

“Conner creates an inexplicably touching hero both as man and monster.”

Publishers Weekly

“For me there are only two classic vampire novels: Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* and Anne Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire*...now comes Conner’s *Stargazer* which deserves so much of our attention for all the differences it brings into the genre.”

Science Fiction Chronicle

“Classic vampire mythology redefined in the most exciting and original way. Science fiction at its finest!”

Samuel Benavides, award-winning writer & director of *Mansfield Path* and *Phantom Senses*

“Rarely has a book of fiction made such an impression on me as Miguel Conner’s *Stargazer*. I originally read its first version edition years ago. It was an experience that has remained alive with me through the present. Don’t expect from Conner the usual vampire fare. His book is original, suspenseful, great story telling and most of all, forces us to think and draw parallels with certain ethical realities confronting us now. If one is looking for the best vampire and science fiction in the last twenty years, *Stargazer* is not to be missed.”

Rosamonde Miller, author of *Strange Vocation* and the vampire series *Tales of Shandolphin*

“If like me, you’re an avid fan of the vampire race, you must not miss this first time novel. Miguel’s notion is so stark and disturbing that it will stay with you for a long time.”

Barnes & Noble Explorations

“*Twilight* needs to get some of this. A fantastic epic providing a new gripping take on Vampire story telling.”

Keira Ligertwood, author of *Journeys of the Shadow Tracker*

Stargazer © 2011 by Miguel Conner

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored, or transmitted by any means-whether auditory, graphic, mechanical, or electronic-without written permission of both publisher and author, except in the case of brief excerpts used in critical articles and reviews. Unauthorized reproduction of any part of this work is illegal and punishable by law.

This is a work of fiction and, as such, it is a product of the author's creative imagination. All names of characters appearing in these pages are fictitious except for those of public figures. Any similarities of characters to real persons, whether living or dead, excepting public figures, is coincidental. Any resemblance of incidents portrayed in this book to actual events, other than public events, is likewise coincidental.

ISBN 9780615367217

The Number One Son
Publishing Company LLC
16970 San Carlos Blvd.
P.M.B. 160
Fort Myers, FL 33908

Cover art by Melinda MacCullen & Jordan Stratford.

MIGUEL CONNER
STARGAZER

The Number One Son
Publishing Company LLC

The first edition was dedicated to my son, Alexander, who taught me once again how to gaze at stars. The second edition is dedicated to my daughter, Sofia, who showed me how to become one.

MIGUEL CONNER STARGAZER

We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at stars.

-Oscar Wilde-

Already your horn has been raised, Iscariot, and your wrath is full, and your star passes by, and your heart is determined.

-Jesus in The Gospel of Judas-

Chapter 1

All I had wanted was a drink. That's it. Some nourishment and off to satisfy the mind next. A drink, and I would have left. I never knew that would be the most important drink of my existence.

I was starving after waking up. What else was new? I always thought *Moratoria* lasted too long this time of the year, with summer ebbing.

After dressing, I left my cupola and took the shaft in normal form up to The Citadel. The walkways and tunnels were already filling with Stargazers trying to get started on the nightly rigors of existence. I had my rigors, but a stop at Lilac's Bar was my first chore. I was hungry, and a certain loneliness had settled on my shoulders like old dust.

The bar had just opened. The sound of humming vacuum cleaners devouring mildew interrupted the fresh sizzle of igniting television and registers, all unnoticed by scurrying barbacks carrying glass-racks and clean napkins.

"Good evening," Tina, my regular bartender said, as I nestled on a bar stool. "Hard *Moratoria*, Byron? You look wasted."

I snorted and fingered my pockets for a cigarette, a rare habit for Stargazers and usually frowned upon by The Elders.

"I keep having odd dreams," I said, while Tina slid a square ashtray in front of me. "Keep dreaming I see *Sol*. Can you believe it?"

"That is odd, Byron." She wiped the glossy amber-surface of the bar, for more Stargazers entered. "Never heard of that one. Believe me, many tell me their dreams after *Moratoria*. What did it look like?"

I kindled my smoke and blew out milky curls almost as pure white as our skins. Tina had an advantage, though, her long, obsidian locks contrasted well. I thought she was one of the few who actually looked well dressed in tight jeans and a

thin muscle shirt, all black—a fashion that hadn't left Xanadu since forever.

"That's the odd part," I said, chewing my lip, another habit The Elders also disdained—it many times caused Stargazers to puncture them with the canines. "I don't know what it looks like. How could I?"

"I don't know either," she said. "No Stargazer has ever seen and survived our only enemy. That is why we escape it at night."

"Exactly," I said in full agreement. "It doesn't make any sense."

"Maybe you saw some old archive or movie and it stayed with you."

I shook my head. "There are no images of *Sol* in our society, Tina. We've made sure of that. Even the mere image of it is said to liquefy our minds, our sanity. No, it's different. It's like I can almost remember..."

Tina frowned. "Remember, Byron? What are you talking about?"

I sighed and shook my head at the same time. "Nothing. Don't listen to it. You've got all night to hear people's whining. How are you?"

She smiled. "I'm fine. Would you like something to eat?"

"You know what I like."

"Type A-negative on the way." She turned and walked to the large, crystal containers lining the back of the bar. Just as I was getting to see her fine workmanship, filling the pint glass from one of the copper tubes leaving each urn, somebody tapped me on the shoulder.

I rotated my head and did some of my own frowning. "I didn't know it was last call already."

The figure encased in imitation jet leather before me growled as he usually did, letting eyes glow in enough crimson just to let me know his mood.

"Byron," Lord Crow acknowledged tersely, towered at each side by two of his Ravens. Rumors always quietly circled The Citadel on why The MoonQueen had created Crow with

such short stature and stocky physique when we were a species of grace and beauty. It didn't matter, I thought, for the vicious head of the Ravens had held his post since I lost it.

"What can I do for you, Crow?" I questioned. "Care to join me for some nourishment or a video game? I hear the Scientist Guild has recently put out some amazing Virtual Reality software."

"No, no, and yes, Byron," he said. "Actually I need to have a word with you."

"No problem. Pull up a seat."

He shook his square head. "Not here. I was thinking of doing it at The Council."

Crow must have satisfied at the faltering of my confident façade. "The Council? Why, there are more important matters transpiring there. I'm sure any of the—"

"And it's not just with me," he said, grinning. "It's with one of The Elders."

I was able to turn for a second when Tina placed the filled glass before me. She offered the trio a round, but they declined.

"I think this will be all, Tina," I said. "Upload it to my Credit Account, which I think is still healthy enough to buy a snack."

"No problem, Byron." She winked at me and gave a quick glare at the Ravens.

"I'm glad you're being so cooperative," Crow said with a mild chuckle. "It's not one of your more known qualities, Byron."

"Hey, might as well start the night on a high note," I said and slammed the cocktail. Viscous liquid gushed coldly down my throat, immediately filling my body with tingling vitality. "Whew! I needed that."

"Let's go." He grabbed me by the arm as I wiped my mouth with a moist napkin.

Before I walked out of the metal doors of Lilac's, I glanced back at the containers, for a taste remained in my mouth, not true taste but more like a dangling feeling on my lips. The source was inside the transparent urns, floating slow-

ly in some chemical I couldn't care to remember but which kept the carcass preserved for the bars around The Citadel. The only thing keeping the body from bouncing wildly against the surface was a tube stuck to a neck, its lost face uncaring it was being drained and fed to Stargazers.

And as we walked out into the vast Mall Zone, I realized the feeling was a certain, nagging embarrassment that stayed in my mouth, similar to the certain, nagging embarrassment I felt when I couldn't remember my dreams completely. Embarrassment? At feeding? At worrying about that ball of hot gas beyond the stratosphere? Now that's odd, I thought, joining the traffic of perfect beings, gods in a new era, for *Sol* had never seen and how could one feel anything concerning animals?

Maybe I should as the leaders of our society, I thought sarcastically, since that's where I was going.

2

We sauntered over to one of the tube-shafts at the fringe of The Mall Zone, a place where shops, bars, and all other service areas flowered in The Citadel. Included there were the entertainment areas: Skating Rinks, Video Arcades, Electronic Libraries, Hunting Ranges, and such. At least a mile of this, wrapped in domes, smoky buildings, synthetic gardens greatest attraction of The Mall Zone was the Interactive Bars, which the Ravens exclusively attended for dining purposes. There, you didn't savor your meals from glasses or bowls, but you actually got a chance to hunt down a Warm One and shower afterward if you felt like it. The Hunting Ranges were usually long mazes or flat arenas in which feeding was entertainment or gambling in the form of armed Warm Ones or traps designed by architects. Stargazers needed some enjoyment from *Moratoria* or the menial work we did for Xanadu.

And work we did, outside The Mall Zone. Threading the fringes of this pseudocircular area rested office buildings, var-

ious plants, and small factories where the impeccable society was better lubricated, all overlooked by the various guilds. In essence, this was Xanadu: The Citadel, a city covered in nebulous domes and crowned by a gigantic one, which stopped the radioactive weather outside that sometimes arrived with temperature high enough to damage us.

This all was perhaps the less important part of Xanadu. Outside The Citadel four massive tunnels, miles long and sometimes a mile wide, glanced by villages and more factories, extended over the poisoned sand and onto The Farms. Four Farms and four tunnels marking an X, each breeding, cultivating, and transporting Warm Ones to The citadel in urns or alive (that's why we had to keep an atmosphere here, no matter how much economists griped about the costs). All this traffic never usually affected The Mall Zone or the other areas—underground tunnels and roads brought in the food. Those were the least of modes of transportation, primarily for animals and cargo. Xanadu was an organism of shafts, elevators, aluminum tubes, and sleek subways, all four our convenience—whether we chose to fly, walk, turn gaseous, or just take the train. It didn't matter as long as no one practiced animal changing, a gift from The MoonQueen that The Elders ruled blasphemous some twenty years ago because it imitated lower forms of life.

We opted for gaseous movement and took a tube, one of the hundreds on designated walls, with the destination and a stop/go light over each. I didn't like this shape myself, but Crow informed me we were in a hurry.

We traveled to the most important part of Xanadu. We rose up to the top of the gigantic cupola, placed called The Tower or The Council, where The Elders schemed and found better ways for the Stargazers and the guilds to cope with our new place in the evolutionary ladder. And even they had to listen to The MoonQueen, The Queen of Darkness, Our Mistress, Mother of All Stargazers, whom dwelled at the highest point of Xanadu, ruling all in her infinite compassion. Or so they told me.

We materialized in our forms right in front of a large

door with a silvery rose stamped on it, access to a place few Stargazers ever went. A desk with a laborious secretary sat next to it.

"Can I help you, Lord Crow?" the secretary inquired with a patronizing expression. She could do that here.

"I have an appointment with Master Shibboleth," answered Crow.

She played with a mouse and inspected her computer screen. "Ah, yes. Nine o'clock, you and a Mister Byron, right?"

"Yes." He looked at me with distaste. I felt like lighting a cigarette.

She punched some numbers on her keyboard. The massive doors opened. "You know where his office is, Lord Crow?" He nodded. "Then please enter. Leave your guards here please."

Crow growled but we made our way into a carpeted hallway. We took a few corners, passing scurrying Stargazers working in The Tower, stopping at an opened door with another painted rose.

"One thing, Byron," Crow said, pausing before we entered.

"Yeah," I said casually, ignoring his solid stare.

"Please don't act like yourself. Ignore the 'please.' You know where we are. I don't like it anymore than—"

"This? What is this?"

"You'll see. I'm just warning you to behave."

"I'll do my best," I lied with a nod.

"Do better," he ordered and walked in.

The office was plush and elegant, but that is not what caught my attention. Most of the wall, curving upward, was ambergris glass, giving a striking if not haunting view of the land: Clouds of purple and sparkling pink scraping golden mountains of torn rock, endless desert streaming in and out of this valley, lovely *Luna* perched above it all. The northern gust must have been kind this night, taking away some of the dust from the sky. Furthermore, she appeared to us in full form, not in her crescent or other aspects. We could almost see her firm

contours, almost notice a less potent shade of orange, not the blurry mess she had been since the nuclear winter ended after The Holocaust.

Crow and I were so awed by it, we didn't hear the other occupant rise from his desk of fake-oak and brass. He greeted us a second time.

"Uh, Master Shibboleth, greetings." Crow bowed at the handsome Stargazer with milky-hair, extremely pointed ears (more pointed than most of us), dressed in gray robes. His face reminded me of my own features—tapering, savagely noble, but with eyes that always seemed to mock everything. I owned dark hair that people said had deep red streaks in it.

"Greetings, Lord Crow," he said with a musical, yet sonorous voice. "And you, Byron. It has been a while since I saw you."

I walked to him and extended a hand, not caring to be formal. He took my hand confidently, though.

"Greetings to you, Shibboleth," I said. "When was that, last year at the Equinox Festival, Master Tsing-Tao party?"

"Yes it was." He motioned for a decanter on the desk. "How about a refreshment? It's A-positive from a young stock, a small privilege The Elders have in our arduous duty."

Crow was already salivating and licking his fangs. Shibboleth poured us a round and told us to have a seat. We sipped the wonderful food from cordials in silence for a few seconds. Then The Elder informed his secretary through the intercom that he was not to be disturbed.

"Oh, this is tasty," I remarked. "As good as any reason to come and visit you."

"This is not the reason you come to visit me," Shibboleth said, second in rank out of seven Elders. He held his glass up, at the same time patting his lips with a handkerchief. "But it is very connected. And very important."

"What do you mean?" I asked, and Crow elbowed me, only to get a disapproving stare from The Elder.

"Please, Lord Crow," he said. "This meeting is as important as it is secret. Matters of security are at stake. Everyone in this room should feel free to express themselves and

ask any questions.”

I sneered at the Raven and took out a cigarette. The look on Shibboleth’s face was precious.

“I agree,” I said, “but why am I here? There are definitely more important power-players in Xanadu than me.”

Shibboleth leaned back in his chair, touching his long nails in contemplation.

“I’m sure you’re not the only one in The Tower who thinks this, Byron. But the word has been sent from the top.”

“The top?” Both Crow and I questioned.

“The top,” he echoed calmly, although his eyes shifted murkier for an instant.

“You mean,” I said, but he was already nodding. “Our Mistress?”

“Yes,” he hissed and stood up, pacing by a window as if admiring the view he could see every worknight through eyes needing no illumination.

I sucked on the smoke and thought of my dreams.

“Byron,” he said, hands behind him, back to us. “Most of The Elders know of your past. You were once of the greatest children of Our Mistress. We are all equal in this new age after The Holocaust when the Stargazers overthrew the Warm Ones. But...” He paused, as if for the first time noticing the smoke saturating the room (Xanadu was not known for its filtering qualities). “You were the prototype of something greater perhaps. You have wondrous talents that have been, how would you put it, wasted throughout your many careers in the last hundred years.”

I looked down, wondering why I didn’t feel any shame. Not even embarrassment, that taste, that feeling, that topic I felt this conversation was leading to—they always did when it came to me.

Shibboleth waived at Lord Crow. “At first you served as a Raven, making sure security was impeccable in The Citadel and The Farms in the nights when we were still domesticating all the Warm Ones. You were expelled for terminating another warrior. Do you recall why?”

“Vaguely,” I mumbled.

“Over what, Byron?”

“A friend,” I answered flatly.

“But you weren’t punished even if Stargazers are not allowed to destroy one another, the second greatest crime after transgression against Our Mistress, both punished with immediate extermination. But you were somehow forgiven and moved onto other areas. And how you excelled, Byron! You wrote the first true Stargazer classical piece, you sculpted award-winning statues, you designed great graphic interfaces that aided Xanadu. But each time, you somehow let your bravado sabotage your potential.”

I felt like defending myself, but all I could do was put out my cigarette and watch smithereens of golden ash quiver to nothingness.

“And believe me, we have worried about it and pondered alternatives to your, let us say, disgraceful existence.” He paused again, to make sure the words sank in to my chagrin and Crow’s pleasure. “But we are civilized; and The Elders and The MoonQueen only wish the best for our civilization.”

Enough was enough. My legendary short attention was already kicking in, which was usually followed by my legendary boredom.

“That’s really great, Shib. But what am I doing here? Most of my disciplining has been carried out by the Ravens or other guilds. Not a superior of your stature.”

He grinned, but his eyes turned putrid orange. I heard Crow gasp, but my sight would not falter. “It’s simple, Byron. We wish to offer you another chance. The MoonQueen wants your aid, to prove her infinite wisdom is just that. You were birthed the perfect Stargazer, Byron, now prove it. Or else.”

“Or else?” I took out another cigarette.

“Or else.” He sat back down, this time offering me a light. Another privilege of The Elders.

“Since you put it that way, Shib,” I said, leaning over to catch his illumination. “I guess I’ll be at your service. What’s going on?”

“Lord Crow,” he said, slowly swinging his chair left

and right.

“We believe there are certain, potential instigations in Xanadu,” he explained after clearing his throat.

I frowned. “Instigations? From whom? Stargazers?”

“No, of course not,” Crow spat, eyeing The Elder’s decanter. “From the Warm Ones, in one of The Farms.”

“Don’t these happen all the time?” I asked, remembering my nights in those dreary places.

“Yes and no,” Shibboleth said. “They do, but they are of little concern. Many times we allow them to give the Ravens and scientists a change to sharpen their fangs, pardon the expression, or to prune the volatile parts.”

“But this one is different?”

“We believe so,” said Crow, “especially since one of our own was found...”

He glanced at Shibboleth for help at the lodged word.

“Fallen,” The Elder said calmly. “Destroyed.”

“Destroyed?” I said. “And you think it was a Warm One?”

They watched the shaking of my head. That had never happened in this city, as far as I knew. Not when I was the head of the Ravens, not even with Crow.

“If our intelligence is correct,” Crow said. “It might be more than just a very isolated event, perhaps a collective insurrection.”

“What exactly happened?” I asked, still unbelieving.

“You will be detailed once you get there and then you act quickly.”

“I still don’t understand,” I said. “Why me? Why not eliminate a few hundred of any potential troublemakers and be done with it?”

Again, he looked to Shibboleth for words. The Elder was glancing to his side, lost in his own churning thoughts.

“As Shibboleth informed my Ravens,” Crow said. “The MoonQueen doesn’t just want a massive squashing of the rebellious element. One, our food crop has lessened in the last ten years—spilled juice is not desirable. Two, the Warm Ones are covering up very well. Our Mistress wants somebody with

a good eye.” He glared at me. “Someone with a very good eye.”

“Not just that,” Shibboleth added, “but someone who understands the ways of places away from The Citadel, someone who is sensitive, who can perhaps look at the Warm Ones and read them better than most.”

“Sounds like me,” I said acidly in a low tone.

The Elder stood up again, as if not getting enough of the scenery. “It is you, Byron. You will be an example and you will be redeemed. Small feat for someone like you.”

“And example?”

The Elder sighed. “Yes, an example, Byron. The Moon-Queen told me personally that she believes that we, as a species, are growing soft. Not exactly soft, but perhaps complacent, lacking in dynamics. It’s been almost a century and a half since The Holocaust. When the nuclear winds settled and the endless ash blotted out hateful *Sol* for decades, we rose from the rubble of what we caused as the supreme species. The new offspring of Our Mistress, who gives birth to all of us from her black womb, almost starved but were able to find the Warm Ones, those who survived.”

I felt a speech coming but this one struck me with a certain melancholy.

He turned his head and regarded us both. “And thus came the city-states, wondrous metropolises in the wastes where the Stargazers could thrive with new technology. Of the five built, how many are left, Byron?”

“Let me see,” I said slowly. “Two failed, disappeared; we believe a massive radioactive surge or an earthquake on the west coast obliterated Rice City and New Tenochtitlan. Hard to tell, long-distance travel and communication is so hard. Then there was Utopia, New Atlantis, and Xanadu...”

“We know what happened to Utopia.” He leaned on the desk to make sure I heard him loud and clear. “The first of the city-states, our cradle.”

“At least we know the rumors,” I commented.

“Blasphemous idiot!” Crow snapped. “The MoonQueen, who originally dwelt there, told us what happened. It was the

Warm Ones who revolted and sabotaged our facilities. I ought to—”

He was silenced by Shibboleth’s risen hand.

“Please, Lord Crow. We are not here to prove Mr. Byron’s character. That will be proven very soon. And then it will be judged.”

“By whom?” I asked, for the first time feeling like a prisoner of some didactic ploy. “Our Mistress? The Elders?”

“You will be judged,” he said firmly. “Our civilization, new as it may be, even though Stargazers roamed the earth since the beginning of time, must evolve unhindered. We have lost much, Byron, we have much to gain. You must understand that once, some of the wiser ones hunted in the open, underneath the stars and a naked *Luna*. That is why we baptized our kind with a name that makes sure they always remember, hope for, and seek that time when they can hunt under stars and a naked *Luna*. One of these nights, the atmosphere will cleanse itself and the land might grow. It’s taken *much* longer than we had theorized, but when that happens, when we can see the stars again, it is our intention to have as many city-states, separate yet united, ready to converge in the greatest empire this planet has ever witnessed. And morale and example are good ways to begin. We do not want to grow lax, for nature is still harsh and ingenuity is scarce. We will *not* become soft as the Warm Ones did in the end. We will move forward! That is my duty as an Elder.” He pointed to the silver rose pin that all Elders wore. “We are like a rose—beautiful, enigmatic, but ready to prick anyone if their growth is disturbed. Do I make myself clear?”

I wasn’t looking at him. My gaze was fixed on *Luna*, a bloated tangerine dangling between veils of sickly clouds, always watching the land, always filling our kind with hope, with hunger.

“Perfectly clear.” I matched his sight, and raised him infinity simply to show him that his speech hadn’t worked *that* well on me.

3

I didn't do much else that night. I dropped off some work to an engineer leader I did freelance work for once in a while. Archimedes took my drafts with a satisfied nod. "Good work, Byron. Why don't you come work full time for me?"

"No thanks. Work ages me."

He didn't get my humor, inspecting my work a second time.

"That's nice. Come here, I want to show you something."

I followed the guildmaster through laborious cubicles all the way to his office. Few of the Stargazers dared a glance at me, drowned in their work behind computers or drafting boards. After locking his office, he pointed at massive plans strewn across his desk. I was more interested in the chemical plants on the other side of the window, refining plastic and testing new synthetic fuels, a small part of a society mostly dependent on electricity coming from minute nuclear plants a few blocks away, under another dome.

"It looks like," I said and paused, catching the vast size of the plan's intentions. "A plumbing system?"

The barrel-shaped Stargazer with the large chops at each cheek grinned proudly. "Got a copy from some connections in The Tower. It's going to be wonderful, you know."

Archimedes explained it was nothing less than a new, overhauling construction that would change the face of Xanadu. Within the year, nourishment could be transported through high-tech plumbing all the way from The Farms instead of in live or dead cargo. This would eventually save a lot of funds in transportation and tunnel wear and tear; it would also give Stargazers a chance to wake up at night and simply help themselves to nourishment from the tap instead of having to keep it bottled in fridges or have to go to a bar. The idea came from New Atlantis, our modern sister.

"What will they think of next?" I mused.

Archimedes merrily slapped my back. "Isn't it amazing?"

Thought you'd enjoy this, oh pessimistic one."

"Maybe I won't have to leave my cupola ever again."
"Goddess help me, Byron. Always so sour."

"Sorry, Arch. They are impressive, I'll admit. Anyway, I have to go. The night is short."

"Tell me about it. Well, get some *Moratoria*, will you? You look less than perfect."

"So I've heard. I'm fine, really, just been hobnobbing with the powerful of Xanadu," I said, and he chuckled.

I left his offices, somehow glad I'd interacted with him. Archimedes, unlike the more important of the city (no one was important, we're all equal, The Elders always said), treated me rather well. Not coolly, like the rest. The fact I'd destroyed another Stargazer was enough to make most of my peers cringe, but I'd hurt others, just as I'd created so much.

I decided to hobnob with the rest down at The Mall Zone. I strolled through the shops and boutiques, crossed fluorescent parks where Stargazers practiced their powers or meditated, stood in elevators witnessing the countless levels of glass and reinforced steel. Hands in pockets, whistling a tune, I suddenly felt very lost here.

The nagging, embarrassing feeling was still lingering in me. Shibboleth's impassioned speech hadn't galvanized me as much as I'd wanted. I knew I had an opportunity to start over, perhaps redeem myself, as he'd stated. Somehow, I didn't care that much about that, about anything, no matter how many times I told myself that this was the only world I knew and we're at the summit of creation. I could either exist with it or be judged by it.

I moved on to thinking about stupid, inane things as I brushed shoulders with other pallid creatures. Why did we all look different in our embodiments of perfection? Some of us had slanted eyes, others had red hair, some of our skin was almost a brownish tint. There were tall ones, ones who walked with bow legs. Obviously, just like Crow, some of us were smarter than others. Why?

I could hear The Elders talking through computer monitors, like they did every night on Channel 6 or at The Fusing:

The MoonQueen creates us in variety to create oneness. You do not question the motives of Goddess. Our traits are shared by the Warm Ones, for we coexisted together long ago, but we are the natural step in evolution.

We will move forward!

Somebody shouted at me. I shuddered, obviously way to wrapped up in my mind.

I was in the middle of a narrow walkway lined with quartz-halogen lamps of verdant tint. Ahead of me, a Raven waved at me with one hand, the other dragging a large cage. In it, through the glass-covered metal bars, I could see a herd of Warm Ones cowering in the center.

“Move it!” the Raven yelled.

“This isn’t an unloading zone,” I said, taking a step to one side.

“Damned Railway B-8 broke down,” he said angrily, “got to take this cargo and more all the way to Munchies on Mall Level 25. There’s a Century-Birtnight.”

“A Century-Birtnight,” I whistled, the cage passing me. “I never had one.”

The frustrated soldier gurgled some more complaints, but wasn’t paying attention.

Even though the tightly sealed glass covered most of the cage, I could smell them through small air holes. I could smell their rich juice, pumping, flowing, gorging their cases. I realized how hungry I was, how hungry I always was, and how it always bothered me. Were all the rest like me? I could easily feel my eyes ripple to another color, fangs pulse inside gums, nails sprout from flexing fingers.

Then I actually noticed the animals. All of them were adults, except for one, the meal of honor, for sure. All shared the same terrified look, pulled here in the middle of the beautiful and pale, in the den of hunters. Even in their state, tattered and mildly fed, impounded like they had been since birth, they still held a certain frail determination, as if this couldn’t be happening, as if there was an escape. It was fragile, slight, but I caught it.

I saw a tear sprout from the pup at the same time his

cheeks flushed in color. How curious that water came from its eyes, how delicious was the fact juices coagulated in certain parts.

“How pathetic,” I said, not knowing why.

I walked away, because I could already see groups of Stargazers surrounding the cage in mist or physical shape to see the specimens.

Strolling away, I noticed I was famished and had to do something about it. At four at night, I reached Lilac’s. The place was emptying—The fusing was tomorrow and everybody had to be at their best. I grabbed a seat on Tina’s section. The music was too loud, the tingling of mildew returned.

“Back again, Stargazer?” She grinned, looking as fresh as when she started the night. Part of her strap was down to her arm, revealing an upper view of her right breast.

“Need some nourishment, Tina,” I said, inspecting an empty pack of cigarettes. When had I smoked them all?

“You sure do, Byron,” she said, already filling a glass. “Shouldn’t go all night with just what you had, if I’m not mistaken. You look like you just saw nuclear fallout.”

“No, just working hard at not working hard.” I crumpled the pack and threw it on the floor.

She handed the snack to me, still grinning, still showing part of her bosom.

“I hear the radiation count is way up outside,” she said, watching me guzzle the stuff and quiver in delight. “Maybe that’s why you’re feeling depressed. Many from the Scientist Guild say it can affect our moods.”

“I’m not feeling depressed, Tina, it’s against the law,” I said, handing her back the empty cup. She concocted me another one. I tried not to look at the container. I tried not to listen to some petty conversation on the results of the arena scores by two jerks sitting on a bench outside, fifty feet away.

“Whatever, Byron.” She leaned over the bar, and the sight doubled. “This one’s on me.”

“Thanks, Tina. You’re great, you know.” I took only a couple of sips, watching how the maroon liquid stained the glass.

She leaned her head on a dainty hand. “And you’re an odd fellow, Byron. I’ve heard so much about you, much of which I can’t believe, but I can’t seem to dislike you like the others.”

“Well, do you like me?”

She reached under the bar and pulled out two cigarettes. I took one.

“I’ll take it as a yes,” I said, and lit hers.

“I don’t know why I do it,” she mused, a cascade of smoke drizzling from her nostrils. “But who we are and how we act in such ways, why even appear on this world at all is all because of The MoonQueen, uh? She is the reason for everything, and there’s no point in questioning her.”

I shrugged, taking another gulp. “I guess. The reason you hear so much about me is because I’ve always done things for my own reasons, even if I don’t know them.”

She waved the cigarette at me. “Which brings us back to what I said.”

“You’re right,” I said. She giggled. “You’re damn right.”

“Oh, Byron, you’re an interesting character, and—”

“—and you see your share, Miss Bartender.”

“Yes, I do.”

There was an odd silence between us, so I broke it.

“How about it?”

“How about what?”

“A date?”

“A date? What is that?”

I smiled. “I don’t know. Let’s find out.”

She stood up. “Byron, you’re not talking about one of those primitive habits Warm Ones and other animals have?”

“No, not at all. I’m just talking about companionship, Tina. Let’s do something tomorrow after the ceremony.”

Tina pursed her lips, but they wrestled themselves to a smile. “Okay, that’s fine. I’m not working, and most of my friends will be at Gilder Arena for an art-gallery opening.”

I smiled again, adding a wink. “Good. And then we can do one of those primitive habits Warm Ones and other animals have.”

“Silly,” she scoffed and dissolved to mist, vanishing to take care of some Stargazer on the other side of the bar who needed service. “Meet you here at nightfall,” she added when turning to her natural shape before dealing with the customer.

“It’s a date,” I whispered and also took off on foot before she changed her mind.

I strolled around for a while, stopping to new bulleting from The Tower. A spokesman from The Elders proudly informed about how scientists had discovered a vaccination for an odd malady in the Southeast Farms that had reduced our supply. What followed was the usual good news: positive economic forecasts, new advances in computer processing, and the start of a major plumbing system in Xanadu. A first ever, an attractive Stargazer said, pretending to read off papers in her painted fingers.

I was about to say something snotty to the television, when the first alarm went off, booming across miles of steel and concrete, turning every light to murky red. Two more, and *Sol* would send its first shards of hate to Xanadu. It was time for all to reach their elevators or shafts and return to their cupolae. At the second ring, in another half hour, Ravens would sweep The Citadel and make sure no one was piddling. At the third one, you were on your own. As *Sol* rose, our bodies would be immediately forced into a necessary slumber, regardless of our location.

Thus, while the angry star swept this part of the world, nothing stirred on the surface of this city, nothing happened as an entire civilization entered into this brief, shielding hibernation called *Moratoria*. One god-soul, the source of power and perfection granted by Our Mistress, the real reason why we were more than just animals, survived and was revitalized during this. Many of the scientists spoke of time when robots would take over while we went into *Moratoria*, but we’d have to see. They hadn’t done it yet in New Atlantis.

I took my specific shaft to my cupola, flying as quickly as I could, along with thousands more. They weren’t exactly cupolae, but more like large chambers with rooms, furniture, and electronic entertainment, a couple hundred feet beneath

the earth. Only The Elders were allowed to *Moratoria* above the ground in The Citadel. This all worked for protection, our protection. When a Stargazer sealed his chamber, he or she was safe from anything: An atomic bomb, a Warm One revolt, or a natural cataclysm. Well, one was almost safe, I thought, recalling the other two city-states.

I punched the codes in, and the door neatly shut. A main-frame somewhere would keep it locked, until *Sol* vanished again to another part of the world. I was safe and alone here. I took off my clothes and inspected myself in the mirror. Besides being safe and alone, I was still handsome, I told the reflection. The reflection didn't cheer up.

I checked my computer, no messages, no new news, nothing. Damn, and I didn't want to *Moratoria*. But I was who I was.

Feeling black pulling me down in a haze of tiredness, I dreaded two things instead of one. *Sol* was coming, somewhere outside, and the Stargazer must dream; but I only dreamt of *Sol*. That was one thing, I groggily mused, lids feeling heavy, body not making to my bed but staying on the couch. The other thing was that in less than a week I would spend healthy time in The Farms with Ravens, scientists, and the animals.

I wondered if that pup still cried and was gone.

Chapter 2

I woke that night and didn't leave immediately even though I was famished. I checked the news on the computer, searched some archives on Warm Ones and The Holocaust, and played some violent video games. The latter out of frustration because I swore the history of the Stargazers changed every time I researched it.

"Nuclear winter lasting this long?" I mumbled at one point. "Goddess's sake. Never figured that one out."

Before I predictably got side-tracked into my own personal conspiracy theories, I forged ahead into the ongoing conspiracy that seemed to be the history of Stargazers. Yet the truth was that there was very little that could be found on pre-Holocaust nights, besides how we were persecuted and almost ultimately destroyed by some secret weapon.

Thinking of secret weapons, I totally forgot about Tina. I dressed in a hurry and sped to Lilac's. She was pacing the entrance before throwing a few insults at me for being late. I apologized five times and treated her to a quick meal before we attended The Fusing.

The fusing was held in a stadium in the center of The Citadel. All Stargazers were required to attend our holiest event, held every two weeks. There, filling ten thousand seats, maybe more, we watched gigantic screens with the images of an Elder impart their wisdom and recent news. We were always reminded that our god-soul, the Dark Instinct, was nothing more than a fragment, a spark of The MoonQueen's eternal cold fire, that our divine part was made in her image because of her grace only. We were always reminded that the stars would shine one night and we would rule the earth just as Luna presided over the constellations. We were always reminded of many things.

Eventually, the more popular part of the event started. Liquid music boomed. Stargazers tore off their clothes and

began touching, wriggling, holding one another for hours under strobing light. It was a ceremony of oneness, a carnival of true adoration, thousands of us feeling, grappling one another with exposed fangs, lost to the beat of heavy light, praying in savagery to The MoonQueen. Sometimes people bit one another in rapture, sometimes the ceremony took to the air in primordial dances. It was the ultimate achievement of our species, and even outside The Citadel in the villages and The Farms, Stargazers performed this ritual in smaller scales.

Once in a while, rarely, the image of The MoonQueen appeared, glorious, breathtaking, telling us with her mind-voice that a new Stargazer was to be born, perhaps because of the accidental demise of a prior one or for her own reasons. In awe and supplication, we watched as her being detonated in chromatic fury and another being fused from the ghastly illumination. It was quite a sight. All of us were born this way from her, The Queen of Darkness.

No one was born that night, but Tina told me she felt disturbed, almost too excited after the event. I agreed and told her to give her senses a rest at a park. She leaned on me as we shouldered our way out of the stadium, along with a content population.

“Whew!” she more or less said, sitting on a bench by a river of mercury. “Haven’t felt so filled after a Fusing since I can remember, Byron.”

I didn’t say anything at first, admiring her short dress of cardinal, after I’d just admire and rubbed her lithe body for a long while. This felt different. I wanted this to feel different.

“Maybe you’re not filled, Tina,” I said, standing right in front of her.

She looked up at me.

“What do you mean?”

I placed a hand on her cheek, then followed the contours of her bright-red lips with my fingers.

“Maybe you’re not filled, maybe you wanted to be, but you are still empty.”

I stared into her and found a path.

“I don’t understand,” she said shakily. “What are you

doing to me?”

“What did you feel in there, Tina?”

“I...” I kneeled. “Tell me. I’m your friend.”

She looked away. “I felt somehow lost, somehow very lonely, even though I was sharing with the others. It felt so...anticlimactic yet secure at the same time.

I moved her face so she would regard me.

“You see how I feel, Tina? How Stargazers really feel.”

“Is this bad?” she questioned in a hushed tone. She looked so ghostly. So beautiful.

“It just is, Tina.” A tear of red rippled on the corner of my left eye. She took it in one finger and licked it.

“Maybe it is, Byron” she said, as if noticing for the first time. “But it’s more. It’s you. This had to do with you.”

I smiled warmly. “You and me. Part of that lonely, anticlimactic feeling...what we did.”

She swallowed hard before speaking. “Then how do we truly fill ourselves?”

I kissed her and held her and squeezed her, not as part of a species or a ceremony, but as her and me. She tensed at first but came into my cold grasp. Her fangs accidentally ripped into my lips. I groaned, she giggled. I told her to lick what came out. She did, and I groaned more. I slid my hands up her snowy legs. She caressed my hair.

“Byron,” she whispered, “this is forbidden, we are not...”

But she continued. And suddenly we were mist, suddenly we were one, swirling away from the shouts of disgust of other Stargazers, sucked by tubes until we reached her cupola.

There, we shed our clothes and caressed each other.

Under olive sheets, her hand closed around a penis that shouldn’t have been solid, that should be just a useless appendage of evolution’s laboratories. I kissed hard breasts, bit swarthy nipples. We both gasped in something akin to delight, converging into a cacophony of growls. Eyes bleeding light, mouths salivating, we rose into the air and sparks danced around us. Suddenly, unconsciously, we mutated to gas, twirling like a small cyclone with a flaming texture. We still felt

the same sensation, the fire, the heat, our only voice. We didn't question, we let the wave of forbidden intuition guide us to a tunnel, to a light.

In the air, we became one again in our true shapes, amidst howls of anger and claws ripping skin open. I'd never felt anything like it, a surge of sadness and excitement truly fused in pleasure. Over and over, I thrust and bucked, over and over, she held me tightly and shivered.

"Outside of me," she purred, "outside, Byron."

I didn't know what she meant, what her lips implored.

"I want to see," she kept on saying, "outside."

And as something rose and exploded inside me, I knew.

Yelling with a voice I didn't know, I pulled out from her moistness, also wanting to see what happened.

It wasn't like the old videos of mating Warm Ones or other creatures kept in laserdisc libraries. It wasn't seed, it wasn't creation, not for me. Not for me.

For only red spurts from the tip, bathing her in stickiness, also the same hue. Juice came out from me, pulpy rivulets of red, or as the Warm Ones called it.

Blood.

I shrieked in terror for some reason, but Tina laughed, bringing it to her mouth, lapping away.

Blood.

I collapsed on the bed. I felt exhausted. She lay on top of me, shaking at what we'd done, what we'd tried.

"Again," she begged coyly, reaching for the dial on her stereo.

"Shit," I said tiredly, and we went at it again. Blood.

So the next night went.

Actually, that's how the next few nights went. Tina called in Lilac's, making some excuse. I avoided all the work I should have been doing.

"We'll get into a lot of trouble if we're caught," she would always say in between pants after we finished, hair teased wildly, body spotted in my redness.

"They don't have to find out about everything," I would answer. Then we'd get some food out of her small fridge, talk

about something, and mock creation one more time. Knowing we might get in trouble was just half the fun.

That was the whole reason I'd done it, I rationalized over and over through the ritual. I almost felt bad for manipulating Tina, but maybe she had done it for the same naughty reasons. The Elders had forbidden us to imitate lower forms of life. It was embarrassing. Yet, as I'd realize that night walking around The Mall Zone, we *did* imitate a lower form of life, from our habits to our domain. How could we have not when we coexisted for hundreds of thousands of years before The Holocaust? I'd seen enough footage from scan files. We couldn't transform into animals but there we were acting like our most important stock once did. There we were, borrowing from their past. There was nothing wrong with it, was there? We were a curious species, a free and curious species. Why were there so many damn rules?

Maybe it was just disobedience that truly drove me, the chance to rebel because they were trying to one more time to control Byron, push him in the right direction.

We will move forward!

During the raging of *Sol*, while we rested in each other's arms, my dreams shifted. I didn't dream of things I couldn't see, but of things I didn't want to see. In the haze of *Moratoria*, I could see me running out of wreckage through sheets of fire, carrying wounded people to safer havens. The image changed, the wreckage was larger, me in the center, alone with shadows slowly surrounding me. Someone tugged my legs. Somebody told me to run for shelter.

When I awoke, I jumped out of the bed and scanned Tina's computer. Xanadu was still here. No fire ripping civilization.

"What's wrong?" she asked, floating to my side.

"Nothing," I said.

"Dreams again, uh?"

She leaned her head on my shoulder.

I nodded. "They're different. I think maybe I'm just feeling guilty about something. Not what we've done, but the work I should be doing."

“Me too.” She put an arm around me.

“We should get out of here and return to reality.”

“We should.”

“We...” But I was already kissing her.

After the third night, I finally left her to research. She hugged me, but something akin to sadness was lodged on the corner of her eye. I told her we’d soon be sharing each other, filling each other again after the trip. She only nodded, draped in a blanket, and saw me leave through the shaft.

I didn’t have time to ponder the hollowness inside me. I rushed to The Council and argued with the secretary for about five minutes. Finally, she got Shibboleth on the line, and I went to his office.

“What can I do for you?” he inquired, holding several faxes in his hand.

I told him I needed to use his databases—The Citadel’s were rather limited.

He regarded me seriously for a few seconds.

“We said you will be debriefed when you get to The Farm. What exactly do you need to find, Byron? Maybe I can help you.”

I shrugged lightly, knowing exactly what to say next.

“If you want I can always use your help. I just need to find out more about The Farms. It’s been a while since I was in one. You know, how the farming system has progressed, grazing and irrigation dynamics, advanced zoological theories, and other matters. Where do you want to start?”

He gave his faxes a quick look.

“Tell you what,” he said. “I am quite busy at the moment. Why don’t you use Balkros’s computer. He’s with Our Mistress on an important trip to New Atlantis trying to find out more about the new plumbing system. He won’t be back for nights.”

I thanked him and was led by one of his assistants to another office, past the news studios and data archives, which made Shib’s look like a Warm One hovel. Good advice, Shib, I thought. A slovenly and eccentric Stargazer, Balkros was the mastermind wizard that had set up most of the computer sys-

tems in Xanadu and one of the main architects of The Holocaust. When we didn't talk about an equal society, Balkros was at the top of the hierarchy. When we didn't talk about lower emotions, Balkros commanded the most fear.

His computer had about five trillion codes and passwords, making it very hard to surf his databases. I figured some of them out, but learned less than I'd wanted.

My primary search was to learn about The Farms and Warm Ones. Despite the fact I'd worked there for years in the early nights, much of it was blocked out that evening a dark rage took me and a Raven was destroyed by my hand.

I printed out the finding and then went deeper. Something about my vision in *Moratoria*, perhaps in Shibboleth's passionate speech or my own guilt had sparked a raging curiosity, a curiosity I sensed I'd denied for a long time. I wanted to find out more about Utopia. What had happened? How could it be avoided here...how could my dream not come true?

Why would it come true?

2

The next evening, I was on my way toward my mission.

I'd forgotten how civilization eroded away from The Citadel. The farther we rode on the subway, the less tended scenery became. Broken stone and rusted metal broke flashes of passing lights, those which worked. We passed rustic villages and towns, zoomed by other trains and flying Stargazers. We'd left The Citadel about an hour ago, making a few stops to load and unload cargo. Less than five miles, and the Northwest Farm would be nigh.

I stood quietly, gripping a handle, rocking against the torrid rhythm of the subway. Our compartment swelled with fresh Ravens and members of the Scientist Guild, who oversaw the breeding and living habits of Warm Ones. A few feet away, Crow and some assistant spoke during most of the trip

about ways to tighten security.

“Maybe we should lower the ozone levels around the villages,” the assistant said. “The higher radiation might keep the cattle even more docile.”

“Wouldn’t be prudent,” said Crow. “Even though they’ve been studying this for years, it was tried in New Atlantis a while ago. The Warm Ones started producing diluted juice. Believe me, they are as docile as they can be.”

“Too bad we can’t take their brains away,” said the assistant.

“Then they’d be hired as Ravens,” I muttered under my breath.

“What did you say, Byron?” Crow asked with a snarl, both hearing what I’d said and probably most of the compartment. Chuckles echoed.

“I said, why can’t we just create our own retarded Warm Ones with all the genetical research we have from pre-Holocaust times? I hear they’re already trying it in New Atlantis. Imagine, dumb, mute Warm Ones that can be used for menial tasks and then be happy to have us eat them.”

Crow’s voice was steel. “Byron. Your insolence knows no bounds. It will, though.”

“Come on, Lord Raven,” I said musically. “They used the technology once. We just hate having to borrow more than we have already. Why not admit we have imitated them?”

The chuckling stopped. Crow, his assistant, and the other soldiers stared at me in shocked revulsion; scientists looked at one another as if just discovering this new approach. What was wrong with everyone?

I wasn’t going to bother wondering about that anymore. Instead, I thought about all the data I fathered the night before in Balkros’s office.

Utopia: A massive city-state south of the flatlands of a place once called Oakhoma or just Oke-home. It was large, primitive and bulky compared to Xanadu, with a population of almost sixty thousand Stargazers, twice ours. It was a fascinating place, grown from some metropolis of pre-Holocaust times instead of from scratch like the rest. It thrived and ex-

panded incredibly for the first forty years and there The MoonQueen and Elders oversaw the other city-states, communicating and connecting with other Stargazers surviving in the fatal wilderness. A hard task, but they did it. It was a great feat.

So what happened?

Blood...

It seemed, the archives said and proved Crow and the rumors wrong, their mistake was that some of the population somehow grew, let us say, fond of the Warm Ones. Conflict arose within the ranks, breaking seams in the society to allow certain mutinous acts. It wasn't known how it truly happened, but some explosion occurred, destroying half of the city and permitting Stargazers there to die under *Sol* and the radiation, so much stronger a century and change ago. The MoonQueen and four surviving Elders escaped to Xanadu, making it their home base. She obviously held a stronger reign after what happened. I'm sure the Cataclysm of Tears, sixty years ago, which took away two more cities, didn't make her any more relaxed. Even though these databases hadn't been shaven of information about the real fate of Rice City and New Tenochtitlan, there still wasn't any conclusive evidence on what had happened to the city-states. Perhaps she knew, as Our Mistress was the only being that could easily travel the world without worry. But, like many things, she communicated only when her will decided it, if it ever did.

There was no information on what occurred to the remnants of Utopia. Everyone, Stargazer and Warm One, had probably perished in the tragedy. You would never hear one of The Elders who survived talk about it. Ever.

"All right, we're almost there."

I turned, shaking from my trance to see Crow's ugly face leering at me, my little quips long leaving his mood.

"Ready to go into a slaughterhouse, Byron?" he said, right next to me. I hadn't heard him move. The train was slowing down. "Let's hope it's not your own."

His assistant chuckled behind him. I rolled my eyes.

"Don't worry about me, Crow. I've got the situation un-

der control.”

His face closed inches from mine, even though he had to crane his neck.

“That’s not the only thing you’ve got under your control from what I hear,” he whispered with loathing.

“What do you mean?”

He shrugged lightly. “Oh, nothing, but getting a meal at Lilac’s has been kind of hard lately.”

I didn’t say anything, turning hands to fists.

“One way or another, Byron,” he hissed. “You’re finally going to face the consequences.”

“Can’t wait,” I said, but he was already walking off, cackling all the way to one of the doors.

I stood there of a minute, a crick in the flow of Ravens and others getting off to The Farm.

“Shit,” I then said and grabbed my bags.

Chapter 3

The Farms are as fascinating as The Citadel. And as necessary.

Too enamored by my thoughts on rebellion and Utopia, I never noticed the train tracks engage and upward angle, rising hundreds of feet. We stopped at Commodore Station, renamed after one of the Elders left behind in the fall of Utopia. The station was basically where all the subways stopped, directly at a large and steep canyon. At the bottom of the hill, after a small strip of bare terrain. The Farm spread before us, dozens of little villages and towns separated by stone walls. All of this was surrounded by Ozone Fields, nothing more than encircling poles that trapped electricity and oxygen in a dome of magnetic waves. Besides detaining enough of the radiation to give the Warm Ones a functioning health, it corralled the animals and filtered *Sol's* nutrient rates, allowing them to grow the feeble crops needed to survive. To leave the fields was assured death for the animals. To reach Commodore Station was climbing dangerous heights to a hive of terraces and gargantuan cranes. For us, the radiation was less of a concern, and we could fly, carrying at least ten times our weight without much effort.

From one of the many balconies carved out of the sedentary stone, I admired the rustic view of the Northwest Farm, the oldest and smallest of the four. It was a flat bastion of adobe houses broken by brick walls, dank fields where they grew their nourishment, and other quaint things I'd forgotten about. Below the ground, canals connected to irrigation systems and wells. The source underground lakes that had to be relatively close to any area where animals were raised. Precipitations were very rare, only transpiring high in the mountains this time of the era.

The field pulsed invisible over me, its humming always heard, haunting and judging at the same time.

If that wasn't enough reminder, the Slaughterhouses to

my right should have been, marked by the chimneys smoking much of the night. Each night Warm Ones were led to them through cranes into large hangars. From there it was a spectacle of simmering fumes and winding lines, steel pens, chemical vats, a labyrinth of walkways to destinations that served only to deliver the most important ritual of their existence. In the end, the animals either became an item to be perused from table tents in some bar or sport for the recreation-seeker.

I remembered that part of my downfall as a Raven, besides the impious deed, was creating a black market of jewelry that became very popular in Xanadu. Instead of wasting some of the corpses, I had some workers debone them so I could carve out earrings, bracelets, and other baubles. When I fell from grace, my little stint outside the Artisan Guild's jurisdiction came into full view.

I leaned over the railing, vision capturing so much for thousands of feet. Even though the Warm Ones chose *Luna's* presence to rest, I could see forms moving behind tattered curtains-families, clans, huddling together as the Ravens were never too far away, skulking around their neighborhoods to make sure their property behaved. Occasionally, as I knew, some hungry soldier or even scientist might snatch an animal from their home or alley and hide the remains. It really didn't matter, for all ended up as food sooner or later. No Warm One survived after thirty. Many were chosen way before that during holy nights or for special orderings.

I straightened, taking a generous gulp of smell. Nostrils flaring, I could almost taste a thousand forms of juice. They were all out there for the taking...

"Hard to stand sometimes," a voice from behind me, "That's why we issue nose-plugs to most who go down there."

I turned to see two figures coagulating from vapor, recently expunged from one of the tubes by the door. One was Crow, as I now understood, my chaperone in this quest. The other, an old friend of mine, was to be my quick guide before I headed out on my investigation. Seeing both of them standing together didn't make me any happier than I already wasn't.

"Never was," I said. "That's why discipline has to be the

first virtue in the farmlands.”

“Good to see you,” Mephisto said, putting a hand on my shoulder. “It’s been a while, Byron.”

I nodded eyeing his white robes. He chuckled lightly, also nodding.

“Yes. My nights as a Raven ended...” He paused and glanced at Crow. “That evening, Byron. My services are better utilized as an anthropologist for the Scientist Guild.”

“Better than being a Heretic,” I said with a harsh smile, and they both shuddered.

Crow might have wanted to growl, but Mephisto had regained his easy going composure, something he’d always done well. All too well.

“Byron, you never change, do you, old friend? Always so humorously morbid, always the shadow on somebody’s outline?”

“But you have changed,” I said, turning to The Farm. “And I don’t know what you’re doing here. Last I heard you were in the Southeast Farm doing menial work for some expansion of farmland.”

He chuckled again and asked Crow if we could have a word alone. The Raven snorted and disappeared. Mephisto stood next to me, perhaps to catch my focus on the primitive borough.

“Things always have a way of coming full circle, Byron,” he said in a low tone.

“I guess.”

“Master Shibboleth wanted me to give you the first tutoring when you got here.”

“So an old comrade of mine might curve my volcanic attitude, huh?”

“Byron, I’m being honest with you. Believe me. This is uncomfortable, too, old friend, if I can still regard you as that.”

I scrutinized him then, Mephisto, the old trickster with flames in his eyes, long, cropped hair complementing a long nose and lofty cheekbones, thin, almost gaunt, by full of haughty passion whenever things went his way.

"I don't know," I said. "When dust rose after my crime, you took off like a nuclear wind. I'm sure your chameleon loyalty went to good use."

"You haven't done so badly yourself," he said, but wouldn't look at me.

"I'm still me, and you study animals."

"We'll see about that," he said with a wink.

"What do you mean by that?" I was getting tired of that sentence.

"They're fascinating creatures, Byron, you'll understand. And I don't have to fall any more than I have, and you might."

"That's why you're here."

He shrugged. "I still think of you as my friend. It's a way of maybe helping you. I'm actually considered one of the top five zoologists on Warm One habits this side of The Citadel."

"Wonderful," I said, "I'm sure you'll impart all your wisdom to my yearning ears."

"That's all up to you." Mephisto said, going for the door, knowing at least that I heard him stop at the door, as if waiting for an answer. One would open. "Even if one of our own hadn't been destroyed, many here believe they have something dangerous down there, for no reason other than the way they suddenly look at use with expressions of pure, confident defiance. You're the master of confidence and defiance, of finding the heat in ice, Byron. This will be your greatest challenge."

I heard him stop at the door, as if waiting for an answer. His only answer was to watch me take out a cigarette.

"One of my helpers will get you to a proper cupola. I will meet you by the Slaughterhouse an hour after dusk. Good night."

I lit the cigarette over the silence and the sultry aromas.

2

The next night, after more vivid dreams of a city in ruins, I met

Mephisto where he'd asked. I was able to avoid some of Crow's lackeys by flowing into a rusty crack on the floor of my chamber, which unlike The Citadel was located above the ground and was not very guarded. When I met him, he didn't seem bothered I walked alone.

The first level was still about seventy feet above the ground; alone, we flew down the outskirts of The Farm. There, amid traffic of Stargazers escorting hordes of Warm Ones to cages and teetering cranes that would transport them to the Slaughterhouses, he spoke out constantly about the sections of the city. Quite a lot had changed with the Warm Ones in the shape of aqueducts, irrigations systems, and healthy modern technology.

"We're not too worried about them getting too good for our own good," Mephisto said, checking notes from a laptop. "As you know, we have always believed that letting them think they own and thrive in their own societies prevents desperate uprising—"

"Yeah, yeah I know," I interrupted, strolling ahead of him to a wide, empty street. "If they have an illusion of normalcy they feel less threatened by us and our intentions."

"Has worked very well," he continued, "but it's so hard to fully understand them in their primitiveness no matter how similar to use they look. We've tried it all; even video cameras are less than effective because of the radiation levels—"

"That's not the problem Meph," I said, scanning the area. It was his turn. "What do you mean?"

"The fact we rest during *Sol* and they during *Luna* makes it hard for both species to fully interact, therefore we basically can't get under their skin unless we're eating them."

"Good point Byron, but—"

"And they have the advantage because they can survive under *Sol's* rays, while we cease to exist. Makes you wonder, eh Meph?"

I enjoyed watching his expression of disbelief. Once, we'd both spouted such statements in the old nights for no other reason than amusement at getting a reaction.

"No, The Elders have told us that it is because of our su-

periority that this occurs. Stargazers and their god-souls must store incredible reserves of power of their own use—”

“Has any scientist proven this?”

“No,” he stuttered. “You know that it is forbidden to practice science on Stargazers—”

“Relax, Meph.” I raised my hand. “I’m not disagreeing with you. I’m just saying it’s going to be a chore to figure them out. I’m sure you and your associates have some ideas. What are they?”

He appeared more comfortable accessing information, away from my mouth. As he did this, I wondered if I should slide on the nose plugs like he’d done. Back in my nights, it was only you and your will keeping you from going on a mad reaping every evening. A Stargazer could devour the juice of an entire Warm One if he felt like, but actually only needed about three pints a night to survive. I could almost remember the old ‘Don’t Waste What Can Wait’ ad campaigns from the Elders.

“Well,” he started, spewing out paper from a pocket-printer latched to his belt. “We have a few leads. One, as I mentioned, is their recent grasp on technology, which we monitor very well. Unless they have stored weapons somewhere—”

“That’s not it,” I said. “We still have the Ozone Fields and a population of hunters. It would have to be more if you’re bothered by their expressions.”

“Then perhaps it is their new religion,” Mephisto said.

“Their new religion?”

“Yes. Since you left, they have all on this farm embraced some dogma in which they worship clay idols.”

“Interesting.” In the distance, I could see Warm Ones getting out of our way, turning corners, grabbing offspring, locking doors, whispering to one another. I was sure the next few blocks would be empty by the time we took a few more steps.

“We believe it is some imitation of Stargazer worship of Our Mistress, or perhaps some regeneration of their old cult of a singular, Supreme Being.”

“Who really helped them during The Holocaust,” I commented. “What kind of idols do they worship?”

“Most of the idols are vaguely of a male figure. They try to hide them from us. Most Stargazers really don’t put much matter in them because it’s really no threat.”

“Unless it unites them in some religious crusade against us.”

Mephisto shrugged. “I suppose. What can they do, Byron? They still don’t have the power to challenge us, they aren’t suicidal enough.”

“Maybe, but that’s the key.”

“I know.” He handed me the papers. “That’s what you have to find out. I would start there, Byron.”

“Who leads them?”

“What? No one leads the Warm Ones.”

“Right. Do they have some religious leaders, as should be natural? Their type of our Elders?”

Once again, he seemed out of balance at my colorful remark. “Actually, they do. The epicenter of this new religion is someone called the Shaman. That’s what’s perplexing. The Shaman is always some extremely sickly individual who never lasts more than ten years, never even reaches close to thirty. At the end of its tenure, before wasting away, the Shaman chooses another one. It is usually the opposite gender, much younger in age, and the changing is done by some public copulation.”

Mephisto stuck out his tongue in disgust. I thought of the bartender.

“Have you ever brought a Shaman in? Maybe to see why their lives are so short.”

“Our policy has always been to leave the Shamans alone, for his presence allows them that ‘illusion of normalcy’ you talked about, making them tamer. The Scientist Guild wanted to make an exception and bring him in recently, but Shibboleth informed us to stay our hand because of the rioting that might ensue. The low reserves of food, you know.” He winked at me again. “He offered us you instead.”

“Great. Let’s talk about the fallen Stargazer. Who was

he?”

“His name was Leztant,” Mephisto said, “a scientist. He had been analyzing water pollution levels in one of the wells on quadrant eighteen. It seems he wandered down one of the underground tributaries and...well...he floated back to the well, Byron. We sent a troop of Ravens down there, but they found nothing. Master Shibboleth, who oversees the evolution of The Farms, was then informed.”

“I see.” I nodded. “I’ll need to examine his remains, and any reports on what caused his ‘floating back’?”

He didn’t say anything, pretending to inspect his screen.

“Mephisto?”

He sighed. “Byron, I just told you it is forbidden to practice—”

“Even one who’s been destroyed?”

His shrug made me even more annoyed.

“Well,” I said. “Can I even take a look at his body?”

“The Elders confiscated it,” he said in a low timbre. “The Raven who found Leztant was immediately transferred to another farm. I’m sorry, Byron, but you know this is a sensitive occurrence that should never reach The Citadel’s ears. Most of the population here doesn’t know about it. But I did hear a rumor that it was as if he’d been severely burned.”

“That’s wonderful, Meph. How am I supposed to uncover a possible rebellion when I don’t even know what their weapons might be? You give me rumors, religions, and Warm Ones looking at us ugly as a debriefing, but I don’t have any hard facts.”

His eyes widened when I crumpled up the papers and threw them to the side of the street.

“What’s wrong Byron?”

“Nothing,” I said. “I’m just so happy that you and The Elders have already aided me so much. Now, if you excuse me, I obviously have a lot of work to do.”

“Uh, don’t you want company?”

“No thanks,” I said, before pivoting on a heel. “You’ve already done enough, Meph. Working alone, I might be able to get this over so our blessed leaders can leave me alone for a

while. By the way, I'm impressed on how well your new arm grew after I saved you."

I could feel him churn in silence as I left him. I paced down the street in my usual gray slacks, turtleneck, thick soled boots, and long black coat, hands in my pockets, whistling some song I composed but would never put down on paper.

It felt good to anger him. Somehow, it also felt good to cross a border to another civilization.

3

I spent the next few nights as nothing more than a shadow. I didn't do anything direct, going from corner to corner of The Farm in different modes. The Warm Ones avoided my path, as much as they did with Stargazers flying above them or Ravens in patrols. A few times, Crow or one of his lackeys found me and insisted they be present. I usually ditched them or just annoyed them enough to leave me alone.

Everything seemed as docile as it should be. They lived in fear. We ruled them. But I did notice the certain confidence in their sullen eyes and even in their aroma, especially the ones residing around the religious hub. Something was going on, and I was heading right into the middle of it. The thought that I might be bait of sorts from The Elders had already crossed my mind a few times. After all, if I ran into a dangerous rebellion and was destroyed, I'd be erased and that was okay for our society; if I uncovered a great scheme and redeemed myself, then that was also fine for our society. For those reasons I was going to avoid the wells and underground springs for now, and start with this Shaman.

Deep in all of our passions and hunger, no Stargazer worried about the Warm Ones. We had enslaved them after The Holocaust, we had broken their spirits many times since at large costs. Evolution continued and some night nature would return to use as it was intended.

And we might once again gaze at stars.

One evening, after the dreams had settled too real on my temples, I wandered to the area where the Shaman resided. He inhabited one of the many courtyards in the center of The Farm, where the Warm Ones held their little festivals or gatherings.

I skulked around in a side alley, witnessing a party of sorts. Dozens of animals sat at stone tables next to primitive fountain sharing a scarce meal. In the center, their young played various games under round lamps threading the tops of the roofs or on poles. Odd music blasted from one of the many opened windows. I was surprised they had learned to install electrical systems so proficiently.

I almost had the urge to put on the nose-plugs, such was the scent brimming from the happy meeting, but I suppressed it. I tried to concentrate on their faces, on their small joys, on the talking coming from their thin lips. Nothing. No secrets. No hidden innuendos. But their expressions...it was there...as if even *they* didn't know why they felt confident.

A ball rolled directly to my feet at the lip of the alley. For some reason, I picked it up. A herd of pups followed its path.

Most of them stopped in midtrack when they saw me, eyes full of curiosity. One didn't stop, a male who was almost old enough to be tattooed. As he walked toward me, gasps and shuffling echoed throughout the alley.

"Can I have my ball?" the pup said.

I eyed him for a second or two before saying, "Can I have my ball, *please*"

The pup gave out a small snort, "Can I have my ball, *please*."

I extended my arm. He did the same.

"No!" A scream caused both of our heads to rotate. From the terrified crowd that had swarmed around us, a Warm One female rushed us. She snatched the pup and put him down a few feet away.

"Do not speak or interact with that, Clannad," the girl spoke sternly to the pup, who was for the first time afraid. "You know that is not allowed—"

“Hey, relax,” I said. “I wasn’t going to do anything.”

The animal stood up from her crouching stance with a look of anger. I was surprised. It was the first time a Warm One had looked at me that way. It was more, though, it was her features. Despite the drab clothing, the shaven hair required after the twenty-fifth year, the sickly countenance, fire burned within her, within a youthful face, within rag-wash eyes of brown with long, strong eyelashes. For a moment, I was paralyzed by the creature before me, even thought I could extinguish her life with the flick of a wrist, with the lash of my jaws.

“Do not involve yourself in our matters, *please*,” she said with a mocking snap.

I raised a warning eyebrow. “I heard you refer to me as a ‘that’.”

She extended her arm and pointed at me. Her sleeve rose then, revealing the tattoo all members of her species received after ten, painted numbers that the Stargazers inspected every week in massive, random roll calls to see who was to visit the Slaughterhouses. It was a simple method: They lined them all up in the courtyards or streets and used a glowing scanner on each tattoo. The codes were fed on a computer at the station. Then amid the screams and fighting, they dragged the Warm Ones to their end. Those stupid enough to try and save the chosen were more than often chosen themselves. I couldn’t even start counting the numbers I’d tossed into cages or brought to the Slaughterhouses, the looks of despairs and pleading, the number of credits I’d won after wagering bets to see how long a Warm One lived while being drained.

“And who do you think you are?” she questioned rapidly. I shuddered. The question caught me off guard. All of a sudden, I saw the crowd encroaching where I stood, their expressions mirroring hers.

I couldn’t answer, so I asked, “And who do *you* think you are?”

I tossed the ball at her. She gave me an answer as she caught it.

“I am Medea, Shaman Appointed, from the clan of Seth,

daughter of Durgo.”

“What—”

She threw the ball back at me. “And who are you I ask again?”

I caught it. “I am Byron, uh, Stargazer, Offspring of The MoonQueen.”

“You lie,” she said with a narrow smile. I could hear Ravens converging on this area, their sharp ears noticing the disturbance blocks away.

“I lie? I told you—” I got ready to throw the sphere at her again but her mouth was faster.

“You cannot be anyone’s son,” she said, “because we created you.”

My arm froze. Body tensed. We created you? I’d never heard such a comment from an animal. The audacity of those words not only pierced me but stunned me. I found myself blinking rapidly, knowing I had no remark to counter her absurdity. All of a sudden, I felt every stare from the crowd, felt closed in, almost trapped.

I opened my mouth, but all I wanted to do was take a step backward. And then another.

A troop of Ravens appeared from all over, yelling at the Warm Ones to get back into their homes. The crowd rapidly dispersed in segments, rushing away from the snarling Stargazers with raised fists. Tables knocking over, children crying, dust rising, doors slamming, I stood in the middle of the fracas holding the stupid ball. The Warm One called Medea slowly walked away with the pup in one hand.

One of the Ravens, following his instructions of aiding me, came to my side. “Want to make an example out of her?”

I blinked a few times more. “No. Not necessary. Just doing a little research.”

The Raven laughed. “Well, let’s hope you don’t start too much more trouble in your research, Byron, even though we’d like to wet our fangs once in a while.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “It didn’t go exactly as planned. Won’t happen again.”

“At least you got a nice toy out of this,” he said, still

laughing, leaving me to make sure the area was settled. When it was done, splintered furniture, spilled food, and shut doors were all that was left of a party my species quickly dashed. Somebody had turned down the music.

Her name was Medea.

I carried my 'toy' back to the station, deciding to start fresh tomorrow, more prepared. Mephisto wanted to inspect it, and Crow wanted to make sure no bombs were planted in it, but I told them I'd play them a game of kickball for ownership. They declined.

We created you.

Chapter 4

What's happening? What do you mean?

The dream, it's burning everything away. I'm running through walls of heat, past shattered mortar. Above me, a sky swirls in chromatic hate. I'm sweating. I'm carrying somebody. She's so heavy. I reach a street. Bodies and body parts litter injured sidewalks. The ground shakes, and my nose smells something other than juice. Flames cover me... and ...

I'm standing before a stadium of Stargazers, a stadium I haven't seen before. They look angry at me. They look hungry for me.

Why, I haven't done anything yet. I'm trying! Don't leave your seats, don't cross the air with salivating fangs. I'm not enough. I'm a citizen of this city I'm...

I hear the laughter of a lady, but it's not a lady... it's a goddess.

She laughs, and I'm covered. My skin tears, bones pop from sockets, my skull implodes. They won't stop. I won't go away. More flames. More juice...

2

I shuddered into wakefulness. The sheets were drenched from the juice I'd just sweated.

But that's not what bothered me just then, laying in my cupola. That's not what caused me to go into whimpering convulsions and fall off my bed.

"No," I croaked, seized by acute aching from toe to fang. I converged into spasms, more juice left me.

Sol!

I was awake. It was outside, fuming, a searing abyss, heating up the land with its enormous hatred. It was outside. I

was awake.

Even through steel and rock, even though I knew it was already falling off the horizon, it pierced me. I felt its anger assaulting my mind, making it self-sabotage completely. The punishment on my body felt a thousand times worse.

I shut my eyes, hoping I could return to my darkness, but I suddenly realized I couldn't go back there. I was too scared. My dreams sent me to it prematurely.

Flopping on the ground, my body coiled erratically in place, for the first time truly understanding primordial agony, so much more than physical. I grabbed one of the legs of the bed and squeezed, howling in pain. The metal twisted in my grasp, and I would howl all the way to the night.

3

"This is very unusual," Mephisto said in his infinite wisdom.

Crow kicked something on the other side of the room. I sat slumped in my chair, holding a large bottle of food, sucking it slowly through a straw.

"Unusual?" Crow echoed angrily. "We have a Stargazer who woke up way before *Moratoria* ended, and that's all you have to say?"

"Look," Mephisto said, still pacing the chamber. "You know we can't touch Byron. I know a Stargazer perspiring very rarely happens, only in times of great stress, but it does happen."

"I know," Crow said, "it's happened to me before, but I've never woken up before *Luna's* rise. Has anyone?"

"Not to my knowledge," Mephisto said. "But the point I'm trying to say is that this might have occurred because of some psychosomatic symptom, just as the perspiration."

Crow crossed his arms, I noticed, for the first time raising my head. The room was blurry, something I'd also never experienced.

"I'd rather play it safe," he said, "and assume it might

have been something the Warm Ones did. This could be very serious, like a form of nerve gas. Maybe that is what destroyed Leztant. Byron, do you still have that ball?"

"No," I said, licking my lips, not bothering to tell him that chemical gases only worked on lower forms of life. "I gave it to the scientists."

"It's clean," Mephisto said. "Nothing unusual as far as we can discern."

"That's comforting," Crow said sarcastically, "but I must take severe precautions, like eliminating any Warm Ones in contact with Byron that night. Plus, The Elders must be contacted imm—"

"That is a little drastic, Crow," Mephisto cut in. "Like I said, it might have been just Byron himself. He's a notable Stargazer."

"Notable?" barked Crow. "Did you rise before dusk as well? I'm in charge of all security here, and that's what I need to—"

"No," I said in such a tone they both gave me their attention. "Whether this is some new weapon or me just going insane, I'll deal with it."

"No way," Crow said.

"Yes way," I said, standing up wobbly. "You know what Shib wants. One way or another, I need to get closer to them and see what happens. If I get completely changed or disintegrated, then it won't be much of a loss for you, Crow."

He pursed his lips and eyed Mephisto. The tall Stargazer shrugged.

"Fine," Crow said. "Continue with your work. But I still need to inform The Elders."

"If that will make you happy," I said, heading for the exit.

"And don't expect any more Ravens to help you out, either. I'm keeping the area clearing until I'm sure."

"I can take care of myself, Crow. Go ahead and kindly fuck off my area from now on."

He started hurtling obscenities at me. I heard Tina's name a few times down the corridor. I didn't care. What were

they going to do, turn me into a *Heretic*, the worst punishment decreed by The Elders in Xanadu, which simply meant banishment in less romantic terms? Considering what I'd experienced recently, that would be a great favor.

4

This time no gathering filled the courtyard. I met an empty silence the following evening. The Ravens weren't the only ones avoiding this place. It was time to use yet another capability enhanced by the god-soul.

I stood in the center and closed my eyes, ignoring the humming of the fields in the distance. I concentrated on listening to everything transpiring for blocks away. Hundreds of voices gorged my ears from inside the various buildings, each one separated in my mind.

Look, it's that monster who almost ate little Clannad. He's come back for more.

Hide the children, Brunna. I'll bar the door.

I hear they took Osros to the Slaughterhouse. He was twenty-eight...

Yes, they're getting desperate.

Getting desperate? They don't even know...they just guess most of the time.

Why is he just standing there?

They'll kill us all in the end.

He's dressed different from the others, though, still in all black...

Eat your dinner...

Master, I'm worried—

I opened my eyes. Her voice. I zoned in on it and walked toward its direction. I made sure to curse myself for not having listened for clues the first night I was here. But, like my brethren, we had grown accustomed to simply taking what we wanted from the animals, without acknowledging their minds or customs with any seriousness.

I reached a house about a street down. It looked like all the rest, except for a painted circle of dried juice on the door. I sniffed and grimaced. It wasn't Warm One juice, but that of the large rodents they ate, one of the other few animals that survived The Holocaust, a *Ruka*, usually hunted in the vast sewers of The Farm.

I had to chuckle internally. Another obvious sign Crow and his idiots missed. They could have found the living quarters of the Shaman long ago. I didn't go in then, hearing some more...

...ceremony soon, Master. You are weaker every week. You can barely walk, much less—

I am fine, Medea. I can still raise the old pole if necessary.

But, Master, you cannot give your wisdom with full mobility. We are losing more and more people to the monsters. You...

Her words stopped at a sore, reluctant groan.

Fine, fine, Medea, my dearest. If it's any consolation, I had already planned my abdication. Are you ready?

Yes, Master.

You better be, my dearest. You are the chosen one.

Maybe we should not choose just one Shaman, Master. We are too many here, and your word only spreads so far. Envision many Shamans throughout the villages until the Revolution can be completed. The Blood of Circles all around!

That will be your choice when you are Shaman, Medea. Now, please fetch me some berries from the fields. I am hungry. I like the red ones, the blue ones are too acidic.

Your will, Master.

I heard her coming toward the door. I should have hidden to further snoop on her. Instead, I took a few steps back and lit a cigarette by the time she opened the door.

Her features didn't change much when she saw me, except for the harshness. She wore long, baggy robes with the same circle painted on her chest.

"You?" she questioned, quickly closing the door behind her and then hiding her hands inside the folds of her clothing.

“What do you want?”

“I want some answers,” I said plainly. “You will give them too me.”

She laughed once. “Why should I?”

“Because I need to know some things.”

“Your kind never needs anything from us,” she said, standing right in front of me. “Except our blood.”

“Existence is tough,” I said, making sure not to lower myself to her absurdity again. “And I’m not here to discuss irrelevant things.”

“Then what are you here for?”

“Information,” I responded, amazed the animal still showed not an ounce of fear or respect without the rest of the herd.

She smiled without humor. “Information? I thought you Stargazers, as you call yourselves, knew everything there was to know?”

“Almost everything,” I said slowly, stamping my cigarette and putting on my nose-plugs. Something about her, perhaps just her resonant juice, was keeping me off balance. “You’re not afraid of anything, are you?”

“Why should I be? We live under the shadow of death, Star—”

“You may call me Byron.”

“Okay, *Byron*,” she said with distaste pointing to the east. “Right down the street in that hill you live in, our kind are butchered constantly. My mother and father went one evening when I was young and never came back, and so it goes. We’ve heard stories about the butchery there—the lines, the draining, the little games you play like pretending to allow some escape and then kill them for sport. I don’t even want to fathom what your civilization might look like away from our homes. Even here we exist enslaved, always afraid, never too far away from one of your kind who might get brave in the middle of the night. I do feel fear, Byron because that is all we truly have, but I can use it.”

“To create hope,” I said, having not heard the first part of her speech. The nose-plugs were not working very well.

She half smiled and looked away.

“Yes. To create hope.”

“And then you can have your revolution.”

The girl stared at me, her firmness slightly wavering.

“Yes, we will have our revolution.”

“And what makes you think that? We are superior to you.”

“That was not always the way. That is not natural.”

“Why not?” I questioned. “Because you created us, right? Why did you say that last night?”

She crossed her arms. “Why would you care what I said?”

I recalled *Sol* greeting me when it shouldn’t have. Stress, Mephisto had deducted. I wondered if it was more...

“It doesn’t matter,” I told her. “Like I said, I’m not here to debate but to find answers. One of ours was destroyed by your kind and it won’t go unpunished.”

“Are you sure it was our kind?” she asked with a sneer.

“A Stargazer would never...” I started, also recalling an old friend and a mortal battle here in this farm a hundred and five years ago.

“You have doubt,” she whispered with joy. “Thought I wouldn’t trust you with a *Ruka*, but you do.”

“And you are sure open, Shaman Appointed. Too open for your own well-being. I could call the Ravens and have you and your little religion wiped out from memory. I could destroy everything you knew before you ever saw *Sol* again.

She appeared unfazed by the comment. “I have nothing to hide, Monster, and even less to lose. Your kind has granted us endless harm and suffering. It doesn’t matter. The time is coming, the signs are obvious.”

“What signs?” I inquired with mock interest. “Tell me about them. I can’t do anything about them, can I?”

“No,” she said, inspecting the expression on my face.

“Then tell me...Medea, right?”

“Medea,” she said, not happy at all she had given her name to me before.

“Well? Tell me.”

She pondered for a moment and then grinned at me. “Very well, Byron. Meet me in two nights by the temple, you know, the big building across the courtyard. At midnight.”

“And then I will have my answers?”

She nodded. “Then you will have your answers.”

She turned and left me.

5

I returned to Commodore Station soon after. I was still very weary from the past night and it could happen again.

Before flying up to one of the busy balconies or openings, I made another visit to one of the voices I’d heard. In gaseous form, I slithered through cracks and under doorways until reaching a small bedroom of a hut. Three pups slept in it. I condensed and walked to one of them.

I smiled at him, resting peacefully under a waterfall of moonlight coming in through the tattered curtains. At the same time, I was glad for the nose-plugs—his exposed skin from a craned neck looked tasty. I didn’t feed, though. I simply took out an object from my coat and left it by his side, immediately jumping out of the window without a sound.

When the one called Clannad woke up he would have his ball back and hopefully I would be in the *Moratoria*. Even animals had feeling and things of worth to them. More than that, the pup had shown no fear toward me, not because of focused hatred as with the one called Medea, but because he didn’t know any better. His personality hadn’t been tainted by experience yet. I admired that.

Walking toward my cupola I passed Crow and several of his henchmen in one of the loading docks. He was barking instructions about magnifying defenses or some crap like that,

“You never know what those creatures do during the raging of *Sol*,” he shouted. “I even hear they burn effigies of us while we are in *Moratoria*.”

I sneered quietly and, without notice, went to my cham-

bers, avoiding a hundred people who'd want to know where I'd been. My little escapade was keeping people very wary.

I surfed my computer the rest of the night, a little machine that couldn't even reach 4000 gigahertz. News was just beautiful at The Citadel: The glorious homecoming of The MoonQueen with great tidings on the plumbing system; within a year, Xanadu would have the same luxury our smaller cousin, New Atlantis, enjoyed. Not bad for a species of immortals. Radiation count had dropped after steadily rising the last year, perhaps due to some pacific low-pressure system sweeping the land. Rumors kept circulating about the thought of a new city-state to be built to the south in the next five hundred years because of an incoming ice age, but most guilds said it was still in the alpha stages.

I ate a small snack before going to bed, thinking about how this Medea somehow intrigued me with her insolence and bravery. The animal reminded me of someone.

I dialed Tina's number through the modem, but only got her answering machine. Things must be busy at Lilac's.

I finally went to rest, more excited than I'd been in a long time. I dreaded the dreams of *Sol* and fire in the sky and my people angry at me, but I rested unperturbed through most of *Moratoria*, comfortable like an identity. There was much to discover.

6

The crowd disappears before and above me. I'm not a mess of shredded skin and bitten bones. I'm whole. I'm me.

The Goddess stops laughing, standing right before me. She is blue and beautiful and ancient, wearing gowns of light, jewels of liquid energy.

She extends a perfect hand to me, skin like the lightest glacier, deep cherry nails on long fingers.

Glory unto the highest, she says, and her voice is the night.

I look into her and I see twin Lunas in a dim sky. I almost reach for her, but I can see a dark fire behind them as strong as Sol's oven.

No, I say.

Glory unto the highest, she repeats, and I go to her.

