had pressed them for quite a while, but what she did or didn't find out had not been much of interest to Eysin.

She had been lying on that bed, feeling the warmth of red light, dreaming of returning to Reval. She didn't know it, but Asya soon commented, “The more you talk the slower you will heal.”

Eysin shut up for a while, and Asya felt the need to comment on her ramblings.

“A city is a terrible machine, and you will be trapped inside, under its control - whether you believe it or not. You go there, you support every piece of shit that happens there. But here - you take care of the land, you take care of people who take care of the land - and the land will make sure you'll have everything you need, too.”

“Ack, bollocks! This place got me nearly killed! Twice now!”

“Nearly!” Asya pinched her. “Do you think you would have survived with such situations in Reval? Who would have come for you?”

“I wouldn't be in such situations in Reval,” Eysin whispers - more pleasant to the irritated throat.

“I got it as good as we can, the rest will have to heal the natural way, or I could mess up your voice, sorry.”

Eysin lifted a thumb for her. Asya left her and she curled up inside the large jacket and fell asleep to the smell of teas and herbs, and something of Arkion.

* * *

Eysin sits in her cool kitchen, waiting for company. Soon, there is a knock on the door and she goes to get it.

When she opens the door, first she has trouble recognizing the woman. That's the first time she sees Imogen wearing makeup and casual clothes. Her hair is loose and wavy, she looks very nice. "Hello, Eysin, long time."

She invites her in and doesn't know for a moment whether to offer her a seat or something else. Imogen is taking off her cute heeled shoes and looks around the dim room, "It's so nice and cool here. But the weather is lovely, don't you want to go do this outside?"

"Sylrissa is still headed this way, we shouldn't leave without her. Besides, I was hoping to do this inside, this heat is a little too much for me."

"I passed a nice tea house on my way here. We could go there, instead," Imogen says. "We can leave her a note and she'll come there, too."

Eysin and Imogen walk through a well-kept park and reach a part of a city where there are cute wooden houses, many old men sitting around, and children and dogs running around a fountain. They walk into one of the small buildings and take a seat. Indeed, it is nice and cool there, too. They order some tea and get used to the surroundings - and each other.

"You look well," Imogen says. Eysin's wearing a light summer dress - something she'd never seen before. "Have you healed well?"

"I'm good as ever. I must say - you look incredible, as well." They sit in silence for a bit until Eysin asks, "Sylrissa will bring the titan parts for you. I've not come in touch with them ever since the lockdown."

"But did you take a look? Can you access memory, at all?"

"I learned to read memory, sure. And I did take a look, but there is an unexpected problem. While their initial framework is global - sort of like DNA, present in every piece, unchanged - unless it has suffered some topical injuries - the temporal memory doesn't appear to work that way. I think - while it's still all in one piece, it has access to the whole surface, but as we had just a shard, I could only access the memory of that particular area. That piece of surface I picked

- disappointingly enough for both of the broken titans - was a part of the shell that faced the wall.”

“Which means you can see nothing...”

“So, even if you give these to Agnes, I doubt she’ll find anything. Do you have any way to access any of the other parts of the Titan?”

“I’m afraid not.” Some fucker had sold the pieces, and Imogen had no say in it. These Titans didn’t belong to her. “They are all gone, off the island - and I have no way to track them down. The pieces Sylrissa is bringing over - are the only things we can work on.”

“Have you worked out the suspects?”

“Well, we have eliminated around a thousand possibilities. The people who intruded the temple were all in some way friends of Daegan... They were a bunch of people who came here 3 years ago, from Reval. They kept together and Daegan was the only one of us oldies who mingled with them.”

“Denea was one of them?”

“Well, Asya has an alibi for her, and she’s been behaving very nicely. But I haven’t eliminated her from the list of suspects just yet. There was another thing I wanted to talk to you about - the umbrellas...”

“Yeah, what about them...”

“It is a fine invention. Could you make us some more?” Imogen knew she was asking too much. Her eyes were big, like begging. She thought the answer was going to be no.

“I can teach you how to make them. I can share the blueprint.” She takes a new shiny ring from her arm and places it on the table. “I thought you’d want that, so I prepared this for you.”

Imogen takes it and adds it to her ring collection. “You’re good with these. It’s a shame you didn’t want to hang around. Would be a lot easier guarding the temple. But I understand you needed to... Leave. I hope you’ll recover and come back.”

Eysin shrugs. “I’ve recovered, but I’m not done here yet.”

Imogen places her fingers around another ring on her arm and seems to think about it, then takes it off and places it on the table, “I am already asking too much from you, but a little favour. Can you tell me what this is?”

Eysin picks it up, and feels it in her fingers, even without bringing

up the Kaestus or a visor, she looks at it like she can read it directly. "It's a sword."

"Of course," Imogen smiles, "what else could it be? It belonged to Arthur."

"Would you like to start using it? I could reset it for you, scrape his encryption..."

"Nah, I don't care for swords... Besides, it's the only piece of him that I've got left of him."

Eysin hands it back to her.

Sylrissa shows up, they order more tea and sit for a while longer. She looks nice and summery, too, she has a nice tan and a light shirt. She's not wearing anything purple. But she doesn't look very happy, she looks a little nervous, continuously looking at the windows and the door, as if she's expecting the wrong person is about to step in.

"Half vacation is over," Sylrissa doesn't know what to talk about, "I thought... If I come here at all, I hoped to go to the beach, too. Maybe, in the evening, have some cool drinks, I think they have a fun bus set up there, mojitos and all that."

"I'm game," Eysin loves the idea.

"I'm afraid I have to go meet the big lord man..."

"Oh, is that why you're dressed so fancy?" Sylrissa asks, a little surprised, and a little disappointed, too. She thought Imogen could be fun.

"Yeah, we got this land dispute thing going on. I'm telling you this, girls - if you plan to marry - just take the damn name." Imogen had a rather upset look for a second.

She had inherited some of Arthur's properties, but because she had not, when marrying him, taken his last name, there were some problems. Some parties - who are relatives of the house, and also carrying the same family name, do not consider her a proper inheritor. She and Arthur didn't get any children, so, the Brotherhood was quick to claim the properties. But she fought. At least she tried.

Sylrissa took a package from her back and placed it on the table. The shards of the Titans were wrapped in a cloth and tied together with a string. Imogen takes them, weighs them and puts them in her bag. "Thank you. Did you also try reading them?"

“I’m not so good at memory... Besides, it was all very fuzzy. It’s like Eysin said - the temporal is all topical - and when you disconnect it, it will no longer have access to other information. Sucks, really.”

“Very well. How’s the old man keeping up?” Imogen asks from Sylrissa.

“He is enjoying his summer. Very occupied with his grapes and olives.”

“Ah, the big harvest year.” Once every four years. The winter grapes and winter olives just took a while - and heavy maintenance. But they were a famous brand. Imogen finishes her tea and strokes looking as if she’s already planning to leave, “I am sorry that I have to cut this meeting so short. We actually would have other matters to discuss, but I have to go fight for the land a bit. Please let me know if any of you plans to visit the Temple, sometime, okay? I will schedule another meeting with you two when my disputes clear up a little.”

They all stand and give hugs to each other, she leaves, and Eysin and Sylrissa sit down again, this time on opposite sides of the table. Sylrissa doesn’t want to see the door and the windows anymore. And when she looks at Eysin, she smiles now.

“Mrs Ravana,” Sylrissa gasps, “you’ve got mail!” She takes something from the purse - an envelope! And slides it to the middle of the table. To: Eysin Ravana, sent to the Temple address.

“Mail?” Eysin hesitates to take it, “who’d send me a mail?” She puts her hand on it and shifts it closer to herself. Feels like there’s a lot of paper inside, a bulky letter. “I wonder if it’s some official document shit or some spam? Do you get that, here?”

“The sender is on the opposite side, I think it’s an actual letter,” Sylrissa smiles. “Seems like quite a volume, though, I hope you keep it for later and now pay attention to your beloved visitor!”

“You wanted to hit the beach?”

“We’ll do that when the sky is dimmer, I can’t stand roasting under the sun for another minute. But I would prefer it if we went... Either to the park or your place.” She had reasons to not want to stay at the tea house.

* * *

Sylrissa made that day a phenomenal summer day, they had fun just walking around, enjoying various drinks and ice creams, doughnuts and soup. And later in the evening, at the beach, in the company of strangers, cracking jokes, they enjoyed some cool wine and icy mojitos. They went completely overboard with the drinks and even made it to some small kind of nightclub with loud electronic dancing music. More cocktails and they stuck to the ones that tasted like watermelon, and kept dancing with each other until 4 and then for the 2 next hours walked their way back to Eysin's place.

They felt pretty ill in the morning, but that wasn't a thing that a bit of ice cream couldn't help. They went out and ate some breakfast together, Sylrissa felt straight enough again and said it was about time she started driving back home.

"It was really good to see you," Sylrissa says when parting ways at the parking lot. "I hope we do this again, at least a couple of times this summer. Or maybe we should go on a hike somewhere... I haven't gone canoeing in years! Would you like something like that?"

"Sure, whenever you want to go, I can make time for it."

They hug, and she drives off, goodbye. Eysin walks back to her small home. Dark and cool, and silent. That had been more socializing in the past 24 hours than she had been used to.

She picks up her bag - one that she had never used before this day, and thinks to sort the stuff - she had brought along makeup and whatever emergency things she thought she could use. Eysin had learned from her early Reval days that all sorts of mini emergencies come up when going out like that - but now she wanted to put all these things back in their proper places - and she knew there were going to be things for the trash bin, as well.

She turns the contents of her bag on her bed, and on it also lands the one thing she had forgotten about, but had caused her much excitement when she received it. The letter. She forgot about the sorting she had planned to do, picked up the letter and looked at the other side of the envelope.

From: Arrichion Atelbaer.

“Who the fuck is that?” She scratches her head and her eyebrows crook. She recognized the last name - the biggest name in the region. Theogenes Atelbaer, Arthur Atelbaer, Bartel Atelbaer, Atlas Atelbaer. But the first name was a very strange one, she'd never seen it before but made her all the more curious.

She hoped very much that this wasn't just some bureaucratic thing typed down, some Eesian contract or some documents from RESO. She walked towards her couch to get comfy in it, she opens the envelope a little impatiently, nearly tearing the letters apart, and sees - there are a few torn pages, possibly from an old small notebook - everything is handwritten, with a blue pen.

Hi, Eysin.

I heard of the events that went down at the temple, and glad to hear how well you handled it. It was quite the topic here in the camp for a while, you girls are now seen as some kinds of heroes among us!

I have also received word from Atlas, he thanked me for having sent you his way and said he had been quite hungry for new students, and you had been sufficiently eager to learn from him. He did not comment on your progress, but it seems like at least you have the right attitude - he'd never take you on otherwise :)

I hope you like Ceremony and the campsite, I recall these houses were quite nice during the summer. On hotter days, they keep quite cool. I went there to heal quite a few times myself.

And have you seen Atlas' dogs yet? They have a big ranch, kennel masters and all that. There's an incredibly big dog, Bubby - he's taller than you, but when Atlas cares to introduce you, you won't find a gentler and friendlier dog! You should go see if you haven't already. He's getting old, also, so, do it while you still can!

For us over here, it has been a rather challenging few months. For me, personally, it got rougher after the first month. When the jacket no longer had your scent on it :(There hasn't been anything nicer to put me to sleep and dream good dreams.

It looks like it will be another few months before I can return. We are

making quite interesting progress here on the site, but that's not something I can discuss over the mail. Maybe I'll tell you all about it when I return. And there are a lot of other things we could talk about, still. I am looking forwards to it!

Occasionally, I think back at our conversation in the forest. On that whole chain of events on that night, I keep finding new angles to process it through. A lot happened - around Ceremony, in the Temple, and later. Whenever I'm idle, that's where my mind goes back to. It was a very shit night, but it was also very enjoyable. And my wish is to have more experiences like that - why not with you?

The idea of returning, and meeting you again - it keeps me going here. When I look around, I have noticed - those who do not have that something to return to, something to look forwards to - tend to fall ill, and their energy is all messed up. They become a little heavy and unreliable. I think, if it wasn't for you, I could be the same way :(

The conditions here are pretty rough. We have had several occasions where lives were on the line - threats by the insanely cold weather (it is way better, at the moment, but nothing like the summer you're possibly going to have). Threats by our competitors. And sadly also some internal tensions. We have a bunch of fights here over scraps of food. We ran out of provisions 2 months ago and not everyone is good at hunting.

It's pretty phenomenal when we catch a moose or something! But that's as much as I can say about the expedition. I'm confident I'll come back in one piece :)

I want to meet you again. I remember I owe you a story, and it looks like I also owe you for my current good health and energy! The story about Reval and the Eco Terrorists! It's a story I've been itching to tell for a long while!

And I do believe it is YOU, and the good news from you, that has helped me not succumb to the overall despair here in the camp.

*See you soon,
Arkion.*

PS. I just thought of something nice: kisses are like a mouthful of moist spaghetti.

