

THE KINGDOM OF US

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First version published by Amazon Kindle. September 22, 2011
Burlington, Ontario, Canada.

The Kingdom of Us

Volume I of the trilogy The Polarix Project:

- The Kingdom of Us
- The Polarix Project
- The Kingdom of Them

To my daughter Karin who made the cover of this book and help me with some editing and to my wife Sibila who read and suggested some crucial changes in the plot.

Raul Comas

Prologue

The man in black uniform was walking through the empty runway. The warplanes were stored in the illusive safety of the hangars. The pilot looked up to the fabric of the night where grey clouds were cruising fast and low in the dark sky. The storm should soon hit the Base.

He approached his fighter jet, the latest model which only Five Star pilots were allowed to fly. The weapons were loaded, fifty incendiary air-ground missiles with double explosive charges; the gun was equipped with armour piercing bullets. The pilot was about to climb up to the cockpit when a dark shadow suddenly dropped down from above, landing beside him. The startled pilot grabbed his pistol by the handle, but stopped short of firing it. He recognized the naked feet firmly planted on the cold pavement, the short silver hair on the head glowing in the dark, the pale naked skin glittering like gold under the dimmed blue light of the runway. The pilot could not resist a smile. He was told that these poor creatures would die if their bodies were to be covered in any way. They breathed and processed food differently than humans did; yet they looked like men.

“Hey, Friend, what the hell are you doing here?”

“You are in danger. They know everything. I can take you away from here.”

The pilot gently touched the nose of his warplane as if it could move its tail like a dog. He turned around and stared at those big eyes looking at him from an abyss of black nothingness. He never liked these heavenly creatures. Other pilots minded them not, but in combat, nobody trusted these winged men. They were too sloppy and far from being a serious threat in modern warfare. The pilots always ended up risking their life to save these creatures' butts in the sky, and these dumb naked guys never looked back to say thank you.

But this one was different. The pilot never asked for a name, but just called it Friend. The pilot never forgot the day Friend saved his life six months ago. His plane had been hit by enemy fire. The control unit died. He had no other option but to eject the seat. When the parachute opened, the high winds dragged him to the front line. He thought he would die hanging from a parachute, in mid air, dozens of bullets drilling their way through his flesh. Suddenly, a shadow appeared from behind, cutting off the straps of the parachute. Friend grabbed him by the waist and flew him up high to the sky, saving him from a certain death. After reaching a safe distance from the battlefield, the winged creature dropped him to the ground. The pilot, in gratitude, gave to the flying man the only thing which still had some value in the stinky ball of shit called the world; he offered the creature his friendship.

“Sorry buddy, but it is too late to turn back. I have to do this, trust me. Kiss my children on my behalf, will you? I am doing this for them.”

The pilot placed his strong hand on the creature’s shoulder. Friend looked at him and shook his head, the lips hardly resembling a human smile. He could not understand these human beings. They were so stupidly fragile and at the same time so stubborn. The flying man lifted up in the air, flapping its powerful wings. The pilot kept looking up until the grey silhouette disappeared swallowed by the darkness. He jumped into the cockpit, activated the front panel and closed the polarized glass above his head. He turned on the engine and started taxiing through the runway. Nothing else was moving around, except for the clouds in the sky. The pilot calibrated the weapons, locking each rocket against the hangars. He only needed to take off, reach the right altitude and press the red button.

The pilot sped up his flying machine. The plane took off very slowly, like reluctant to obey the fatal command. Barely a few feet above ground, the missile alert started beeping. A red light blinked insistently on the control panel. Two ground-air missiles had been fired against him by the nearest Air Defence Tower. The pilot did not have time to react; he was doomed. The pilot closed his eyes, a sad smile settled upon his face. The missiles reached the warplane interrupting the flight. The explosion took place too close to the ground. A shock wave hit the barracks, waking up the other pilots. The large amount of explosive in the warheads disintegrated the plane in a ball of fire, leaving no trace behind, just a column of black smoke. From the distance, quietly sitting on top of a communication antenna, the winged creature, barely covering his shameless nakedness with a pair of grey feathered wings, felt terribly sad and lonely, but no tears came out from its dried black eyes. He was not a man anyway. He could be just an abomination. Who may know?

30 years later...

6:30 AM

Martin was in the shower. He watched the water running down the hairy trail beginning from the middle of his chest along his navel. He looked at his feet. They reminded him of his father. The memories were still crystal clear in his brain, imprinted in the area where they most hurt. He saw a dark blonde man who used to take the young boy skinny dipping in the river during the warm summer nights. Martin had dark hair. He was shorter and stockier than the slim figure of the tall man in black uniform, always smiling from the picture he kept in his living room, over the coffee table. But he remembered that his feet were identical copies of his father’s, large and wide with some hair advancing as far as the toes. Martin touched the golden chain with the Cross of Bravery hanging from his neck. The medal was awarded to his father postmortem, a few

days after his accidental death, when his plane was mistakenly gunned down by friendly fire. Martin was then a fourteen year old boy.

He turned off the tap. Grabbing a towel from the hook, Martin began to dry his short black hair. Suddenly, he felt another presence in the bathroom. Martin, as the Chief Inspector of the Crime Prevention Unit, had access to a Protector, a program running in the Umbrella which sealed a defined area from trespassers. But Martin never turned it on. Daryl, his colleague and second in command, insisted he should start using it. The Hackers were growing bolder. They would eventually attack high ranked officers of the law enforcement agencies, like for example the commander of the CPU. However, Martin preferred to trust his sixth sense, intrinsic in every natural born detective. He felt someone was nearby. Martin was ready to use a Guardian, his best weapon within the Umbrella, but he needed first to identify a clear target . Wrapping the towel around his waist, slowly he opened the glass door. In the surrounding steam mist of the bathroom, he could hardly see the tall figure of a man standing by the sink. There was the intruder. Martin was about to setup the Guardian on the man, when something in his subconscious mind stopped him from doing it. There was a certain familiarity in this figure. The intruder was a naked man, short white hair glowing in the dark, as did his smooth pale skin. Martin had seen that before.

“Chief Inspector Martin Crawford, do you know who I am?”

Martin stepped out of the shower. The extractor fans would take forever to clear out the mist from the shower, unless he opened the bathroom window. Martin came closer. He was now standing just beside the intruder. He could see the features of the face. Yes, they had met before. Martin remembered the strange creature, the naked body hardly covered with its extended grey wings, standing at the far end of the church during his father’s funeral. Everybody was at the ceremony, the Archbishop Monsignor Carlo, the Professor Doctor Hauptman, and the Bishop Father Frank plus, of course, his mother carrying in her arms his little sister Miriam. It was the Professor, the oldest friend of his father, who introduced the naked guest to him. Doctor Hauptman told him that his father called the creature Friend.

“Friend, is that you?”

“Yes, your father named me that way. Do you remember what I told you the last time we met?”

Martin tried to remember the words. It was like in a dream when someone told you something very important that you were not supposed to forget, but once you woke up, you could not remember the exact words. The winged creature stared at him, like a Search program wanting to dig deep inside his mind. The intense black eyes appeared to be absorbing every particle of light around. The creature opened its mouth to speak.

“It is fine, you do not have to worry if you can not remember. I see you got most of the genes from your mother’s side. But you have his eyes. I can see my reflection again in your father’s eyes. Anyway, young Martin, setting the emotions aside, last time we met I told you to be extremely careful, because what you see around you, this reality as it is perceived by your eyes, may be very deceiving. I believe it is time for you to know the truth. I am convinced the Hackers are running out of time. I suppose nobody can hear us here, in the bathroom. The mist would short-circuit any Listener trying to spy on you. Now, listen carefully. You have to find the Warrior. You have to protect the Warrior. You must go and seek the Courier. The Courier will lead you to the Warrior. This is all I can say for now. After this conversation, you will have two options. You can forget everything I said or act according to my instructions.” Friend looked down at Martin, examining his wet body from head to toe. The creature came closer and kissed Martin on the left cheek. “Trust me son; your father asked me to give you a kiss just before he died. He loved you very much. Now I have to go. I can not risk staying any longer. The sun is coming out and people may see me flying out of your apartment. The rules forbid visiting your world. We must stay in the army camp near the Divine City. Remember to keep your mind open. But it is up to you, Martin, up to you alone.”

The winged creature grabbed him by the shoulders and squeezed him hard, like probing Martin's strength. Before Martin had the chance to say something, the panoramic glass window of the bathroom, overlooking the high-rises of the city, slid wide open into the wall. The feathered visitor graciously jumped out of the building up to the early morning sky. A few strokes of the wings took the celestial creature far away, among the low clouds, before the first rays of the summer sun shined above the roofs of the taller buildings of the Old City. Martin got out of the bathroom and entered his bedroom. He noticed that the balcony doors were wide open. He closed them and activated the Protector. An invisible energy shield settled down enveloping the whole apartment. From now on only authorized people were allowed to cross the barrier. Nobody could get closer to him without first asking through the Intercom. No more surprises. His colleague, was right, he should have the Protector on at all times.

7:00 AM

That girl had touched his hand. Daniel was completely sure she did. He looked back over his shoulder. She was gorgeous, black hair hovering over her shoulders, big caramel eyes and a slim figure harbouring the precise curves in the right places. That girl was way too perfect, totally out of his league. This was too good to be true.

On the opposite side of the corridor, Cary could not believe that she finally did it. She liked him a lot. She had liked him for ages, but he was too shy. She simply could not

wait for the kid to make the first move. Now she was waiting for his reaction. She was a little bit nervous.

Her friend Lucy shook her head. This guy was a nerd. He was not that ugly, but the dark blonde hair was always uncombed, the eyeglasses were like a century old, and he wear exactly the same pair of jeans every day since the school year started. The only thing worthy to watch in this guy was a pair of stunning green eyes, shining in his boyish face. And also the fact that he was a senior, three years older, which gave him some extra points. But for the rest, love had to be blind, indeed. Cary could have had, if she had wanted, the cutest guy in the whole college, but that was the way she was, madly in love with the most insignificant nerd she could find around.

Daniel's reaction was not fear but hesitation. He walked up the corridor and approached the girls. He knew he had to say something. Cary was looking at him with a sensual welcoming smile.

"Hi. I think we've never met before, I mean we have not been properly introduced, not yet, of course." He felt so stupid saying the most stupid thing he could find in his stupid mind. *What a moron, for God's sake!* "My name is Daniel."

"Hey cutie, my name is Cary and this is Lucy." Cary could not resist a good laugh when the boy looked around in surprise. "You are the cutie, no need to look around."

"Oh, you think I'm cute. That's funny. You and my grandma are the only two people in the world who think that way about me."

Now she was laughing, and even Lucy had to smile. This guy was hilarious. Cary liked him even more every second they were together. Daniel could not believe he was having a conversation with this amazing girl in the middle of the corridor where everybody was watching.

"Lucy also thinks that you're a handsome guy, right Lucy?" Cary laughed seeing the expression of disgust reflected in her friend's face. "I was thinking, what about going to some place after school, I mean you and me, together?"

"Well, I am a bit busy right now with an assignment." Daniel wanted to slap himself in the face and stick his fist in his mouth. *Stop saying these things, you moron!* The girl was clearly making a pass at him and he was about to blow it. He must stop acting like a jerk. The only time he had been that close to a woman was when an older friend of his grandma once fondled him in the bathroom, where she caught him playing with himself in the shower. "I have to go to the Museum, maybe you want to come with me? I want to become a Historian, you know."

“That sounds terrific, I love History! Of course, I’ll go with you. What time are we going?”

“I was thinking after lunch, if that's okay with you?”

“Sure, wait for me at the main entrance after the bell.”

She smiled at him, took Lucy’s hand and walked away, swiftly slithering between batches of senior students that were crossing the corridor in the opposite direction. Daniel, standing in the middle of the corridor, without moving a single muscle, kept looking at her disappearing into the crowd. A pack of seniors almost knocked him out of the way. A friendly hand pulled him by the arm to the safety of the lockers.

“Hey dude, how are you? Did you see that hot chick?” A taller and skinnier kid, with curly dark hair, patted him on the shoulder. “I saw you chatting her up. I can't believe you think you can score with that chick. Forget it dude, she's out of your league. Hey, stay with me, look at me, listen...”

“Shut up!” Daniel finally reacted. He grabbed Oscar’s shirt by the collar and pushed his friend against the wall. “Remember one thing you prick, she's not a hot chick to you anymore, her name is Cary, are we cool?”

“Dude, relax, I get it.” Oscar could not believe Daniel was really taking the possibility of a romance with that girl seriously. It could not be true. Oscar knew how these pretty girls enjoyed teasing nerds like them just for fun. Daniel was too naive. He was out of touch with this world. He spent too much time among old books, in the Museum or in the Archives.

“Good! Now listen, follow me to the patio. I've got something to show you.”

The two boys headed out to the schoolyard where a group of students were playing volleyball. Daniel took Oscar to a far corner. They sat on a wooden bench, painted with the logo of Universal Movers, the public manufacturer of Personal Transportation Units or PTU, which people were still calling cars. Oscar was an activist of the Green Planet, an organization funded by the Ministry of the Church for the purpose of overseeing environmental issues. Oscar had been trying to get Daniel involved too, but his friend was only obsessed with History. He had some kind of fixation with the past, in contrast with the rest of his pals who were mostly into virtual reality games and technology gadgets.

“Look, dude, I need you to do that thing for us... You know what I mean.”

Oscar knew what Daniel meant. It was very risky here. There were rumours about the Secret Service recruiting informants among the students to catch Fryers in the school. The name Fryer came after a popular saying for people frying their connection with the Umbrella or short-circuiting the system. Some Fryers were not able to control their ability and could not predict how or when they would be disconnected from the system. They were easy prey for the guards patrolling the streets with portable scanners. But a real Fryer knew how to do the trick and control it. Actually, true reasons for dropping off the connection with the Umbrella were not that many. The system offered the users a set of tools for finding information about almost everything, calling friends, contacting people, sending silent messages, entering into forum rooms for public discussions, and asking questions in the Global Net. The Umbrella also served as a health watchdog, constantly scanning the entire population with Diagnostic programs, looking for early symptoms of illnesses, before a heart attack or a stroke could become an emergency.

Another important function of the Umbrella was being an efficient vigilante. The scanners employed random Searches looking for malicious thoughts which could evolve into a possible criminal activity. Dozens of agents within the Criminal Prevention Unit, known as the CPU, spent most of their time analyzing the alerts raised by the Security programs. Each alert was flagged with a different colour. The yellow ones were mostly ignored by the agents. Too many yellow flags on someone and the system could upgrade it to an orange alert. The orange alerts were always closely reviewed by a CPU agent. In most scenarios the flagged person ended up just with a verbal warning without major consequences. However, sometimes an Orange Alert could progress into to a Red one. Red alerts required urgent intervention, like the arrest of the suspect by CPU officers. The detainee was put under trial within the Holy Court and, if found guilty, was sent to Rehabilitation. Rehabs, as people call it, consisted of a set of brain resetting procedures which always worked like magic and the patient was in no time reinserted back into the society with a fresh mind and no memories of any faulty behaviour.

“Well, we are out, but only for one minute, okay?”

Daniel was lucky to have Oscar as his best friend. A Fryer would rarely disconnect another person. Besides the risk of natural mistrust, because nobody knew who could be an informant working for the Ministry, the energy required to keep the system out of the brain increased exponentially when severing the link of more people. The Fryer had to pay a high price in neural starvation. A prolonged disconnection from the Umbrella could paradoxically fry out the same brain of the Fryer.

“It's fine.” Daniel nodded confirming that he could not reach the Global Net within his head. He pulled a piece of paper out of the back pocket of his trousers. “Look what I found in the Library of the Museum.”

“What's this?” Oscar grabbed the piece of paper with his fingers. A quick look was enough for him. He could not believe it. “Shit, man, shit, shit, shit! This can't be true!”

“Listen, it fell from the book I was reading. Look at the bottom. It's original, I'm sure of that. Turn it over and put it against the sun. Read the message embedded in the watermark.”

Oscar placed the piece of paper in reverse against the sunlight. The words he read were giving him goosebumps. It was written in small capital characters all across the border of the paper.

“Dude, this piece of shit is too dangerous. We should not be doing this here.” Oscar looked around terrified. He gave the piece of paper back to Daniel. “Okay, we are in the Umbrella again. Why you do not come over to my place later this afternoon? We need to talk about this.”

“Alright, it's a deal.”

7:30 AM

The Voice was pounding hard inside his head. His mind was being suffocated, every nerve victimized. He had been drugged, stripped naked, blindfolded, kidnapped. He only remembered feeling dizzy after breakfast, going back to his cell. When he woke up, he was attached to a wooden table; his wrists and ankles tied up with ropes.

“Listen, my young friend, you'd better start talking now or it's going to hurt.”

The Voice sounded familiarly warm despite being intentionally distorted. Could the Voice be physically there? No, the Voice would never take that risk. Probably one of the Servants was doing the dirty job.

The first time Father Roland heard about the Voice was when the Archbishop asked him if he wanted to become an undercover agent for the Secret Service. The Voice and the Servants were an embarrassment for the Ministry. One day, an anonymous blog appeared in the Global Net talking about a group of followers of the Ancient Scriptures. This group had founded a secret organization, a sect within the Church, with the purpose of liberating the people from the oppression of the Ministry and releasing them to the Lord's arms. They called themselves the Sacred Servants of the Temple, but soon people called them just the Servants. The Search programs, setup by the Secret Service, looking for the intrusion of the Servants in the system, always pointed to a different address within the Ministry buildings. After months of investigation, the Secret Service came out

with the theory that the leader of the Servants, who was also called the Voice, had to be someone who visited the Ministry offices very often, had access to the private terminals in the buildings and was an expert in Experimental Theology, the controversial branch which studied alternative ways to worship the Lord. These conclusions pointed altogether to one place, the Holy School, also called the Seminar, which buildings were located downtown, not far from the Ministry. The Secret Service needed an informant with a solid scientific background to infiltrate the closeted community of scholars living in the Seminar. Father Roland was one of the few under-graduated students who had accepted a position at the Ministry. The scientists never went along very well with the administrators, but Father Roland believed the Church must follow a direction, have a budget and respect the civic codes. He went through a rapid training course and was sent back to the Seminar. After one year in a resident program, he was accepted as Assistant Teacher of Complex Mathematics, the area where Father Roland was slowly building up a name for himself.

While teaching in the Seminar, he made friends with several professors and assistants. Many of them openly sympathized with the Servants. The Voice always spoke to its followers within the Umbrella using alternate frequencies in the Intercom. It never asked for permission to speak; it simply entered and took over the mind of its target. This was how the Voice recruited its new Servants. Father Roland was hoping to be contacted at some point, but it never happened. Maybe he made some mistake. The fact was that the Servants found out that he was an informant for the Ministry, and what was worse, they also knew that he was a Questioner, a secret collaborator of the Hackers.

“You're a filthy double agent, an ass-licking dog of the Ministry, and you're also a damn traitor, working for the Zone. Tell me if I'm not right.”

The pain came from the electric clamps strapped to different parts of his body. The electric charge penetrated its way through the nerve system up to his brain. He screamed. He was not begging anymore. The pain was unbearable, amplified within his mind by some dark force which was trying to dig deeper inside. But he must not allow it. If the Servants could not break open his mind without his cooperation, too bad, they will get nothing out of him, absolutely nothing.

“These damn Hackers know how to build strong defences. But you will let us in, oh yes, you will. Why endure so much pain and the humiliation of your body? I'm only asking for some names.”

Father Roland felt a hand groping his body, pinching, squeezing. The torturer was a sadist. This bastard liked what he was doing. He heard the sordid noise again. The electric current invaded his body. The pain was excruciating. He screamed. This time he stopped breathing. He was about to pass out.

“Open your mind to me and I will stop the pain. I promise we will not kill you if you cooperate. We will take care of you. You can become one of us....”

Father Roland could barely understand the Voice. Pain, he felt just too much pain. The pirate program inserted inside his mind was twisting every nerve, magnifying the physical torture of his body. The Servants wanted desperately to break the blockage, the security Firewall, placed inside his brain by the Hackers. Every Questioner got a Firewall and a Receptor when the initiated became a full member of the Cell, the clandestine organization created by the Zone within the city. This defence mechanism had never been broken before. The Firewall had an emergency function, the release of a powerful discharge which would electrocute the brain and the heart, killing the host organism and rendering unusable the mind, even after Rehabs. Father Roland knew that. He could open the Firewall and deactivate this security feature, but then his mind would be at the mercy of the Servants. The Voice would become the master of his memories, it could play with his emotions and control his desires.

The Servants were dangerous. They wanted to find the location of the Zone and exterminate the Hackers. They wanted to crack down on the Cell and eliminate all the Questioners. They were a bunch of fanatic bastards. Father Roland could not allow them to know who his contact with the Hackers was. He rather died first, protecting the identity of his fellow comrades, defending the hope that the Hackers and the Zone represented for everyone who did not believe anymore in this false Kingdom. He closed his eyes. His heart beat rushed out of pace, his brain exploded in a storm of neural lightnings. Everything was happening in a fraction of a second. The Voice noticed the unexpected activity. The monstrous program inside tried a last time to break the blockage. But it is too late, the brain was burning in an internal fire, fried by the discharge. The heart stopped beating for good. The priest was dead.

8:00 AM

The Professor was the revered author of the Unavoidable Truth, which was the ideology behind the foundation of the Kingdom. The old man rarely abandoned his reclusive penthouse in the middle of downtown. He bought this apartment when he came back from the Divine City, after his surprising resignation as Consort of the Temple. Not even two years had passed since the end of the Last War, when Doctor Hauptman asked the Lord for permission to retire and live a private life outside of the Church. The Lord reluctantly accepted his resignation. There were no riches in the universe that the Lord could pay the Professor for what he had done for him and his Kingdom.

The Archbishop, Monsignor Carlo, an old friend and disciple of Doctor Hauptman, insisted the Professor should accept the position of Dean of the Theology Faculty at the World Peace Academy. The Archbishop and the Professor had renewed

their old friendship which dated back from the time before the Annunciations. The head of the Ministry in the richest province of the Kingdom, the almighty Archbishop Monsignor Carlo, always consulted his old teacher before taking an important decision. Being the founder of the Church never restricted Monsignor Carlo of acting humble in front of his old teacher. This time was not an exception, even when Doctor Hauptman had taken the Archbishop by surprise by appearing in his office this early in the morning.

“We need to talk.” More than twenty years older than Monsignor Carlo, the Professor always felt the need to act fatherly and protective with the Archbishop, despite the high rank of his disciple. “I am afraid I have little time left.”

Monsignor Carlo inspected his old friend’s slender figure. The old man was keeping the good shape despite being close to the ninth decade of his life. He remembered the first time the Professor walked into the classroom. Doctor Hauptman was still a young scholar, but everybody in the Seminar was already talking about him. The Professor had always been a controversial person, questioning everything, looking for the truth behind the obscure deals which were rampant in the times of the Old Church. The young novice Carlo Andrade fell in love with him at first sight. The mutual infatuation was immediately established. The Professor took notice of the unusual brightness and extraordinary leadership skills of his best student. Monsignor Carlo graduated with excellent marks around the same time of the first Annunciations.

The young priest was granted a scholarship to finish his doctoral thesis under the protecting wing of Doctor Hauptman. He stayed for another year in the Seminar until he was allocated as the Second Assistant of the Bishop in the Old City. Despite this new job, Carlo continued following the Professor’s research about the Annunciations very closely. On the other hand, Carlo came from a very wealthy and well connected family. Soon he was promoted to Principal of the Grand Cathedral and, when the old Bishop died, few months later, he was appointed the new Bishop of the Old City, the youngest ever high ranked official of the Old Church. However, by then things were moving very fast. The Annunciations were the news of the moment. People had started to believe in the big changes that were about to happen. Monsignor Carlo, suddenly, made a bold decision. He resigned to his position in the Old Church and started a new movement in support of the revolutionary ideas surrounding the next coming of the Lord. He called this movement the One Church. Many members of the old parishes, charmed by his personal charisma, followed the ex-Bishop. New congregations appeared everywhere, first in the Old City, then in the countryside, and soon, the One Church, was expanding across the borders. In the first Assembly of the Congregations, Monsignor Carlo was elected Bishop of the One Church.

When the Alliance was formed, in opposition to the Free Coalition, which had occupied the Holy City, he enlisted, together with a group of young priests, as spiritual guide for the troops. It was during that time, in the training camps, when Monsignor

Carlo and Colonel Crawford became really close friends. The famous aviator, the hero of the air raids against the Renegades, was also an old friend of the Professor, who surprisingly, insisted in keeping a neutral position between the two sides of the conflict. A group of fanatic nationalist governments opposed the idea of one Kingdom under the Lord. They joined together their military forces and created the Free Coalition. Their first action was to take the Holy City by surprise, the centre of the old faiths which were, in one way or another, related to the mystic event of the next coming of the Lord. The Old Church did not move a finger against the occupation, but the One Church started an active campaign to free the city where the Temple would have to be built after the arrival of the Lord. The Temple and the Holy City were to be the capital of the Kingdom. A group of influential leaders of the world had received the visit of the celestial winged creatures bringing the news of the next coming of the Lord. They came together and agreed to form the Alliance, to join their forces against the Renegades.

Colonel Crawford was an elite pilot in charge of building up the Air Force of the Allies army. He was one of the first to enter in aerial combat with the enemy above the deserts surrounding the Holy City. His Squad of Aces, composed by the best pilots and the most sophisticated aircraft, easily battered the less modern jets of the Renegades in the first real victories of the Alliance. The air supremacy of the Allies was secured. The ground troops of the Coalition began to retreat. After two years of bloody fights, the Renegades were confined to the walls of the ancient city. The Allies began the Siege of the Holy City, which was later known as the Final Battle of the Last War, as people named the conflict which was supposed to be the last one in the History of mankind. It was at that point when Colonel Crawford got killed by friendly fire. After his death, the Professor endorsed the Alliance and started the writing of his epic work, the Unavoidable Truth, following the direct instructions of the Lord. The Coalition kept fighting for another three months, fiercely resisting within the old walls. Exhausted and hungry because of the blockade, afraid of the alarming increase in casualties among the civilian population; the leaders of the Coalition accepted defeat and signed the Capitulation Act, their unconditional surrender. The Lord graciously forgave each and every one who fought on the Renegades' side. From that moment on, they were officially known as the Confused Ones.

The building of the Kingdom started immediately after the end of the war. Over the ruins of the battered ancient city, a new metropolis was reborn like the phoenix from the ashes. It was renamed the Divine City. The Temple was completed two years after the Final Battle was over. By then, the last outbursts of the resistance in the far regions of the world had been pacified by the Allies army commandos and the One Church's spiritual guides. The latest were armed with the Unavoidable Truth of Doctor Hauptman, the theological compendium which united different interpretations of the old scriptures, prophecies and expectations of the ancient faiths with the recent events related to the arrival of the Lord.

Old memories from the History of the Kingdom, thirty years old, flashed again in the Archbishop's mind. Those were the good times, when everybody was a true believer. The expectations were huge, enormous. In the initial euphoria, he advocated in favour of the collective leadership and, as the founder of the One Church, only accepted for himself the regional dioceses surrounding his native Old City. Monsignor Carlo was appointed Archbishop of the richest province of the Kingdom. The One Church inherited all the properties and resources of the Old Church, but kept itself away from the stiffness and troublesome rituals of that ancient plutocratic institution. The Temple housed the Lord, surrounded by the members of the Holy Council of the Elders. The Council was greatly influential, with the divine word as the ultimate law. However, the Conference of the Archbishops was the official ruling organ of the Kingdom, the legislative and executive arm of the Lord. The Holy Court was the judicial branch, created to protect and enforce the newly approved civil codes.

In the beginning, the Temple barely interfered with the legislative work of the Conference. The Archbishops acted upon the will of their respective congregations which they represented. They resolved in consensus the problems of the Kingdom. The Ministry of the Church was the executive arm of the Conference, with the Secret Service as its internal security force. The Heavenly Guard was created as a parallel ministerial institution with the purpose of consolidating the local police departments and national guards into one global force, while the Allies army was reduced to a minimum level, under the exclusive jurisdiction of the Temple, in the military bases near the Divine City. When the Umbrella was deployed, the Crime Protection Unit came into existence as an independent agency, responding directly to the Conference. The main task of the CPU was assisting in the implementation of the system, replacing the Heavenly Guard in the resolution of the criminal investigations, with the use of much more sophisticated tools, developed by the Ministry of Science.

These were the institutions that controlled the functioning of the Kingdom and, more or less, everything had been working fine, until now. The Temple had slowly started to stick its nose in the Conference's business. The Archbishop would have not minded if the Lord in person wanted to participate in the day by day operation of the Kingdom, but he knew the Lord was not the real force behind this intrusion of power. The Councillors, the same wealthy elite of before, were getting ready to fight back and regain their ancestral political and economic world domination. They were the bankers, aristocrats, owners of vast extensions of lands, of the mines and shares of the giant corporations. It was not a coincidence that the winged creatures came to see them with the Annunciations. The Lord needed their help. They were the ones with the necessary resources to fund the Allies army. The Lord knew his coming was not going to be easy or smooth if the old elite did not align with him, if the rulers of the world did not help him to win the Last War, to build the Temple and create his Kingdom. And now it was payback time.

“I wanted to speak with you too. The Conference did not approve the expansion of the Secret Service. I need more funds, Professor. I need them badly. Sometimes I regret giving away my position as the leader of the One Church.”

The Professor had not expected this rant from his old disciple. He knew the Divine City was changing. The Conference was being sabotaged with bribes from the Council. Money was always money, even in the Kingdom of the Lord. The old masters of the world were getting bolder. They controlled the Temple. Nobody could get physically close to the Lord without the Council’s supervision. They were pushing the Conference to approve new laws to expand the free enterprise, cut the corporate taxes, and diminish the state control on the Bank of the Church, the Wireless Electric Grid and the Gravitational Energy Institute. They wanted a bigger piece of the pie. They had already reversed some of the initial consolidations in the industry. New independent firms were thriving in the Divine City. Private conglomerates were growing in size and resources. The tax cuts were making their products more competitive, slowly killing the state funded manufacturing. They openly spoke about the need for some competition within the Universal Health Care. Some Councillors had even dared to attack the Worldwide Welfare program, which they considered a bloodsucking monster wasting vital resources that should be invested in private developments.

“I came to talk about something else, something much important than your Secret Service, and you know it. I have been calling you for the last three weeks, but you always have an excuse. I decided to come and see you in person. This cannot wait, my dear Carlo.”

The Archbishop looked at his old teacher without changing a millimetre the broad width of his famously charming smile. He knew what the old man wanted. But he did not want to talk about it. He did not want to hear a goddamn thing about the Zone, the Hackers and the Questioners. For him, that did not exist, it simply could not. How could there possibly be a place, in this world, outside of the Umbrella, harbouring an army of rebels? How could there possibly be people willing to deny the divinity of the Lord? The Zone and the Hackers were just a bunch of morons, feeding a myth, a fairy tale, in the sick mind of this poor senile old man. After the Final Battle, the Confused Ones were all fixed for good in Rehabs. The Free Coalition's army could not be resuscitated. If few dozens succeeded in avoiding Rehabs and now called themselves Hackers, that did not mean they represented a serious threat to the Kingdom. *Come on Professor, you got to be kidding!* There were other things more important than a group of rats hiding underground to avoid being detected and exterminated by the Umbrella.

The Professor looked at his old disciple, there was anger in his eyes. He knew the Archbishop was in denial. He did not want to recognize that the dream was over. This was not the old Kingdom, not anymore. It was a fake. Monsignor Carlo still believed that the Kingdom, despite not being perfect and having some flaws, could be repaired, no

need to destroy it. He would say that nobody in the planet was starving, that everybody had got a secure pension, that health care and education were granted for every citizen. At some point in the past the Professor was willing to make concessions for the sake of these benefits, but not anymore. They were part of the scam to keep people minds immersed in a never-ending dream. He knew everything was a trap from the very beginning. For how long would the Archbishop guarantee those benefits?

The elites were on the move again. They were like wizards. They knew how to make things look nice, sweet and edible, almost perfect and we, the dumb people down under, must just believe and serve. The Professor knew the sharks have kept their teeth intact and were now ready to bite again. They wanted to shape the world the way they always wanted. In the Kingdom of the Lord, they had no enemies anymore, no unions, no student revolts, no violence, not even peaceful demonstrations. The Renegades were transformed into the Confused Ones, then re-educated and re-inserted back into the quiet and lukewarm social soup, which this world had become. The workers, the small business owners, the taxi drivers, the clerks, the professionals, the teachers, the doctors, the engineers, everybody must believe that the Lord was in charge and therefore everything had be fine. The Temple had been rebuilt. The Lord was now just around the corner, reachable by everybody inside their mind, barely a call away in the Intercom through the Umbrella. Nothing could go wrong with him watching over his Kingdom. He was the defender of the people. He would protect us forever. But the Professor knew the real truth. In the real world, nothing could ever go wrong for the elites. They had some setbacks before, but they would always fight back to recover their position at the top of the social pyramid, no matter the cost. Some people may concede that some of us must be richer than others, some must be more equals than others in the Kingdom of the Lord. The key was to keep those down under in the pyramid happy with some bread crumbs falling from above; they would even say thank you. Ignorance was a blessing, indeed.

The Professor had heard this argument many times before. However, he believed that inequality was not a stable state in the entropy of the human society. It would tend to grow into an abysmal rift, the deeper the rift, the lesser the time for the bomb to explode. Therefore the elites had prepared this trap called the Kingdom of the Lord. It was a wonderful place where they could justify their right to have more than others behind the Lord's mysterious ways of doing things. It was like coming back to the origins, when people believed that the privileges of the powerful were granted by the divine will. They said that they shared their wealth and helped the poor with altruist donations. Therefore the more money they got the more they could give. Philanthropy was the way they had found to redeem their souls, because in the end, they were also human beings like the rest of us, victims of their own greed. People must wake up for once and understand that they must take their own destiny in their own hands, or soon it was going to be too late. History would repeat itself and society would eventually head into a sort of modern dark age, which could perfectly be called the Kingdom of the Lord.

“Please, Professor, do not start again with those crazy ideas. Don't you get it? The Lord is here to stay, for good. With him everything, against him, nothing! We must join forces to make his Kingdom better.” Monsignor Carlo was still smiling. He showed the Professor a chair beside him. “Come, sit down, my old friend, do you want some coffee? I ordered it from the famous Devil's Beverages, down the street, around the corner of the Cathedral, the best coffee in the province.”

“Listen, Carlo, we are running out of time. You must know where to stand. I thought you would understand me better than other people. You did it once. You started the One Church against many odds.”

“My friend, trust me. I know the best place where we must stand right now. You are confused. Your imagination is deceiving you. There is no way you can resuscitate the Renegades. We must learn how to live within the new rules, under the protective watch of our Saviour, the Lord. Besides, the Temple controls the Umbrella. They are already inside our minds, and you know it.” The Archbishop stood up and, went around the Professor, grabbed him from behind, by the shoulders, his mouth close to the old man's left ear. “And you should stop exposing yourself on your panoramic windows. People can see that you are naked from below. We have got some complaints already. If this continues, you will force me to send you to the Clinic in the Divine City. Please, Professor, trust me, it is too late for you to abandon ship; it is too late for all of us. Believe me, my friend, we can still save the Kingdom. I only need more funds for the Secret Service and I need your influence in the Ministry of Science, my dear Professor.”

The Professor let his disciple push him gently into a chair. His old body crashed down exhausted after the long walk and the time waiting, standing outside, to obtain an audience with the Archbishop. Like before, Carlo would never listen to him. But the Professor had to try anyway, for the sake of their old friendship. The old teacher was grateful for everything the Archbishop had done for him. When the Professor published the infamous article criticizing his own Unavoidable Truth, the Seminar accused him of being a heretic. The Temple suggested the public burning of the booklets. The Heavenly Guard issued an order for his arrest. Only Monsignor Carlo's direct intervention could avoid the mayhem. The Councillors wanted the Professor detained and sent to Rehabs, his brain washed out or rebooted. Not even the Lord was willing to move a finger for him, but Monsignor Carlo did it. The Archbishop issued a public statement proclaiming the Professor was a Living Saint, as a reward for being the author of the Unavoidable Truth, the holy book inspired by the Lord's words. The proclamation converted the Professor into a sacred cow, untouchable no matter whatever he did or said. His article was retired from circulation and never published again, but he was allowed to continue his cycle of controversial conferences in the Academy. He owed to Monsignor Carlo the sanity of his brain, if not his life. The Professor sighed in resignation when the Archbishop put a cup of hot smoking coffee in his hand. His disciple would not listen to him, again.

8:30 AM

The Patrol was too close. Miriam stopped the car. She was not expecting guards to be around, but her husband was right. Arthur did not want to come to this place. He said the guards will be here. But she was stubborn. This scanner was the best bypass and she had to do it. Arthur looked at her, not saying a word, with a warning of danger in his gaze. He knew this scanner would be heavily guarded. It was the main node of the eastern suburbs. Many minds were connected through it. A sudden drop off from the Umbrella would not go unnoticed, even for just a few seconds; someone may sense the void and report it to the authorities. A clever detective of the Criminal Prevention Unit may notice the couple standing near the scanner in the security camera footage. The cop may run a Search for their magnetic signatures. Miriam's name would immediately come out in the Conditional Exceptions database, where she was exempted of being flagged in case of a disconnection from the Umbrella. This would arouse suspicion and also implicate Martin, for sure. But Miriam was stubborn. Arthur cared not that much about his brother in law, he was just another cop, but Arthur worried about Miriam.

“Okay, you stay in the car. I'll do it.”

“Arthur, you can't do this, I have to. I can't keep you out of the Umbrella if you're that far away from me.”

Arthur knew she was right. She had to go. The guards were quietly drinking coffee, sitting on a bench in the park. The scanner was located on the top of an old cell phone communications tower.

“We should call off the operation, Miriam, these guys are too damn close. They may carry a portable scanner too. Maybe we can do the bypass to another scanner in the countryside. For the results that we want, it is almost the same.”

“You know it is not the same.” Miriam looked at the guards. She tried to identify a metal box or something that could hint to the presence of a portable scanner. If the guards had a portable scanner, they were doomed, no way she could hide a sudden drop off from the Umbrella. “We need a big node like this to speed up the network. Another countryside scanner will not help. If we do this one, we're in for good. Nobody will think we bypassed a main scanner like this. The guards only check the remote ones for bypass. That's my point.”

Arthur could not win. Her reasons were unbeatable. He never could win because she was the brain in this marriage. He was the famous artist. His visual works sold like

blueberry muffins. The walls of the Temple were all covered with his collection of Windows to the Past. The Lord was his number one fan. Miriam was also an artist, but she was not that famous. However, nobody knew how many times she provided him with the raw material for his work. Nobody knew she was the one who decided what he should include in the final version, on what theme to work on next. She took care of the household finances and loved his parents as her own. Nobody suspected that, without her, it simply would not be an Arthur Goldman, the master of Visualization.

“Okay, let’s do it. I will approach the guards and ask for directions. You go to the tower and do your thing.”

Miriam nodded. They got out of their Personal Transportation Unit, an old model made by Universal Movers, slow, nothing fancy, but big and comfortable. Arthur had the money to buy the most luxurious sport PTU in the market, one for each of them, but he preferred to spend the money in buying art, because beauty must save the world, he said all the time. Miriam agreed with him. Still, she liked their old four seats family car. Sometimes she asked him for a special favour. Once she wanted to have a haircut made by a downtown famous hairdresser. The cost was huge, but he accepted. Another time she wanted them to go to a resort in Sunshine Beach. Another costly venture, but Arthur again went along with her. However, he never asked for anything. Even for his work, she had to force him to buy a big panoramic screen which they installed in their bedroom.

Miriam squeezed his hand before they separated. Arthur went in the direction of the guards, while she approached the tower. She had done the bypass many times before. Bypassing the node scanners was the only way the Zone could get in the Umbrella. The speed of the communication depended on how many minds were linked to the node. She wanted to try a downtown scanner, but the Messenger did not allow her to do it. It was too risky.

She got closer to the tower. It was a very old one, from when the cell phone companies thought they had the world in their hands. Those cute little electronic devices became obsolete once the Umbrella and the Intercom were deployed. The scanner was located at the top, but the control panel was at a reachable height for her. It was locked, but she had the combination. First she needed to disconnect her brain from the Umbrella. Once out of the system, the Zone could easily activate remotely the code which had been previously implanted in her mind. This code was the key to open the panel. She had to enter the code manually and go back to the Umbrella as soon as possible. Once the code was typed in, for a few seconds, the scanner would disconnect everyone linked through its node until the Zone finished reprogramming it. The scanner then would reboot automatically and get everybody back into the Umbrella in no time, before the Security programs could notice the massive drop off. The void, reflected in the patterns of the grid, would be noticed only if someone ran a wide report scan, for that day at that time, and

even then, it may look like a routine power fluctuation in the network. Miriam looked back where Arthur was talking to the guards.

“Hey, what is she doing?” She heard someone asking. She froze.

“Nothing, she's my wife. She's an art collector.” Arthur gave the same explanation he always kept ready at hand in case someone asked. “My wife specializes in old cell phone technology.”

“Well, then maybe she wants to buy a dozen of useless cell phones I still have at home.”

“Maybe, who knows, pass me your signature and she will contact you to check what you have.”

A smile appeared in Miriam's face. She dropped off from the Umbrella. The feeling of being out of the system was always exhilarating. She sensed the Zone probing her brain. The Hackers constantly monitored their people to see if there was a chance for a secure communication. Miriam was an interesting case. She was a Fryer, both voluntary and involuntary at the same time. She could drop off whenever she wanted, but sometimes it happened unexpectedly. When the disconnection occurred by surprise, she became a Deep Fryer; someone able to keep the Umbrella out for a long time in a large radius. Therefore the Hackers were always looking for the opportunity to contact her. The Zone utilized amplified radio frequencies which the Receptors could capture when they were not being blocked by the Umbrella. Every Fryer out of the system could be, technically speaking, contacted by the Zone, but for security reasons, the Hackers never recruited people through the air. They approached the potential Questioner in person, and later used their own Fryers for sending messages to the whole Cell or to one specific member. However, the Hackers did random probing within the Umbrella to find out the possible candidates before initiating the risky recruiting procedure.

Miriam typed the code in the keyboard of the panel. A green light indicated the acceptance of the password. The Zone could now take over the scanner. She reconnected herself to the Umbrella. It took her less than twenty seconds. The Zone would maybe need another twenty seconds more to reprogram the scanner. Miriam approached the guard who was explaining to Arthur how to get to a famous restaurant in the vicinity. She smiled at the three officers.

Arthur sympathized with the violent faction within the Cell. They were called the Rockers. They proposed detonating explosive charges in the scanners, shutting down the Umbrella by force. But the vast majority of the Questioners opposed the Rockers. Violence would affect their credibility among the population. The bombs could kill innocent bystanders. Miriam had many discussions with Arthur about this issue. Arthur

believed they should not care about this collateral damage because, under the Umbrella, every mind could be contacted by the Ministry and instantly converted into an informant. The people around were not innocent bystanders if they believed and supported the system. For him, everybody that was not a Questioner, or at least a secret sympathizer of the Hackers, was a potential collaborator of the Ministry, another screw in the machine.

Miriam, on the other hand, was convinced that people were easily deceived. They acted accordingly to patterns implanted in the brain through different techniques, like suggestive propaganda, fear and subliminal messages. It had been constantly done before through the media, but now, with the Umbrella, it was much easier for the authorities to control the public opinion. Everybody was an innocent bystander, a victim, even the guards, even the CPU officers like her brother. She only set a threshold at the highest level of the government, where people knew exactly what they were doing and, even so, as Doctor Hauptman, her beloved adoptive grandpa said, they were also victims of their own crimes.

“Thanks guys, appreciate it.” Arthur took her hand. “Come on honey, now I know how to get there .”

They returned to the car. Arthur was sweating despite being a little cold this morning. Miriam looked back through the rear mirror. The guards were laughing, maybe making jokes about them. She did not care. The work was done. She felt pity for the guards. Hate was just a by-product of fear. People were afraid of the Questioners. For many, the Questioners were stubborn renegades, totally delusional, who dared to deny the divinity of the Lord. In reality, every member of the Cell had its own theory about who the Lord was. Some believed he was an alien creature from another planet, disguised like a human to conquer our world. Others thought that the man was an impostor, a time traveller who went missing into another dimension and came back accompanied by a funny bunch of winged naked men, pretending to be the legion of the Lord. Some truly believed the guy could be the Lord, only that he came back too late, when things had changed too much, beyond his comprehension and he had become an easy prey for the masterminds who built this Kingdom on his behalf, but for their own benefits. If that was the case, there was nothing divine about it anyway.

Miriam smiled at her husband. She started the car. The PTU took the next turn towards downtown. Nobody could notice the Sentinels which were following them within the Umbrella.

9:00 AM

This PTU was fantastic. He spent double the amount of money he would have paid for a Universal model, but he did not have a family, his income was way above the

average, and he cared not much about politics or environmental issues. Martin wanted to have fun and the WM Zero-Zeta was the latest sport vehicle manufactured by the Western Movers, the largest private corporation competing against Universal Movers, the state controlled conglomerate. His Personal Transportation Unit was a two-seater which followed the standards for connecting to the Speedway but, once on its own, it flew using a double impulse electromagnetic engine with eight power cells that released the extra charge needed for the amazing acceleration. The exterior design was magnificent and with the red metallic paint, his PTU made everybody on the street turn their head when he passed by.

The only thing Martin complained about living in downtown, was the traffic. The closest Speedway was too far. He had to drive all the way from his apartment to the office through the urban maze of narrow streets. It was a relatively short distance which became a nightmare in the morning rush hour. He turned to the right on Main Street and, in the next crossing, the traffic completely halted. He waited politely a few minutes before turning on the emergency blue lights he placed on the roof. Everybody around looked surprised; nobody expected a sport car to belong to the special services priority fleet. The emergency blue lights forced the rest of the drivers to move their vehicles around, in some way, to give him free access. Slowly, Martin drove his PTU among the pile of cars, advancing through the packed street, until he finally reached the entrance to the underground garage of the CPU building.

He took the elevator in the lower level and pressed the seventeenth floor button. Daryl, his second in command, joined him in the main floor on the way up. He was a conscious citizen who preferred the public transit option. Drops of sweat were shining in his dark skinned forehead. It was getting warm. This summer would make a good case for the Environmental Ministry to get a bigger budget. Daryl said something about his older daughter. Martin smiled politely. People always tended to forget that he did not have kids. He had been thinking of adopting a pet, a dog or a cat. His mother wanted a cat for him. His sister wanted a different type of pet for him. He needed a woman, she said. She wanted him to get out on a Saturday night, to go to a club for singles, to find a nice girl and get married, that simple. Miriam was always very straightforward when she wanted to say something. Martin loved his sister dearly. The ten years difference of age made him the classic overprotecting older brother. When she married her weird husband, she did not want any maid of honour for her wedding, she wanted a best man. Martin was her best man. Their mother Donatella still could not understand how these two siblings could stay that close together being so different in both age and mind, Martin was a cop and Miriam was a rebel.

The door of the elevator opened and Daryl gently pushed him forward, patting him on the back. Almost half a foot taller than him, this black guy could have been a professional quarterback. They actually played football together in the Academy, but Daryl was much better than him. They approached the glass door of his office. Berta was

waiting with a wide smile and a cup of fresh coffee ready for him. Daryl passed by the woman and looked back at him making faces. Daryl knew that Martin was flirting with Berta. No matter how hard he tried to keep these things private, his coworkers always found out about it.

Martin entered his corner office followed by his Assistant. She put the coffee on the desk and leaned onto him to correct something in his shirt. Why women had to act exactly like his mother whenever they wanted to broadcast their special connection with him? This intimate relationship with his Assistant had been on and off almost since she started working for him two years ago. But it had no future. It just could not. She was married, three kids, a committed husband and, besides, she was an old friend of his mother. Berta was six years older than him but looked ten years younger. The Kingdom may not have granted the immortality which people had been dreaming of for centuries, but it had made miracles for women with the hormone rejuvenation treatments which kept alive the illusion of the eternal youth. People nowadays died at a very old age, but always with a pretty and young appearance in their coffins.

“Is there anything new this morning?”

This was the routine question he always asked to calm down his early morning sexual urges and to remind Berta that her working day was starting right now. She pointed with her protuberant lips to his Display Station. The monthly report from the Umbrella was flashing on the screen, waiting for his attention. Martin thanked her Assistant as she left closing the door softly behind her. He concentrated on the report. The Sentinels could not find anything. He had installed a couple of these programs to follow up a pair of suspects who were linked to a gang of drug traffickers from the Far East Province. The drug usage had been on the rise since last year. It went down after the Umbrella was deployed, but the thugs soon found out that they could use Fryers to drop off from the system and hide their transactions. Many soft drugs had been legalized and people now could openly buy them in the state controlled adult stores, together with porn, tobacco and alcohol. The Kingdom was not perfect. The Lord always needed sinners to forgive. But in the case of the heavy drugs, their commercialization was still banned and criminally punishable. Martin also approved the use of the new Listeners to spy upon some potential Questioners. In the report he noticed hours of sound analyzed by the Security programs. But nothing significant came out from that. The Questioners were very secretive and had a sixth sense to detect when a Listener was near.

There was only one thing in the report claiming his immediate attention. An Orange Alert had been flagged against a young man called Daniel Swift. The face of a boy was smiling at him from the Display Station. He was completely sure he had seen before this name and the picture. Martin opened his Personal Notes. He used this application to make backups of his work. If the Global Net went down, he could immediately recover the data and continue working offline. This happened only once

before, when the Hackers became notorious for taking down the CPU network. The Ministry of Science responded with more upgrades and advanced firewalls. Later the Shield packages came into existence, together with the Protectors and the Guardians. The Hackers had no chance now to penetrate the CPU defences, but just in case, Martin always saved his work in his Personal Notes.

He started a search in his private database. He was right. There it was. He had sent a Verbal Warning through the system three weeks ago to a Daniel Swift, in response to a previous Orange Alert. Another orange flag and the boy would get a red one. Once the kid got marked with a Red Flag, the CPU had to take him into custody and start an investigation process.

Martin opened the new alert recorded in the report. It was the same as before, he remembered it. The kid had asked for access to a restricted work in the Public Archives. The articles and books, censored by the Temple, were kept under heavy security by the Ministry of the Church. Nobody was supposed to even know about their existence. A form requesting access to this material would immediately flag the person with an Orange Alert. But Martin had already responded to a similar alert before with a Verbal Warning. This issue should have been closed and saved as a Task Done. Why it was coming up again in this report? He entered in the system database the unique code of the Verbal Warning stored in his Personal Notes. The Search returned nothing. That was strange! How come he saved an alphanumeric code in his Personal Notes if it did not exist? The system did not record his Verbal Warning, meaning, it was not sent to the boy. Something was wrong. Or he was becoming delusional and inventing codes or someone had deleted the Verbal Warning from the database before the system executed the command. He could not believe the Hackers had gone that far as to tamper with the system database. They could not have access. What did they want anyway, just anarchy, disrupt everything, go back to when there was no Umbrella and people were divided by national borders, and diseases and hunger killed thousands of people every day around the globe? No, the Hackers could not be that stupid.

The voice of Friend, this morning in the bathroom, echoed in his mind. Was he going crazy? Maybe there was not any winged creature in the shower this morning, maybe he just imagined everything. He never heard about a Courier or a Warrior. Did those words have any meaning at all in the real world? He grabbed his head between his hands. In the Display Station, a pair of deep ocean green eyes kept smiling at him. He was about to close the report when he heard a beeping inside his brain. It was the Intercom ringing. Someone was calling. Martin saw the image of his sister and opened a communication channel.

“Martin, I need to talk to you. When can I see you?”

Martin closed his eyes. Somehow, listening to the soft voice of his sister, calmed him down. He needed to talk to her too. He had always been very good to her. Maybe she may know. Maybe she could help. He turned off the Display Station.

“I need to see you too. Are you busy right now?”

“Not really. We just came home from a morning walk and we're sitting here now, in the bedroom, looking at some art together. You are welcome to join us if you want.”

“You sure I will not be interrupting anything?” Martin had been hoping that his sister was alone in her apartment. Her husband, Arthur, has never been an object of his devotion and he knew the feeling was mutual. He hesitated for an instant before asking again. “Can I come over now, I mean, I could be there in an hour or so?”

“Yes, of course you can.”

9:30 AM

Monsignor Carlo embraced his old teacher in a soft delicate hug. His body was fragile; his advanced age was taking a toll on him. The Professor did not accept his offer of a week stay in the Regeneration Clinic of the Holy Fountain. Monsignor Carlo had made all the arrangements to get a space for his old teacher in the famous clinic. He wanted the Professor to go through a set of rejuvenation treatments which were making miracles among the members of the Council of the Elders in the Divine City. But the Professor declined his offer. He said something about ageing with dignity and keeping a sharp mind, but Carlo suspected that the old man was actually becoming senile. He was obsessed with the corruption in the Kingdom's institutions. He even mentioned once in public that the Renegades were right and should have won the war. Recently the Professor published a frantically absurd article called the Avoidable Lie, a harsh criticism against his own Unavoidable Truth. As soon as he read it, Monsignor Carlo understood that the old man was insane. Only by having a sick mind, could the Professor say that everything he wrote before was a mistake, a legend full of falsehood. In that article, he proposed the theory that the Lord was a dumb alien, with human form, totally unaware of the reality of this world, and that the winged creatures were a bunch of exhibitionists from another planet. He said that mankind must look inwards and believe in the God living inside every one of us. *Poor old man!* Monsignor Carlo leaded Doctor Hauptman to the door where a concierge was waiting.

“Please, old friend, don't walk that distance again. The next time you want to contact me, just call me in the Intercom.”

“You know, Carlo, you are a very nice bastard.”

“I know, my friend, good bye Professor. I'll visit you soon, I promise.”

The old man looked hard at him with an ironic smile, before turning away. Monsignor Carlo smiled back, shook his head and closed the door. The unexpected visit of his old teacher ended better than he had expected. The Professor agreed to speak with some key persons in the Divine City. Doctor Hauptman was still having an enormous influence in the scientific community. Every scholar in the world admired the author of the Unavoidable Truth, and some Councillors in the Temple were still listening to geniuses from the Ministry of Science. The Councillors had the power to convince the Archbishops who voted against his proposal in the Conference. Maybe in a month or two, he would ask the Conference to review his case again and get the funds for his Secret Service approved.

The Army had been neutralized by the lack of training and the ban of lethal weapons. The old military finally evolved into a ceremonial branch of the Protocol Department, in charge of the parades during the official celebrations in the Divine City. The Heavenly Guard, under Father Frank's control, was only about numbers. The oldest and largest law enforcement agency was notorious for its laziness. The Criminal Prevention Unit was the only well endowed organization. The Agency was rightfully funded by the Conference, and even today was still sucking off the most brilliant minds from the Heavenly Guard. But it had some limitations. The CPU could only handle common crimes related to the protection of the Umbrella. It would never get involved in politics and would never have a real weight in the balance of power.

Monsignor Carlo treated the Secret Service like his personal guard. His officers received special training, dressed with beautifully crafted black leather uniforms and hid their faces behind dark polarized designer glasses. They were armed with the closest to a lethal weapon someone could get in the Kingdom. The Magnum-LX pistol was capable of releasing an electric charge that blocked the neural connections of the brain for five minutes, leaving the target unconscious and immobilized. Only the Heavenly Guards had a similar gun but an older model with less range and duration of the shock. However, these weapons were pretty obsolete by now. After the Umbrella, nobody needed them anymore. He remembered when the first Listeners and Sentinels were introduced by the Ministry of Science. His Secret Service got the first trial versions. These tools were really amazing. A Sentinel was a little program that followed the target by inserting its code in the entry port of the connection with the Umbrella. It recorded the coordinates of the person's movement and could be remotely accessed at any time to retrieve the information. With this program the Secret Service did not need undercover agents to follow the suspects on foot anymore. The Listeners were perfect for recording conversations. These programs were more complex than the Sentinels and could not reside in the entry port; therefore they had to be setup every time the connection moved

away from the hosting site, but the installation could be done remotely again, within the Umbrella, knowing the exact position of the subject.

However, the Sentinels and the Listeners were only good for spying on people. They were not true weapons. The Secret Service did not have the resources to acquire more sophisticated tools. Only the CPU, with its generous budget and fewer personnel, could afford to have dozens of Guardians and a similar amount of Protectors. They even got the crazily unaffordable Interrogator program. The only thing that was awarded to the Ministry for free, together with all the other government institutions, was a Shield platform with an extended range protection to cover the Ministry buildings, including the Cathedral, the Seminar and the high ranked officials on the move. A Shield package included a Firewall, a Deflector and a Locator. These three programs were in charge of defending a closed network from an external penetration, deflecting subliminal attacks and identifying the source of the intrusion attempt. They were not physical programs like the Protectors, which could actually seal a given space with a psychic barrier that a mind could not cross, or a Guardian, which attacked a specific target with a magnetic field capable of reducing the brain activity to a standby, severing the neural links to the muscles and ligaments. These two programs were very powerful, but very expensive to produce and maintain, and therefore, out of reach for the Secret Service.

Monsignor Carlo felt frustrated. His authority and influence could give him access to some of the most advanced tools from the Ministry of Science, but only for personal use, and he truly needed them for his agents, like the CPU detectives who could use Guardians everywhere and any time they wanted. He could not continue depending on the Temple's charity for upgrading his security force. He would like to have at least a dozen Guardians and a couple more Protectors, besides the one assigned to him. There were rumours about new sophisticated programs, which handled the implant of subliminal messages, that were currently being tested by the Ministry of Science. The possibilities were unlimited if only he could get hold of more money. *Money, money, money!* What a bunch of naive idiots were those, like him, who thought that this word would have completely disappeared from the daily vocabulary thirty years after the Final Battle.

A knock at the door distracted his attention from the Display Station. Monsignor Carlo took a look at the LED clock on his monitor. It was almost time for his morning tea. Every day he had tea with Donatella at this hour. Monsignor Carlo stood up and opened the door. There she was, still the most beautiful woman in the entire Kingdom. The Archbishop never cared much about his celibacy. He took those vows when he belonged to the Old Church. As soon as he left, Monsignor Carlo considered he was freed of any compromise contracted with the previous institution. However, most believers did not feel that way. When the priesthood crossed over to the One Church, they brought with them most of the rites of the Old Church. As the leader and role model of the new movement, Monsignor Carlo had to be careful and keep up with the appearances,

officially denying his romance with Donatella whenever some intrusive journalist asked him about it.

Donatella entered his office with the usual smile upon her face. Nobody could guess what lied behind those mysterious and sensual green eyes. Monsignor Carlo had always been intrigued by her ability to mask her most inner emotions. The Ice Lady, as many people called her, imposed a great deal of respect among the believers. She was the widow of a War Hero, the Deacon of the Cathedral and the Secretary of the Assembly of the United Congregations. Everybody considered her to be the Prime Dame of the Church. However, for Carlo, Donatella was far from the image of the cold and distant woman that the media liked to represent. Donatella was a wonderful lover. She knew very well how to make Carlo feel like a man again, every time the Archbishop got rid of his white dress and jumped naked in bed with her. They did this at least once per week.

“I have to show you something.” Donatella kissed the Episcopal ring on his left hand, in the old fashion way, and went straight to his desk. Without bothering in asking for permission, she sat on the mahogany throne, in front of the Display Station. Monsignor Carlo followed her. He went around and placed himself behind, looking at the monitor. “This is the last report from the Conference. It just came out this morning. Now, read over here, in the second page, fourth paragraph.”

The Archbishop read the highlighted text as fast as he could. For the first time the Servants were being mentioned in the official literature. The report stated that a new faction of the Church was advocating for a blind faith in the Lord, a trend supported by the Holy Council of the Elders. It was obvious that something was going on in the Divine City between the Council and the Servants.

“It does not make any sense. The Servants are a cult not a faction within the Church.”

“It does make all the sense, Carlo. The Servants are growing in numbers. The Secret Service reported increases in the sect within the Seminar and within the staff of the Ministry.” Donatella looked at him with her astonishing deep ocean gaze. “You have to start taking the Servants more seriously, my dear.”

“I am, trust me. I am spending almost half of my budget investigating the Servants. But if the Council takes their side, it is going to be much harder. Besides, they are very well organized in tight cells; nobody knows who their leaders are.”

“You should ask for help.”

“Who is going to help, the Hackers?”

“No, the Hackers will not help, of course, they want your head on a silver platter too. But the Secret Service lacks the tools the CPU has. You should speak with my son Martin.”

“That, by the way, is not a bad idea.” Monsignor Carlo took her hand to his lips and softly kissed her beautiful fingers. “I spoke with Father Frank about this, but he was afraid of taking too much risk. The Servants could aim their sharp propaganda machine against him. I could sense his fear. I think he wants to keep some distance from this fight.”

“That's understandable. The Servants can destroy any career within the Church. I can't see why they haven't targeted you already.”

“I guess my prestige is too high and solid for them to cause real damage. That is not the case of Father Frank, with his ridiculous shyness. On the other hand, maybe it's time for me to negotiate directly with the Council. I can not trust the Conference anymore. I should deal in person with the people who hold the real power in the Divine City.” The Archbishop exhaled a loud grunt. “I need a powerful alliance; things are changing fast these days; power is shifting. And our dear Professor wants me to contact the Hackers and listen to their proposals. Is he really loosing his mind completely? I know I can't fix the Kingdom on my own, but I do have some good ideas of how to do it. Besides, nobody can say the Kingdom is not working after everything we have achieved in these thirty years. Why destroy the Kingdom instead of making it better? You are right, my love, I will need Martin's help.”

“I will arrange a meeting with my son for you.”

10:00 AM

Father Frank walked in without any escort. He never used bodyguards. Nobody could recognize him outside of the Ministry. While the Archbishop was the Superstar of the Church, the Bishop was the grey eminence, always behind the curtains, away from cameras and reporters. However, despite his phobia against publicity, Father Frank, the Bishop of the Old City, the Commander in Chief of the Heavenly Guard, exuded authority with his sole presence and posture. He was a very tall man, six feet and a half of height and weighted two hundred and fifty pounds, of mostly muscle, despite his chubby appearance and being a man at the beginning of his sixth decade of life. Father Frank shaved his head and carried a blond short beard with a matching moustache. Two piercing blue eyes shined on his handsome, masculine face.

The Master Supervisor, an old man in a white robe, bowed his head and stepped aside. A young blonde priest, almost a novice, took the lead. Father Frank followed him

through the narrow corridor. The Seminar was technically under the Ministry's jurisdiction, but historically it had been associated with the Diocese of the Old City. The Master Supervisor, an old friend of Father Frank, preferred to call the Bishop when his Second Assistant found the body.

“What was the name of that poor soul?”

“Father Roland, Excellence.” The young priest responded. “I believe the death took place very recently. I found it half an hour ago and the body was not yet entirely cold.”

“Are you some sort of detective aficionado?” Father Frank patted the priest's back in a paternal manner. “Should not we let the CPU agents do their work?”

“I am very sorry, Excellence. You are right.”

Walking in the bowels of the old building, behind the young Second Assistant and beside the Master Supervisor, Father Frank was assaulted by memories of his past. He had not been in this part of the building since he was a novice, more than forty years ago. The narrow corridors and stone stairways, linking the different levels of the basement, were supposed to be accessed only by the service personnel. But boys would always be boys. The students loved to explore the dark passages of the basement, especially in the middle of the night, under the trembling light of a candle. Some kids were brave enough to reach the cellars and steal a bottle of the famous Saint Saviour wine. Father Frank remembers he did it once, encouraged by his best friend. The future Archbishop, Monsignor Carlo, wanted a taste of the rare wine, but was afraid of being caught and disciplined by the Master Supervisor. He always had been a chicken.

However, the young Frank adored his friend Carlo, who was one year his senior. He would have done anything for Carlo and he did it. One night he went down the basement and walked through the dark passages, the reign of the shadows where the ghosts from the catacombs underneath the old building, loved to spend their time scaring the shit out of the novices. He was afraid, terrified, but he wanted very much to please his friend. When he finally reached the cellars and took a bottle of wine, something happened that, even now, was still giving him the shivers. The candle went off. He looked for a matchbox, but he could not find it. He forgot to take it with him. The darkness was absolute. The cellar, with the many rooms for storing food and beverages, was a labyrinth. Using his hands and bare feet, the young Frank moved slowly, trying to remember his way back. Then he saw it. It was a pale shine at the end of the corridor, a white silhouette floating in mid air, just below the low ceiling. He closed his eyes expecting the apparition to go away, but when he opened again his eyes, the phantom was still there, just a few feet away, so close that he could see the white bones of the hands and the deformed skull looking at him with its empty eye sockets. He screamed and ran

as fast as he could, hurting his shoulders and arms against the rough walls of the corridors. He never told anyone about this vision, not even Carlo. He gave his friend the bottle of wine and was rewarded in return with a cordial warm hug.

The Second Assistant went to the right and opened a half hidden door into a lower dark cell. The young priest turned on the light. Father Frank noticed a single LED lamp hanging from the ceiling, which surprisingly suffices to illuminate the whole room. In the middle, on a bare wooden old table, rested the naked lifeless body of a young priest. Hands and feet were tied up with ropes by the wrists and ankles to the four legs of the long and narrow table. Father Frank recognized the face. He remembered having met the victim, not long ago, in the Archbishop's office. Monsignor Carlo introduced the priest as a Secret Service agent, working undercover in the Seminar.

"We have not touched anything." The Master Supervisor approached the body. Father Frank nodded in approval. The Supervisor was a pretty clever person. "I guess I should report the incident to the Ministry."

"Do not forget to call the CPU." The Bishop was inspecting thoroughly the body and the face of the victim. "They will know the exact time of the death. You should not wait too long before calling the detectives."

"I am ready to send a message through the internal channel to both the Ministry and the CPU. I am just waiting for your blessing to do so."

"You don't need my blessing to do that. Please, send the message right away."

The Master Supervisor left the room. Father Frank indicated the Second Assistant to go and follow his boss. He wanted to be left alone. He needed to pray for this soul. The Second Assistant closed the door behind him. Father Frank knelt beside the table. The floor was impeccably clean. Someone had cleaned it very recently; the room still smelled of disinfectant. He closed his eyes and prays. The Lord would not be pleased to have a such young soul with him. The Conference would have to know about this murder. The CPU would have to send weekly reports of the investigation. The Temple would not rest until the murderer is found. This death was going to be a scandal in the Divine City. The Umbrella could not prevent this monstrous crime within the same Church. *Shame on the Seminar; shame on the system!* Maybe the Archbishop was right. If the Secret Service had more funds, it could better protect their undercover agents. The reality was that the Kingdom needed to be shaken from the ground, up to the highest tower of the Temple.

Father Frank stood up and took a closer look at the victim's body. He found nothing, no traces of abuse, only some minor bruises on the arms and chest and the marks on the wrists and ankles showing that the victim did try to get free, but otherwise, no signs of violence, even the peaceful expression of the face was inconsistent with the rest

of the scene. The detectives from the CPU would have a hard time trying to reconstruct this crime.

A beep in the Intercom interrupted his thoughts. Father Frank was about to block the call when he visualized the face of Monsignor Carlo. The Supervisor must have already informed the Secret Service of the incident. Father Frank allowed the Intercom to ring in his head for some more seconds before opening the channel.

“Father Frank, I need you to get the CPU in there right now, and please, place the Seminar under quarantine. Nobody should get in or out until the CPU detectives arrive and take over the situation. Understood?”

“Yes, Monsignor, I already sent my patrols to guard the entrances. The quarantine is in place. The CPU should be here soon.”

“Good, please, wait there for them and after that, come see me at my office.”

The Archbishop flickered before dissipating. Father Frank closed the channel. He notices Monsignor Carlo was not in a very good mood. He could feel it in the voice, even though his old friend was a master of disguising his emotions. Father Frank went around the table once more, examining the body. Death was a blessing. He could not understand why people were so obsessed with immortality. They blamed the Lord for failing to deliver it. He saw death as a form of liberation from the absurdity of this physical world. The afterlife must have some real meaning, because there was none on this side. We must enjoy life as much as we could without asking too many questions. That was the way it was before and should always be. Father Frank was tempted to touch the pale skin of the face, to close the lifeless brown eyes, caressing with his finger the blue lips of the victim. Slowly, he moved closer, extending his hand toward the naked body. The tip of his finger was about to touch the cold skin when a knock at the door made him jump and retract his arm. The Master Supervisor came in followed by two CPU officers in their white uniforms. Father Frank recognized the dark face of Daryl, the Second Inspector. The gravity of the crime required the highest level of attendance. The Chief Inspector should be here, not his second in command.

“Where is Martin?”

“Sorry Excellence, I could not find the Chief Inspector.” Daryl used his best apologetic tone of voice. Father Frank was obviously not contented with the answer. He wanted to know where the Chief Inspector was, and Daryl did not know. “He is outside of the CPU internal network and is unreachable by the Intercom. I left an urgent message for him.”

“Tell him to call me as soon as you contact him. I am leaving now.” Father Frank waved his hand pointing to the victim. “He is all yours. Find me the murderer quickly. Nobody can touch a priest and get away with it, not even a Hacker.”

10:30 AM

Martin was standing at the doorsteps of the bedroom, taking a look at the masterpiece being drawn by Arthur on the giant wide screen which covers a whole wall of the room. The artist was working on his new collage, projecting and composing imagery from his mind into the oversized screen. Miriam was sitting on the bed, watching her husband working.

She smiled at Martin. Miriam adored her only brother. She remembered when she was four years old, the moment she knew their father was dead, Martin took her in his arms and whispered in her ears not to worry, because he would be always there for her. And Martin had kept his promise. When she left the Preparatory School and told her mother that she did not want to become a nun, and her mother was about to explode in one of her frequent rants against the rebel girl, Martin stepped in and supported her decision. When Miriam informed the family of her intentions to marry Arthur, despite the aversion of her brother toward her flamboyant boyfriend, whom Martin considered a pervert sexual predator, he defended her decision against the Archbishop and her mother, who wanted Miriam to dump the weird artist and wait until she finished the Art School, before settling down with a real man.

After the marriage, Miriam moved with Arthur. Her husband and her brother had learnt how to tolerate each other when they had to share a room together, something which they did very often. Martin was a usual guest for dinner at their apartment. Miriam never kept a secret from her brother. When Miriam was contacted by the Zone, two years ago, and she became a Questioner, she told her brother first before even consulting this move with her husband. With this decision, she officially became an enemy of the Kingdom, which her brother was intended to defend as the Chief Inspector of the CPU. They were on the opposite sides of the battlefield. They should hate each other, but that would never happen. Martin and Miriam could be seen frequently together, a bottle of wine in between, debating about the Kingdom. They agreed on many things and on many others they did not, but above all, they loved each other dearly. They shared many things in common, like being the orphan children of a War Hero, having a strong mother who adored both of them and would do anything for her offspring, and together, as a family, they were adopted by the Archbishop, who happened to be one of the most powerful men in the world.

“You should see the Professor. He may know something.” Arthur turned around and stood in front of Martin, like usually, wearing absolutely nothing. He always liked working in the nude.

“Could you please put some clothes on when I am here? I can not understand why the Lord gave me this pervert as my brother in law.” Martin knew Arthur was a diehard exhibitionist and he got used to it a long time ago, but he enjoyed every opportunity to tease his brother in law. However, this time he was not joking. Arthur was the second naked man he had to deal with this morning.

“I can not understand why you come in here if you want not to see my cock. But no, of course you want to see it, you want to check out some real man with a decent tool in between the legs, right? Missing something down there? Maybe you want a taste of it? Just let me know. I would do anything for my beloved brother in law.”

“Shut up, you pervert scum!” Martin was a trained cop, used to listening to all type of verbal insults from the criminals and he never lost the smile on his lips. But his brother in law was different. Arthur had the extraordinary ability to exasperate his nerves. “You are lucky my sister still loves you; otherwise you would be in Rehabs in no time, I promise.”

“Stop, you two!” Miriam finally intervened. She knew this stupid fight between the two men of her life was just a macho show. Arthur and Martin were not really too different from each other. She believed they would become great friends some day, but for now, this was what she got, two boys telling words to each other. Miriam stood up from the bed and approached her brother. “Arthur is right; you should try the Professor. I am sorry we can not help you. I remember hearing something about a Warrior, some type of legend among the Hackers, but I know nothing about any Courier. Why you did not ask Friend to be more explicit?”

“I don't know. Friend did all the talking. I guess he took me by surprise. I have not seen that winged man for decades and then he suddenly reappears in my bathroom.”

“Now I see why you are so pissed off today. That winged naked man raped you this morning in the bathroom and now you want more...”

“Oh, shut up, Arthur!” Miriam took her brother by the hand and leaded him out of the bedroom and into the kitchen, closing the door behind. “Aren't you hungry? Do you want me to make you a sandwich?”

“No, thanks, I have to go. Listen, I programmed the Protector for the next twenty four hours.” Martin kissed her hand. “I used the excuse of our almighty godfather visiting often. He has a powerful Shield with him but only a Protector like this one can keep you

safe in case of an involuntary seizure. Only do not forget to restore the Intercom service. People will wonder why they can not reach you if you stay out for too long.”

“Yes, of course.”

Martin kissed his sister again and left the apartment. He called the elevator and went down to the underground garage. Once inside his PTU, he hit the acceleration pedal. The powerful humming of the electric engine was a real thrill. The vehicle exited the garage and merged into the traffic of the Memorial Drive. A sharp turn to the right and Martin was back on Main Street, direction to downtown. Only then he realized there was an urgent message waiting for him in the Intercom. The expression in the face of the Second Inspector looked a little alarming. The message took him totally by surprise; there had been a murder, a real murder, in the Seminar.

Last time Martin investigated a murder happened six month ago. A jealous wife killed her husband by poisoning his food with arsenic, a classic mystery tale which the stupid Umbrella was not able to pick up. The Security programs found nothing strange in a housewife handling arsenic and food at the same time. The Ministry of Science upgraded the programs after this incident. Now there was another murder which the Umbrella missed. And it happened inside the Seminar. He could not believe it. Daryl asked him to call the Bishop as soon as he got the message, but he preferred to go and inspect the site in person before talking to Father Frank or any other authority of the Church. Martin turned on the emergency blue light and sped up. The other vehicles moved away from his path. Soon he saw the Hotel Plaza and the Grand Cathedral bordering the Celestial Square. On the other side of the street, he passed by the metal and glass tower hosting the Ministry of the Church and the building painted in blue of the Headquarters of the Heavenly Guard. The Laurel Avenue took him straight to the yellow stone building, officially called the Holy School of the Saint Saviour, but known to everyone simply as the Seminar. This centuries-old institution graduated thousands of priests for the Old Church before. Now the priests of the One Church were being ordained after four years of intensive training which included the understanding of the Unavoidable Truth, the reading of the amalgamated ancient scripts, the participation in scientific research under the guidance of the Ministry of Science and the practice of the new Rules of the Temple, a compendium of old traditions and rituals approved by the Conference. Besides forming the priesthood of the One Church in the province, the Seminar was also recognized as the main research centre for Differential and Applied Theology.

The gate opened after his magnetic signature was read by the scanner. Someone must have added him recently to the list of authorized visitors, because only high ranked officials of the Church had free access to the ancient building. In the reception, Daryl, the Master Supervisor and his young assistant were standing silently looking at him. The

Second Inspector briefly explained that the Church wanted this handled quickly but with discretion.

Martin put on the gloves given to him by Daryl and followed the three men to the cellar. The vision of the third naked man he had seen this morning was really shocking. The victim looked peacefully asleep, tied up by the ropes to the long table. Martin observed the bruises on the chest and neck. It seemed like the victim had fought to escape, but the ropes were strong and the knots well made. Then he noticed the marks in some other parts of the body. Electricity had been used. The voltage was not large enough to burn the skin. It was not used to produce much local pain, but mainly to stimulate certain nerves in the body. However, an expert eye could detect the blue marks where the clamps had been attached. The bondage, the nudity and the electric clamps pointed to a sexual game gone badly. He had heard about novice initiations and other secret ritual practices in the Seminar, but that was an internal issue of the Church.

Martin opened the mouth of the victim. He carefully examined the throat and the tongue looking for any sign of asphyxiation. He looked around the empty room. A scanner could easily pickup DNA evidences from the floor and the walls, the table and the ropes. However, the scan would show that dozens if not hundred of people had been there. The cellar was not a closed place and students and service personnel often visited it. His only hope was the result of the autopsy. Martin told Daryl to call in the tech-group and wait there for the specialists. Martin took off the gloves and left the room followed by the assistant of the Master Supervisor. Martin suddenly stopped in the middle of the corridor.

“Do you have anything to say about this incident?” He asked the blonde young priest. The assistant did not seem surprised by the question. He looked straight into Martin’s eyes.

“No.”

Martin nodded and continued his fast walk through the corridor, leaving behind the young priest. Martin knew the way out of the building. He found the main level exit to the parking lot. Martin got in his PTU and drove away from the Seminar. He wanted to avoid the stress of driving downtown. He turned on the auto-pilot. He set the destination not to his office but to the most expensive address of the city. He needed to see someone, right now.

11:00 AM

Daniel looked at the old wall clock hanging above the projection screen. There was something with this analog antiquity that made him relax. The teacher was

explaining the differences between the Renegade platform and the Alliance objectives in the Last War. Daniel knew all this material since long time ago when he first got interested in the History of the Kingdom. He found strange that his young teacher was mentioning the enemies by their original name and not the Confused Ones. The Renegades, in their platform, battled for a world with different worshipping practices and faith systems. The Free Coalition was an impressive political and military machine. Everybody who doubted the good intentions of the coming Lord, joined force with the Renegades, a name which was actually given to them by the Believers, as the Allies were first called. The teacher was trying to sound impartial. She wanted to create a suspense that did not exist anymore. The Free Coalition lost the war. The Renegades surrendered and were converted into the Confused Ones. The Alliance took over the world and established the Kingdom of the Lord. They winners wrote the History, end of the story.

Time seemed to flow slower this morning than ever. Daniel was already starving, but he had to wait for another hour before he could go out for lunch and, yes, the meeting with Cary. Her beautiful face floated in front of him as soon as he closed his eyes. He remembered seeing this girl before, admiring her beauty, but he never thought he could have a chance with her. She was out of reach for him and therefore, did not make the list of his priorities for this school year. First, he wanted to be accepted as a History Assistant in the Public Archives of the Ministry of the Church. He applied for the position through the Global Net as soon as it was posted. He had a good chance to get it. He was just one year away from graduation and his marks, through all his education, were outstanding. Secondly, he wanted to matriculate in the Academy of World Peace. For that, he would need to compete, in a close race, with students from all over the world. Only forty positions were available for the History program. As a second option, Daniel had in plans to apply for the Theology program, which had two hundred positions, and should be easier to get in. The third thing he wanted to accomplish this year, was to investigate thoroughly the political games taking place in the Divine City. He had been thinking of applying for a short term internship at the Conference or in the Temple, but those positions were even harder to get in than a spot in a program of the Academy. With the right connections, of course, that would not be a problem, but he knew nobody. His family consisted only of his grandma, which was actually not his grandma but his grand-aunt. His parents died twenty years ago in a gas car accident. The vehicle exploded after the crash. He was the sole survivor, and his grand-aunt took care of him. She raised the boy alone, with the help of the Worldwide Welfare program and charity donations from the local parish. Amazingly, the final product came out not that bad, at least he liked to think that way.

Daniel smiled at his own joke. Cary, on the other hand, was from a rich family. He had seen an expensive PTU driving her to the school. Social differences were supposed not to be any longer an issue, but the reality was very different. In the Kingdom, the social divide had been growing deeper. The wealthy families intermarried between themselves. Climbing up the ladder was a hard thing to accomplish for any kid whose

both parents were not, at least, high paid professionals. These dark thoughts slowly form a stormy cloud in his mind. Maybe he should be honest with Cary and stop seeing her right now, at the very beginning, before both got hurt. She had to face the fact that he was a poor kid. He lived with his grand-aunt in a one bedroom shit-hole, in one of the overpopulated Towers of the People. These were tall buildings, housing thousands of low income apartments, built by the Ministry of the Church, not far from downtown. The idea was to mix the poor kids with the wealthy ones in the same school and their families together in the same congregation. That was a nice try. The rich people, living in the luxurious high-rises in downtown, knew how to keep their distance. In church, they sat apart, avoiding close contact with the Towers' people. In the local school, the differences were levelled by the educators, but as soon as they left the classrooms, everyone returned to their own individual worlds.

However, Daniel saw a bright future glowing in the distance. He would go to the Academy. He would graduate and become a scientist. He would move with his grand-aunt to one of the nice apartments in the newest complex, built not far from the old Seminar. Maybe, if he was lucky, he could find an apartment in the same building where Oscar lived, with his two professional parents. Maybe then he would be able to look at a girl like Cary.

“Daniel, could you please tell us why the High Commander of the Renegades was proclaimed a Living Saint by the Church?”

The question took Daniel by surprise. The teacher had noticed his distraction and wanted his attention back. Daniel smiled at her. She was still young, in her early thirties. She was married; he could see the ring in her hand. She surely had one or two kids. She must be a happy believer, a conscious citizen. She probably participated with enthusiasm in every recycling program promoted by the Ministry of the Environment. Daniel stood up to answer the question. He wanted to say that the Church proclaimed that man, a Living Saint, as part of the bargain to avoid future attempts to prosecute the leader of the Coalition. He had read it in the fine prints of the Capitulation Act. However, that was not a politically correct thing to say. An answer like that, could set the CPU dogs on his trail as a potential Questioner.

“With that proclamation, the Church made a public recognition of the Lord's pardon. The Renegades were really nothing more than confused people and their military leader was a visionary man who, at the end, embraced the Lord and surrendered the Holy City, sparing mankind of more meaningless bloodshed in the Final Battle.”

“That is very well said, Daniel! That was indeed the reason for the proclamation. The High Commander of the Alliance was also proclaimed a Living Saint, in accordance to the Capitulation Act. Becoming Living Saints joined even more these two great military men, who are still among us, and reached a very old age, thanks to the Lord and

the advances of our Ministry of Science.” The teacher smiled at Daniel. He responded with another smile. He was about to sit back on his chair when the teacher asked him another surprise question. “Is there another Living Saint, besides these two venerable people?”

Daniel was positively impressed by his young teacher. Not everybody knew that Doctor Hauptman, the author of the Unavoidable Truth, was also proclaimed a Living Saint. The Church published the official Announcement only in the internal press, and only a few members of the media commented on the issue.

“Yes, Miss Carlyss, the author of the Unavoidable Truth was proclaimed a Living Saint by the Archbishop, two years ago if I'm not wrong.”

“And you know why Doctor Hauptman was invested with that honour?”

Daniel suspected that the real reason had to do with Doctor Hauptman going mad. He had read some of the Professor's censored articles and conferences. The Archbishop was forced to do it, if he wanted to save his old friend from being excommunicated and sent to Rehabs by the Conference. He could not remember the official statement from the Ministry, but he tried to guess.

“The man gave us the Unavoidable Truth, the very pillar that sustains our Kingdom. The Church made him a Living Saint to recognize this enormous achievement, I guess.”

“Indeed, Daniel, Doctor Hauptman was rewarded for his epic work with much recognition. But he was declared a Living Saint only two years ago, and Doctor Hauptman wrote the Unavoidable Truth like thirty years ago.” The teacher kept a focused gaze on her favourite student. Daniel must know the truth. He was an explorer of the past, an avid reader of old newspaper and magazines, an aficionado Historian. “The venerable Professor of the Academy is a very old person. He lives in our city, actually not that far from here. His mind is beginning to drift away from our reality. Some envious people could try to discredit the old man and take away from him the indisputable merit of authoring the Unavoidable Truth. Therefore our beloved Archbishop decided to protect the famous Professor from being accused of treason and heresy. A Living Saint is placed above any doubts and cannot be prosecuted by any human authority. Only the Lord in person can handle any inconvenient situation involving a Living Saint. Thanks to this action, despite his controversial articles and conferences, the Professor is still the head of the Theology Faculty at the Academy and the Honorary Rector of the Seminar. Thanks Daniel, please, you can sit now.”

Daniel could not believe his teacher had the audacity of exposing this truth in front of all the students. He suspected some of his colleagues were informants, working

for the Secret Service or the Heavenly Guard. Someone may report the young teacher to the Ministry. At the least, this could cost her an Orange Flag; some truths were better being kept silent. This had been the policy of the Church for the last thirty years. Nobody mentioned anymore the Annunciations. Nobody said anything about the early defeats of the Alliance in the Last War, prior to the air raids of the Colonel Crawford. Nobody remembered that the Colonel Crawford was killed by friendly fire under very obscure circumstances. He had been working lately on this sad story. It was not an easy subject to research, but Daniel wanted to dig deeper in the Archives. The kid looked at his teacher. The woman's eyes met his gaze. Both smiled. Both knew the truth had been told, as it should always be.

11:30 AM

Donatella left the parking lot of the Celestial Square, where her dead husband had been immortalized in bronze, in the central piece of the monument. She was driving a Personal Transportation Unit made by Universal Movers. Her UM 54 model was the newest PTU from the state controlled company. The reviews had been mixed about this car, but Donatella loved it. It was large enough to carry up to four passengers, or two with cargo on the folded back seats. The speed was still far from being impressive, but it was not as slow as its predecessors. She took Main Street south. The vehicle computer asked if she wanted to setup a destination and turn on the auto-pilot, but the traffic was acceptable and she decided to drive the car in manual mode. Donatella preferred to have lunch at home, unless she had a business meeting, then she went to one of the restaurants around the Celestial Square or to the cafeteria of the Ministry, in front of the Grand Cathedral, where she kept her offices. Sometimes, Monsignor Carlo called her without previous advice, and they shared an intimate lunch in his private quarters, on the top floor of the Ministry.

Sometimes, she eat lunch with her friends from the Order of the Ladies in White. She founded this watchdog order ten years ago. It was a secular organization, where women from the congregations, investigated charges of corruption in the government instances. The Ministry immediately approved her initiative, and gave to the Order of the Ladies in White free access to information, no restrictions browsing the Global Net. The Order could investigate in deep a civil claim which lacked evidences to be considered officially a crime by the Umbrella. But mostly, Donatella loved the privacy of his own home, eating in the garden around the infinity pool, listening to a beautiful classic piece of music. Sometimes she cooked a light meal based on baked vegetables and brown bread, sometimes she ordered food from the Healthy Choice franchise, near the Crawford Mansion, as her house was known in the Riverbank, a good thirty minutes drive from downtown, without traffic.

She remembered how happy she was the day her late husband took her to see the house, which he had bought just days before the wedding. She always wanted a beautiful ceremony in a garden with a pool. The mansion was perfect for it. It belonged to some rich family from the old money. At that time, the economy was in very bad shape. Real estate businesses were the most hurt by the crisis. The owners decided to get rid of some properties in the Old City, to compensate for lost revenue in the stock market. On the other hand, the Colonel had just received the bonus for his two years service in the Far East and a hefty increase of his military salary, enough to cover the mortgage of the expensive property. He sold his family estate in the countryside and made the arrangements to have the mansion ready for the wedding day. The ceremony was a great success; the social chronicles mentioned the party in every magazine. Colonel Crawford was already known as the Ace of the Air after winning four consecutive International Air Shows. His good look and deep voice helped the media chains to market his figure as a television personality, the official face of the military. He was commissioned to do a cycle of conferences, in public institutions and educational centres, promoting the Armed Forces. It was precisely during one of his conferences, in the Communication and Marketing Institute, that Donatella met the handsome pilot.

Love was not at first sight; it took some time for her to comprehend that she was in love with him. At the beginning, the Colonel courted her too aggressively, scaring her away in the first months. Colonel Crawford was recently divorced, after ten year of fruitless marriage to the heir of a Financial Empire. His previous wife did not like kids, while the famous pilot wanted to start a family. They ended the marriage in very friendly terms, because the proud military man asked for none of the money.

With the Colonel being fifteen years her older, age could have been a deterrent for a young girl, but not for Donatella. The Colonel, at thirty four, looked very lovely, strong, comfortable and safe. None of her male friends from college could stand a comparison with this handsome man. The only thing that bothered her was his affiliation with the most conservative circles of the Old City. Donatella had always been a rebel. Since her early teens, she hung out with the wrong crew, like her father used to say. Drugs and alcohol were the negative side of the coin, the positive side was her high level of political education. She embraced several social causes and actively participated in demonstrations against the old system. Surprisingly for everybody, she accepted her parents' offer to pay for her education in the exclusive Communication and Marketing Institute, a worldwide Think Tank in media and commercial advertising. That did not stop her of being a rebel, but once she got into college, her teenage aggression was slowed down and soon moderated. Donatella finally matured into an astonishing woman. From being a slender, short hair, barefoot girl in tight jeans and black tank tops with red stars on her breast, Donatella evolved, like a butterfly, into a fashionable young lady, thanks to the irresistible influences of the elitist college. Presentation became, suddenly, something very important for her. Besides, she was gifted with natural beauty and the talent to combine an elegant dress with the precise smile. When Colonel Crawford looked at the

audience in one of his conferences, his eyes were caught by the impressive stamp of this sophisticated girl, sitting in the front row of the theatre.

At the end, she accepted dating him after he explained that his political preferences were more centrist than she thought. He respected the power of money but sympathized with the poor and the needed. Donatella, who was still a supporter of the anarchist movement in the city, kissed him, and few months later, the Colonel proposed to her when she less expected it. The Annunciations were happening everywhere in the world, but the media had not yet given them much attention. Rumours were floating in the air. Her family knew of a high ranked politician who knew another high ranked politician who had received one of these weird Annunciations. Strange winged creatures flew down from the sky, appearing suddenly to some people, to tell the news of the next coming of the Lord. The ones chosen for the Annunciations were always the same, the rich and the powerful, business and media moguls, state politicians, old blood aristocracy with large land and mine holdings, bankers and financial gurus. The conservative sectors were the first to embrace the good news. The liberals were more sceptics, but the anarchists and die-hard leftists saw the coming of the Lord as their chance to end the old system for good. The world suddenly fell in love with the flying creatures. They were the beautiful celestial beings, the golden messengers, descending from the heavens, announcing the next coming of the Lord. Nobody cared that these flying creatures were naked men, with ridiculous large wings attached to their back, and exposed dicks and balls, hanging in the front between their legs. Not even the most ultraconservative circles, including the fanatic religious ones, saw a problem in showing the nude guys in photos, videos and on television, at any time of the day, without any viewers alert or adult rating. The ultra left and the ultra right were, for the first time in History, united by the promise of the Kingdom of the Lord.

Donatella also fell in love with the messengers and the message. After her graduation, she started her own advertising firm. It was in the middle of the Annunciations boom and she jumped into the waggon. Money came from private donations and also from some government organizations. The Kingdom of the Lord was advertised everywhere like a Rock Concert, with heavy metal music mixed with pop tunes and classic arias. The recently married couple joined efforts in support of the next coming. The Colonel had started some unofficial military preparations, in case the Lord needed him with his elite squad. Donatella was already pregnant when she began frequenting the local church, where the priest, Father Frank, introduced her to the charismatic Monsignor Carlo, the Bishop of the Old City. The impression about that first meeting had an everlasting effect for both of them. The young Bishop, not yet thirty years old, found the young girl extremely attractive, despite her advanced state of pregnancy. Her beautiful green eyes bewitched him in a way that he could never get rid of the spell. Whenever he closed his eyes he saw hers, a pair of deep ocean shiny fires, irresistibly drilling deep in his soul, digging in the maze of his brain and burning her mark forever in his heart. That was true love at first sight. Donatella was conquered by the free spirit

inhabiting the attractive southern body of the young Bishop. They started a close friendship. Donatella always had been a very clever woman. She took her husband to the church and soon both priests, Monsignor Carlo and Father Frank, became close friends of the Colonel too. When Martin was born, the couple asked the young Bishop to be the godfather and Father Frank to baptize the newborn.

Later, when Monsignor Carlo resigned from the Old Church and started his new movement, Donatella found herself in the difficult position of having to choose between her traditional parish, under Father Frank's guidance, or the new congregation founded by Monsignor Carlo. At some point, she was sharing her time between the two churches, but the Colonel saw the power of the new movement, the believers were abandoning the old ship by thousands every day. New congregations of the One Church, following the message of Monsignor Carlo, started to appear everywhere around the world. The Old Church did not react on time, but continued trying to sell out the spirit of tradition and ancestry. The leadership failed to understand the change. The Lord was coming not to be sacrificed on behalf of the human race, but to lead the revolution against the old order and establish a modern Kingdom of justice, equality and abundance. That was the message the believers wanted to hear, and that was the message Monsignor Carlo delivered to them. The Crawford family stopped their affiliation with the old parish of Father Frank and became enthusiastic supporters of their close friend and godfather of their child, Monsignor Carlo.

When the Alliance called for the best of the military to join, in a global effort, to recover the Holy City, just before the coming of the Lord, the Colonel was one of the firsts to go to the war zone to build up the logistics for the Allies army. Before leaving, the Colonel asked his friend Monsignor Carlo to take care of his family in case something happened to him in the approaching war. Martin was nine years old when Donatella became pregnant for the second time. The couple had been trying to have a second child for a long time. Donatella even tried some fertility treatments. The Colonel was visiting home for only two week every two months. The preparation of the Air Force was taken all of his time. It was not an easy task coordinating with commanders piloting different aircraft and with diverse military backgrounds. The joint effort required constant exercise to be effective against the more homogeneous Free Coalition, which had been in the area for a much longer time than the Alliance. When Miriam was born, the Colonel was allowed to stay with the family for just one month.

In the absence of Colonel Crawford, Donatella and Monsignor Carlo became lovers. Only Father Frank knew the secret because he had been her confessor. Father Frank tried to stop them. He even threatened to excommunicate Monsignor Carlo, but it was too late. The friendship between the two priests suffered a giant blow when the young Bishop resigned and founded the One Church. After Miriam was born and Colonel Crawford was back in the battlefield, Monsignor Carlo explained to Donatella that he wanted to undergo a paternity test with the newborn girl, but she never agreed. Donatella

told him that Miriam was the daughter of Colonel Crawford and the other details were not important. Carlo never insisted again.

The lovers were always careful. Not only was she a woman married to a War Hero, but people were expecting him to keep the ridiculous celibacy intact, even when the One Church never stated any restriction for the priesthood. To protect their image they met only in the secluded privacy of her bedroom, and never made any public demonstration of their mutual affection. Father Frank, who knew about their clandestine relationship, was tied up by the secret of the confession. Later on, after he defected from the Old Church and joined the One Church, he again became the closest friend of the secret lovers. Monsignor Carlo awarded his old friend the prestigious position of Bishop of the Old City and Commander of the Heavenly Guard.

After the death of Donatella's husband, Monsignor Carlo was seen more often in the Crawford Mansion, but the public saw it as a natural affection of the founder of the One Church for the orphans and the widow of the War Hero. Later, some people became suspicious, but nobody dared to say anything about it. Their secret became sealed by their power. For thirty years they had been together, an enduring love that survived everything, from a nasty war to the adulthood of Donatella's children.

Monsignor Carlo had been not only a faithful lover, but also the best friend Donatella always wanted. However, things were changing, again. She looked back in the rear mirror. Donatella could not hide a perverse smile twisting her lips. She knew she was being followed. He was coming, like a horny wolf, blindly after the trail of the scent left behind by the female in heat. There was nothing this pig could do to resist her charms, and she was very well aware of that.

12:00 PM

Martin used to visit the old man more frequently when he was a student at the Academy. The Chief Inspector could not deny this observation from the Professor. This year, it was the third time Martin had come to see him. The Professor was very happy to share some time with the oldest son of his late friend, the Colonel Crawford, and invited Martin for a light lunch, on his glass enclosed terrace, with an astonishing panoramic view of downtown. Martin could see his own building not that far. When he was younger, he loved coming to the Professor's apartment. The modern penthouse in downtown, with a minimalist contemporary decoration, was always a refreshing contrast compared to the classic mansion by the Riverbank. He and his sister grew up under the constant care of all their father's friends. Besides the Archbishop, whose relationship with their mother made theirs also special, the Professor had also followed closely their careers, offering advices about their education and generous gifts for holidays and birthdays. Of the two siblings,

Miriam was the closest to the Professor. She even called him, grandpa, while Martin referred to him, in secret, as God.

When Martin went to the Academy, the Professor was his Applied Theology teacher. Everybody in the school enjoyed his conferences. They were excellent, dynamic and, already by then, they were a little controversial. Martin was proud of the special relationship he had with the Professor. Once per week, he went to visit the old man in the company of some of his friends, looking for interesting philosophical debates with the venerable author of the Unavoidable Truth. Unfortunately, after he was promoted to Chief Inspector of the Crime Prevention Unit, his visits became more sporadic.

Martin was always intrigued by the fast paced life of the old man, where women came and went away, without leaving any deep mark in the Professor. He never married and never felt the need of starting a family. His past was too troublesome, agitated and confusing; some actions of his were hard to understand. Martin remembered that his father always spoke highly of Doctor Hauptman. They were friends long before the Annunciations. They were actually neighbours. His father had been an exceptional soldier in every sense of the word; he excelled in military strategy and mathematics as well as in Philosophy and History. Doctor Hauptman was his Philosophy teacher in the Military Academy, and the fact that they were neighbours, drove the two men closer together. It was because of the Professor's influence, that Martin's father became involved in politics.

The Professor was a genius since a young age. He shared teaching jobs in three different places, the Seminar, where he was in charge of the Theology Faculty, the University and the Military Academy, where he headed the faculties of Philosophy and History. When the Annunciations began to happen around the globe, many high ranked politicians called the Professor for advice. He deeply investigated each of the events and concluded that the message and the messengers were real, despite a large group of scholars who doubted the occurrences and treated the celestial visits as hallucinations or tricks invented by the politicians. The study of his works about the Annunciations became mandatory in the Seminar. They inspired many priests to defect the Old Church and join the new movement founded by Monsignor Carlo, another follower of the Professor's teachings. Everybody expected Doctor Hauptman to align himself with the Alliance.

However, when the conflict became evident and inevitable, the Professor surprisingly adopted a position of neutrality, taking over the role of a mediator and negotiator between the two opposing sides. People understood that, in reality, this neutrality covered a hidden and inexplicable sympathy for the Free Coalition. Apparently, at some point, the Professor became suspicious of the Lord's true intentions and decided to support the Renegades, but due to his past associations with the Alliance, he was not able to openly proclaim his support for the other side. However, later on during the conflict, his judgement changed again, and the Professor switched over to the Alliance. The Lord welcomed his decision and gave him the task of writing the Unavoidable Truth.

This master piece had almost the same role in winning the war as the military victories in the battlefield. Many Renegades converted to the One Church soon after reading the material. Doctor Hauptman personally took part also in the drafting of the Capitulation Act. Following the Professor's recommendations, the Lord pardoned the Renegades calling them the Confused Ones, and the Conference awarded the High Commander of the Coalition with the title of Living Saint, to grant him immunity.

Few months after the Temple was built and the Lord had named Doctor Hauptman the Consort of the Temple, a position equivalent in range to the leader of the Holy Council, the Professor, suddenly, resigned and left the Divine City. He did not accept any other public responsibility in the Church and went back to the Old City, where the Archbishop, his old disciple and friend, convinced him to take over his old jobs of teaching in the Academy and in the Seminar. The Professor kept a very low profile for more than two decades until recently, when without warning, he published an article with harsh criticisms against his own Unavoidable Truth. Accused of treason and heresy, only the smart move by the Archbishop of declaring Doctor Hauptman a Living Saint, saved the old man from the humiliation of having his brain rebooted in Rehabs.

Martin followed this judiciary process against the Professor very closely. As Chief Inspector of the CPU, he was not allowed getting involved in politics, but his contacts in the Heavenly Guard kept him well informed. Nobody knew about it, but he had prepared a backup plan in case the Archbishop's proclamation was not accepted by the Conference. He and Miriam were ready to kidnap the old man and keep him safe outside of the Umbrella in some hidden place in the Old City. Martin had already sneaked out a Protector from the CPU and set it up in Miriam's apartment.

Martin never asked himself why he was willing to go that far for Doctor Hauptman. However, from the Professor's perspective, the Chief Inspector's attitude was as predictable as his father's. Once, Colonel Crawford confided to his old friend an anecdote that happened when he was serving in the Far East. His squad was ordered to bomb a camp of terrorists in the jungle. After flying over the site, the Colonel understood that the supposed terrorists were simple barely armed warriors of a local indigenous tribe defending their territory against a vast timber cutting operation. He cancelled the mission and reported back to his superiors. The military wanted to court-martial him for disobeying an order, but his men went on strike and threatened the Army to go public with the press. At the end, the military saved the honour by condemning the timber cutting operation and taking sides with the natives against the corporation. Colonel Crawford received another medal, which he added to his collection of shining objects he kept in the basement of his old family house.

Martin was just acting the same way. When the CPU captured the first Questioners, and the detectives interrogated the detainees, after seeing a few die electrocuted by the Firewall inserted by the Hackers in their minds, Martin ordered the

immediate end of the interrogatories. He released the Questioners and setup Sentinels on them to follow their connections in the Umbrella. He never sent anybody to Rehabs, except for one involuntary Fryer, caught once by a Patrol, who willingly preferred to get rid of the inconvenient mental disorder that caused the disconnection from the system. Martin kept only for himself a dossier with the reports from the Sentinels which were following the Questioners. The security in the Cell was very tight. None of the suspects ever came closer to another member of the Cell that the CPU did not know already of his or her secret affiliation. Nobody else had a clue, but Martin had Sentinels installed to follow his sister and his brother in law. On the other hand, Martin had also added her sister's address to the Conditional Exceptions database. This way, the building got excluded from the random inspections made by the Heavenly Guard patrols with portable scanner. This contradictory attitude of someone who had taken the oath to defend the Kingdom, did not come as a big surprise to the Professor, who had followed Martin's career since the beginning, and with whom her little sister shared all their family secrets.

Martin knew very well the high level of intimacy existing between Miriam and the Professor. He always wondered what part of their ordinary daily life was being told every week to grandpa. For him, the Professor was like God, someone watching from above, listening, observing every act, maybe judging, but never moving a finger to intervene. At the same time, Martin felt for the old man a mix of respect and sympathy, if not a real love, like Miriam certainly did. His sister was a child when their father died. The little girl became very attached to the old man, who took her every Sunday to the Zoo, or to the Aquarium, or to the Museum or just for a walk on the Riverbank Boulevard.

Martin remembered that, in the beginning, the Professor seemed to never get older. In Martin's memory, the Professor kept exactly the same appearance for decades. But recently, his body had started to change. He had become thinner, much thinner. His height had decreased by a couple of inches. His eyes had lost the vivid shine, the spark that irradiated tons of intelligence and wisdom. He was loosing hair and wrinkles had grown deeper and larger on his noble face. Martin knew the old man was sick. Only a hormone regeneration treatment could do the magic and extent his life a little longer, but the Professor refused taking one. Martin respected this decision, which he considered not a very clever one, but undoubtedly dignifying.

He watched the old man stretching his legs on the lounge sofa, where he always preferred to rest and take a drink after lunch. The Professor was wearing an oversized thick robe with nothing under. The old man did not want to waste detergent in washing more clothes than he needed, especially since he rarely left his place, and often he went just nude when alone in the apartment. Beneath the robe, Martin could guess a skinny fragile body. Beneath the pale, almost transparent skin, he could take a peek at the drawing formed by the veins and arteries, constricted by the age and jammed by the plaques. A stroke or a heart attack would take him away soon, very soon. But Martin did

not feel any pity. He knew the Professor would not like people feeling sorry for him. The old man had a very interesting and long life experience stored in his brain, he told Martin. It was neither the fame nor the glory what put a smile of satisfaction on a man's face when the last call arrived, but the sense of fulfilment that came from being needed and loved. These were the real achievements that mattered at the end of the road. Miriam and Martin provided him with those feelings for which he felt eternal gratitude. Martin was touched by the honest confession of the Professor, who never wanted to take the risk of forming a family on his own. The Chief Inspector did not know how important he was for the old man. Martin wanted to embrace him and maybe, why not, kiss him on the forehead, like his sister did every time they met, but he could not do it. It was embarrassingly too late for him to start doing it now.

The Professor was looking out the window to the streets below. The city glittered down there, flooded with the summer sunlight. The view was amazing from the tallest penthouse in downtown of the Old City.

“You know, Martin, beauty is divine, indeed. I have no doubts about it, but I always wondered if God really exists, I mean, if a true Creator is out there, hiding from us in some dark place in the Universe, like a naughty child who knows the mess he has made and now is afraid of the reprisal.”

“Well, in the absence of a Creator, at least we have the Lord with us.”

“Do we have a Lord?” The Professor avoided his gaze. The old man kept staring down through the window. “I thought too that we had a Lord. But I am not sure anymore. Maybe I am getting too old to believe in fairy tales.”

“But if that is not the Lord, who is that guy?”

“I don't know.” The Professor seemed to be absent for a second. Martin smiled condescendingly. He asked before, during lunch, about the relationship between his father and Friend. He only knew that the winged creature saved his father from a certain death during the war, and they became friends. Actually, Martin remembered his father saying that Friend was the only winged creature which he allowed to come closer than ten meters from him. Martin explained the Professor about the surprise visit of the winged creature in the morning. The old man, like always, avoided his questions. This time he used the excuse that talking too much while eating, was bad for digesting food. But now that the lunch was over, Martin was waiting for his answers. The Professor took a sip from the glass of wine. “By the way, you never asked me how your father died.”

“I know that my father was killed in a stupid accident. I thought that was all I needed to know.”

“Perhaps there is more, Martin. Your father's death was not an accident.” The Professor turned his head and focused his blurry gaze on the Chief Inspector. “Your father took a decision that I could not understand at that time. He suddenly switched sides. He was about to destroy the Alliance's planes, when he was gunned down by the Anti-Aircraft Defences of the Base.”

Martin finished the rest of his drink. Doctor Hauptman had to be insane. Only this could explain what he was saying now. His father was a War Hero. The Alliance commissioned a statue of the famous pilot after his death. The statue of his father was the centrepiece of the monument to the fallen soldiers in the Last War. Martin felt proud every time he saw the bronze statue of his father in the middle of the Celestial Square.

“That is a little too hard to swallow, Professor.”

“But it is the plain truth. However, that was not the bad decision of which I am talking about. I was on the same page with him. I supported his mission. The plan was to regain the air supremacy for the Coalition and start a contra-offensive against the ground troops of the Allies army surrounding the Holy City. Chances were high that the Alliance would have to retreat and maybe accept the conditions of an armistice. Somehow the military intelligence found out about the mission, but they did not stop him. The Alliance did not want to make public the defection of your father. They waited until the last moment, and when the plane took off, they fired. Your father did not stand a chance against the incoming missiles. The plane disintegrated in the air. The Alliance secured the air supremacy for the rest of the war, and the Coalition forces were doomed.”

“That seems to me like a suicide mission. My father was not the type of man who would die like that for nothing.” Martin was thinking fast. The Professor must be confusing the facts about events that happened thirty years ago. “If I'm forced to believe this story, I can not understand where is the bad decision, anyway.”

“Friend knew of the plan to kill your father some minutes before the take-off. He rushed to find your father and warned him, before the Colonel started the plane. Friend offered to take him away to a safe place, but your father refused. He said he needed to do it for the sake of you, his children. He knew the Alliance was waiting for him to take off to launch the missiles against him. They wanted to destroy the plane and make the whole explosion appear as if it was a sad accident, a malfunctioning defence system which mistook your father as a foe and fired the missiles. He knew all that, but did not abort the operation. By then, it was a real suicide mission, and he went ahead with it anyway, knowing he was going to die. That is the bad decision I am talking about.”

Martin wondered if he was stunned by the revelation or if something inside his mind already suspected the truth. He looked at the grey eyes of the old man. His short white hair was falling in chunks, revealing a pink scalp with dark freckles here and there.

The Professor moved not one muscle in his face. He was just observing Martin, waiting for his reaction.

“I don't know what to say, honestly.”

“You don't need to say anything. I believe you know that I kept a neutral position at the beginning of the conflict. Your father, the Archbishop, Father Frank and I, usually exchanged opinions about what was happening on a daily basis. Monsignor Carlo was blinded by the coming of the Lord, supported by Father Frank, who always repeated whatever Carlo said, but your father kept an eye wide open when it was my turn to openly express my doubts. During my research about the Annunciations, I observed an interesting fact in the behaviour of the celestial messengers. They only approached the most influential people of the world, never a congregation of believers. When I asked about the place where they lived before appearing to us, the creatures were caught off guard and did not know what to answer. When I had the chance to ask the same question to the Lord, he told me that their souls were submersed in a state of hibernation, not living, not dead, waiting for the right moment to come here. All that seemed very suspicious to me. It was not too convincing, in my opinion. Monsignor Carlo tried to sell me his utopia of the Kingdom, but it was really his own idea of how the future should be once the Lord had won the war.”

“And the Lord won the war anyway, mostly thanks to you and your Unavoidable Truth.”

“Yes, he won the war.” The Professor nodded with a sad smile upon his face. “I know that better than anybody else. But let me tell you something I have not said to anybody before. I have been thinking recently a lot about those initial days. I remember they were turbulent times. Things were not as clear as they may look now to you.”

“I believe things are still very complicated.”

Martin was trying to gain some more time. He wished somehow he could stop the old man from teaching him another History lesson. But he knew the Professor too well, the old man was unstoppable when he had an audience, and Martin was undoubtedly a very receptive one.

“Listen, you have to put yourself in my place thirty years ago, in the deserts surrounding the Holy City. If you try harder, you may see what I am trying to say here. I remember that, at some point, of a sudden, I understood that everything was a fake. I do not know how, but it hit me very hard.”

“Do you mean the war, the Allies army?”

“No, I mean everything, the Alliance, the Lord, the Kingdom, everything was a trap. I confessed my suspicions to your father and Monsignor Carlo, my two oldest friends. The priest did not believe me, of course. He thought I was getting confused by hanging out too often with the wrong crew, the leaders of the Coalition. But your father also felt, maybe by instinct, that something was not entirely right. The traditional powerhouses, that same ones that had dominated the world for centuries, were in charge all over again. The military was controlled by the old politicians, bankers and landowners. The Lord was not the almighty being your father had been expecting. The Lord could do some small tricks, like creating energy fields, but that was not enough to win the war. The winged creatures were good for nothing in the aerial fights. They fell like flies beaten by a vermin insecticide, the first time they tried to oppose a formation of warplanes from the Coalition.”

“I never met the winged creatures up close before until this morning. But I think I have some memories of my father making nasty jokes about them.”

“Your father was not joking, trust me. He was disappointed and partially angry. Nobody in the Army wanted to see the truth. The Alliance could not convince the other half of the population just by force. The military solution would end in a bloody war involving the entire surface of the globe. The initial agreement of a localized conventional conflict to resolve some minor theological differences would soon be forgotten. In frustration, the nuclear weapons card would be played by both sides. Mankind was doomed. Then your father came out with the plan to switch sides and destroy the Alliance’s planes. By that time, the Council of the Elders, formed by the elite, were in charge of the military. They were exactly the same people who were chosen by the winged creatures for the Annunciations. The Free Coalition, on the other hand, consisted mostly of volunteers from around the globe, with the support of few governments outside of the old system. Your father explained to me that the only way to stop the war of going global and nuclear, was to maintain the balance until the point when both sides would see the need to negotiate a peaceful agreement. He told me that, at the end, the real winner would be the one which was capable of conquering the heart and mind of the people. Military solutions had never been a good recipe for achieving that goal. Both sides would have to sit and talk. They would have to divide the world in two parts, one for the Lord and his Kingdom and another for a free-will federation of Renegades. That was precisely the option proposed by the Coalition and the one that seemed fair to me too. I jumped with him in this venture. I went to see the leaders of the Coalition and they approved your father's plan. They agreed to accept your father as the Commander in Chief of their own Air Force once most of the Allies planes would have been destroyed. They even were willing to help. They wanted to send a squad in support of your father's surprise attack against the planes landed on the main base. But your father asked for a solo action to protect the secrecy of the operation.”

“Fair enough, it was a good plan, I think.”

“Yes, it was a good plan, but something went wrong. Only another two people, besides your father and me, knew about the mission, the High Commander of the Free Coalition, and Monsignor Carlo. However, the word got out somehow, and the military intelligence of the Allies army discovered the plot.”

“Are you telling me that someone of these men was a traitor?”

“No, stop there my boy, do not get me wrong. To be honest, I suspected for many years that the priest was the one who denounced your father. Monsignor Carlo was against your father's plan. He believed that the Lord's Kingdom was the best solution for all the problems of the world. I thought that Monsignor Carlo decided to open his mouth and go with the gossip to the Lord or to the High Commander of the Alliance. But now I know that Monsignor Carlo would never have done that. First because he did not know all the details, only your father and the High Commander of the Coalition were aware of every step of the operation. And secondly, he is too clever to make that mistake, because the real plan of your father was to miss and get killed that day.”

This time Martin almost dropped his drink to the floor. The Professor smiled at him with an expressionless face. The old man must have been enjoying the surprise mixed with scepticism in Martin's gaze. First, the Professor told Martin that his father was not a true War Hero, but a deserter who wanted to switch sides and fight for the wrong side, the Confused Ones, the losers. Later, he told Martin that the Alliance was aware of his father's move and that the winged creature went to save him just minutes before his death. And now the old man was telling him that his father wanted to be killed anyway. Why would he do such a thing? “I can't understand.”

“I know, Martin. It is not that easy. I have not told anything of this to your sister.”

“And my mother...”

“She may know, or maybe not. But the important thing now, is that you know what I know. Now you know how I think. I have been living all my life with the burden of having to understand why your father made that crazy move. I spoke many times to Friend about that day, about the instant just before he got killed. Your father did not react too surprised when Friend told him that the mission was known to the enemy. Your father told Friend that it was too late, and that he had no other option but to go ahead and do it for the sake of his children. These words were a cryptic message of your father for me. Friend is one of the most intelligent flying naked guys I have met, but he could not see the reason for that meaningless sacrifice of his human friend. He told me he was tempted to go and kidnap your father by force and take him away with him far from the Base. But your father had always been respected too much by everybody, for Friend to do

something like that. The Colonel was determined to die that day and nobody could stop him.”

“You have not told me yet a good reason to believe in this theory of yours.”

“There is not a good reason, my boy. It is all about how you perceive the concepts of good and evil, while living an ordinary life among friends and family members where each acts differently, sometimes in contradiction with your own moral canons. According to your father, the original plan to balance the war was not more than a test. If everything went as expected, he would have destroyed more than half of the warplane arsenal of the Alliance that night. But then, let's think further about what would have happened then. The Coalition knew about the mission. They were ready. They had their own plans drawn around it. The contra-offensive would not have stopped with the rupture of the siege. The Coalition would have conquered other cities in the area, expanding their position and influence across the world. But the Alliance had practically unlimited resources. They would have come back stronger, more lethal than before, and this time the Lord would not have the option, at the end, of pardoning the Confused Ones, if you know what I mean. The idea that the two fields would have been forced to negotiate, once the military balance would have been achieved, was not entirely correct. I know about it now. The Allies would have never renounced to the Kingdom reigning on the whole planet and the Renegades would have never allowed the survival of something which they believed was diabolic and evil. The stalemate would have translated into a never ending war, millions would have died, and at the end of it, nothing could have been left worthy to rule over. Your father must have had some type of secret conversation with the Lord, because I am sure he was the one who hinted the Alliance about his own plan. Now he wanted the Allies to win the war, but it was too late to turn his back to friends like me and the people who were fighting on the Coalition side and who trusted him. He decided to die. For his service, the Alliance would make him a Hero, maybe just for the sake of its public image. The Coalition would consider him a Hero too. His children would be safe, no matter who ended up winning the war, but he had put his bets on the Allies. By securing the victory of the Alliance, at least a long period of peace and harmony would be established across the world under the Kingdom of the Lord.”

“But you told me before that my father did not believe in the Kingdom.”

“Neither did I and here am I. Your father made the ultimate sacrifice. He gave his life for you, Martin. He wanted his children to have a safe future until they were able to see the truth with their own eyes.” The Professor waved his hand in front of him pointing to the city below. “I also had to make a painful sacrifice. I wrote something in which, for instance, I never believed. I followed your father's example. We had to let the Alliance win the war in order to save millions of people. The Unavoidable Truth did what the military was not capable of doing. It conquered the heart and mind of millions of people, and they surrendered their souls to the Lord.”

“And the Alliance won the war and now we are living in the Kingdom, end of the story, right?”

“Yes, we are living in the Kingdom and this was the idea. We are a very unique type of animal on this planet. We learn from our mistakes and from the mistakes of others. We needed to see the Kingdom with our own eyes. We needed to see the rich and the privileged regaining their old positions of power, ascending to the throne in the Divine City, hiding behind the shadow of the Lord. We needed to see the invasion of our privacy, the loss of our freedoms, the restriction of our own individuality for the sake of the common good, currently represented by a celestial smiling face surrounded by a bunch of naked guys with wings on their backs. Only then, after the Kingdom was safe on solid ground, finally transformed into the nightmare your father foresaw in his dreams, people could really begin to wake up.”

“But why do not let the Renegades win the war in the first place?”

“First, as I told you before, nobody could guarantee the Coalition's victory. The Alliance would have never abandoned the Lord. Secondly, even if the Coalition could have won the war, then the dream of the Kingdom would have survived underground, waiting for the right moment to surface again and, believe me, then it would have been stronger and nastier than the one we know now, people would have been brainwashed from the moment they were born, trust me. There is nothing more dangerous than a dream which could but did not come true. It sticks to the walls of the brain, painfully reminding of what it could have been, evolving into a diabolic entity, ready to swallow the soul and make people do unthinkable things for the sake of giving birth to that monster. No Martin, your father was right and so was I.”

“But the Kingdom is still here. People waking up, you mean the Hackers?”

Martin had always suspected the Professor of keeping some contacts with the Hackers; maybe some were Renegades, old friends of him. As a Living Saint, the Professor was an untouchable. His connection to the Umbrella was sealed from Sentinels and Listeners by a powerful Protector. Not even a Security program was allowed to get close to a Living Saint.

“Indeed, the Hackers have reached the critical point when action must follow. The Questioners in the city are growing at the speed of light. Nothing can stop the awakening, Martin, absolutely nothing. The only problem we face is that damn Umbrella. The Hackers are using it for propaganda and scanning the minds, to spy on the databases and find sympathizers to recruit them for the Cell. But, the Umbrella also restricts their activities. Your CPU can detect any rebellious thought just the moment it is being formed.”

“Do you mean a rebellion in the city, against the Kingdom?”

“Yes, Martin, a global revolution against the system is at the doorsteps. Only the Umbrella is stopping it. But there are good news, my boy.”

The Professor reclined his back comfortably on the lounge sofa as if this was the most innocent conversation between two old friends. Martin was still in shock, impressed by the logic and the honesty of the old man. Martin could, in theory, set up a Guardian on the Professor and arrest him. The scandal would be of enormous proportions, but he could play back the entire speech as evidence. He always had in hand a Recorder program, which he used all the time to store the last two hours of conversation, in case he needed to recall a dialogue about something important. Martin could easily prove the treason of the venerable author of the Unavoidable Truth. The condition of Living Saint would not be enough to save the Professor this time.

“Why you are telling me all this now?”

“My end is not too far, my boy. The Lord can cure many illnesses, but he can not defeat death. I should have told you this a long time ago. Miriam is a Questioner, you know that.”

“Yes, she is a Questioner as well as her husband. I have two Sentinels following them. This way, if the Heavenly Guard or the Secret Service find out about them, I can always say that they are already under my jurisdiction. And I also satisfy my curiosity about their dealings with the Zone.”

“That is very clever, bravo! Now, I wonder why you do that. Why you are protecting people who want to destroy what you stand for? Wait, you do not have to answer that. I know how much you love your sister. She trusts you blindly too. When she told me about her becoming a Questioner, I did not approve it. I thought that the Cell would set her apart from you and your mother, but she was right, that did not happen.”

“My mother knows it too.”

“Yes, Miriam told me. And I will not be surprised if the Archbishop is also aware that his beloved goddaughter is a Questioner. That was a risk Miriam was willing to take. The Hackers also trusted her, despite her family connections.”

“She could be useful for them, I guess.”

“No, not really, that was not the reason why the Hackers approached her. Of course, they knew she could gain access to sensitive areas, just for being your sister and Donatella's daughter. For example, she could try to disarray the CPU network or

deactivate the Shield in the Cathedral, but the Hackers could do the same without her, believe me. She was treated just as another citizen waking up from the dream.”

“And I am supposed to be still sleeping?” Martin laughed trying to relax the climate of the conversation. The tension had been slowly building up in the terrace of the penthouse. He could feel it, and surely the Professor was also aware of it. Martin suspected that there was something the old man had not told him yet.

“Well, it is up to you, my boy, up to you alone.”

“You are not the first telling me today exactly the same words.”

“I guess Friend did it too, right?”

“Yes, he spoke to me with some cryptic words. He said that I must find the Courier and protect the Warrior. Who are these people?”

The Professor made an effort to stand up. Martin helped the old man getting on his feet, and followed him to the kitchen. Doctor Hauptman served a glass of water for himself and asked, with a sign of his hand, if the Chief Inspector wanted one too, but Martin refused with a gesture. The Professor sat on one of the tall stools by the bar and invited Martin to do the same. The Chief Inspector looked at the clock displayed on one corner of the panoramic window. He should be going. The crime of the Seminar had a severity one priority. But his mind would not allow him to leave until the Professor had said the last word. Martin sat beside the old man, looking at him with an enigmatic smile. The old man finished his glass of water and his gaze focused again on Martin's brown eyes.

“Among the Hackers, sometimes, a nickname reflects the meaning of a main task that the person has to perform. There is an old myth among them. They follow a secret scripture called the New Book, which explains how everything works, what the goals are and the instructions of how to defeat the Kingdom. It includes a set of legends and prophecies. According to this New Book, someone would wake up some day with the ability to shut down the Umbrella in the entire city. This person would also have other unheard powers, a mind so strong that the Lord would tremble only by having it near. This someone is called the Warrior.”

“I see, another super hero, so it is just a legend, nothing real.”

“The Lord was also a myth thirty years ago, remember?”

“And who is the Courier?”

“That I do not know. I can not remember every page of that book nor every pseudonym in the Hackers’ mythology. You should have asked Friend?”

“My sister told me the same. But I was in shock, besides, I am sure Friend said everything he wanted to say. I thought these creatures were isolated in the vicinity of the Divine City. I never expected his visit, much less, all the things he told me.”

“Friend is special, my boy. Your father noticed it since the first moment they met, when the winged creature saved his life. It was always the other way around. The pilots had to risk their life to save these flying men of perishing disintegrated in mid air by the enemy fire. That was the first and only time a winged creature saved the life of a human. Your father asked me the same question you have now in your mind. Why Friend did it? After a while, he understood that Friend was unique among the others. This creature felt some sort of guilty because he also believed in the fairy tale about a Kingdom where men and the winged creatures would live together in harmony and happiness, forever and ever. But he noticed, from the very beginning, that the plans had changed. The Lord was just a puppet of the people who always held the power in this world. These winged creatures are not that clever, and they are programmed to blindly follow their Lord. Only Friend is different, an exception to the rule. Maybe he is an error in their creation, a defect or a virus in the system, who knows. Of course, Friend could not just leave the Alliance and fight on the Renegades' side. The Lord would have him literally annihilated for treason. But he wanted to help.”

“I see, the Hackers have got in him a spy near the Temple, a nice move.”

“Yes, he reports to the Zone everything he hears in the Divine City.”

“And would I be guessing wrong if I say that Doctor Hauptman is helping the Zone too?”

“Have you heard of the Messenger?”

“The Messenger is the first who speaks to the new Questioners when they are being recruited. We have caught some of them before the Hackers had time to install the Firewall program. During the interrogation, they mentioned the Messenger.”

“Did you ask your sister about the Messenger?”

“Yes, actually I did. But she does not know who the Messenger is. She thinks it must be a Hacker, probing the minds from the safety of the Zone.”

“The Hackers also use the pseudonyms to protect their real identities. The Search programs are good in making associations between names and profiles stored in the databases. Having a nickname is a safety rule for every Hacker.”

“But why do they need these nicknames if they are supposed to be in some region outside of the Umbrella?”

“These nicknames, in many cases, describe the actual function of the Hacker within the organization. I know of some of them, for example, I can tell you that Miriam is the Scorpion, do not ask me why, and Arthur is the Linker, I guess he is a contact with another group within the Cell, I never asked. There is a Sniper, probably someone with the technical ability of penetrating the defences of a network to hack a database in the Umbrella. And there is also the Messenger, someone in charge of the communications between the Zone and the Cell. Remember that a Hacker has a magnetic signature like anybody else. When they move within the city, under the reach of the Umbrella, they are vulnerable to being scanned by a random Search program. Your computers may find something suspicious, like for example, the long term absence of a trace within the Umbrella, a clever officer, like you, could make the correct associations and setup a Sentinel or a Listener to spy on the person and collect future evidences.”

“I did not know the Hackers would risk coming into the city. I thought they were always hiding behind the Zone.”

“Most of them can not come in, it is indeed very risky, but others, who have not compromised yet their public identities, come frequently to the city to visit family and to hold secret meetings with the leaders of the Cell.”

“Everything you are now telling me is new to me. This conversation has been more productive than all my previous interrogation sessions with Fryers who were targeted by the Zone as potential Questioners. But my question to you is still the same. Why telling me all this now and not before? I guess I was not ready. How do you know I am ready now? How can you be so sure I will not use this information against the Hackers, if not against you personally?”

“Martin, I know you since you were a little child. The question was not about you being ready or not, but about the Hackers waiting for the right moment to set you free of the dream. If Friend came and told you that a Courier will take you to the Warrior, it does mean that this moment has arrived. And again, it is up to you to follow these instructions or not.”

“I do not understand how can you trust Friend if you doubt the Lord? Why rest assure that this winged creature is not looking for some personal advantage, maybe an opportunity to become the Lord himself, who knows?”

“I trust Friend because it is not he who is rolling the dices here, my boy. He is also following instructions.”

“May I ask from whom?”

“Of course, the Zone tells him what to do. The Messenger is behind the voice speaking to him. Friend is allowed to be outside of the Umbrella. Actually most winged creatures prefer not to be connected. Their mind is not as developed as ours. They feel lost trying to use the tools we have in the Umbrella. They can not understand most of the information available in the Global Net. They even fail to navigate with their mind through a simple program like the Intercom. They were created to be the messengers of the Lord, nothing else. But this works also as an advantage for the Hackers, helping them to keep their communication with Friend. They have been in contact since the first Hacker started the Resistance.”

“I see, you even call it the Resistance, very interesting. But then, could you tell me who the Messenger is? That would be a real nice piece of Information.”

“I have no problem in telling you anything, and I will not put any pressure on you, not emotional, at least. I would hate myself if I use the memory of your father to blackmail you, to force you to do something you are not convinced by yourself of doing it. Once you leave this penthouse, you will still have the freedom to make your choice. And believe me, no matter which one is going to be this decision, I will continue loving you not less than before, as I promised your father. You may continue fighting against the Hackers, catching more Fryers, interrogating potential Questioners, which is your job now, am I being correct?”

“Or I could also make a different decision, right? I could start a Search for the Courier, using any hint I could get in our CPU network. I could deploy random Search programs in the Umbrella seeking possible associations with that nickname. Once I got this elusive Courier, I could use it to find the Warrior. I could finally hide and protect the Warrior within the system and I could deliver the Warrior, sane and safe, to the Hackers.”

“That would be very nice of you. And I can tell you, my boy, the Messenger could not be happier and prouder, if you could do that.”

“I guess you are the Messenger.”

Martin was drilling the Professor's eyes, as if he could, in some way, get in and probe the mysterious mind of the legendary author of the Unavoidable Truth. The old man did not blink, but smiled softly and extended his hand to the Chief Inspector of the Crime Prevention Unit.

“You are not mistaken, my dear Martin. I am the Messenger. And I believe that you already know the truth. You are the Hammer, the protector of the Warrior.”

12:30 PM

Cary could not take off her eyes from Daniel. He was sitting there in front of her, among all these books, his face burning red with some sort of interior fire, desperate to tell her everything he knew, everything he had found in his searches through old magazines and newspapers. He told her about the Annunciations and the winged creatures, about the other mysterious dimension from where they came, the dark and far place of which none of them has any recollection. He told her about the moment of the Lord's arrival, the euphoric feeling which invaded everybody's heart, about his first speech to the people. He told her about the other half of the population who doubted, the Confused Ones that were once called the Renegades and their military Free Coalition which surprised everyone by attacking and taking in their hands the Holy City, the place where the Lord was supposed to build his House. He told her about the Alliance of the Believers, the beginning of the Last War and the nasty battles in the desert, air and sea. He told her about the Final Battle and the Siege of the Holy City, about the victory of the Allies army, the surrender of the Coalition and the Capitulation Act with the pardon of the Lord for everyone who fought against him in the war.

Daniel felt the History inside his veins, the passing of time flowed through him like blood in his arteries. Cary got carried away by the passion of his storytelling. He told her about the beginning of the Kingdom, the rebuilding of the Divine City, the construction of the Temple, the expansion of the One Church and the Unavoidable Truth. He told her about the spirit of freedom and solidarity that nested in every nation, the elimination of the borders, the creation of the Worldwide Welfare that erased the poverty from every corner of the planet, about the banning of weapons, the proliferation of modern Academies and Hospitals everywhere in the world. He tells her about the advances of the Ministry of Science, the reduction of the individual carbon print, the regulation of the exploitation of non-renewable resources, the invention of new construction materials, the hormone-regeneration treatments, the Wireless Energy Grid, based on the combination of gravitational forces and the magnetic fields of the planet, in conjunction with conventional renewable sources. He told her about the Umbrella, the decrease in crime thanks to the Search and Security programs, the decrease in health problems thanks to an army of Diagnostic programs scanning the magnetic signature of our organism, the Intercom and the unlimited possibilities of the mind to mind telepathic communication, the Global Net where anybody could get an answer to any question instantly thanks to the fast and reliable Query programs, constantly browsing the databases of the system.

Like everybody else, Cary knew mostly about everything Daniel was telling, but it was the way he did it, the attention to every detail, to the historical anecdote never mentioned in the official text books, that had left her totally fascinated with the story. She could not resist anymore. The girl got closer, grabbed the boy by the shoulders and pushed her lips against his. Daniel was silenced by the unexpected wet kiss of the most gorgeous girl of the entire college. He was forced to surrender his virginal mouth. His instinct told him to open his lips and to embrace her. They could not keep their balance. He fell down to the floor with her on top, books and magazines falling down and spreading around them. They were in a private booth at the Library of the Museum. Not everybody could get one, they were limited in quantity, and customers had to book them ahead of time, but Daniel was an assiduous visitor, the cleaning guys, the clerks, the Master Librarian, everybody knew him. If a booth was free, he could get it. The little cubicle had not an actual door, but they managed to get covered behind the tall shelves that formed the walls. Cary was straddling his waist. She grabbed his wrists with one hand and pinned them against the floor. With the other hand, she unbuttoned his shirt, baring his smooth chest. She smiled; Daniel had very nicely defined pectorals for a nerd. She took off his glasses and kissed his deep ocean green eyes. The boy succeeded freeing one hand and reached up for her breast. She let him to open the top of her blouse and slide his hand inside.

“What, in the name of the Lord, are you doing?”

The voice caught them totally by surprise. Lucy was standing at the entry of the cubicle, looking alarmed and disgusted. Cary got up from the floor. The boy followed her, fixing his shirt. Cary looked for a second at her best friend and then back to Daniel. They both laughed.

“We just fell on top of each other.” Cary said while collecting the fallen books and putting them back to the shelves. “How did you find us?”

“It was not too hard with all that noise.” Lucy sounded really mad. She ignored the boy’s presence and kept looking at Cary, as if she were the only one existing there. “Cary, I think the best for you is to leave and come with me now. You are losing your mind. You forgot the Ethic Act or this boy has you drugged or what?”

Cary had not forgotten the Ethic Act. She actually hated it, like most young people did. Before the Ethic Act, everything was totally different, more normal. People could express their affection for each other in public. They could hold hands and even kiss if they wanted. But things started to change. The Church became too intrusive. First, the gay marriage legislation was reverted into a civil union with certain restrictions. There were rumours about a bill, which was being debated within the Conference, to ban homosexual unions for good, like it happened with the abortion. Just after the Umbrella, the Conference released this controversial Ethic Act, a piece of legislation encapsulating

the moral rules that should govern the social behaviour of an abiding citizen. Adultery was considered a crime. Public nudity became indecent exposure. Homosexuality and other types of sexual conducts, classified in the Ethic Act as unconventional, were stigmatized as inappropriate deviations. Expressions of affection in public places were forbidden, as well as sexually charged conversations. People were taken by surprise. They did not have enough time to react when the Peace and Freedom Act was, almost simultaneously, released by the Ministry of the Church, forbidding public demonstrations that could represent a threat to the public order. The propaganda in the media and the subliminal education program, promoted by the Heavenly Guard, were slowly showing outstanding results in the transformation of the mind of the weakest people, the less educated, those who blindly chanted the same slogans, the brutalized victims of a subtle but merciless brainwashing. The society was being literally violated from above. The youth and the teens were the more rebellious, fighting against this back-to-the-caverns offensive, led by the most conservative circles in power. But unfortunately, the young people were the minority in an ever ageing society, and they had none or almost zero political weight within the Kingdom.

“We didn't forget anything.” This time it was Daniel who tried to calm down Cary's best friend. “Come on Lucy, we are just friends.”

“Friends don't unbutton their tops, my dear. Come with me Cary.”

Cary stopped picking up books from the floor and looked straight into Lucy's eyes. She knew her friend was acting motivated by pure jealousy. She took Lucy's by the hand and pushed her out of the cubicle.

“What is going on with you, Lucy?”

“Cary, I came here to rescue you from this stupid nerd. He had you hypnotized or drugged, I don't know. If our friends know about this, our image will be trashed for good, you for being with this subnormal guy and me for not doing anything about it. There are a bunch of cute kids after you. Please, stop seeing this ugly one. I believe this weird nerd has nasty intentions about you, especially after what I just saw. Is he really a virgin?”

“Come on Lucy, it isn't like that and you know it. You don't like him because you are afraid of losing me. Trust me, you will not. I will always be your friend and maybe we can hook you up with a friend of him, and we can hang out together.”

Lucy's face changed, she could not believe what Cary was telling her. This boy had done a real damage on Cary's brain. But she was her best friend and best friends helped each other in good times and in bad times. Lucy would need some proof to show Cary what really was behind this nerd's sick mind.

“Okay, if you want to stay with him, fine, it is your problem. I am out of here.”

Lucy turned her back and walked away. Cary attempted to stop her, but she could not reach Lucy before her friend rushed out of the Library. Daniel was standing at the entry to the booth. He watched the whole drama with a sad smile. He could not hear the whole conversation, but some words reached his ears. Cary came back to him.

“I'm sorry.”

“There is nothing to be sorry of.” Daniel took her hand. “I never thought the most beautiful girl in the world would fight for me against her best friend. What should I do? “
“You don't have to do a thing, just be here for me.”

A tear appeared in one of Cary's big brown eyes. Daniel kissed her hand and pressed it against his cheek. He felt a knot forming in his throat. He never felt before this pressure on his heart, this tickling inside his stomach, this euphoria which made his head spinning weightless. He could not believe this was happening to him. He had to tell her.

“I think I'm in love with you.”

“Oh, that is so sweet!” Cary smiled and also took his hand and kissed it. “Can you say it again?”

“I'm in love in you.”

1:00 PM

Why she was in bed with another man ? Why she was making love to Father Frank? There should be no logical explanation, but of course there was one, very simple, her survival instinct. More than three decades of love and friendship between Donatella and Carlo could not be thrown away just like that. Father Frank promised to be discreet, but she could not count on it. He was a clever bastard. He would tell if he needed to. But she could do exactly the same. Father Frank was very outspoken in favour of the celibacy vows. Donatella was using her Recorder program. She was taping every second of what her eyes were seeing, every noise her ears were hearing. She knew Father Frank was probably doing the same. Like a pair of poor filmmakers of ancient amateur adult movies, Donatella and Father Frank were actors and directors at the same time. Their Recorder programs were filming everything, every angle, without editing, storing the signal captured by their eyes and ears in a virtual memory within the Umbrella.

She was on top, riding him very slowly, doing the same smooth movements that turned Carlo crazy. Father Frank was, like Carlo, in his early sixties. But he had not the

southern skin, firm and tanned, covered in a soft carpet of dark hair like Carlo. Father Frank was of northern ancestry. His skin was greasy and pinkish white, almost transparent. His body seemed muscular, but at the touch it felt chubby, oily and soft like that of a baby. But he had some secret charms. Father Frank was almost one inch larger than Carlo and a much better kisser. His shaved head, straight nose and blue eyes made for a nice masculine face combination, awarding him with a handsome overall look. He lacked the fine manners and style of Carlo, but that turned him into a more tough and attractive man liked by most women. Donatella pushed the man down, nailing his wrists against the mattress. She intensified the pace. She was in total control, just the way she liked it.

Father Frank closed his eyes. He was agreeably surprised. This woman was much better than a good damn masturbation on a Sunday morning. He only had been twice with a woman before Donatella. The first time happened when he was a teenager, before entering as a novice in the Seminar, and the second time when an old rich lady violated him in the back alley of his parish, just before the Annunciations. That second time left him with a trauma, with no desire to be with another woman again. The old lady blackmailed him; she threatened to retire her funds which he badly needed for the renovation of the church. He closed his eyes and let her do to him whatever she wanted. After this incident he became an active promoter of the celibacy vows. Thanks to his personal efforts, the One Church inherited these vows, even when there was nothing written about it in the Unavoidable Truth and the Lord had never been interested in what happened in the bedrooms of his subjects.

Father Frank had always admired the beauty of Donatella, since the first day they met. He remembered the moment he saw her for the first time in his church, looking for a priest. She needed his help. Her husband was in the military. The Annunciations were getting some attention in the media. Carlo was there that day. Father Frank and Carlo had been friends since they were students in the Seminar. After the ordination, they kept their friendship strong. Carlo soon was appointed Bishop. He came often to visit Father Frank at his church. Father Frank introduced Carlo to Donatella. The three youngsters soon became very close friends. He did not know that Donatella and Carlo were secret lovers, until one day, he found them kissing in the Sacristy. Father Frank refused to give Carlo and Donatella the communion that day. But the two lovers did not need it anymore. They were following the new rite, the One Church, which Carlo had just founded and was attracting many members of Father Frank's congregation.

Their friendship cooled down for a while after the split of the church. But when the Last War started, Father Frank enlisted as a voluntary in the Spiritual Guides battalion led by Monsignor Carlo. Just after the Final Battle, when the Unavoidable Truth was being a hit book everywhere in the world, the Old Church came under attack. It had survived during the war as a parallel space of worshipping for the believers, by adapting the ancient scriptures to the recent events. Due to his personal friendship with Monsignor

Carlo, Father Frank had become a very influential voice among the Old Church priesthood. The Conference of the Archbishops was divided about the issue of the dual worshipping. Some of the members were still officiating in the Old Church. The Lord did not care much about how or where his subjects wanted to worship him. Monsignor Carlo finally convinced his old friend to switch sides and jump over to the new waggon; in return he promised Father Frank the position of Bishop of the Old City. They stroke a deal. Father Frank abandoned the sinking ship and became a member of the One Church. This was the final blow against the Old Church, which was dissolved by the Conference few days later, after the majority of the young priesthood followed Father Frank's steps.

Monsignor Carlo kept his promise. Father Frank was appointed Bishop of the Old City, a position which not only gave him the Grand Cathedral as his personal parish, but also was generally accepted as being the direct heir to Carlo's Episcopal throne in the province. Besides becoming the second in command within the Ministry, Father Frank was also appointed the Commander in Chief of the Heavenly Guard. He became indeed a very powerful figure; however, few people could recognize him walking on the streets. Though an impressive physiognomy which made him stand alone among any group of men, he lacked the charisma of the shorter but more radiant Monsignor Carlo, who in public had to compensate for his lower height with a tall Episcopal hat, but whom everybody knew everywhere he went. Father Frank disliked publicity. He always sneaked away avoiding interviews and media attention, safely hiding in his underground offices of the Grand Cathedral.

Donatella, who was elected Deacon and Secretary of the United Congregations, also had her offices in the first floor of the ancient building. Her position within the Church was also very solid. Being the lover of the historic founder helped in many ways, but most important for her career was the prestige of his late husband, a hero of the Last War. She was considered by many almost like a saint, especially by the female believers who adored her and treated her family like the new royalty. She was, technically speaking, also a founder of the Church. She had been with the movement since the very beginning, side by side with Monsignor Carlo. Father Frank joined later but his contribution was greatly noticeable. These three celebrities, together with Doctor Hauptman, the author of the Unavoidable Truth, were often called the Four Pillars of the One Church or the Four Legs of the Lord's Throne.

Once per month, Monsignor Carlo invited the other three of them to a lunch in his personal quarters. There, the four friends used to debating about the hot issues of the moment in an informal and open minded environment. It was during these meetings that Father Frank started to feel some sort of irresistible attraction towards Donatella. He had finally accepted that his best friend Carlo was her lover. The relationship was not public by any account, but many people knew about it. As soon as they did not make it official, the Church and the Conference would not object to it. Despite his feelings for Donatella,

Father Frank never made a move. For three decades he respected the intimacy of the relationship between his two friends. Only very recently, things had started to change.

In the last lunch together, they spoke about Monsignor Carlo's proposal. The Archbishop, for the first time in his career, received a serious blow in the Conference, which denied him the extra funds for the Secret Service. Instead, the Conference gave more resources to the CPU and the Heavenly Guard. A privatization wave coming from the Divine City was about to hit the shores of the province. The Hackers had been growing in number and boldness. Father Frank expressed his loyal support for the Temple against the suggestions of Monsignor Carlo to challenge the legitimacy of the Conference. Donatella agreed with Father Frank under the amused gaze of the old Professor. In reality, Father Frank cared not much about any of that. He had his own plans. He kept an intimate relationship in secret too, a divine lover, the Lord. He owed no loyalty to Monsignor Carlo or to the Conference of the Archbishops. He was loyal to the Lord and to the Lord only. He had been working very hard to prepare for the inevitable. He knew the next struggle for power was about to begin and he had to be ready. He controlled a military force which would be a major piece in the game, but he needed some extra help. He wanted broad access to all the congregations, not only to his own parish, in the Cathedral. Being a shy person, he never developed a good relationship with the press. He needed badly an ally with a good Public Relationship curriculum, someone with a prestigious face and the right contacts among the leaders of the congregations. Father Frank made his move towards Donatella that same afternoon in the Ministry offices, during the lunch at Monsignor Carlo's private quarters.

Donatella could not believe it when she felt a naked foot brushing against her legs under the table. She looked straight ahead and met the piercing blue eyes of Father Frank. She was about to retreat her legs, disgusted by the apparently accidental act, when something in her head ringed a bell, activating her outstanding survival instinct. She had been trying to convince Carlo to renew his leadership role in the Church, but her long time lover was feeling tired, exhausted. He preferred to keep the political status-quo, while gaining more power with the expansion of the Secret Service, his own personal security force. But things were taking the wrong direction everywhere in the Kingdom, and Carlo was moving too slow. In the Divine City, the growing influence of the Council had reached the point of overriding the Conference. On the other hand, the Hackers were becoming more assertive, implanting subliminal messages in the minds of thousands of believers. Crazy atheist theories were being discussed openly in the media. The Kingdom was crumbling down under the attack from two fronts. The old elite of the rich and the powerful wanted back their supremacy, while the resurrected renegades were terrorizing the society. Someone had to do something for the survival of the Kingdom. Carlo was wrong wanting just a cosmetic fix by empowering his Secret Service. The Professor, the only person who could seriously influence the Archbishop, had adopted again a neutral position, and like before, during the war, Donatella suspected that he was favouring the new renegades. The only one left in their circle of power was Father Frank. He knew

what he wanted. His Heavenly Guard was loyal to him to the point that she did not believe they would follow orders from the Archbishop unless Father Frank had confirmed them. She also knew, through her contacts in the Ministry of Science, that Father Frank had been looking for a closer cooperation between the scientists and his elite troops, for the development of more sophisticated tools within the Umbrella. Just recently the Listeners and the Sentinels had got upgraded versions and she knew that the Security programs were about to be updated as well. With more resources for the Heavenly Guard, Father Frank was preparing an unstoppable military force that could stand for him and the Kingdom when the moment arrived. Donatella left her legs at the reach of Father Frank's feet and smiled back at him over the table. That night, after Carlo left her, she opened the garden door and let the priest come into her bedroom. At least once or twice per week, Father Frank went to visit her at the beautiful mansion in the upscale Riverbank neighbourhood.

Donatella exhaled a sensual moan while she felt the tension building between her legs. Father Frank exploded in a long spasmodic orgasm. Sex was always good with the right person on top. Father Frank was happily smiling. Donatella rested against his body, her hard nipples pinching his chest. He caressed the tender soft skin of her back, their faces touching together. She kissed him. He opened his eyes.

"It was really good." They usually commented the results, but avoided speaking of any emotions beyond that. He knew she was still in love with Carlo. She thought the priest only wanted a partner to release the tension, just friends with sex, nothing more. Father Frank looked at her eyes. Her smile seemed fake, forced upon her sweaty face. He sensed that something was wrong. "Hey, what is it?"

Donatella lifted her body off his and lied down on the bed beside him, her hand touching his. When they were in bed together, they usually made love twice. She looked at the time displayed with a dimmed green light on the left top corner of the panoramic window, opposite to the bed. It was getting late; she had a meeting with Carlo. Father Frank usually stayed in bed until late night; sometimes he waited for her return if she had to go for some errands.

"I have to go. I have a meeting at the Ministry. But you can stay if you want, and we can have dinner together."

"I am tired. I have not slept well for a while." Father Frank covered his nakedness with the blanket. "I will take the afternoon off. I am going to take a long nap, while waiting for your comeback here, in the nude, may I?"

"Of course, you can, and do not even think of putting any clothes on."

Donatella left the bed and went to the bathroom. Being with two men was not a big deal. That did not bother her. She was a widow, she had urges and she was in peace with the Lord. On the other hand, being with two priests did not bother the Lord, for men were equal, no matter how they chose to serve him, in the Church or in any other place in his Kingdom. With Father Frank, she enjoyed the wild sex. He was good at it. It was just different, more relaxing, with no strings attached. With Carlo she enjoyed everything, from the kisses to the touch, from the caressing to the aftermath in each other arms, when they hugged each other and stayed silent with their eyes closed. She loved Carlo dearly. She did not love Father Frank. Was that cheating? Of course it was. She knew it. However, it was not adultery, she was a widow and legally independent from any man. But Carlo did not have to know. She did not want to hurt him. Donatella came back to the bedroom. Father Frank was about to fall sleep. She started dressing. Suddenly she stopped and approached the bed.

“Listen, I want you to promise me something.”

“Consider it done.” Father Frank answered without opening his eyes.

“No, listen, I am serious. I don't know exactly what is going to happen, but I know something is in the making. I want you to promise me the same thing Carlo did for me when we started dating.”

“I did not know we were dating.” Father Frank finally opened his eyes. “But I am fine with that too.”

Donatella noticed the aggressive tone. Like all men, he hated having to share her with another man. He wanted her for himself alone. Next step, he would be asking her to break with Carlo. She would need some time to think over it if this relationship developed to that point. But in the while, she needed his assurance.

“I want you to promise that no matter what happens in the future, you will always protect my children. This is the only thing I will ever ask from you.”

“Donatella, your children are grownups now. They are adults like you and me. They do not need your protection, or mine, or Carlo's. Miriam is a married woman. Her husband makes more money than the three of us together. Martin is in his forties, in the Lord's name, he is the Chief Inspector of the CPU. For sure he knows how to defend himself better than we do.”

“I know, it may sound strange, but please, do it for me, promise that you will never cause any harm to my children.”

“Of course I will not, for God’s sake. Fine, if you want me to do it, I’ll do it. I promise it, happy now?”

“No, swear it in the name of the Lord.”

“Okay, I swear it in the Lord’s name.”

Donatella smiled and grabbed his hands. She did not believe he did really mean it, but at least he had said it aloud, for the records. Father Frank looked at her astonishing green eyes. He would really try to keep his promise. Her children should be safe with him.

1:30 PM

Monsignor Carlo was not expecting an official enquiry. His godson, Martin, came by in a surprise visit. In the beginning, the Archbishop thought that Martin’s visit was the result of Donatella's mediation, who had finally convinced her son to come by the Ministry and see him. Martin never truly liked him, even since he was a young boy. Children sometimes had a sixth sense. They felt when there were hidden intentions in the adults surrounding them, or maybe he saw something, like a furtive kiss or a touch between Carlo and his mother when he was still a child. Small kids were very sensitive to misinterpretations which could cause a hidden but permanent trauma in their developing minds. Martin never said anything to Carlo or his mother about their relationship. On the other hand, Carlo felt that his conscience was completely clean. He actually loved Martin as a son for real and would always protect him, exactly as he had been doing for all these years.

The Chief Inspector suddenly came to his office, uninvited, and without previous warning. Carlo had just finished his lunch. The Crime Prevention Unit, like any other law enforcement agency, was officially under the Ministry’s jurisdiction and therefore, technically speaking, the Archbishop was Martin’s immediate superior. However, the Conference considered the CPU as an independent force which responded directly to the Temple. The CPU enjoyed even more autonomy than the Heavenly Guard, which had a Commander in Chief and was the number one uniformed agency in the Kingdom, larger than the Army in men and resources. Both the CPU and the Heavenly Guard routinely sent weekly reports to the Archbishop’s office, but Monsignor Carlo had nothing to do with their budget, personnel, future plans or daily activities.

After a polite exchange of salutes, Martin started immediately with the purpose of his visit. He turned on the screen on one of the walls and projected there a set of disturbing images. There was a naked young man tied up with ropes to a wooden table. Monsignor Carlo came closer to the screen. He knew the victim, Father Roland, one of

his undercover agents. Father Frank spoke to him about the murder this morning, but did not go deep into the details. He only mentioned that the Seminar was put in quarantine and that the crime seemed to have some sexual connotations which could embarrass the public image of the Church. However, seeing a picture of the crime scene, gave him a different impression. Something in the face of the victim told him that this murder was not about some kinky sexual act going wrong.

Monsignor Carlo explained who Father Roland was. Martin was taken by surprise. He did not know that the victim was an undercover agent of the Secret Service infiltrated in the Seminar. Martin suspected that some rivalries existed between the different uniformed agencies. He could picture agents from the Secret Service watching over the Heavenly Guard or trying to catch out of base some of his detectives at the CPU. But in this case, the Archbishop confessed of a serious internal espionage happening within the Ministry. Martin waited for Monsignor Carlo to expand his thoughts, but the Archbishop seemed reluctant to speak further, at least in his office. The priest used the Intercom to order two cups of espresso coffee and invited the Chief Inspector to follow him to his private rooms. Martin had rarely visited his godfather in the living quarters. After Martin moved out from the family mansion, they met in private mostly for dinner at Miriam's apartment. Only once the Archbishop went with his mother for a surprise visit to his newly acquired apartment downtown, and only once he returned a similar visit, also in the company of his mother, to the Archbishop's private rooms at the Ministry.

"Come in, Martin, grab a seat." Monsignor Carlo opened the door of his private studio. "I have setup a double Shield protecting this place. I do not trust anybody. Listeners could be everywhere. You never know."

"I can not believe it. Nobody would dare to setup a Listener or a Sentinel on the almighty Archbishop."

"Things are changing, Martin. There is a shifting in power going on behind the curtains, and, believe me, I am far from being in a winning position, for now. I spoke about this with your mother. I need your help. She promised to arrange a meeting between us, and since you are already here, I can explain everything to you."

Martin sat in a big leather chair, close to the coffee table. The Archbishop did the same, but he chose the love-seat in front of his godson. Martin looked up at him trying to see beyond the steel gaze of Monsignor Carlo. He did not know why, but he never felt comfortable in the presence of this man, a man who had been very tightly associated with his family for many years. The funny thing was that it was not always like that. He grew up used to have Monsignor Carlo as the closest friend of his parents, visiting the family house every other day. Martin remembered, being a little boy, he liked the young Carlo very much for his constant jokes and his handsome smile. Then something happened. He could not remember very well. He must have been six or maybe seven years old. His

mother was out doing some shopping. Martin was playing in his room with some plastic soldiers. His father was home, visiting for two weeks. Martin heard the doorbell, but he let his father go and open the door. Monsignor Carlo had come to say hello. Martin did not pay much attention until he heard loud voices. He stopped playing. The voices got even louder. Martin left his room and followed the noise. It came from his father's den. The door was not closed, but ajar. He looked inside. His father had grabbed Monsignor Carlo by the collar of his white shirt and pressed him against the wall. Martin got scared and ran back to his room. He closed the door. Later, Monsignor Carlo and his father came by, all smiles on their faces. Martin remembers the nice box of chocolates the priest had brought for him that day. His memories were glued together, the taste of fine expensive chocolate and the scare he felt when he took a peek through the door of his father's den. He never asked his father about what he saw.

“You know, Excellence, I always wondered what would have happened if my father was still alive.”

“First, I don't like it when you call me Excellence in private, and you know it more than well. Secondly, I don't see what are you expecting me to say.” Martin was about to say something when a young priest, the Archbishop's personal assistant, knocked at the door and, after receiving the authorization, came in with two cups of espresso. Monsignor Carlo drank only espresso, which Martin found a little too strong for his taste. Once the assistant left the room, Monsignor Carlo continued his speech. “Your father was a great man, Martin. I am not talking about the War Hero or the Ace Pilot; he was a good husband, a good father and a good friend. These qualities are very hard to find in a man. If he was alive today I would have him as the Commander in Chief of the Heavenly Guard, instead of our good friend the Bishop. I would feel more comfortable with your father in charge of that military force. But life is as good as it gets, and the Lord always works in mysterious ways.”

“Before coming here I went to see the Professor. I needed to ask him some questions.” Martin made a short pause. “I need to ask you some questions too. Friend appeared in my apartment this morning.”

“What did you say?” The mention of the winged creature had the same effect of a sharp nail pinching the Archbishop's bottom. Monsignor Carlo placed the empty cup of coffee on the table. “Do you mean Friend, your father's winged pet, as your mother used to call it?”

“Yes, the same, the flying man who saved my father's life during the war. He came to see me this morning with a message for me.”

“Does this have anything to do with the crime at the Seminar?”

“No, I just have a bunch of questions for my father’s old friends. I know you and the Professor met Friend during the war.”

“Yes, we did. Your father introduced him to us.” Monsignor Carlo nodded while his eyes nailed down Martin’s gaze. “But why he came to you today? I thought they were not allowed to fly outside their army camp in the desert. You mention a message too.”

“Forget about the message, it was gibberish to me.”

“Maybe I can help, what did he say?”

“I am sorry; Friend asked me to keep the message for myself.” Martin could not believe he got the Archbishop hooked. Curiosity killed the cat. The Chief Inspector smiled at his godfather. He could not say he did not have feelings for this man. They were contradictory feelings, indeed, but among others, there was also sympathy and maybe some sort of affection. His infancy ties with the priest were too strong. “Anyway, my questions to you are really about my father’s past.”

“What do you want to know?”

“My father died in an accident, right?”

“Yes, of course, his plane was mistaken as a foe by a malfunctioning Defence Tower, you know that.” Martin looked straight into the Archbishop’s eyes. The priest did not blink. Monsignor Carlo was not willing to tell the truth, at least not yet. His brain was working at high speed trying to guess what exactly Martin wanted from him. “Did Friend tell you otherwise?”

“I prefer not to answer that question”

“I see.” The Archbishop swallowed his worldwide famous polite smile. Martin must be careful. He must remember whom he was speaking to. “Well, do you have any other question?”

“Did you fuck my mother before my father was killed?” This time the Archbishop exploded like a fragile balloon which had been kept for too long under pressure. Monsignor Carlo stood up from the sofa, the face all red. He approached the exit and opened the door. Without saying a word he showed Martin the way out of the room. The Chief Inspector had not stopped smiling during this unexpected display of anger. This response was the answer Martin already suspected. That day in his father’s den, Monsignor Carlo was being confronted by the Colonel. His father must have found what was going on between his mother and the priest. Martin was almost convinced of that. The third question he wanted to ask, may never get an answer. He could not ask about these things to his mother. She would slap him in the face as if he was still a naughty boy

getting into her private businesses. Martin did not move from his chair. He tried to stay in calm. “How come my father did forgive you, after all?”

Monsignor Carlo looked at the man sitting on his favourite leather chair. He tried to see his dead friend in these eyes, which were almost identical. Carlo knew someday this would have to happen, a day when he would have to confront Martin asking the questions he had always avoided. He wondered why Martin had waited for that long, maybe because Martin had been always a little afraid of him. Carlo was never able to make a good substitute for a fatherly figure in Martin’s life, but he was the closest to that model the boy could ask for, especially in the difficult days after the father's death and in the beginning of the Kingdom, when Martin was still a teenager. His relationship with Miriam was very different. The girl was a natural born rebel. Her mother expected her to change after the marriage. Donatella herself was also a rebel until she matured and married the Colonel. But in the case of Miriam, she married that flamboyant of Arthur, who was of little help in her maturity process. However, Miriam really loved Carlo like a father. He knew it. He could feel it.

The Archbishop, slowly, closed the door and turned back to the love-seat. Martin’s gaze followed him until Carlo sat back and hid his head between the hands, both elbows on his knees. Martin felt pity for the priest. He was being too harsh with him and this man did not deserve it. Monsignor Carlo had done too many good deeds for his family, and for him personally.

He remembered when once, in High School, he got caught by the teacher masturbating in the back row of the classroom. The Principal wanted to expel him despite the prestigious aura of his father. His mother could not convince the School Council to give him a second chance. Monsignor Carlo acted immediately as soon as Donatella told him. He took Martin with him and went in person to see the Principal and the members of the School Council. Martin remembered the speech because it shocked him, maybe as much as it shocked his teachers. Monsignor Carlo explained that the Lord did not want a morality based on the shame or the disgrace of a young soul. Teachers and Priests were soldiers in the front line of the Kingdom, the ones in charge of teaching the people how to be better citizens, better subjects of the Lord. Teachers must guide the youth, rescue the boys and girls when they take a wrong path, and put them back on the right one, using the persuasive methods clearly explained in the Unavoidable Truth. Expelling a young boy from the school system was like stabbing the Lord in the back. This was just a plain treason which deserved a hard punishment. After that speech, the Principal and the teachers had no option but to pardon the young Martin and let him stay in the school.

Another time in College, when his Physical Education marks were not high enough for him to apply for the Academy’s Entry Scholarship, the Archbishop wrote a letter to the Army Foundation, explaining that the young Martin was an exceptional mind, prepared to serve the Lord in a way which many good soldiers of the Kingdom wish they

could. The mind will always oversee the body; therefore the state of the mind should be valued more than anything else, especially for selecting the best soldiers of the Lord. The Archbishop signed a Ministry Waiver suggesting the Army Foundation to eliminate the Physical Education program from the mark average rating. The Foundation followed the Ministry's recommendations and granted the young Martin the Excellence's Award, which allowed him to have a decent stipend, while living in the student residence.

Favour after favour, some small some big ones, Monsignor Carlo had been there for Martin along his entire life. No doubts that the influential halo of the Archbishop added some weight to the decision of the Conference to promote him to Chief Inspector of the CPU. However, Martin needed these answers like a thirsty man needed water; he had to know the truth for the sake of just knowing it. Monsignor Carlo should understand this.

"You still don't get it, do you?" The Archbishop's gaze met again Martin's eyes. "You can't understand how much I loved your father, and your father loved me. He was like the older brother I always wanted to have. You never wonder how we became so good friends that I was appointed your legal guardian by him, not by your mother, in case something happened to your parents. It was your father who wanted me to be your godfather, not your mother."

"I know all that. But that does not mean..."

"Yes, Martin, that means exactly what it means." Monsignor Carlo stood up and approached Martin. The priest came down to his knees in front of Martin and took his hands. "Listen, your father loved me so much that when he found about me and your mother, he went crazy first, against your mother. He wanted to kill her."

"What are you taking about?"

Martin tried in vain to free his hands from the Archbishop's grip. Monsignor Carlo, keeled at Martin's feet, squeezed harder his hands. It was too late to step back now. He had to tell. Things were changing too rapidly nowadays. He could not afford to lose Martin too.

"I hoped I would never have to tell you this, but you are right, you deserve to know the truth. Your father had contracted a nasty disease while serving in the Far East. There was no cure, and it would take his life at some point after a few years. Slowly, this disease was advancing, affecting his sexual drive, until it rendered him impotent, unable to produce any semen at all. He suspected that your mother and I were more than friends. He thought we had some kind of platonic love between us. But he never said anything to us, until the day he found out your mother wanted to leave him for me. Honestly, I was thinking of running away with her; forget about the Church, the Lord and everything, I

just wanted to be with your mother. But your father was a visionary. He always knew ahead of time where things were heading. The Kingdom would have found us no matter where we were going to be hiding. Adultery was going to become a punishable crime, as it is right now. I would be prosecuted as a filthy deserter from the army of the Lord and your mother as a treacherous whore who betrayed a War Hero. Your father confronted me, not your mother. I told him the truth. Your mother and I fell madly in love with each other since the very first moment we met at Father Frank's church. We both respected and admired the Colonel. We actually loved him. He was a great man, one of few. But Donatella was in love with me and I was in love with her and there was nothing we could do about it. It took a while for your father to understand that the human heart has nothing to do with our brain; it works totally independently of any rational thinking. He never mentioned the issue any more. He did not tell anything to your mother. He accepted in silence what was unavoidable and factual. I think that your father implicitly approved our secret relationship. His only condition was that Donatella would never leave the house, the family, you and him. Of course, Donatella would never leave you and sharing a life with a man like Colonel Crawford was a sacrifice which both, she and I, were willing to accept for the sake of your own future."

"That is a lie, a filthy coward lie!" Martin could not believe what the Archbishop was saying. That had to be a lie. Her mother never told him anything about his father's illness. The Professor would also know about it if it was true. Martin made another effort to push the Archbishop away. The priest fell down to the floor. Tiers appeared in Martin's eyes. "How can you say that? My father would have never accepted those terms. And what a bastard liar you are; saying that you keep fucking my mother for my own sake!"

"I did not say that, Martin. I don't say it was easy. It was hurtful for everyone, especially in the beginning. You don't know how much tears of hate I cried whenever I saw your father kissing your mother in public. I wanted her all for myself. That's the ego of love, Martin; there is no sharing, trust me. Donatella and I tried to keep our romance as private as possible, not only from the public, but also from your father. But he loved your mother too much to say anything, especially when his illness had put him under a great disadvantage in comparison to the young man I was then. I don't say everything went smoothly in the house. Sometimes there were tensions and your father almost punched me once on the face during an argument in his den. However, everything changed when Miriam was born. Your father came back from the war for a long visit. He knew that Miriam could not be his daughter. I was afraid he would hate me forever. Your mother felt uneasy too. But when your father arrived to the hospital, he was so happy, his face so radiant! He hugged your mother and me together. That sealed the new deal. We became even closer than before, your mother, your father and me. When I went to the battlefield, your father and I spent a lot of time together. We spoke about many things, mostly about your mother and you and Miriam. Let me tell you, when your father died, it was very hard, I felt as if I had lost not only my best friend, but a beloved brother. Only my strong feelings for your mother and for you, his children, kept me going. Your mother had been

always my highest inspiration all these years, and you better than anybody should know that.”

Martin did not know what to say or what to do. He had the Archbishop sitting on the floor, at his feet. He was standing, wanting to leave, to disappear, to be swallowed by the floor and the walls, but he knew he could not do it, because a part of him, a tiny seed hidden in his heart, was telling him that everything Monsignor Carlo had just said, was true. Martin did not have the chance to know his father as well as to judge his actions or understand his decisions. Martin had to rely on the eye-witnesses who shared his father's life while he was still a young boy.

“Please, get up from the floor. It hurts seeing you like this,” Martin offered the Archbishop a hand. “I hope you understand that I need some time to process all this information. I have to go now.”

Monsignor Carlo took Martin's hand and stood up with his help. He tried to embrace his godson by the shoulders, but Martin pushed him away. The Archbishop, cleaning his own tiers, adjusted his white dress and led the way to the exit.

“I understand you need some time, Martin. But please, be gentle with your mother if you are going to ask her questions about this.”

“Does my sister know that you...?”

“Yes, she knows.”

Monsignor Carlo opened the door. Martin was ready to go. The priest grabbed his arm for a second. Martin felt the man's gentle touch. He thought that maybe he should not have asked those questions. Sometimes suspecting something could be better than knowing the truth. But he also understood that this type of truth had to see the light some day, no matter how much it may hurt people. Martin walked away through the soft carpet of the corridor. Suddenly, he felt the need to look again at the eyes of this man, but it was too late, at the very moment Martin turned his head back, Monsignor Carlo closed the door of his private quarters.

2:00 PM

Cary was walking beside him, holding his hand. She never felt so happy before. Previous boyfriends she had were surely better looking guys, popular school football team players, the cool type that made her proud to walk the streets with, showing off her

conquest, making the other girls jealous. But with Daniel everything was different, like being taken to another level, a mixed feeling of euphoria and safety, shots of adrenalin making her heart beat faster, her lips forced to wear a permanent smile every single second. Besides, without the glasses, a nicer haircut, and some fashion accessories, Daniel would be as handsome as the kids she dated before. She could not understand Lucy's problem with Daniel. Maybe some chemistry was not working between them, at least for the moment.

When Cary's father went away, her mother explained that sometimes people were forced to make painful decisions. Cary was nine years old when, one day, she heard her parents having an argument in the kitchen. They never had one before. She knew her father had been chosen to work for the Ministry of Science. However, she did not know that the position was not in town, but in the headquarters located in the Divine City. Her mother had a good job as an architect in an important firm. She could not move. Her father promised to visit as often as he could, and he did it in the beginning. He came every month for four or five days to stay with them. But his work was extremely important. He told her a secret. He was helping to build up the Umbrella, the future of the Kingdom. The visits became more sporadic. Her mother filed for divorce. They stayed as friends for a while. He visited again few times after the divorce. One day, her mother came home with a man, Stephan. Three months later, Cary had a brand new and shiny stepfather. The family sold the apartment and moved to a pricey townhouse near downtown.

Her father wrote to her one letter every month. She was planning going to visit him in the summer of that year. Then, suddenly, the letters stopped coming. Her mother explained that men were like that, irresponsible and unreliable. She told Cary that her father had probably meet someone and forgot about her. Cary could not believe it. The Umbrella had just come alive. She felt proud her father was among its creators. Cary started a frenzy search for her father, but his magnetic signature was not registered in the system. She sent dozens of desperate messages to the Ministry of Science through the Global Net. Few days later she received, in the normal mail, an official letter from the Divine City. The Ministry of Science did not know where her father was. The day before the Umbrella was inaugurated by the Lord, he did not come to work. His coworkers went to his apartment and found it completely empty, no furniture, nothing. After a few days, the Ministry of Science placed an order for his global search with the Heavenly Guard. The investigation lasted several months, but the detectives could not find anything. Her father had disappeared without a trace, no messages for his family or friends at work. One year later, his father's name was officially posted in the Global Net as a record of a missing person. Five years later, she received another letter from the Heavenly Guard declaring her father officially dead.

Cary never cried. She just never believed in his father's mysterious disappearance. She thought he was doing some very secret work for the Ministry of Science. When the

letter about his death arrived, she did not want to look at it. The life insurance policy written by his father in her name, was still untouched. Her mother tried to convince Cary that she was in denial, that people died, that his father had probably drowned in the same beach, where he liked to go swimming at night in the Divine City. But she never stopped looking for him. She was still having half hundred searches running in the Global Net. Sometimes she dreamed of him. She saw him smiling again, embracing her, kissing her, even talking to her. In her dreams his father told her to be patient, to be strong, to learn as much as she could. Her relationship with Stephan had slowly evolved. It was not as sour now as it was in the beginning. She had matured and totally supported her mother's decision to marry another man, but she would never call dad this man, not even uncle as once her mother suggested, for Cary he would always be simply Stephan, her mother's husband.

His father was the only son. Her paternal grandfather had died in the Last War, fighting on the wrong side. Her paternal grandmother ended mentally ill and had to be rebooted in Rehabs, all her memories erased. She lived now in a nursing home. Cary visited her often. She brought her chocolates and flowers. The old woman believed that Cary was just a friend, another young lady working for the Health Care Department, the organization running the hospice. In the new identity that was created from scratch, her grandmother chose to be an exotic dancer, who had many love affairs in her life, but never married. Cary wanted to believe she was happy that way.

“Here we are.”

Daniel and Cary stopped at the glass doors of a modern high-rise building. Daniel had her convinced to go with him to see Oscar. He wanted to show her something. Daniel called his friend through the Intercom. The glass doors were unlocked, and Daniel and Cary went inside. They disappeared behind a corner, looking for the elevators.

Lucy sprinted to the building from the opposite sidewalk, but the stupid doors closed before she could get in. She had been following Cary and the nerd kid. Lucy suspected the guy wanted to take Cary to some dirty place, drug her and have sex with her. She did not want Cary to notice she had been following, therefore she kept a distance, but she miscalculated the timing of the doors. Now she was there, outside, not knowing what to do. Then a genial idea flashed in her mind. She knew it was wrong, but, given the circumstances, it was the only thing she could do. She would spy on them remotely. Lucy had been working as an informant for the Secret Service since she started the college. She was very proud of being a young soldier of the Lord in the new front line, the war against the Questioners and the Hackers, the crazy people that denied the divinity of the Lord and wanted to spoil the mind of many youth. She went to training sessions at the Ministry once per week for the first three months. A special agent worked closely with her. She went through a simulation about being contacted by the Zone as a potential Questioner, infiltrating the Cell, sending cryptic messages through the Intercom

and setting up a Listener on someone she suspected was working for the Hackers, who could be just a sympathizer, but she should never hesitate. A Listener was a non-invasive program; it did not touch the connection of the mind with the Umbrella. It stayed floating in the vicinity, but could stream whatever was being said by and around the person being targeted. She could listen to everything Cary and the nerd were talking. If she felt that Cary was in some type of danger, she could get the Heavenly Guard on the site in few minutes. Lucy could explain later to the Secret Service that she thought Daniel was a potential Questioner and that her friend was at risk. Not thinking twice, she started the procedure. She applied for a Listener's immediate availability and she got one. She initiated an Intercom call to Cary. That was the path for the Listener to follow. The call was a fake one and would never reach Cary's mind, it would stop short before the entry point, but that was enough for the program to locate the target.

2:30 PM

Donatella was back in her office located beside the Sacristy, in the main floor of the Grand Cathedral. She just finished reading the internal press notice of the Ministry about the murder in the Seminar. That was disgusting. According to the evidences, the Secret Service suspected a sex related crime.

She had been trying to reach Martin in the Intercom, but his son was unavailable. She had left two messages for him already. She wanted Martin to come with her and Carlo to Miriam's apartment for dinner this evening. Her daughter promised that Arthur would not be there. The flamboyant artist had a meeting this afternoon in the Great Lord's Art Gallery downtown and would dine later with his friends in the Sinners Cave, a restaurant and nightclub often visited by people whom Donatella would have sent to Rehabs just for the weird way they dressed, with piercings and tattoos all over their bodies.

As a Deacon, she responded to Father Frank, the Bishop and Principal of the Cathedral, but as Secretary of the Assembly of the Congregations, she had also to report directly to the Archbishop. She had not finished her notes about the last Assembly meeting and she knew Carlo was waiting for it. The financial report of the staff activities could wait until tomorrow. Anyway, the Bishop took the day off today. Father Frank was waiting for her, naked in her house. He would do the same that he always did. It was some type of routine which made him feel like he was the man of the house. First, he would take a long nap to repair his virile strength for later tonight. Then, he would make a sandwich in the kitchen and sit down naked in the sofa, in the living room, to eat while watching some of the entertainment public channels in the large panoramic screen. She warned him that she would be late, probably after ten. It certainly felt nice having a naked man waiting for her at home. The Colonel never did that. He was too stiff and serious.

Carlo never stayed longer than a couple of hours. The Archbishop was always afraid of the press, of some reporter taking pictures of him through the windows, kissing her, embracing her, making love to her. He could not afford risking his image. For the public, Monsignor Carlo was a pious man, providing love and care to the famous widow and her children and someone who would never take advantage of the situation. At least this was the story he intended to sell. If the public wanted to believe it or not, it was not his concern, as soon as nobody could prove the contrary.

Donatella tried a third time to reach Martin. This time the call went through. Her son looked tired. He probably had not had a proper lunch yet. But she would not dare to ask. She did not want to start a stupid fight for nothing. However, she was not happy with her son not taking her calls before.

“Martin, why are you blocking my calls?”

“I am not blocking you, Mom. I was back in the Seminar and because of the Quarantine I could not turn on the service. I believe you already know about the murder.”

“Of course I know, or do you think I am sitting here in my office scratching my nose.” Martin was a terrible liar. She knew he had been blocking her calls. “Listen, this evening we are going to have dinner at your sister's place. Carlo and I are coming. I want you to come too. It is going to be a family dinner, like in the old times, only the four of us. Arthur is not invited.”

“I see.” Donatella could see his ironic smile. Martin knew that his mother could not stand Arthur being around her longer than ten minutes. “I don't know, Mom, I'm very busy with this investigation of the Seminar.”

“Carlo wants to see you. He has some business propositions for you.”

“I already saw him this morning.”

“Did he tell you anything?”

“We spoke about many things, Mom, maybe about too many things.”

Donatella captured the slight variation in her son's voice. Now more than ever she wanted Martin to come for dinner. She needed to see her son and Carlo, sitting one beside the other, in front of her, at the table. Who knew what these two had been talking behind her back?

“Well, it does not matter. Martin, I want you to come. Please, be there around seven.”

“Okay, I will try, but no promise.”

3:00 PM

During the first years after the Final Battle, Doctor Hauptman worked as Consort of the Temple, a position which allowed him to be the human closest to the Lord. His curiosity seemed never satisfied by the answers to his never ending questions. What the Lord remembered from his past? Where were he and the winged creatures before their coming? What was the reason he decided to come now and not before or later? Why he announced his coming only to a selected group of people? Was he really immortal or could be killed in combat like his flying companions? What powers he had besides telepathy and the ability to generate energy fields? The answers were always blurry. In the beginning he thought it could be a communication problem between his mind and the Lord. But later, the Professor understood that the Lord really could not offer more clear answers even if he wanted to. The Lord reminded him of someone with a severe case of amnesia, with all previous memories erased, who had been in a coma for centuries and just had woke up, with a list of incomprehensible instructions which he must follow without questioning.

The Professor also tried in vain to extract some useful information from the winged creatures. The naked flying men were stationed in a nearby army camp, where they spent most of the time sleeping and only few hours of the day learning about the world which the Lord had just conquered with the help of the Alliance. The Lord at least tried hard to put some rationale in his answers, but these flying beings had a very limited intelligence and the lesser desire to improve it. Their responses were like those of small children the first day of class, trying hard to find some sense in the new surroundings. They did not have any notion of science, did not know and did not care about History or Geography. Their mind had some type of permanent link with the Lord, but it worked only one way, to receive orders from him and to obey. The Lord told them to stay there and wait, and they were just doing that. Wait for what? The Lord did not know, that was the last instruction recorded in his mind, he just had to wait. When the Professor asked from where those instructions came, the Lord told him that he was not sure but that he thought they came from the Creator. Did he meet the Creator before? The Lord did not remember. How could someone forget meeting the Creator?

Doctor Hauptman soon gave up, but before leaving the Temple, he helped with the organization of the Ministry of Science. The Professor called to the Divine City the brightest minds from every corner of the world, the best specialists in every area of the human knowledge. He had extracted very important information from the Lord. He needed to explain his fellow scientists how to manipulate the gravity force and how to use the electromagnetic fields to generate unlimited electricity. This secret, which had

been not revealed to mankind before, became the cornerstone of the giant leap that took place in human science three decades ago. The scientists learned how to produce electricity from the magnetic fields that surrounded the planet. They could build any engine and get how much power they needed for every specific usage. They learned how to use gravity for moving heavy objects and developing better and faster flying machines. The scientific research spiralled in every single sphere of human science including genetics, medicine, construction materials, nanotechnology, computers, agriculture and manufacturing.

It was not long after the Wireless Energy Grid was built across the globe, that the idea of interconnecting all human brains in a telepathic network named Umbrella began to take shape. The Professor understood the enormous possibilities of such endeavour, the positive effects for mankind, the freedom of communication, the unrestricted exchange of common knowledge, the invaluable tools available for education and health care, but he also saw the intrinsic dangers that the Umbrella represented for humans as individual beings. The first programs created for the Umbrella were too invasive. They went too far, digging too deep into the brain, even causing sometimes irreparable damage.

Doctor Hauptman convinced his fellow scientists from the Ministry to create a set of rules which limited the scanning power of these programs. These rules were comprised into another program called the Beholder. This sort of watchdog inspected the release of every new program to the Umbrella. The ones that could not abide by the rules were simply not allowed into the system. To modify the code of the Beholder a unique key was required. The key was given to the Lord for safekeeping. The rules could be simplified in the Beholder into three level of access and every program got filtered accordingly.

Level three programs could barely touch the human brain. They were designed for general usage like the Intercom, the program used for telepathic communication, and the Browser, the program used for searching in the Global Net. Level two programs were intended to work in the Umbrella under the supervision of authorized personnel only. Some of these programs were the Shield packages, used for protecting private networks, the Search programs, used for finding a person's magnetic signature and associating it with an exact physical location, the Sentinels, used for following up a connection in the Umbrella as well as tracing its movement in geographic coordinates, and the Listeners, used to capture the audio signals in a specific point in space and to transmit them to a remote recording terminal. Level one programs had an even narrower clientele. They were assigned only to high ranked officials in government institutions. Among these programs were the Guardians, used only by the Crime Prevention Unit to immobilize a suspect by interfering with the connections between the muscles and the brain, also the Protectors with different expansion levels, designed to defend the user from both mental and physical attacks, by creating shields or barriers impossible to be crossed by another human brain.

Level zero programs were exceptions to the rules. Only a few had been allowed by the Lord to bypass the Beholder. These programs required a very high security screening. One example of these programs was the Interrogator, used by the Crime Prevention Unit to scan deeper in the human mind, trying to find subconsciously hidden information, valuable in the investigation of a specific crime. Another example was the Healer, a program used only by physicians and psychologists in Rehabs to erase chunks of memories or reboot the brain, and also to build up new identities from scratch.

The Ministry of Science controlled the coding of these programs, their testing and their release into the system, after passing the Beholder's filters. The importance of this activity forced the Ministry of Science to be highly compartmental. Only the Head Scientists knew the details of each specific program being developed in each subdivision. Doctor Hauptman kept a close contact with every single one of them, since the main rule that governed the Ministry of Science was his own Unavoidable Truth, which provided not only spiritual guidance, but also explained the main goals of the Kingdom and the path to follow in every sector of human development.

This close relationship between the Professor and the Ministry of Science had given him substantial advantages above the rest of the Kingdom's subjects, including many high ranked officials and government institutions. His Protector had special features to avoid detection by the Security programs when navigating through the Umbrella. His Shield not only could detect and repeal an intrusion attempt, but also was able to simulate a false penetration to misinform the attacker. But the Professor knew that more important than these customized programs for the Umbrella, was his Transmitter, a special tool, made at his request before the Beholder was introduced. This Level Zero program was inserted in the entry point of his brain to the Umbrella and utilized standard old fashioned radio frequency to establish a one-way communication with a remote mind outside the system. Of course, a hidden Receptor program had to be first introduced in the entry port of the targeted brain through the Umbrella. These Receptor programs, like the Firewalls used to protect a Questioner in case of a deep interrogation, were not made by the Ministry of Science. These tools were created by rogue scientists working under the protection of the Zone. To implant these programs in the human brain, the Hackers divided them into small pieces of code which were later chained together during the installation procedure in the hosting recipient. This way the Hackers could use the Umbrella to transfer these illegal tools without being detected by the Security programs..

Doctor Hauptman was sitting in the kitchen drinking a cup of coffee. He wanted to light up a cigar, but he did not smoke inside the apartment, only in the balcony. The balcony was outside the range of the Shield, but he felt overconfident with his powerful Protector . He believed this program alone could prevent a random Search program from peeking at his entry point to the Umbrella. The Transmitter was precisely the program that the Professor was about to activate. He had just received a coded notification from the Zone. The Warrior was out of the Umbrella.

3:30 PM

Daniel was walking with no rush at all. A group of people was standing at the bus stop. Daniel weighed for a second the option of taking the public transit, but decided to walk the nine blocks to his place. He passed the bus stop and continued walking on the narrow sidewalk under the protecting shadows of the old trees. He needed this walk badly to clear his head. This day had been, with no doubts, the more exciting in his life. In the morning he met Cary. At lunch, in the Library, their time together was amazing, the kisses, the hugs, she on top of him when he felt to the floor, her hands on her breasts. But nothing compared to this afternoon weird situation in Oscar's apartment.

It was not difficult for Daniel to convince Cary to go together to see Oscar. He promised to show her a surprise. Oscar was not happy when, after some small talk, Daniel asked him to disconnect the three of them from the system. To fry out the Umbrella for three people was too risky for Oscar, not only because the vast energy vacuum would be more noticeable in case of a random scan of the area, but also because the amount of resources drained from his brain could damage his own health. At the end Oscar agreed to release their connection for three minutes only. As soon as they were out, Daniel took off the piece of paper he wanted to show to Cary, but he did not have time to do it. First, he felt a high pitched buzz in his left ear, then almost immediately Cary went down to the floor on her knees covering her ears with her hands. When Daniel tried to assist her, she refused his help and, bringing a finger to her lips, signalled him to remain silent. Oscar freaked out and restored the connection, but Cary did not respond. She continued on the floor like listening to something. After what seemed to Daniel like an eternity, she got on her feet and asked him to take her home.

Daniel remembered that he got scared at the beginning. He thought that when Oscar disconnected them, something had gone wrong in Cary's brain and she had collapsed to the floor. Only after the girl told him to be quiet, he understood that something else was going on. Cary explained to him that she was not in the Umbrella, but she was listening to some voice. Maybe she was suffering a mental breakdown, induced by her first sudden disconnection from the Umbrella, and she was having hallucinations. He did not have time to show her the paper with the watermark of the Zone, proving that the mystic place was real. After Oscar restored the connection, Daniel wanted to stay longer to talk about the paper with Oscar, but Cary insisted that she had to go. Daniel did not have other option than to leave with her.

They walked the five blocks between Oscar's building and Cary's townhouse. Daniel held her hand all the time. He tried to talk about what happened, but she asked for some time before she could talk about it. She needed to think, Cary told him. She only

hinted that she was a little afraid too. When they arrived to her place, he kissed her and she held him tight in her arms. Cary closed the door with the promise to call him back.

Daniel was barely paying attention to the surroundings, but a sixth sense made him look to the opposite sidewalk across the street. There she was. He recognized Lucy. The girl looked at him for a second. It seemed like she wanted to tell him something. He hesitated; should he cross the street and approach her or wait for the girl to make the first move towards him? Before he could make a decision, a white van stopped at the curb in front of him, hiding the view of Lucy. He was about to go around the vehicle when two men in white uniforms, jumped out of the van and grabbed him by the arms. Before he had time to react, he felt a heavy weight settling down on his chest.

“Daniel Swifts, you are currently placed under the custody of a Guardian. Do not resist or it will get worse for you. You are being arrested by the CPU, charged of committing several crimes against the Umbrella. Please follow the instructions of the officers. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say is being recorded and can be used against you in a trial and during the investigation.”

Daniel tried to say something but one of the officers showed him the back of the van. The other one pushed him inside. Once he was seated on the bench, the Guardian got stronger and he barely could move a muscle of his body, including his tongue. The officers closed the door leaving him alone within the metallic walls without windows of the vehicle’s rear compartment. The van started moving. Daniel suspected that this time he was in big trouble.

4:00 PM

Her mother was asking desperately about what happened, but Cary did not say a word and continued packing her things in her bedroom. The doorbell ringed. Her mother looked at Cary wondering who could be. Cary looked through the window. Lucy was at the door. She went down the stairs, almost taking down on her way Stephan, her stepfather, who was just coming out of the kitchen with a sandwich and a beer can in his hands. She opened the door. Lucy stared at her with tears in her eyes. Cary invited her friend inside and closed the door.

“I am very sorry, Cary, I did not want this to happen.” Lucy was speaking too loud, shaking. She took Cary’s hand. “Please, believe me. I only wanted to protect you. I setup a Listener to see if the guys wanted to drug you and rape you. I did not know you were planning to get out of the Umbrella. The CPU already got your boyfriend. I just saw the officers arresting him. I said that you were not involved, but they will come for you anyway.”

“I know; it is okay, Lucy.” Cary now understood why she had to leave in a hurry from Oscar’s apartment, go home, pack her stuff and disappear. “It was not your fault. Listen, I need to leave now. I do not know when I will see you again. But remember, no matter what happens, I will always love you.”

Cary embraced Lucy who had started sobbing. Cary knew that Lucy was an informant working for the Secret Service. Lucy told her as soon as she got recruited. Like many other kids, Lucy was convinced that the Lord needed her help to fight against the new enemies. Cary did not blame her friend for setting up the Listener, but the twisted system which forced kids to spy on other kids. She kissed Lucy on the cheek and opened the door. Lucy got off rushing out of the townhouse. She did not want to be there when the CPU arrived.

Cary went back upstairs, to her bedroom, where she finished packing her rucksack, just the bare minimum, a couple of panties, a pair of shoes, some t-shirts and an extra jean. Stephan, still with the beer can in hand, joined her mother. They both were standing behind, looking at her like she was an alien from outer space in the middle of the room.

“Where do you think you are going young lady?”

Cary gave the look to Stephan that he knew better to stay away of her and not to get involved. Her mother felt that something was very wrong. She knew her daughter was in some type of trouble, but she did not know how to help.

“Mom, I have to go now, trust me, everything is going to be fine.”

Cary put her rucksack on her back, kissed her mother and went down the stair. She opened the door, carefully looking around. There were some pedestrians passing by, but no traces of CPU officers or Service Secret agents. She gave a last look inside. Her mother was half way down the stairs, slightly waving her right hand, saying good bye to her. Cary closed the door and rushed out to the street. The voice inside her head had been guiding her since it first made contact with her at Oscar’s apartment. Cary followed the instructions. She must go and walk all the way to the Art Gallery. She could not use the public transportation. She must avoid being scanned by a random patrol. She was not in the Umbrella. She has not been in the system since Oscar disconnected her for the first time. She knew the guards would soon be looking for her everywhere. Cary was not worried about her, but about Daniel. While crossing the street, some running tears escaped from her eyes and slid down her face. You should care only about what you could control. She remembered her dad always said this whenever some insignificant stuff, like an unexpected rain on a Sunday morning at the beach, bothered her too much. Now she knew exactly what he meant. There was nothing she could do about Daniel, at

least for the moment. She must obey the voice. She had to hurry up, find the Linker in the Art Gallery and ask for help. Those were the instructions being dictated inside her head.

4:30 PM

Martin was back at his apartment. He was on the bed, fully dressed in his white uniform, shoes on, looking at the ceiling. Today had been a day full of revelations. First the Professor, God told him about his father's strange death. Martin was still trying to understand his father's intentional suicide mission. In his opinion, it was a meaningless sacrifice. Martin knew that, thirty years later, he was seeing everything from a different perspective. His father was in the middle of a war which threatened to evolve into a worldwide conflict, destroying dozens of cities and killing millions of people. His father, at the last moment, understood that joining the other side and adding his precious skills to the Renegades forces, would have prolonged the war, increasing the bombings and the death toll. Martin remembered his last words according to Friend's version. His father did it for the sake of his children. What does that mean? If his father would have joined the Coalition, he would have become a traitor for the Alliance. After the Allies army's victory, his father's fate would have been uncertain, maybe Rehabs or who knew. His family would have been marked with the treason stigma forever. Martin would have been the son of a traitor, not of a hero. The implications of this were perfectly clear to him.

However, there was another thing bothering Martin besides the circumstances involving the death of his father. He always suspected that Monsignor Carlo was his mother's lover since before Miriam was born, which made the priest a candidate for claiming the paternity of his sister. Miriam was the first to tell him about this possibility back several years ago. He remembered his sister always looked at his father pictures trying to find some physical resemblance with him. Their mother's genes were the predominant in both Martin and Miriam. At least Martin had his father's eyes while Miriam had her eyes shaped as exact copies of those of their mother except for the colour shade. Miriam's skin tone was darker, and always grabbed a beautiful tan in the summer. Martin and his mother were too white; their skin tone was a transparent pink. They could not stand the ultraviolet radiation without using the strongest sun-block lotion in the market. His father was also of northern ancestry, dark blond, probably with a better suited skin for the sun than his and his mother, but never the firm texture and the nice orange-olive tone of Miriam's. From everybody, close to the family, that they knew, only Carlo had that southern type of skin. But Donatella never accepted the slightest possibility of having any doubt about who was the father of her two children. There was only one man in her list, the Colonel Crawford. Therefore, despite Miriam's suspicions, Martin was simply not prepared for Monsignor Carlo's confession. Martin's first reaction was to deny it. He wanted to call his mother and ask her. But after thinking twice, Martin understood

that life was often more complicated than it looked at first sight. He decided to better stop digging in his parents' past, afraid of opening doors that had been closed long time ago for probably some good reasons.

Another vision invaded his closed eyes. He was walking on an endless field of green grass. The sun was up in the middle of the blue sky. He could feel the fresh breeze in every pore of his body. He was naked and she was too. The girl was running in front of him, in a game trying to escape from his arms. He finally caught her. They stumbled down to the ground. She turned him around and climbed on top of him. She was straddling his waist, her hands pushing his wrist hard on the grass. He could see her smile, her beautifully small and pointy breasts caressing his chest while the sunlight made a halo around her dark long hair. He knew that this never happened. The only time he was with Bella, the girl of his vision, was the special night they spent together in his bedroom, in the family mansion by the Riverbank. The next day she disappeared for good from his life. His mother told him that the family was involved in a car accident, everybody died in the crash. He never felt so much pain before. For many days, Martin just wanted to disappear too from his own life, to escape from this unfair world. At some point he thought of visiting a psychiatrist and ask for a Rehabs treatment to have his memories erased. His mother convinced him to learn how to grief and move on. She told him that Bella did not deserve to be killed once again inside his head, where she was supposed to be with him for the rest of his life. Someday he would meet another girl, she told him, but the memories of that first love must stay alive with him forever.

The Intercom beeped inside his head. It was Daryl calling from the office. Martin opened his eyes. He looked at the clock on the wall screen of his bedroom. He had been there like an hour doing nothing. Martin sat on the bed and opened the channel.

“Hey Boss, we got an emergency over here.”

Daryl's voice sounds excited, which was very unusual. Martin had known his second in command for decades. Martin was very close to his family too. Daryl's father was a black priest before the Last War. It was from Daryl's old man that Martin first heard about someone being disappointed with the Kingdom. The Coming of the Lord was not exactly what the Reverend was expecting. In the Kingdom of the Lord, the strong voice of the black churches, which had successfully fought for the civil rights of the people, had been silenced forever. They fought not only for the blacks but for the rights of every repressed minority in the society. But once the Kingdom was in place, the Unavoidable Truth and the One Church swallowed the other small churches. Many black Reverends embraced the One Church. Some of them were now Bishops of large congregations. But a few, like Daryl's father, preferred to stay independent. However, they could do nothing but watch how their congregations were slowly drained out of believers, until everybody jumped onto the One Church's unstoppable train. Martin always listened to the old man in silence, without approving or rejecting anything. His

mother had taught him to always be respectful and listen to the old people, because most of the time they were right about what they said.

“What kind of emergency?” Martin asked this question just for the sake of asking. He knew Daryl could not say much in a public channel of the Intercom and it was a waste of time to open a private channel in the CPU network while he had the Protector turned on. “It is okay Daryl, wait for me there.”

5:00 PM

Arthur was pleased with the contract he had just signed. The Lord was a fan of his work. The Envoy from the Temple had acquired five collages and one abstract from his latest series. Arthur spent the rest of the time doing small talk with other artists and with the old and pedant Chief Delegate of the Ministry of Culture and Education, who also wanted some of his works for his office.

When Arthur first saw the girl standing aside, looking at him, he thought she was a student from the Art School. She seemed like the serious type with a rucksack on her back and a worrisome expression upon her cute face. He approached her as soon as he got free from the group of admirers. He looked at her. She appeared to be lost, probably waiting for someone.

“Are you looking for someone?” The girl looked at him with her eyes wide open. He could not believe it. She did not know who he was. She did not know who the great Arthur Goldman was! He tried the best of his smiles. “My name is Arthur.”

“Are you the Linker?” Arthur barely could hear what she said. However, something inside his mind turned on the red light warning lamp. He nodded, looking at her eyes like wanting to see deep inside her mind. “Follow me.”

Arthur followed the girl outside to the patio of the Art Gallery. He tried to find her magnetic signature in the system but he could not. She was not in the Umbrella. When finally he sat beside her, on a wooden bench, in the back alley of the beautiful Aurora Gardens, suddenly, he realized that he too was not longer in the system.

“How can you do that?”

“I don't know.” The girl looked nervously around. She did not feel comfortable, sitting there with him. Maybe she was afraid of some guards scanning the area. “I just received instructions to do it.”

“Don't worry; the guards will not come here. Who is sending you these instructions?” Arthur asked but he knows it had to be the Messenger. “It is the Messenger?”

“I guess, I really don't know his name.”

“Tell him to talk to me.” Arthur did not understand why the Messenger was taking so much risk with this girl going around out of the system. She was a clear target for the Heavenly Guard patrols. “He knows I am out of the Umbrella too.”

“He says he prefers to do the talking through me. He says there is not much time. He wants you to help me. He says you must hide me until the Hammer comes for me.”

“Do you know your nickname?”

“No, I do not.”

“I see.” Arthur hesitated. He knew what was written in the New Book. He knew this could happen some day, even if the New Book was considered by many to be a legend, a compendium of metaphors to teach the children the principles of living within the Zone. Every Questioner and every Hacker had a nickname; some of them were mentioned in the New Book and some were not. But few people knew who was who in the vast mythology of the New Book. Arthur only knew the nicknames of some close collaborators in the Cell. He knew that Miriam was the Scorpion and that Doctor Hauptman was the Messenger. According to the New Book, the Linker's main task was to take care of the Warrior until the connection with the Hammer had been established. That was exactly what this girl had asked him to do. But he could not believe this innocently looking girl, this fragile adolescent, was the powerful Warrior of the Hackers' mythology. However, the fact that she had disconnected him, just like that, and kept him out of the system all this time, without even blinking, was a very convincing argument, indeed. “Okay, you come with me.”

Arthur made a gesture to take the girl's rucksack but she did not allow him. She got her rucksack on her back and followed him outside the Garden. Arthur called remotely his PTU. The vehicle came up from the underground garage of the Gallery and, like a faithful dog looking for its owner, rushed through the alley to stop in front of Arthur and the girl.

“What is your name?” Arthur asked opening the passenger door for the girl to get in the vehicle. “I mean your real name?”

“I am Cary. It is nice to meet you, Arthur, right?”

“Arthur Goldman.”

Arthur still could not believe she did not know who he was, the most famous visual artist of all times. Well, maybe not of all times, but at least of the present moment. His collages were everywhere. Kids studied his work in the art programs in every elementary school of the globe. How come she did not recognize him? Suddenly, as if she was hearing his silent thoughts, the girl looked at him with an obvious expression of astonishment on her face.

“Wait; are you Arthur Goldman, the great painter?”

Arthur nodded setting a smile of relief upon his face. Yes! She did know who he was. She just was too nervous to recognize him before. Well, this may happen. He loved the way she said his name. Arthur felt happy now. If this girl was the Warrior, then the end of the Kingdom was near. He felt very proud of being the Linker, the first person in the world who encountered the almighty Warrior, and also because this young girl, sitting in the car beside him, had just called him a great painter. What else could someone ask for in this filthy and bored world?

5:30 PM

Martin was sitting at his desk. In the Display Station, the picture of a young kid, looking at him with a wide smile, was too familiar to him. He saw it before. That was the same kid he wanted to go and see this morning. The one he wanted to give a slap on the wrist for raising too many flags in the Umbrella. The same kid who should have received a verbal warning which never happened, because the action was not recorded in the system or was deleted from the databases. It was an interesting coincidence, or was it? The troublemaker was sitting in front of him, looking down to his knees. In the old times the detainee would have been tied up to the chair, wrists handcuffed, ankles chained. Now a Guardian took care of everything. The suspect could move a little, lift a hand, cross his legs, but could not stand or get closer to him or run away.

Martin looked again at the picture on the Display. This case looked very complicated. Daryl was right in calling it an emergency. If it was just another Fryer, the investigation could have gone through the normal channels automatically without many hazards. However, this was not the case. First, the Secret Service was involved. They were the ones who called the CPU. One of their informants had setup a Listener in an apartment, in a nice neighbourhood. Nobody expected what they got there. A Fryer disconnected everybody from the Umbrella and then a powerful surge of energy derailed the Listener. The code was rendered unusable, but before dying completely, the Listener

captured the beginning of a communication from the Zone, determined the target of the transmission and the source of the mysterious discharge that killed the program.

As soon as the Fryer disconnected from the Umbrella the group of three young offenders, the Secret Service contacted the CPU and let the case being handled by Daryl, who was the officer on guard. The Second Inspector immediately sent a mobile squad to arrest the violators. The officers got first the Fryer and then the kid sitting now in Martin's office. The informant from the Secret Service had notified that the third suspect, a young girl, was her friend and was not involved in the crime. She was supposed to be an innocent bystander. Hence Daryl did not order her immediate arrest. But when the final data came from the Listener, it became obvious that the little girl was the main subject, the target of the transmission from the Zone and, what was worse, she was the source of the powerful surge that destroyed the program. Daryl ordered a squad to arrest the girl, but it was too late. She was already gone from her house and she had disappeared from the Umbrella. A Search Warrant of Severity One had been sent to all the units of the Heavenly Guard. Daryl ordered all the CPU mobile squads to get out on the streets and help the guards in finding this girl. The Secret Service was also willing to send out some plain clothes agents too look for her. They never had a Search Warrant of Severity One before. In all the years the Umbrella had been in service, nobody had ever heard of someone capable of destroying a Listener. Daryl called for help to the Ministry of Science. They assigned a Consultant to the case. Martin already spoke to her, a very nice middle age lady, who explained to him the enormous gravity of the issue.

The Ministry of Science did not believe a human brain could be blamed for what happened to the Listener. To tamper with a Listener in the Umbrella, especially while being outside of the system, as it was the case of the suspected girl, it was required a huge amount of energy, which could not possibly be generated by the magnetic fields of the brain alone. This amount of energy was comparable only to a sudden fluctuation surge from one of the main reactors powering the Umbrella. Meaning, this girl had to be able to, accessing the energy grid, direct the energy to the location she needed, aim it to the virtual memory cells where the Listener had been recreated within the electron cloud surrounding the place, and produce an explosive discharge of high voltage in order to derail the code. All this was supposed to have been done from outside the Umbrella, something the scientists doubted since not even the Lord could be able to do it.

As soon as Martin took care of the case, he ordered Daryl to start the interrogation of the Fryer. Daryl asked Martin for permission to use the Interrogator. The Chief Inspector had to authorize the use of this powerful tool. Martin granted the permission very reluctantly, but he could not oppose this time due to the Severity One of the case. The Fryer was taken to the Interrogation room, while Martin would try to get some information from the other kid using conventional methods. This other kid had been telling him the same over and over again. He said that the girl had nothing to do with what happened, that she was innocent. The kid said very proudly that she was actually

his girlfriend, and Martin had a hard time hiding a smile. The kid also confessed that he had found an old piece of paper at the Library, containing references to the Zone, and that he wanted to show it to his best friend Oscar, who was a Fryer. This version was perfectly in harmony with the one from the Secret Service's informant, but had nothing in common with the revelations from the now defunct Listener.

"Daniel Swifts, let's go again over your story." Martin met the kid's gaze at last. The boy had something in his eyes and in his face that reminded him of someone. He finally realized that the kid's eyes had the same deep ocean shade of his mother's. Maybe that was making this face look extremely familiar to him. "You took your girlfriend to see your best friend Oscar, and then what?"

"I already told you."

"Please Daniel, can you do it again?"

"Okay. We went up to Oscar's apartment. I asked him to disconnect the three of us from the Umbrella. I wanted to show them a paper with the list of the Annunciations and a watermark seal from the Zone, as a proof that the Zone was real. Then my girlfriend suffered some type of mental breakdown and I asked Oscar to restore the connection. After that, I took my girlfriend to her house. On my way home I got arrested by your officers on the street. I guess that crazy girl, the friend of my girlfriend, called the guards on me, right? She was just jealous. None of us had ever thought of becoming a Questioner. You got to believe me"

"I believe you. We know everything about you." Martin tried a friendly smile to make relax the poor kid. "The thing is that a Listener got destroyed while spying on you, and we have to figure out how that happened. Understood?"

"I don't know anything about it, you have to trust me."

"Do you know who the Messenger is?" Martin looks at the boy. The kid is avoiding his gaze now. Martin reconfigures the question. "Daniel, look at me. Have you heard about the Messenger?"

"Yes, yes, yes. I heard about the Messenger." The boy lowered his head even more. Martin suspected that maybe he was finally giving up. "I know a lot about the Zone and the Hackers. But I am just an apprentice of History; this is what I am, truly. I am not a Renegade or a Questioner."

"Are you the Courier?"

The question this time produced like an electric discharge on the kid's brain. His eyes suddenly rolled up finding Martin's gaze. The boy grabbed with both hands the arms of the chair and shook his head as if he was not hearing very well.

"I am sorry?"

"Daniel, answer that question. Are you the Courier?"

Martin repeated the question. He did not know exactly why he was asking this question at all. If this guy was a Hacker or a Questioner, Martin would have known it immediately from the Profiling program, but the analysis came back clean, a strong supporting evidence of what this boy had been saying all the time. The kid was just a student whose only fault had been becoming too interested in the past. Therefore Martin could not believe his own ears when he heard the boy answering in a very low voice, like afraid of being heard by someone else hiding in the room.

"Yes, I am the Courier."

The boy looked more scared than a mouse in a trap. Martin stood up and approached him. The Guardian became stronger when the Chief Inspector got closer. Daniel could sense the force oppressing his arms, legs and chest against the chair.

"When did you know that you were the Courier?"

"I didn't know it until now." The kid was sweating profusely. "Please, you have to believe me, it was in my head and I didn't know it. When you asked I answered without thinking, it is like a reflex."

"Do you mean someone implanted that in your mind?"

"Yes, I guess."

Daniel did not know that Martin was one of the few persons in the world ready to believe him, because something very similar happened to him, when Doctor Hauptman told him that he was the Hammer. The nickname was embedded in his mind, hidden for who knows how long, written by the Hackers through the Umbrella, using subliminal messages, and only after the Professor first mentioned it, Martin found out about it.

The internal channel beeped inside his head. Martin opened the communication with Daryl. His second in command had just finished the phase one of the interrogatory without getting anything useful out of the Fryer. Daryl asked for authorization to proceed with the second phase. The Interrogator program had three phases of action, in the first phase, the program looks for true-false indicators in the surface of the brain. These

indicators acted like the old lie-detectors, marking accordingly every answer of the detainee to a set of questions. Sometimes this was all that was needed to find out if the suspect was guilty of a crime. But in this case, where the CPU detectives were looking for more information, the first phase obviously could not suffice. In the second phase, the Interrogator dug deeper in the mind of the suspect. In the third and last phase, the program went further deep into the subconscious level. Every phase had to be authorized by the Chief Inspector because the Interrogator was a level zero program and the last two phases could cause some damage to the brain, the third phase without remedy. Daryl thought it was just a routine question to ask for permission to use the second phase in this case, but the answer took him by surprise.

“Listen Daryl, that kid doesn't know anything. He is innocent, trust me. I got already what I wanted. I am taking the other prisoner with me. He will be under my personal custody. Is that understood?”

“Well, I think I understand, Boss.” Daryl’s voice did not sound very convinced. “But, what do I do with my suspect here?”

“Release the kid. I told you, he is innocent.”

“It will be done, Boss.”

Martin closed the channel. Maybe he was going too far. Daryl was his friend and would not disobey his commands or call the Ministry for advice. But Martin’s actions were being recorded by the internal Log program in the private network. Any audit from the Ministry would easily find very unconventional his current proceedings. However, he could not take any risk. Leaving Daniel in the CPU building was like feeding a carnivore monster with fresh meat. Martin did not know for how long he could hold the keys of the CPU network. If at some point he was stripped of his authority, nobody would be able to save the kid from the damn Interrogator.

“Come on, let’s go. Follow me.”

Daniel felt the Guardian releasing him. He could now lift his hands, move his legs. The Chief Inspector put on the jacket of his uniform, while constantly looking at him. Where was this cop taking him? Should he follow or should he resist?

“Where are we going?”

“Listen kid, you will better do what I say without asking and always stay close to me.” Martin approached the door of his office. “Come on, did you hear me? Let’s go!”

6:00 PM

Miriam opened the door of her apartment. She went out for few minutes to buy some groceries. The turkey for the familiar dinner was almost ready, but she wanted to add some small things like appetizers and snacks. When she came in, she heard some voices in the kitchen. She was supposed to be alone. Arthur had a dinner downtown and would not be back until late night. Miriam went straight to the kitchen. When she opened the door, Arthur was looking at her with the most serious face she had ever seen on her always smiling husband. A young girl, almost an adolescent, was standing beside him, also looking up at her, but with a friendly smile on her lips.

“What are you doing here?”

“Miriam, let me introduce you to Cary.” Arthur pointed at her with his finger as if she was another of his collage being exhibited in the apartment. “Cary, this is my wife, Miriam.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you. The Messenger told me about you. I believe you are the Scorpion, right?”

The girl made two steps towards Miriam and offered her hand. Miriam shook the hand like a robot, trying to guess who this girl could be. The first thought that came to her head: this girl was a fan, a diehard admirer of her husband, and somehow she convinced her husband to take her to the apartment to see the latest pieces Arthur was working on. But then, how did she know about the Messenger and her nickname in the Cell?

“Who are you, really?”

“She is the Warrior.”

Miriam stood frozen looking at her husband. Arthur was not joking. He was not even smiling. Miriam put the groceries bags on the floor and took a seat at the table. Her memories of when she read the New Book were not very recent, but she remembered who the Warrior was. Did she believe in the legend? She wanted to, like anybody else, but in the context of the book, it sounded too fantastic to be real. And now, if Arthur was right and this girl was supposed to be the Warrior, well, the chances of the legend becoming a reality were even narrower than before. This little girl, probably still a teenager, who apparently could not offer other attributes besides her youthful beauty, was making a terrible Warrior in Miriam’s mind.

“How do you know that?” Miriam left the question open for the two of them to answer. “How can you be sure that she is the Warrior?”

“She followed the instructions.” Arthur explained grabbing another chair and sitting in front of his wife. “She knew I was the Linker and about my mission.”

“The Messenger told me that I was the Warrior. He explained everything to me. And when he first told me, I immediately understood what he meant.” Cary added taking the other chair without asking. “I knew it inside my mind.”

“She can take you out of the Umbrella for how long she wants.” Arthur was convinced this was the strongest evidence of the girl’s superpowers. “She is still having me out of the system, right now.”

“I see.” Miriam was forced to believe the fragile adolescent in front of her was the legendary almighty Warrior, the being capable some day to shut down the Umbrella and defeat the Lord. “Well, she better plug you back in. You are too famous to stay out for too long without being noticed.”

“Miriam is right.” Arthur nodded looking at Cary. The girl explained to him before that she did not know how to do it. She had to learn how to control her ability to manipulate the Umbrella around. “Can you control it now, right?”

“I guess. Let me try.”

Without any effort, not even a blinking of her eyes, Cary felt that she must reduce the range of the energy field around her mind. She did not know how she was able to do it, but she could easily control the surrounding energy grid with her mind. The Messenger told her to try to fortify the communication channel and make it two-way, but she probably added too much force and the channel broke. She had not received any more communications from the Messenger for the last fifteen minutes.

“I am in the system now.” Arthur smiled when his mind got reconnected. “That is better. It is weird to be out for so long. Outside of the Umbrella I always feel like being naked.”

Miriam understood what Arthur wanted to say. After so many years in the system, the mind got used to the safety feeling of being connected to other minds, being watched by overprotecting programs; it was like being in a cocoon, covered by layers of warm solid fabrics. Outside of it, you felt truly naked, you felt cold and anxious. On the other hand, Cary was enjoying a feeling of freedom she never tasted before. She grew up within the Umbrella. She forgot about the dangers that existed before the system was in place. People could die and nobody would notice it. People could starve to death or be in an accident and get no help at all. People could be victims of crimes like a robbery or even get killed by the hands of a psychopath. In Cary's subconscious mind, these dangers existed no longer; therefore she was not afraid. She was enjoying the exhilarating feeling

that nobody could listen to what she was saying and nothing could scan her mind looking for her intimate secrets. For the first time, in her adult life, she could think freely without thinking twice before saying anything, something everybody had learned to do as soon as they were first connected to the Umbrella. People got to be careful with what they have up in their mind, because they never knew who could be digging in their thoughts.

“And what you are going to do now?” Again it was an open target question. Miriam looked at Arthur and Cary, alternating her focus between them. “She cannot stay here.”

“Why not, this is the safest place, right?” Arthur lifted his hands up. “We got a Protector.”

“My mother and my godfather will be here soon, you know that.”

“We can hide her.”

“No, we can not.” Miriam gave a condescending look to her husband, as if he was a little child, saying stupid things, just to get what he wanted. “The Archbishop has a powerful Shield with extra features. He will notice a nearby presence outside the Umbrella. His defence mechanism would activate an emergency call to the Secret Service. No, she cannot stay here.”

“But what can I do. You know I have to protect her.”

Cary was watching the scene, like something happening far away in the television set of a sitcom. Until now, she had been following the instructions. The Messenger told her that she must find the Linker and ask for his protection until the Hammer could come and take care of her. In the beginning, she felt truly scared, afraid of everything, but slowly she had started to gain confidence. She enjoyed the power she had over the energy grid. She wanted to try new things, besides disconnecting people from the Umbrella. But she understood the problems she was causing in other people’s life, for example, to this lovely couple, the Linker and the Scorpion. They were for sure brave fighters, long time Questioners, but her presence was disrupting their normal plans for the day. She should not be here. Miriam was right.

“I think I better go. You do not have to worry about me, I will find the Hammer.”

Cary grabbed her rucksack and made two steps towards the kitchen’s door. Miriam felt sorry for this poor girl. According to the legend, she did not have a clue of who she was until the moment of the Revelation, the first time she was placed out of the Umbrella. Imagine knowing suddenly that you were destined to save the world! That would be surely something really overwhelming, especially for an adolescent; the

youngsters often took everything too seriously. Miriam remembered from the New Book how the awakening of the Warrior was supposed to happen. The subliminal message implanted in this girl's mind had a little piece of code with a watchdog component which was monitoring the entry port to the system. As soon as the signal started to drop off, the watchdog triggered the rest of the code and a cryptic notification was sent back to the Zone, just before the connection with the system was completely broken. The Warrior was out of the Umbrella; this was the signal for the Messenger to start sending the instructions with the Transmitter, which automatically synchronized the frequency with the right Receptor. This was what the legend said. This was what had been happening step by step until now with this girl. If she would leave the apartment now and started looking for the Hammer by herself, she would be ignoring the instructions. The Linker must guard the Warrior until the Hammer took over. Miriam remembered this part very well, despite always considering the Warrior myth too complicated and a little too fantastic for her taste.

“Excuse me, young lady, but you are not going anywhere.” Miriam softly took Cary's rucksack off her back and invited the girl to take a seat by her side. “I got an idea. You can't connect yourself back to the Umbrella. Every Security program is probably looking for you. We need a Protector to be sure that nobody can find you using a portable scanner. My mother's house, by the Riverbank, is the best place, it has a Protector and nobody will be there, at least for the next couple of hours. The house will be empty. My mother is coming here with the Archbishop. Arthur can take you there in the PTU. He is in the Visitor Lists; the house will open the doors for him. Yes, don't make that face, Arthur. My mother may not like you, but you are her son-in-law anyway. Arthur will stay there with you until you can come back here safely.”

“Well, that is a plan.” Arthur said, smiling friendly at Cary. “When should we be going?”

“You should go now. It's getting late. I told my mother the dinner will be ready in an hour or so. They can come here at any time and I know that the house is already empty. I checked with my mother and she is at her office. She will pickup my godfather at the Ministry and come here together.”

“Your godfather is the Archbishop?” Cary asked when she finally realized Miriam had been talking all the time about the same person, Monsignor Carlo. “And you are a Questioner? That is a little funny.”

“Well, shit like this happens all the time.” Miriam gave the rucksack to her husband. “Now go, do not waste more time, any minute you stay here is a risk. The Archbishop can enter through that door at any moment.”

6:30 PM

Martin stopped the car in the parking lot instead of taking the vehicle to the underground garage. Daniel had never been in a sport PTU before. Even in the small back seat of the two-seater car, he could feel the rush of adrenaline when Martin pressed the acceleration pedal to cut off and pass the slow moving vehicles. Without adding a word, Martin signalled the boy with his eyes to follow him. The two came off the vehicle and got into the outside glass elevator. Going up, the view of downtown was breathtaking. The glass roofs of the modern buildings with interior gardens and aerial passages dominated the landscape around. Down below, Daniel could see the lines of cars fighting for a place in the high speed lane of Main Street. To the south there was the green belt of the Riverbank Boulevard. To the north he could recognize the metallic shine of the Ministry of the Church beside the classic facade of the Plaza Hotel, the green roof of the Grand Cathedral and the vast white space of the Celestial Square with the giant bronze statue of the Colonel Crawford in the middle, the pilot hero of the Last War. Daniel believed, if he was not mistaken, that this famous hero was the father of the man standing by his side in the elevator, the Chief Inspector of the Crime Prevention Unit.

Daniel understood perfectly that he had committed a crime. He induced his best friend to disconnect him and his girlfriend from the Umbrella. If caught, he knew the CPU could easily send him to Rehabs. However, the Chief Inspector did not look like he was intending to do that. Daniel could not be one hundred percent sure, but he believed that this going out to the streets, without a Guardian, was not part of the protocol that a CPU detective should follow with a dangerous suspect like him. The elevator stopped almost at the top of the building. Daniel followed Martin through a dark corridor, until they came before a wide wooden door. The Chief Inspector opened the door and invited the kid inside.

“Don't even think of running away. I am activating now the Protector. The program works both ways for any other brain that is not mine. Nobody can pass the barrier around my apartment in either direction, in or out, understood?”

“Yes, sir, I understand.” Daniel nodded. He did not have any intention of running away. Where could he go? In the Umbrella he would be caught in no time. “By the way, I am starving.”

Martin looked amazed at the kid. This boy had balls. He was under arrest. A criminal like him should not come here, to the Chief Inspector's apartment, asking for food. But the boy was right. Martin was also hungry. He showed Daniel the way to the

kitchen and pointed with a finger to a tall stool at the bar. The boy sat there looking at him.

“Listen, I need to find your girlfriend.” Martin brought to the bar some deli and cheese from the fridge and a sliced brown bread still in its original package. “You got to trust me, kid, only I can save her.”

“Why should I trust a cop?” The boy followed Martin’s example and started to make a sandwich. “How did you know I was the Courier?”

“Do you want a beer?” Martin grabbed two cans of beer from the fridge and gave one to the boy. “Too many questions buddy. If you are clever enough, you can answer some of these questions yourself. I also understand that you are not a Questioner. The Interrogator will dig in your brain like a hot knife in a ball of butter. A Questioner would certainly commit suicide before revealing any secrets, but you have not the Firewall installed in your brain. Therefore, if I was you, I would trust this cop and tell him everything I know.”

“I told you everything I know.”

“No, you did not.” Martin said, without looking at the boy, but at the sandwich he was holding with both hands in front of his face. “You have to tell me the details of what happened when your friend, the Fryer, disconnected the three of you from the Umbrella. What exactly happened to her?”

“I told you that she fell to the floor, victim of a mental breakdown.”

“Was she listening to someone inside her head?”

“I don't know. How could I know that?”

“Didn't she tell you? Come on, dude. Help me out here.”

Daniel hesitated. He remembered Cary told him that she was listening to a voice. But Daniel suspected this could be an aggravating factor. If she was hearing voices in her head, while being outside of the Umbrella, the only ones capable of doing that, were the Hackers from the Zone. However, Daniel felt like something inside his mind was telling him to trust this cop.

“Alright, yes, she told me she was listening to a voice within her head.”

Martin nodded and with another big bite finished his sandwich. The boy was still dealing with more than half of his meal. The Chief Inspector took a look around. No, he

could not let the kid wandering free in his apartment. Martin drank the rest of his beer. He could not waste more time. Without warning, he grabbed the boy by the arm and dragged him to the leather sofa in the living room.

“Listen, I need to go now. I am sorry, but I can let you free here, not even with the Protector.” Martin turned on the panoramic screen on the opposite wall and tuned into the local sport channel. There was a live football game going on between the Academy and the Seminar, the two historic rivals. He remembered the good times when he made the team at the Academy. Daniel managed to keep hold of the sandwich and the beer can despite the violent dragging of his body from the kitchen to the living room. The boy looked at Martin with terrified eyes. Daniel could feel the threat in the man’s voice. Martin tried to calm down the kid. “Don't worry, I will not tie you up with ropes or anything, but I will use a Guardian. There is a risk here. If something happens to me, you will have to shit on your pants, piss on the floor and finally starve to death, but the Guardian will not release you unless I come back. The Protector will not allow anybody to cross the barrier so don't expect any help from outside. Do you understand the risk? Now, you can always communicate with me using the same Guardian. I will setup the program to respond to my commands remotely. In case of an emergency, I will release you and give you the instructions for how to turn off the Protector. Is that clear?”

“Yes, but...”

“Come on, finish with that.” Martin pushed the last piece of sandwich into Daniel’s mouth and making him almost choke with the beer. “Get ready, here comes the Guardian.”

The kid felt again the heavy weight settling down on his chest. Martin explained to Daniel that he will be allowed to do certain movements but not farther than the perimeter surrounding the leather sofa. The Chief Inspector also gave him the code to use the Guardian’s channel to talk to him in private through the CPU network. Once the Guardian was on, the Intercom was out of reach. Before Daniel could say another word, Martin was out of the apartment, down to the parking lot and again in his sport PTU.

7:00 PM

The road trip from downtown to the Riverbank normally took not more than half an hour, but sometimes the traffic was bad in the Boulevard and the duration could be much longer. Besides, Arthur drove the car very slowly, not because of the precious cargo sitting in the passenger seat; he always did it that way for the exasperation of his wife. Cary did not drive yet. She had the license, but not the money to buy a car. She observed Arthur driving and wished she was in control behind the wheel. Surely, she would have made the trip much faster. But she did not open her mouth. She understood

the risks and the sacrifice the Linker was doing to help her. The funny thing was that only a few hours ago she did not have a clue of who the Linker was, or that she was supposed to be some rare powerful extrasensory being called the Warrior, according to the mythology of the Hackers from the Zone. She knew about the existence of the Zone and that there were some new renegades, called the Hackers, fighting against the system. The Ministry had tried in vain to keep the secret. The media never said a word about the Zone. But rumours always went from word of mouth, in an eternal mockery of the censorship. Everybody had heard something about someone who was a Questioner.

“How did you know you were the Warrior?”

Arthur asked without looking at her. He kept his eyes on the traffic. Cary almost jumped on her seat because that was exactly the same question she had on the tip of his tongue. She never knew anything about being the Warrior until the very same moment that the voice inside her head told her that she was. Then something clicked in her mind. She suddenly knew that she was the Warrior and she felt like she knew it forever since before.

“I did not really know it until the voice from the Zone told me. But then it felt as if I already knew it. I don't know how to explain it.”

“Probably you were seeded with a subliminal implant. I know the technology exists and the Hackers have been using it for a long time. The Ministry of Science is now working on it, but they are lagging far behind.” Arthur made a sharp turn to the right, exiting from the Riverbank Boulevard into a narrow local road. “That means the Zone knew about you long time ago. How come you were not a Questioner?”

“I don't know. I never felt like I should. Honestly, I believed in the Kingdom.”

“And now you don't?”

“I didn't say that. It's complicated.” Cary realized that she had been acting by impulse, without any valid reason, even contradicting her own beliefs. “I need time to put my thoughts in order. But something in the voice within my head made me follow the instructions. I really feel that I am in danger.”

“Oh yes, you are, no doubts about it.” Arthur was tempted to grab her hand. She was still a little girl. How come the Zone had put this burden on this child? “But don't worry, I'll take care of you. Nothing will happen, trust me. Besides, the Messenger is with you all the time, right?”

“This is something I wanted to talk about it. I lost it when I was at your place. I thought the Protector you have there was creating some sort of interference.”

“No, it cannot be.” Arthur was now looking straight into her big brown eyes. “If you are out of the Umbrella, the Messenger can always reach you. The Protector can't stop it. Only a very powerful Shield could do it.”

“Well, then something is interfering even right now. I can't hear a thing.”

“That is weird.” Arthur returned his gaze to the traffic in front. “The Messenger may be busy with some other stuff right now.”

“Do you know the Messenger?”

“Yes, I do.” Arthur did not want to get into more details. This girl may be the famous Warrior, but she was not even yet a Questioner. “If you are still unsure about this, why are you running away from the authorities? You could just go and seek their help.”

Cary knew this question was pending in the air. She even asked herself the same question. Her curiosity could not be blamed for it. This thing she was doing was way too risky to be just a product of simple inquisitiveness. She may be putting Daniel in dire straits by not surrendering to the CPU authorities. It was true she felt certain empathy towards the people that asked questions about everything instead of just closing their eyes and obeying like lambs whatever was told them from above. When Daniel took her to the Library and raised a lot of doubts about the real past of the Kingdom, she wanted to know more, but that was the farthest she had gone in questioning the system.

Cary believed in the Lord, in his divine force to make positive changes for the common good. The Kingdom may not be perfect, not yet, but in these thirty years it accomplished many things humanity had been dreaming of for so long. She never truly understood what the Hackers were after. The Questioners, according to what she knew, were rebel spirits that wanted to put on trial the corruption and every mistake made by the Church. But they were not fighting against the Lord. The Hackers were outlaws, probably people with criminal background that were wanted by the guards. They lived in some hidden place called the Zone. At least this was what the myth said, because it was hard to believe that there was a real place in the planet which could escape from the reach of the Umbrella. Besides, the Hackers did not do much harm. The media accused them of being terrorists, but they had never killed anybody. They just enjoyed disrupting the normal function of the system. They hacked databases, sent subliminal messages with propaganda against the Church into the minds of some people, but nothing seriously that could put in danger the stability of the Kingdom.

“Honestly, I don't know why I am doing this. I have to say that the Messenger has a very convincing tone of voice. He told me that the fate of the Kingdom was in my hands. He told me I got some supernatural powers which I must use for the good of the

people. Once he spoke to me, I felt like things were starting to connect between each other inside my mind. Suddenly, I knew that I could manipulate the Umbrella. When Oscar, the Fryer who first got me out of the system, restored the connection, I kept myself outside, it was my own decision to make. I wanted to know what the Messenger had to tell me. The voice from the Zone also told me that these powers take time to learn how to use them. For now I am still experimenting with my ability to expand and shrink the range of my anti-Umbrella power. For example, right now you are in the Umbrella, but I can get you out of the system any time I want, just like that. The Messenger also told me that if I reconnect to the Umbrella I will be able to identify any threat coming close to my entry port. Another power he told me I should have ready to use is the ability to speak back to him.”

“Did you try?”

“Yes, I have been trying since we left the apartment, but with no avail. Sometimes I hear like some static in the channel, but nothing more.”

“Well, let me tell you something. I never believed in the legend of the Warrior until now. This myth existed for almost ten years or even more, since the Instructor wrote the New Book.”

“The Instructor is another Hacker?”

“Yes, the Instructor is a real Hacker who lives in the Zone. The New Book contains a set of steps to follow in order to start the rebellion. It covers just the beginning of the fight in which the Warrior has a major role to play.” Arthur turned to the left and stopped at a traffic light. He looked again into the girl's eyes. “I don't remember the exact content of the book; I guess the Messenger knows it better. I thought he would be telling you these instructions step by step, but if he has not contacted you again, I don't know what to think. How you will know what to do next?”

“Nobody else knows the New Book except the Messenger?”

“For sure other Hackers know the book. If the Messenger told you that you can speak back using the channel, maybe you can try to make contact directly with the Zone. However, to be honest, sometimes I think all this is a big mistake. I expected the Warrior to be a fully grownup person, someone who understood the reasons for what we fight and capable of risking everything for our cause.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Hey, listen, don't get me wrong. After what you have done today, I believe you are a very brave girl, especially after being taken by surprise, without any previous

warning. If I was in your place, I don't know if I could have done the same.” Arthur felt bad for what he just said before. He noticed Cary's disappointment in her voice. He should not have put a judgement before the trial. Maybe this girl was an extraordinary person, destined to save the world and he was just a pessimist, pushing her back, scaring her even more than she already was. “Like the Church says, the Lord always works in mysterious ways. I just hope that you can understand what I mean.”

“I understand.”

Cary could not blame Arthur for having doubts about her when she had exactly the same doubts about herself. Why the Zone picked up her as the Warrior? How come she had these powers when she was not even a Questioner? The funny thing was that she knew she was the Warrior. It was embedded within her brain, and as soon as the Messenger mentioned, it was as if something that had been dormant for many years in her subconscious mind, had just woke up from the long dream and slowly started to unwind and grow like a hidden force inside her head. Daniel actually had planted the first seed. He told her about the manipulations of the Church to hide some pieces of the past. Even the Annunciations were craftily written off the History books. Many people do not believe they actually ever happened. And the reason was becoming now clear to her. Someone does not want the public to notice that the winged creatures came only to see the governing class formed by the rich and the powerful. Daniel also found out that the Renegades did not want to destroy the Lord or the Kingdom. The Coalition fought for the right to choose to believe or not, to worship the Lord or other deities, to obey a set of rules or another in accord with the variety and diversity of our regional traditions. Cary was also surprised to find out, from Daniel, that the Lord did not play an important role in the victory of the Alliance during the Last War. It was the Allies army which won the war for the Lord, not the other way around as the History books were suggesting nowadays. If most of the things she believed in about the past were falling apart, then the present was probably being distorted as it was being written by the same victors who modified the History of the Kingdom as we knew it.

The PTU made a final turn into a driveway and slowed down before a beautifully crafted iron gate which immediately began to slide inside the stonewalls, opening the way into the exterior garden of a classic style mansion. The vehicle rolled on a red brick pavement until reaching a columned portico with marble stairs, in front of a fountain with a statue of a naked girl in a hunting pose, wearing a bow and an arrow. Arthur stopped the car.

“Welcome to the Crawford Mansion.”

“Wait a second, do you mean this is Donatella Crawford's house?”

“Of course, this is the house of my beloved in-law.” Arthur looked at Cary and smiled. In the rush they had forgotten to make the proper introductions. The girl knew who he was, but not everybody knew that the flamboyant Arthur Goldman was married to Donatella's daughter. “Miriam is her daughter.”

“But I don't understand, Miriam is a Questioner too, right?” Cary stared at him in disbelief. “How come she can be a Questioner if she is the daughter of the Ice Lady?”

“Yes, we both are Questioners and Donatella knows about it.” Arthur loved when people called his mother in law the Ice Lady. “Blood ties run strong in the Crawford clan. Politics, business and religion are kept outside of the family. Come, follow me. You have to see the amazing art collection that the Ice Lady keeps in her house.”

Arthur got out of the car and Cary followed him. The massive door of glass and metal unlocked when Arthur reached for the handle. The house validated his magnetic signature. He had to give points to his mother in law. Despite being openly hated by her, she added him to the visitors list of her sanctuary. Besides the normal doors and locks, the house had a Protector program in place which kept away any unauthorized guest.

After the wide porch, full of tropical plants in terracotta pots, Arthur took Cary to the large living room which sported a minimalistic style with very few functional furniture, a pink marble floor and stonewalls painted in white. Half a dozen of ancient oil canvases hung on the otherwise naked walls, alternating with a selection of modern art displayed in framed static screens. Cary recognized some of the names but others were unknown to her.

“These are masters of the Old Times, very, very, very expensive. You cannot have an idea how much each of these pieces could cost. Unfortunately Donatella wants to give her entire collection to the Museum of Contemporary Art when she is gone, so Miriam and I will get nothing of this.” Arthur showed Cary the oil paintings, pausing in front of each canvas. “And these others are collages. I gave her that one as a gift, and she bought that other one from the Gallery. These other four are works of colleagues of mine. They are the best, let me tell you. My collages are valued more expensive, but you know, in art like in anything else, you first work for the name and later the name works for you.”

Cary smiled at her companion. She was not expecting this splendid display of modesty from Arthur Goldman. The art pieces were really astonishing. She did not understand much, but she could feel they were great works. Arthur took her to the kitchen, renovated in a modern industrial style with the latest appliances. The black marble counter-top contrasted with the white oak cabinets and the chrome stools around the middle island. A round glass table with stylized acrylic chairs dominated the eat-in area. Again, the walls displayed more pieces of art, but they were mostly small collages. Everything was neat and clean, as if the Ice Lady used the kitchen not very often.

“Now let me show you the Master Bedroom. Donatella has a good taste. She blended the room with the patio decoration and, in the summer, she can open the glass doors and let the breeze fill in the entire bedroom.” Arthur returned to the living room and, from there, he took Cary through a short corridor ending in a pair of solid wooden doors. “Here she keeps in secret the best collage I ever made. I gave it to Miriam but Donatella insisted she wanted to have it. Miriam said she preferred giving it to her, as a present for her last birthday, than listening to her whining every time she came to visit our apartment.”

After the long introduction, Arthur finally opened the door. He was right. The first thing Cary noticed on the wall, in front of the door, was the giant screen displaying an astonishingly beautiful collage. She could immediately recognize Arthur's style. The artist had mastered to perfection the colour blend and the transparencies of the media. A flying man, with broken wings of white feathers, was dying on a blood stained marble floor, an arrow sticking out of his heart. Two young women, dressed in black leather jackets and wearing dark glasses, were sucking the blood, their long red tinted tongues licking every drop on the naked body. The floor was broken into pieces. Between the tiles, an army of blue arms were trying to grab the wounded celestial creature. His face was not in agony, but in peace, like immensely happy for the proximity of his own death. A purple sky with orange clouds accented the unsettling feeling surrounding the composition. In the background, blue cold water was flooding a city of glass buildings. Through the windows of these buildings, a myriad of faces, struggling to breath, screamed silently for help looking up to the purple sky. On top of the orange clouds, a giant blue penis was floating in mid air, attached to a couple of stand alone muscular legs. The massive male reproductive organ was ready to pierce the red oblong sun surrounded by a greenish halo with dozens of crying eyes, the tears cascading down to the water over the city. Arthur looked at Cary with clear satisfaction in his smile. The collage was truly impressive. Cary had a hard time taking his gaze apart from it. But something else in the room made her look around. The bedroom was huge. An enormous mirror reflected the king-sized bed placed almost in the middle. Another screen on the opposite wall was showing images from some of the Church's internal channels. For a few seconds she did not understand how the screen was working if nobody was there, but then she noticed some movement among the white sheets in the unmade bed.

“What are you doing here?” The voice sounded sleepy. Now they could see a real flesh and blood naked man on the bed, half covered by a blanket. Cary looked mesmerized at this man who was staring back at her with a pair of piercing blue eyes. Cary grabbed Arthur's arm. “It's that you, Arthur?”

The naked figure was now sitting on the bed with a large pillow on his laps, rubbing his face with his hands. Arthur recognized the features of that face. They had not met closely since his wedding, only just few formal salutes in the few occasions when he

went with Miriam to visit her mother at the Cathedral. This man was Father Frank, the Bishop of the Old City. In the name of the Lord, what was he doing here, naked, in Donatella's bed? This was a huge surprise for him.

“Yes, it's me, Arthur, but what the hell are you doing here?”

“Well, I guess I felt tired and came here for a nap.” The man smiled enjoying his own joke and then focused his gaze on Cary. “And who is this pretty lady? I refuse to believe Arthur Goldman is cheating on his wife with this beautiful young girl.”

Arthur was about to say something when he saw the screen showing the image of Cary's face with some text scrolling below. Father Frank suddenly stopped looking at them and turned his attention to the screen. The sound turned on now. The Bishop was the one running the channel on the screen. He had been watching the latest news of an internal broadcast and now there was an emergency advisory from the Secret Service. A powerful Fryer was on the loose. Cary Seinfeld was being wanted by the CPU for severe crimes against the Umbrella. She was dangerous and can cause harm with her unnatural energy field capable of disrupting programs in the Umbrella. The Fryer was keeping herself out of the system to avoid detection. The Secret Service asked every official on duty to stay alert and communicate immediately to the law enforcement agencies if there was any sign of a young girl whose magnetic signature could not be found in the Umbrella. This emergency advisory would be repeated in the internal channels every thirty minutes.

Father Frank got out of the bed without bothering to cover his nakedness anymore. The priest approached the screen to look closer at the image and then turned around to face Cary. The Ministry's Shield covered the Bishop wherever he went. The Shield could easily map the magnetic signatures around him in a short range. Father Frank could sense Arthur's signature, but the girl's could not be found.

“Shit! Run Cary, run!”

Arthur knew he could not overpower this solidly built priest, around eighty pounds heavier and close to a foot taller. But he had to do something, he was the Linker. He had to save the Warrior. Arthur jumped on the Bishop, taking Father Frank by surprise. They rolled embraced together on the floor. Cary watched the two men struggling at her feet. She hesitated for a second. She wanted to help Arthur. She was the almighty Warrior. She was supposed to have superpowers, but she was also a little girl and she was very afraid. Cary opened the door, ran away to the living room and then out of the house. The PTU was not locked. She got inside the vehicle. She knew how to drive but she did not know where to go. On the main menu displayed in the dashboard screen, Cary saw an option, Go Home. She touched the display and selected this one. The vehicle asked to confirm the destination and she accepted. The car started and slowly drove

around the fountain giving time to the gate to slide open. The PTU sped up once it crossed the gate. Cary left behind the Crawford's Mansion.

7:30 PM

It took almost half an hour to get from his apartment to the Professor's building. Martin called his sister to tell her that he got too busy at work and could not assist to the dinner at her place. He asked Miriam to give his apologies to their mother and godfather.

The trip seemed to last an eternity. The traffic was too bad and Daniel had been a constant distraction the whole time, using the private channel of his Guardian to ask the most stupid questions, like when they would eat a real supper, because he would be starving again very soon, or if he must urinate on the sofa because the Guardian was not allowing him to reach the bathroom, or if they would be sleeping together in the same bed tonight. Martin had to turn down the sound and learn how to ignore the impertinent remarks of his prisoner.

When he finally arrived, the Professor did not answer his call through the Intercom. He thought that Doctor Hauptman could be busy and had turned the service off, but Martin could not wait. The Chief Inspector used his authority to override the door locks and the special Protector program. Few people had access to the secret codes that hold all the keys and open all the doors in the Kingdom. Through the internal CPU network, Martin contacted the Temple for accessing the codes, due to an emergency situation. He would need to explain the details later in a report, but it did not matter to him, he would always come out with some excuse. The codes were granted and Martin entered the apartment.

The penthouse was all dark, no lights and the window blinds filtered out the street lights from outside. Martin turned the lights on. The living room was empty. He went straight to the kitchen and there he found Doctor Hauptman on the floor, in the middle of a pool of blood, a knife in his left hand, both wrists cut open. For a second he thought the Professor could be still alive. He checked the body, no pulse in the neck, it was too late. An overwhelming feeling of sadness mixed with anger invaded his heart. God was dead!

Martin was now standing frozen in front of the grizzly scene. He was about to call Daryl and ask for a tech-group to come over. But suddenly, he sensed another presence just outside the apartment, a slight movement, a shadow behind a curtain. Then the idea stroke him hard in the head. Maybe this was not a suicide. He could not picture the Professor killing himself by cutting his wrists with a knife. Maybe it was a murder disguised as a suicide. Maybe the killer was still around. Martin got ready a Guardian and moved closer to the windows. He opened the curtain. A shadow was behind the glass. He recognized it. Martin opened the window. The cold air hit his face. The winged creature came inside and Martin closed again the window.

“Where is the Professor?”

Friend looked around, while stepping into the kitchen. His grey wings were retracted flat on his back. Martin followed him close behind. He was still having the Guardian ready. The Chief Inspector did not know if the Guardian would work on a winged creature. Friend stopped when his bare feet got wet with blood. He did not say a word, he was just there, standing and watching. Death had always been a mystery for these creatures. They did not know about its existence until they came to this world and some of them got killed in the war.

“Do you know anything about this?” Martin was staring at the big eyes of the creature. He felt uncomfortable in the presence of the winged man. These creatures were really weird. Their gaze seemed unnaturally black. The huge iris was solid but blurry, as if grey clouds were standing in the middle, obstructing the vision. A sense of deep darkness overcame his soul. “What are you doing here?”

“I got a call from the Professor. The Warrior is out of the Umbrella. He needed my help.”

“When the Professor called you?”

“He did it like three hours ago.”

“And you flew in three hours from the Divine City to here?”

“Of course not, I was not in the Divine City. I was in the Zone. I had been there for the last two days. Everybody was expecting the Warrior to wake up at any moment. The Courier has been activated. The clock is ticking. As I told you, we do not have too much time.”

“Who are we? Who does not have too much time and for what?”

Friend looked back at the dead body of the Professor. Martin should have been kept informed, like his sister, or at least partially. He could not understand why the Professor insisted in keeping Martin out of the Zone's reach. Now his old friend is dead and Martin has a lot to catch up.

“Listen Martin, this is not a suicide. The Servants did it.” The winged creature knelt beside the body and opened the victim's eyes. “His soul was gone before these cut were made.”

“How can you know that?”

“These wounds take a long time to cause death. The soul would have to be sleeping when it went out of the body. But the Professor was killed with violence. I can see pain imprinted in these eyes, trust me.”

Martin did not know what to believe. He was a cop. It was true he did not have much experience with dead bodies. In the Kingdom, few people died violently nowadays. But he was not aware that the winged creatures were able to read in the eyes of a dead man. However, some sixth sense was telling him that Friend was right. Doctor Hauptman was an old sick person. He was already dying, but he would never kill himself. He just was not that kind of man.

“Why the Servants wanted the Professor dead?”

“Have you heard of the Voice?”

The word clicks in Martin's mind. The Voice was supposed to be the mysterious leader of the secret cult which had been taking shape lately inside the Church. He had read some reports from the Secret Service. Once, the Archbishop mentioned the Voice in his presence, but until now the Servants were only an internal concern of the Church. That was pure politics, and he never liked to get involved in politics.

“What is it about the Voice?”

“I told the Professor that you should have been awoken long time ago. The Hackers know more about the Servants than you do. They are a dangerous cancer growing within the Church.”

“I thought the Hackers were fighting against the Church.” Martin sent away the Guardian, but restored the Protector he had turned off when he entered the apartment. He did not want a Listener getting too close now. “I am lost. If the Servants are causing harm to the Church, then it is supposed to be good for the Zone.”

“The Hackers are fighting for humanity. The Servants wants another type of Church, like the one you had before. The Voice also wants that.”

“Do you mean the Old Church? That sounds a bit crazy to my ears. The Old Church is dead and had been that way for decades. Besides, I don't see what this has to do with the killing of the Professor.”

“Some things are still unclear, but we know that the Servants want to reform the Church. They understand that the Hackers are the true enemies. The system has to follow the rules. The Kingdom has institutions and procedures. The Servants and the Voice can

act outside of those procedures. The Servants have been growing among the priesthood everywhere. The Hackers have been trying to penetrate their lines, but to no avail. They were very close though. Remember the poor soul that was killed in the Seminar? He was working for the Zone. Father Roland was a double agent. He was recruited by the Secret Service and sent to infiltrate the Servants, but he truly was a Questioner, long before he entered the Seminar.”

“So you are saying that the Servants killed Father Roland too?”

“Who else would have done it? They probably found he was a Questioner. Maybe Father Roland made some indiscretion and mistook a foe for a friend. The Voice is very dangerous and is very clever. Nobody knows who this Voice is and how it can work freely within and outside of the Umbrella without raising any alert.” Friend noticed that Martin was having a hard time understanding. Maybe the surroundings were affecting his prodigious human intelligence. He left the kitchen and sat down on the sofa in the living room. Martin followed him and sat beside. “Listen, I know it is not easy to process all this information at once. We are afraid the Servants may consider the Warrior their first priority. I believe the Professor was tortured to reveal the location of the Warrior. Somehow the Servants suspected the connection. The Voice doesn't know who the Warrior is and I believe it has to find out sooner than later, before the Warrior becomes too strong.”

“The thing I don't understand is how come a winged creature like you is involved in all this.” Martin finally decided to put all the cards on the table. He had been asking this question himself since Friend appeared to him in the morning. He knew the winged creature was a friend of his father. Probably his father got him interested in his vision about the war between the Coalition and the Alliance. But his father had been dead for thirty years. What other motivation this winged creature had to keep a close link with humanity? His entire kin was supposed to be loyal to the Lord. What interests did Friend have in the Hackers and their fight? “You are a celestial companion of the Lord. You should be on the Church's side, right?”

“Your father left a deep mark on me, Martin. He made me feel for the first time that I was not an abomination of nature or a toy made by some intangible Creator or a puppet in the hands of some human deity. He made me understand that I also had a soul, not exactly as yours, but a soul anyway. After his death, I devoted myself to serve humanity. The Lord tells us that this is precisely our mission on this world. Well, I am ready to serve mankind, but according to my own understandings of how is the best way of how to do it.” Friend tried again to duplicate a true human smile with his lips. “After the war, I kept a close contact with the Professor. He helped many ex-renegades to escape Rehabs. I found out that they got access to an abandoned military base of the dissolved national guard, hidden underground, a secret place where they were safe. When the Umbrella went live, the Hackers were prepared. They kept the system out of their base.

Don't ask me the details; my comprehension of the human science is very limited. The Hackers not only protected the Zone from the Umbrella but learned how to use it for their own benefits. Their scientists worked hard to figure out how to beat the system, how to install Receptors and Firewalls in the entry port of the human brain, how to implant subliminal messages and how to look for potential Questioners. One of their scientists developed the theory of the Warrior. For years this man had been working on it. He is called the Instructor, because he wrote down every single detail of his research. His work is called the New Book and it contains, step by step, how to use the Warrior to take down the Umbrella. The system grew too used to having the Umbrella. Without it, the Kingdom is nothing, all the doors will be open and the Hackers will get their opportunity to strike. Again, don't ask me the details, I don't know the exact plan. I'm just a helper.”

“Why do you have so much trust in me? Please, don't tell me it is because of my father. I am a different person. I had another upbringing. I share different points of views. I could actually be a fanatic supporter of the Kingdom, like most of my colleagues are.”

“But you are not.” This time Friend almost got a perfect smile. He placed his large hand on Martin's lap, a very human gesture that surprised the Chief Inspector. “There is something I don't know how it works between humans, but in our case, we can feel the existing empathy as a warm current of air in a cold room. I am feeling it now. I felt it this morning when I visited you, but besides this extrasensory ability, the Hackers are very carefully when selecting a potential Questioner. Sometimes they don't recruit openly sympathizers, but people that didn't know much about their existence before. It's called the Probing Test. They run it in secret, through the Umbrella, on a person's mind and they know immediately if he or she is ready to wake up. The Kingdom is like a dream. It had always been, even before the Lord came here. But the reality is hidden behind the veils of many lies. The Hackers wants all the human beings on this planet to take back their destiny in their own hands. The Lord is just another puppet, like we all are. The Kingdom is like a never-ending dream, a make-believe place where everybody is happily sleeping while those who really matter are rolling the dices. You may find my words too complicated. I am just repeating the best way I can what I had learned, mostly from our dear Professor. Unfortunately, you don't have too much time to learn and the Hackers need to act soon. The Servants are ready to strike. They will try to neutralize the Warrior. Therefore they killed the Professor.”

“How did the Servants know that the Warrior was awake?”

“I don't know, but I can tell you, this Voice is a clever being. You must be very careful.”

“And how this Voice killed the Professor?”

“There are some tools, some programs, secret ones that nobody knows. The Hackers have been trying to find out from their agents in the Ministry of Science, but they had not been lucky yet. These programs are Level Zero, they go deep in the human brain, and they can kill. This is all I know. Now I have to go. I have to bring the sad news of the Messenger's death to the Zone, and I believe it's better if I do it in person than sending a cryptic message through the Umbrella.”

““I didn't know you were able to get in the Umbrella too.” Martin stood up and looked down to the winged creature. “I thought that your kin was not allowed.”

“The restriction is still in place. Some people in the Divine City want to keep us out. They don't want us mixing with your kind. But the Hackers found a way to create a false human identity for me. In the Umbrella I am Grey Feathering, a nickname which I find very funny.”

Friend got up from the sofa and approached the kitchen. Martin went with him. The winged creature crouched at the Professor's head and placed a soft kiss on the already cold forehead. He stayed in that position for a few seconds. Martin felt a heavy weight in his heart. He also loved the Professor very much. He thought of his sister. Miriam adored this old man. She would be devastated. Friend gently let the Professor's head rest back on the floor. He got up and walked around the island to the enclosed terrace. Martin followed. The winged creature opened one of the large panoramic windows looking down the city. Again the cold air hit Martin in the face. Friend came closer and gave him a strong hug. Martin did not know what to do. He did not know where to place his hands, after all the guy was stark naked and he did not like feeling the grey feathers of the wings. Before jumping out to the air, the winged creature looked back at him one last time.

“I hope we'll meet again soon, Martin. But, as you can see, we are now in a war, again. People get killed when they are in a war. Just in case, I wanted to tell you that your father would have been very proud of you. Bye for now Martin and don't forget, as soon as you get to the Warrior, stay away from the Servants.”

8:00 PM

Donatella was not happy. She wanted to have a private dinner with Carlo, Miriam and Martin, but her son did not show again. He had been avoiding this family reunion for the last couple of years. She loved seeing them, all together, sitting at the table, like in the old times, after her husband's death. Carlo used to come over to her house and eat dinner with them. Sometimes he brought also Father Frank, she smiled.

She had noticed that her relationship with Carlo had matured to the point when they were not longer passionate lovers, but great friends, like in an old marriage. Sex was still there but not as alive as before. Many times, Carlo came to her place and went into a relaxed nap in her arms, something that she also enjoyed, in a way of speaking. On the other hand, the image of the well endowed Father Frank, waiting naked in her bedroom, got her very excited.

“What do you think, Dona?” Carlo always called her Dona in private. She shook her head. She was not listening and the Archbishop had to repeat the question. “Miriam is saying that the Church should look at the Hackers with a different lens. In the end, they also want the best for the people.”

Politics was the last thing she wanted to talk about on this table. Miriam was a Questioner. Carlo knew it, which was perfectly fine too, because, in some way, Donatella felt safer with him knowing all her family secrets. The protection of her children had always been her first priority, especially once their father went missing for good in the way he did. Few people knew the truth about her husband's conspiracy against the Alliance. She could count them with the fingers of one hand. However, the stigma of his treason had always been floating above her family like a sharp sword, ready to cut off their heads at the first step in false. She knew about what happened because the Professor told her. Carlo also knew, of course. He was a close friend of the Colonel too. She never understood how Carlo and her husband could be so good friends when they were fancying opposing interests in the war. Carlo always worshipped the Lord, since day one. But the Colonel's allegiance to the Church grew weaker as the time went by. She thought that her husband was forcefully put in the middle of a controversy, on one side, the Colonel had Carlo with his One Church, on the other hand, there was Doctor Hauptman with his enormous influence and knowledge. Slowly, the Professor won this war. Colonel Crawford favoured his old mentor against Monsignor Carlo. However, despite the political contradictions, the friendship between the priest and the pilot stood on solid ground until the fatal day. Carlo knew what the Colonel had in mind that day, but he did not move a finger to stop him. She remembered that the Professor doubted the priest for some time. He suspected that Carlo had sent an alert to the military. But later, the same Doctor Hauptman assured her that Carlo was not involved in the disclosure of her husband's plot against the Alliance. Once, she asked Carlo why he did not take any action against the Colonel, knowing about his true intentions against the Allies army. Carlo told her that fiends and family were beyond politics and ideologies. He was raised in a family of very prominent politicians who, sometimes, chose opposite parties, but above anything, they were always friends and family. The truth would always prevail and the defeated must be welcomed in the victor's arms with a sincere smile and a warm hug. This was exactly the same solution he proposed when the Renegades surrendered.

“I don't want to hear about this anymore. Miriam knows what I think about the Hackers and I know what she thinks about the Church. I guess this dichotomy is embedded in the Crawford's family and there is nothing we can do about it”

“Well, my position has always been the same.” Carlo took a sip from the glass of wine which he bought from the famous Sacred Blood Winery. “The Hackers are a bunch of criminals that don't want to be monitored by the Umbrella. At least Miriam is a Questioner, she has the right to express her opinions and criticize whatever she thinks is wrong in the Kingdom, but she plays according to the rules. I respect that and she will always have my support. We need good citizens thinking around here, but always under control.”

Miriam was about to laugh. She found hilarious the insinuation by the Archbishop that there was still some civil freedom in the Kingdom, but she was not in the mood to start a discussion on this topic. Her mother, on the other hand, was more radical. If she could, she would have sent all the Questioners to Rehabs long time ago. Unfortunately the technology was not refined enough to filter out exclusively the bad thoughts, and her mother would not risk having Miriam's mind erased only for the sake of her daughter becoming a believer. With this conclusion, ended the debate and peace reigned in the family. Martin, on the other hand, always took a neutral position whenever they had a conversation about politics. He was of the quiet type. Miriam did not know in what her brother truly believed after all. His position as Chief Inspector of the Criminal Prevention Unit made him a strong candidate to be a devoted defender of the Church, but she knew Martin had saved many Questioners from Rehabs, besides jealously protecting her and her husband.

“I can't convince any of you of what the Hackers movement is really about. You should listen to the Professor.”

“The Professor is becoming senile, Miriam. The Lord is a witness of everything I had done to protect him from his many enemies in the Divine City.”

“Well, Carlo, the Professor has also good friends over there.” Donatella finished her piece of chocolate cake her daughter had baked for the occasion. Miriam could easily work as a pastry chief in a restaurant. “Even in the Council, some powerful people are still supporting him.”

“It is not the Council, Dona, you are talking about the Ministry of Science. The Council will never sympathize with someone who is almost openly supporting the Hackers and instigating the rebellion against the Kingdom. The old man is insane and could become dangerous some day. We have given him a lot of power within the Umbrella, which he could use to promote terrorist acts.”

“Don't say those things about grandpa.” Miriam sent her godfather a nasty look, while stopping eating her cake. “You know better than anybody else that, if it was not for him, this damn Kingdom would have been a fucking wreck long time ago.”

“Miriam, watch your language!”

Donatella could not stand when her daughter cursed in front of her. She looked at Carlo expecting his support but the Archbishop had suddenly stopped eating his dessert and was being distracted by something going on inside his head. Miriam was also staring at Carlo.

“Could you, please, excuse me? I have to take this call. It's an emergency.”

Monsignor Carlo had just received a signal in his private channel. Only few close friends and a limited group of high ranked officers from the Secret Service knew the code to call him through the internal network of the Ministry. The Archbishop got up from his chair, went to the kitchen and closed the door. He opened the channel. The image of Father Frank scared him. His old friend was visibly upset. Drops of sweat scrolled down his face.

“Carlo, I have a problem here. I don't know what to do. I'm at Donatella's house. Let me explain, you know the girl everybody is looking for, she was here. I saw her.”

“Please, Father Frank, calm down.” The Archbishop tried to look beyond the disfigured face of his old friend, but the rest of the visual signal, coming from Father Frank, was being blocked. The users could always restrict how much they want to show in the Intercom. “First tell me, what are you doing in Donatella's house?”

“I told you, I saw the girl coming here. I was in the neighbourhood and I saw her face in a PTU and followed the vehicle. I was about to call a patrol when I noticed the car was heading to the Crawford Mansion. I was intrigued. I thought maybe Donatella has something to do with this girl. I decided to investigate by myself. When I came to the house, I found the girl and Arthur Goldman together.”

“You mean Arthur is having an affair with that girl?”

“I guess they were. I cannot say that much, because as soon as Arthur saw me, he attacked me.” Father Frank made a short pause. He was breathing heavily. “The man was like possessed. I had to defend myself. We struggle for a while, but I am stronger than him. I got his neck in my arms and pressed until he lost consciousness.”

“And where is the girl?”

“She escaped. She got away when Arthur punched me and knocked me to the floor. I tied him up with some ropes from the curtains and put him on the bed. I thought of calling the guards, but preferred to call you first.”

“Is he okay?”

“Well, I think he is alive, but still unconscious. I was afraid the Umbrella could pickup the stress signal. I expanded my Protector to block any Search program, but if someone is looking for Arthur and can not find him in the system...” Father Frank took another long breath of air. “And what do I do if Donatella comes back?”

“Wait for me there.” The Archbishop was now the one who made a short pause. He was thinking fast. Father Frank's story did not sound very convincing, but whatever just happened in the Crawford Mansion, could not be allowed to become public. “Don't move, stay calm and keep a watch on him. Donatella will not go home soon. I'll take care of her.”

“Please, hurry up.”

“I'm on my way.”

The Archbishop sat on a chair in the kitchen. He could hear the two women arguing again in the dining room. The girl, which Father Frank mentioned in the call, was the same one who derailed the Listener of the Secret Service. As soon as Carlo was informed of the strange case, he sent an Emergency Warrant to all the law enforcement agencies. Every patrol of the Heavenly Guard was looking for her. He sent out to the streets every available agent of the Secret Service to find the girl. The CPU squads were also after her. He ordered the broadcasting of an Urgent Notice in the internal network, containing a picture of the girl and the precise instructions to call the authorities if someone had any information about her. The Search programs in the Umbrella were looking for her magnetic signature everywhere. This was all he could do, at least for now. The next step would be to apply for a worldwide warrant to the Conference and order a general search through the public channels. But he hoped the guards would find her without having to notify the Divine City. Carlo wanted to get this girl before the case became a scandal of global proportions. The question was how Arthur got involved with this college girl. He knew that Miriam's husband was also a Questioner. Maybe the Zone instructed him to find and protect the girl. Did Miriam know about this girl too? He was tempted to confront his goddaughter, but even if she knew, Miriam would not say anything to him. Too many open questions to handle at once, and there was no time to waste right now. Monsignor Carlo forced a polite smile upon his face, the same one he had mastered, since the beginning of his career, to mask his emotions. He went back to the dining room.

“What is it?” Monsignor Carlo knew Donatella was the hardest person to confuse with this smile. “I know something is wrong. What is it, Carlo?”

“It's nothing, trust me. But I have to go now, and I need a favour from you. Go to your office and wait for me there. Don't call me, I will see you soon.” The Archbishop approached Miriam and gave her a kiss on the top of her head. “I'm sorry for this, my dear, work is calling, you know.”

The Archbishop left the apartment and walked through the corridor at a very fast pace. He took the elevator down to the underground garage. He approached a black van parked besides his own PTU. Four agents from the Secret Service were in charge of his personal security. Monsignor Carlo instructed the agents to stay there and to keep a watch on the building. They had the picture of the girl displayed on the dashboard screen of the vehicle. The Archbishop got inside his PTU and drove it away from the garage into the city night traffic, all alone.

8:30 PM

Cary could not believe she had finally arrived to Miriam's building. The auto-pilot took forever to drive the PTU back downtown. For safety purpose, this feature drove the car several points below the authorized speed limit, avoiding the fast moving lanes. The vehicle stopped in the underground garage. Cary needed to get back to the Umbrella. She had no other option. She had to warn Miriam that she was in the garage and ask for permission to go up to her apartment. As soon as she reconnected, Cary noticed that her perception of the system was totally different now compared to the one she had before. For normal people, the connection to the Umbrella was a seamless process. Nobody could see anything. People just had the safe feeling of availability of the Umbrella's services like the Intercom and the Global Net. But they could not see or sense the Search programs wandering around, the Diagnostic programs or the Listeners or the Security ones. In the case of Cary, she could perfectly feel the presence of any program coming close to her entry point. If she concentrated a bit more, she could also see into a much larger range, she could see the entire system like a living organism. For her, the Umbrella was like an infinite cloud of millions of small candle lights shining in a dark blue space. The programs running in the system were like strings of red, green or orange dots, chained together, approaching the candle lights like humming birds feeding in a field of fire flowers. The system was beautiful! Almost subconsciously, she searched for Daniel. She found the kid and was tempted to talk to him in the Intercom, but she was scared. The farther she went, the higher was the risk of being detected by a Security or a Search program. She came back to her immediate vicinity to find Miriam. Cary decided to use the Intercom and get out of the system as soon as possible.

“Miriam, it's me, Cary.”

“Where are you?” Miriam’s face looked surprised. She was in the kitchen doing the dishes. The visual signal did not include anybody else. Cary hoped she was alone. “What happened? Where is Arthur?”

“Arthur is in trouble. There was someone in the house. Can I come over?”

“Sure, I am sending the code for the elevator.”

“Thanks.”

Cary received the code and got out of the car. Before she called the elevator, she noticed two men, dressed in black uniform, walking towards her. Cary understood the danger, but it was too late to turn back or run. She looked ahead. There was a suspicious black van parked close to the elevator entrance. She used the Intercom again.

“Miriam, I have a situation here. Two men are approaching me and there is a black van parked in the garage. I think I have been spotted. What do I do?”

“Wait, I am coming down.” Cary saw Miriam leaving the dishes aside and drying her hands with a towel. “Go back to the car.”

“I can't. They are looking straight at me.”

“I am just on my way down.”

The agents from the Secret Service did not have Guardians. They were armed with Magnum pistols, the painful muscle-paralysing guns. These weapons had only a very limited time effect, but the agents could always ask for help to the CPU and loan a Guardian if they needed to immobilize a suspect for a longer time. However, the agents did not think they need a Guardian to handle the little girl in front of them.

“Good evening, citizen, could you please come with us?” The taller and older of the two agents had a very deep voice. Cary looked at him trying the best innocent expression she could dress up her face with. “We are Secret Service. The Ministry needs some clarifications. You have to come with us.”

“I guess I don't have other option, right?”

“That is correct, madam.”

The other agent, a foot shorter and leaner than the first, also younger, with his short black hair kept tightly up in random bunches of spikes, showed her the way to the van. Cary understood she was being arrested. She got out of the Umbrella. What kind of superpowers did she have if she was unable to resist a simple arrest? What kind of Warrior was she anyway? She felt frustrated and deceived. The Messenger had never contacted her again. Arthur was in trouble fighting against a naked man, almost twice his size, in the Crawford Mansion. Daniel had been arrested, probably was being interrogated, tortured, who knew. The only safe link she had left was Miriam, who happened to be the goddaughter of the highest ranked official of the Kingdom in the province. Should she trust her? Maybe she was in the game just for fun, like rich girls in the old times, wanting to become social activists, not for their conviction, but just for the sake of a change and the promise of abundant sex and drugs. Cary had no other option but to follow the instructions given to her by the Secret Service agents. At least it was not the CPU. Maybe she could strike a deal with the Ministry. She was a friend of an agent too. Lucy could intercede for her. She could work too for the Secret Service, if this was the clarification the Ministry was looking for. Cary was not a Hacker, not even a Questioner. Her loyalty had not been compromised with anybody. All these thoughts were storming into her mind when, just before entering the vehicle, the elevator doors slid open and Miriam came out rushing to the van.

“Why are you taking my guest away? I invited her over.” Miriam screamed at the taller agent, the closest to her. “You know who am I?”

“Yes, madam, we know who you are.” The tall agent responded with affected respect and calm. Of course he knew who this screaming woman was. He had been coming here, to this building, with the Archbishop, once per week at least, since he became a senior agent. She was Donatella’s daughter. “We have precise instructions from his Excellence.”

“My godfather would not interfere with my guests. You can be sure of that.”

“Not in this case, madam, trust me.” The agent tried a polite smile to calm down Miriam, who looked extremely upset. “This is a matter of the highest security level.”

“Well, if that is the case, I am going with you wherever you are taking her.”

“I am afraid you cannot.”

“Oh, yes, I am afraid I can.” Miriam walked to her own PTU, parked by Cary some few steps away, and opened the door. The shorter agent, who was still standing beside Cary, pulled out his Magnum pistol. Miriam saw the gesture and screamed angry at him. “What, are you going to shoot me?”

“It's okay.” The tall agent intervened. “I believe she can follow us. His Excellence will have to deal with her later. Let's go.”

Cary was seated between the other two agents inside the van. The tall and the short guards got back into the vehicle; the tall agent in the passenger's seat and the short guy was the driver. The other two agents kept a close watch on the prisoner. However, they could not notice that Cary, who did not care anymore of being spotted by a Security program in the Umbrella, was back in the system. She was sending a silent message through the Intercom to Daniel.

9:00 PM

Martin was back in his apartment. Daniel, his prisoner, almost danced of happiness when he saw the Chief Inspector. He did not enjoy being left alone for almost an hour under the custody of a Guardian. The program worked fine. It was very sophisticated and gentle, but nobody felt safe knowing what a Guardian could do to the brain, just maybe by mistake. Martin retired the Guardian. Daniel asked where he could find the bathroom. He needed to go badly. Martin showed the kid the way to the bathroom, while he crashed on the leather sofa and closed his eyes.

The murder of Doctor Hauptman and the conversation with Friend had given him headaches. Where could he find information about the Voice? There were few records of the Servants in the databases. The Divine City seemed complacent with them. The idea of having faith for the sake of having faith was appealing to the ones who wanted people blindly obeying orders, without questioning the reasons. Therefore, the Servants and the Hackers were mortal enemies. Martin believed in the Lord and in his divinity. He remembered an old argument he had with Doctor Hauptman. The Professor never actually questioned the divinity of the Lord, but his human component. The theory of a supreme being, half human and half deity had always been a difficult exercise in theology. The Professor told Martin that the Lord had trouble understanding the human mind; hence he could not be a man. Doctor Hauptman believed that the divinity of the Lord was exclusively related to his immortality and the few superpowers he had to play around with the surrounding energy fields. This was the main reason why, the convergence proposal, made by the Professor in the Unavoidable Truth, had resulted so appealing. By stripping the Lord of his many other traditional mystic components, Doctor Hauptman gained the support of the sceptics and old time atheists, who were mostly the main base of the Free Coalition during the Last War, making plausible their conversion after the Act of Capitulation was signed.

However, the true believers saw this as a sort of treacherous compromise. They wanted to keep the old faith untouchable and believed in the Lord's mythical legend of being everywhere at the same time, but they had to admit the physical presence of the Lord in the Temple, in the Divine City, doing otherwise would have put them in an

awkward situation with the Kingdom's institutions. But time, the supreme healer and transformer, together with a very well designed subversive work, through subliminal education and changes to the History books using twisted interpretations, had made the miracle of restoring this mythical component in many people's minds. The old true believers had started again to openly demand the orthodoxy of a blind faith in the Lord. The Ministry of the Church could not support this path, at least for the sake of keeping up with the appearances of being a realistic institution, integrated with the technological advances of the Ministry of Science, but it was well known that the Temple would be delighted with a further developing of this theological trend.

The Professor saw the danger represented by the Servants who, according to Friend, had been slowly undermining the Ministry from within, growing in numbers and preparing for the moment when they could become public and seize control of the government institutions. Friend told him to stay away from the Voice. How could he do it if he could not find anything about the most elusive person in the Kingdom? He checked the Global Net and the internal databases of the system. Only a few short references had been written about the Servants. The Voice was barely mentioned in few records, which said that nobody had ever seen the person behind the Voice, not even within the highest ranks of the Servants. If Friend was right, the Servants were on a killing spree. They got rid of the spy working for the Zone in the Seminar, and the Professor lost his own battle against them.

Death was always a mystery, but a murder was a painful abortion of life. Martin could not believe God was gone for good. Old images of the Professor, from when Martin was an adolescent, were rolling one after another in his mind. Martin never thought of the old man as a substitute for a grandfather, as his sister did, but he held dearly very fond memories of the Professor. However, he partially resented the Professor for keeping him in the dark about his involvement with the Hackers. Was he afraid that Martin could tell about him to the Divine City? Martin would have never done something like that. The Professor said that he did not want to mess around by interfering with Martin's career. But that justification sounded too subjective and hollow, or at least incomplete. Besides, Martin was one hundred percent sure that the Archbishop, his mother and probably Father Frank too, knew about the Professor's connection with the Zone, or at least they had suspicions, but nobody moved a finger to stop the old man. Martin did not find too strange this passive attitude towards Doctor Hauptman from these other three big fishes of the Church. The Professor had been a polemic figure, before and after the coming of the Lord. Everybody had always been afraid of his sharp pen. However, Doctor Hauptman's allegiance to the Alliance and the Lord, together with his famous Unavoidable Truth, had served the Kingdom better than ten Allies armies together. The Archbishop would go the extra mile to protect his old teacher. Donatella would rather swallow her razor tongue than to harm this old friend of her husband. Father Frank would never dare going against Monsignor Carlo, even when the Bishop never approved the special treatment of Living Saint given to the Professor. This relationship between Father

Frank and Monsignor Carlo had been, for years, the centre of nasty gossips in the Church. People, always envious of others having what they wish and could not have, talked about their indestructible friendship of more than thirty years with hints of something deeper going on between the two men. Martin did not believe in these gossips and truly did not care if they were true. He knew Father Frank not well enough. The Bishop of the Old City had always been the more distant friend of the family. But Martin knew too well the Archbishop, the man who had been his mother's lover for decades, and it was hard for him to imagine Monsignor Carlo sharing anything romantic with Father Frank.

Amid all these complicated thoughts, Martin's mind began slowly to drift into a half-asleep, half-awake state. With his eyes closed, sedated by the soft voice of the sport commentator on the public channel in the screen, Martin's recurrent dream returned. He was again on the grass field with Bella. Martin knew Bella was the true cause why he had never found another woman to share his life with. Martin had tried before to lie to himself and find other motives, but deep in his mind he knew that, whenever he had been with another girl, it was Bella whom he was really looking for. Being in love with a dead woman was the worst thing that could ever happen to a man.

The Intercom was beeping, waking him up. Martin opened his eyes. Daniel was standing before him. For a fraction of a second, Martin saw his mother's eyes staring at him. But soon he realized that the kid's eyes were very similar to Donatella's, exactly the same rare shade of green. Martin recognized Miriam's silent code in the Intercom. The message made him jump on his feet from the sofa. Daniel looked at him. Martin did not know that the boy had also received a message from Cary.

"Let's go." Martin did not have time to go the bathroom to wash his face. He ran towards the door followed by the kid. "My sister and your girlfriend are in danger."

"Cary just sent me a message." Daniel wanted to ask questions, many questions to this strange cop that suddenly was acting like he was not a cop, but the kid barely had time to run after Martin. "She told me the Secret Service has captured her. Why did you say that they were in danger?"

"No time for speculations. I am not worrying for my sister, she is almost untouchable for being the goddaughter of the Archbishop, but your girlfriend is someone very important for certain people. I need to protect her. Come, hurry up." Martin opened the elevator and hit the main level button, almost crushing Daniel with the automatic door when the boy tried to get in. Martin was not sure about how much he could tell this kid which, despite being code-named the Courier, was not even a Questioner. But on the other hand, Martin believed the boy should be aware of what was going on with his girlfriend, and not be left in the dark as the Professor did with him during all these years. "Okay, listen kid, have you heard of the Zone and the Hackers?"

“Everybody knows about the Hackers.”

“Have you read the New Book issued by the Zone or heard anything about the legend of the Warrior?”

“I found some references about a New Book from the Zone, but I never read it, and I have never heard of the Warrior.”

“Well, the Hackers have this legend about a person who will be capable of disrupting the Umbrella for the entire city. That person is called the Warrior. I believe that person is your girlfriend. You are the Courier. You were supposed to deliver her to me. I am the Hammer, in charge of her protection. I do not know much, but I feel compelled to go and save her ass from the Secret Service.”

“Wow! That is an impressive story!” The boy looked at him with wide open eyes, like wondering if this grownup middle-aged man could be insane. “In this case I have to believe you, because I am your prisoner anyway, but I do not see why the Secret Service would want to hurt Cary. They may want to ask her some questions, but believe me, she is innocent. She knows nothing about the Hackers or the Zone. I am the one who had always been interested in finding out if the Zone was truly a real place, and where it was located.”

“Yes, I know. You got an Orange Alert in the system this morning for going nosing around where you should not. I was about to go find you and give you a severe verbal warning, when things got complicated, like it always happens to me.” Martin looked impatiently to his old fashioned electronic watches. “The Secret Service is not the problem here, but the Servants. They are inside the Ministry and they know about this legend of the Hackers. Even if they can not be completely sure that your girlfriend is the Warrior, just in case, in the best scenario, they will reboot her brain and remake it from scratch, trust me they will.”

These words could not scare the kid more than they did. Daniel imagined what would happen if Cary's brain got rebooted. He calculated that his chances of getting again the attention of this gorgeous girl in a second life would be equal to zero. He would lose her for good. He could not allow that to happen.

Once on the main floor, they rushed outside to the parking lot where Martin had left his PTU. The boy sat in the back, and Martin drove the car out of the gate. As soon as they hit the traffic, Martin placed the blue light on the roof and accelerated the vehicle as much as the engine allowed him. He did not have much time to intercept the Secret Service van, which Miriam was following from behind. The agents would try to sneak into the safe heaven of the enormous underground garage of the Ministry, where Martin needed permission to enter. The Chief Inspector was glad he had setup a Sentinel on her

sister. The Program was now transmitting the coordinates to his dashboard screen. He needed to get to Main Street and cut off the van before it turned left to the Salvation Avenue.

“Do you love her?” Martin could sense the tension in Daniel. The kid was now truly worried about Cary's destiny. Martin tried to make him relax a bit. “How do you know you love her?”

“Yes, I do love her. I know I do, but I can not explain how or why.”

“For how long have you been together?”

“I met her for the first time this morning.” Daniel remembered his surprise when Cary touched his hand in the corridor. Talking about Cary with this cop relieved his mind, pushing away the bunch of negative thoughts he was having about the Secret Service and his girlfriend. “How do you know she is the Warrior, if you have not met her yet?”

“I can not say I am one hundred percent certain, but I suspect she is, since you are with her and you are the Courier.” Martin disengaged the collision protection feature of his PTU. He needed to get closer to the other vehicles to cut them off and get ahead in the traffic. “Besides, she did that thing to the Listener. I never heard before of anybody capable of destroying a program in the Umbrella.”

“Everything is happening too fast for me. It's hard to get a hold on it. Yesterday I believed I was a fervent follower of the Lord and dreamed of becoming an Historian. Today I do not know what am I or what should I do.”

“You are not that far ahead of me, kid. Yesterday I was the respectable Chief Inspector of the CPU, today I don't know if I can keep my job any longer.”

“I guess we are both up to the neck in the same shit.”

“More or less, boy, more or less... There they are.” Martin distinguished the black van illuminated by the street lights. “Grab the door handles and stay calm. I know what I'm doing.”

The sport WM model made a sharp turn and crossed over the grass patch of the divider into the opposite lane. Martin avoided two vehicles and finally placed his car just behind the black van. The agents had noticed the risky manoeuvre and the blue light. They were probably surprised of being chased. Who would try to stop a Secret Service vehicle in the middle of a mission? Martin sent through the Intercom an alert to the driver of the black van. He explained that the Chief Inspector of the CPU was commanding him to slow down and pull over. The driver answered with a nasty word and sped up ahead.

Martin had no other option than to proceed with the interception manoeuvre. He accelerated his PTU until the front bump hit the rear of the black van, then he turns left, accelerated and turned right again, hitting the van just above the rear left wheel. The Secret Service vehicle lost control. The internal computer started the emergency stop procedure. The driver tried to cancel the safety feature, but it was too late. The van slowed down, keeping straight first, and then the computer directed the car to the curb where it finally came to a stop. Martin followed right behind. He parked his PTU beside the van. Miriam's PTU was also getting closer. His sister soon stopped behind him. Martin did not want to waste time in an argument with the Secret Service agents. He sent out four Guardians ahead, one for each of the four men he had identified in the black van.

“Stay here! You see that car behind. That is my sister. She knows your girlfriend. She has been helping her. If something goes wrong, go to her. She will know what to do, do you understand?”

Daniel nodded, his hands locked in a hard grip on the door handles. He had never been in a car chase before. The speed was exhilarating. He could not see very well inside the black van, but he noticed five human figures. Daniel could not understand how Martin would handle the situation, alone against four special agents of the Secret Service. He did not have to wait much longer to see it. The Chief Inspector left the PTU and approached the van. The four doors had been unlocked and opened automatically by the internal computer, following the automatic collision response procedure. The tall and the short agents were about to get out from their front seats with their pistols ready to fire when Martin screamed at them to stay inside. The men did not obey and stepped outside the van.

“Stop right there! I am the Chief Inspector of the CPU.”

“What the hell are you doing, sir? We are following direct orders from his Excellence, the Archbishop.”

“I said to stop right there and lower your weapons.”

Martin was not expecting the agents to follow his commands. They already knew he was the Chief Inspector. Everybody respected the Criminal Protection Unit. But they were Secret Service, Ministry's people. The CPU did not have any authority over the Ministry. The Chief Inspector was not supposed to give them any orders. But the Guardians were doing their job. The programs took over the agents by surprise. The two that were still inside the van began to shout something to the ones outside. The tall officer and the shorter agent understood the danger too late. Before they could use their Magnum pistols against the Chief Inspector, a Guardian settled down on each of them, immobilizing their muscles, obfuscating their nerves, throwing them down in agony to the pavement. Martin went to the back of the vehicle and pulled out a third agent, unable

to resist, in pain, with a Guardian squeezing his diaphragm muscle, almost suffocating the poor guy. The Chief Inspector offered a hand to the girl who was still inside and did not understand exactly what was just happening. Cary hesitated. Who was this guy? Was not he a cop from the CPU?

“Come on, we do not have too much time. Your friend Daniel is waiting for you in my car.” The name of the kid was the correct keyword to make her jump out of the vehicle. Daniel, seeing the girl, could not stay still in the car anymore. He opened the door and got out of the car. The two kids ran into each other arms. Miriam had also left her PTU and approached her brother. She touched his hand. Martin smiled at seeing the two youngsters in love, waking up old memories of when he and Bella were young too, twenty years ago. “Well, kids, no time for that now. Miriam, you take the kids in your car. We go back to my place. My Protector is stronger than yours. Trust me.”

Miriam nodded while understanding that everything was changing right in front of her eyes. Her brother had openly defied the Secret Service, interrupting a mission ordered by the almighty Archbishop. That was a hardcore crime against the Kingdom by any mean. She knew that if Martin did that, it was because he had no other option. Martin grabbed Daniel by the arm. The boy understood it was time to go. The two kids followed Miriam. Martin shook his head when he noticed the dent and the scratches on the front of his beautiful car. The Secret Service would have to pay for the repairs.

9:30 PM

Arthur had been unconscious for more than two hours, still breathing, but his brain was not responding. Monsignor Carlo was sitting on the same bed, looking at Arthur's peaceful sleeping face. The Archbishop never liked this guy. From the beginning, he first opposed Miriam dating him and later marrying him. This man was an artist, for God's sake, who, in the name of the Lord, would marry an artist. You could play around with an artist, you could make love to an artist, but you would never marry an artist, he told Miriam many times. After the wedding, they came together into some sort of compromise. Donatella and Carlo accepted this flamboyant artist as the inevitable evil they had to deal with anyway. The Archbishop never really understood his art. The Temple may be full of Arthur's collages everywhere, but there was none, not even a small one, hanging from a wall of the Ministry of the Church.

Monsignor Carlo looked at the time displayed on the screen. Father Frank should be now safe in his office. He could not risk any publicity, not right now. The Archbishop put a twisted smile upon his lips. That bastard was lucky. In other circumstances he would have paid dearly for this. Monsignor Carlo knew that Donatella had been fooling around with Father Frank. His Secret Service did a good job spying on them on the side. But he understood why she wanted to hurt him. He had not been able to provide for her,

not from a sexual point of view, he did not think Donatella was missing that much from him, but from the safety and protection side she had always demanded of him. His latest defeat in the Conference made him look bad in the eyes of his own friends. He was the founder father of the Church; some would even say he was the real creator of the Kingdom, the mind behind every single institution governing the globe, the brain working alongside the Lord, the most powerful human being alive. But he was defeated, humiliated by his own colleagues at the Conference, the damn thing that he allowed to rule the world, instead of him.

Father Franks was offering Donatella a strong army of Heavenly Guards. He got the resources approved without any fuss in the Divine City. Who knew whose ass he was kissing over there, but he got what he wanted. And he was an ambitious man. Monsignor Carlo never feared him before. Father Frank had been loyal to him for three decades, since the day the priest put aside his intention of becoming the leader of the Old Church. But now, this flirting with Donatella, was a clear signal that things were changing. Father Frank may think that Monsignor Carlo was not longer the strong man of the Church, but he was wrong, very wrong.

Monsignor Carlo looked at Arthur a last time before using the Intercom. He called the CPU emergency service. He wanted to report an accident. Arthur Goldman had a seizure and was unconscious, in the house of his mother in law. A female voice, with no face, since the official services only showed the logos or some type of advertisement, asked him who was reporting the accident. After his answer, he noticed a deep silence on the other side, soon followed by the image of the Second Inspector, sitting in his office.

“My apologies, Excellence, the Chief Inspector is not available to take your call, but the Second Inspector is at your command.”

“Hello, Daryl, thanks for the attention. I just need an ambulance here and a doctor, something is wrong with Arthur.”

“I see.” Daryl was agreeably surprised by the intimate tone that the almighty Archbishop was using with him. “I am sorry, Excellence, but any passing out of consciousness is treated by us very seriously. I am dispatching right now an emergency unit. I will go in person. Would it be too inconsiderate from my part if I ask you to wait for me there?”

“Not, at all, I’ll wait for you here. Only please, be quick, I got a lot to do at the Ministry tonight.”

“We’ll be there in no time, Excellence.”

Monsignor Carlo closed the channel. He turned on the panoramic screen of the bedroom. Instead of tuning to a channel, he commanded the house to stream the video signals from the security cameras. He wanted to see the sequences filmed after Donatella left the house. The video showed Father Frank, shamelessly naked, wandering around in the kitchen. There was no camera in the bedroom. Father Frank went back to bed and everything went quiet on the screen. The sequences restarted when the main door opened and Arthur and the mysterious girl came into the living room. Monsignor Carlo froze the frame and made a zoom. Cary's face was looking at him from the screen, sporting the sweetest of the smiles. Monsignor Carlo was reluctant to believe it. This young pretty girl could not be the miraculous super being that derailed the Listener.

Suddenly, the door to the bedroom got open. Two well built men, in blue uniform, approached the Archbishop. Before he had time to ask any question or activate his Protector, the guards pulled out their pistols and fired two consecutive charges against Carlo. Before losing consciousness, the Archbishop smiled stupidly at the two intruders.

“Quick, you tie up the hands and feet.” The bossy tone identified the guard in charge. “I’ll do the cleaning.”

“We should kill this bastard here, right now.”

“Are you crazy? He is the Archbishop. The Boss is right; we need a trial, not an execution.” The bossy guard sent a request to the House. The internal computer asked for the code and the man passed it along with the command to erase the video sequences and deactivate the security cameras. “Done! Let’s go now.”

The other guard had the Archbishop tied up, blindfolded and gagged. The two men lifted him up on their shoulders and left the house. A blue van, with the HG initials of the Heavenly Guard, was waiting in the garden. The men put the Archbishop in the back seat, got in the vehicle, and drove the van away from the mansion, barely avoiding the white van from the CPU, approaching at high speed on the local road heading to the mansion.

10:00 PM

Donatella was staring at the man, which she had pictured naked in her mind the whole day. But now he was fully dressed in his white and yellow uniform, the colours of the Bishop of the Old City. Honestly, Donatella liked him much better in the nude version. Father Frank was typing something in the Display Station. She was right all the time. This man meant danger. He was making his move right now, in front of her, as calmed as if he was just drinking a glass of water. Father Frank was sending orders to his Chief of Staff. He had been planning this for a long time. He was confident the Divine

City would approve him taking over the Old City and the entire province. The Archbishop was accused of being a spy working for the Zone. Father Frank had the evidences. He turned off the Display Station and turned around. He got closer to Donatella and embraced her.

“Sorry, my dear, I could not save your son-in-law. Honestly, I tried, but something went wrong. Well he is not dead, but you know...”

“I know it was not your intention, and to be honest with you, I will not miss him. Maybe the doctors can reboot him from scratch. In that case, I will try my best to convince Miriam not to make the same mistake twice and stay away from that sexual pervert.” Donatella could not hide a subtle smile. She remembered the many times she came to visit her daughter and her son in law refused to put any clothes on, wandering around naked, displaying in front of her all his valuable parts at his best. She found it offensive at first, but later she got used to it and even found the show entertaining and amusing. In front of Father Frank, she was trying to appear as if she did not care much for Arthur's fate, but deep in her heart she knew she had some feelings for him; because he was already part of her family, for God's sake! She looked straight into the priest's blue eyes. “Only I want you to remember one thing. You promise not to hurt Carlo.”

“I will not, I promised.” Father Frank kissed the woman in the nose. “He is still our friend. He may be confused. We'll see.”

“Are you sure that girl is...”

“Yes, I am sure. For the moment, I don't know where is she. But we are already after her. She made the mistake to connect to the Umbrella not long ago. “

“Is she still in the system?”

“No, she is out right now.” Father Frank returned to the Display Station, turned it on again and showed Donatella a map of the city. “We lost her close to here, in downtown and, in the same spot, an accident was automatically reported by a PTU computer from a Secret Service vehicle.”

“Do you think Carlo had her?”

“I can't be sure, but my guys suspect the Secret Service had the girl in that vehicle and she got rescued.”

“Rescued? The Hackers attacked a Secret Service vehicle and rescued the girl?”

“I wish I could know, but once I assume control of the Secret Service I will investigate and find out what happened. I am waiting only for the Conference's final authorization. They will have an emergency meeting in few minutes. I am sure the Temple will concede me the extraordinary powers I am requesting given the circumstances. However, just in case, I have my guards ready to storm the Ministry and the CPU offices.”

“Why the CPU if Martin was not supposed to get involved in this?”

“I told you, my dear, it is a backup plan, everything should be fine, don't worry. Now, let's wait for our beloved friend. My guards should be here with him soon.”

“Are you sure this place is safe?” Donatella looked with doubts at the window glasses, doubling as panoramic screens. “Carlo may have powerful friends willing to rescue him too, like it happened with that girl.”

“No worries, everything is under control. We are not going to keep him here. Maybe you never knew it, but we have an old crypt under the basement of this cathedral. Nobody can find that place, trust me. We will have him transferred to the crypt.”

“I don't like this, crypts are old tombs. I don't feel comfortable having Carlo there.”

“Come on, my dear; no need for superstitions. Besides, this decision is not yours to make.”

“Oh, I see.”

Donatella understood. Father Frank was already defining her boundaries. He was in charge now. Well, at least he thought he was. Father Frank seemed to be a very clever man. He was full of surprises. He took care of everything, the Archbishop, the Secret Service, the CPU, the Divine City, but he forgot something no less important, she was still in love with Monsignor Carlo.

10:30 PM

They were hungry. Miriam prepared some sandwiches with what was left in Martin's fridge. Cary told them about what happened in the Crawford Mansion. By the description, Martin and Miriam recognized Father Frank as the naked man in the house when Arthur and Cary entered the bedroom. Probably their mother had been fooling around with the Bishop too. That came partially as a surprise, since they were convinced

that Donatella was truly in love with Carlo. But nobody could get into the Ice Lady's mind, not even her own children.

Miriam had not been able to contact Arthur in the Intercom. She expressed her concerns about her husband. Arthur was not a fighter and Father Frank, despite being a priest, was a giant full of muscles. Miriam wanted to go there, but Martin did not agree. The house was not safe anymore. Besides, he wanted to have some words in private with her sister. They went alone to the bedroom and left the kids in the kitchen. Martin told Miriam about the Professor's death. He did not mention a word about how he died, about his encounter with Friend and the theory of the old man being murdered by the Servants. However, the news of her beloved grandpa passing away was a terrible shock for Miriam. She could not refrain her tears. She asked who was taking care of the corpse. Martin told her that his office had to do a routine investigation, which the CPU always did whenever people died suddenly in the Umbrella without warning. He had not told anybody else, except her. He wanted Miriam to be the first in knowing it. She appreciated the gesture and, still sobbing, hugged her brother. Martin embraced Miriam and kept her in his arms for a long time.

In the kitchen, Daniel and Cary did some catch up with each other stories. Daniel told her about his arrest and how lucky he was that Martin was in charge. He told Cary that Martin ordered the Second Inspector to free Oscar. The Chief Inspector took him here to his apartment. Daniel explained to Cary how he had to suffer being locked by a Guardian for hours, while the Chief Inspector was away. When Martin came back, they both, almost simultaneously, received hers and Miriam's silent messages in the Intercom. They went immediately to the car. What a spectacular chase he witnessed through downtown! He was really impressed with the amazing driving skills of the Chief Inspector.

Cary told him about Lucy setting up the Listener, about her escape from home, about the Messenger and his instructions to find the Linker, which happened to be Arthur, Miriam's husband. Cary told him how they went to Arthur's apartment, which was not safe, because Miriam was expecting a visit from her mother and the Archbishop. Miriam proposed them to hide in the old family mansion by the Riverbank. About the rest, Daniel already knew almost everything. They came to the mansion and in the bedroom was this man, who recognized her from an emergency broadcast of the Ministry on the panoramic screen. Arthur attacked the man and told her to run away, which she did. Not knowing where to go, she let the PTU take her back to Miriam's garage, where she was kidnapped by the Secret Service.

When Martin and his sister came back to the kitchen, Cary noticed that Miriam had been crying but preferred to say nothing. Daniel asked what was the next move. Martin shrugged his shoulders and, without answering, sat in one of the stools looking to the emptiness in front. Miriam did the same. Martin took her hand. Cary and Daniel did

not know what to say, but they knew something sad must have happened. Time seemed to stay still for a while, until Cary broke the silence.

“I’m afraid the Secret Service can find all of you in the Umbrella, I was thinking that maybe I should have everybody disconnected.”

“No, it is okay, only you must stay out of the system.” Martin shook his head and squeezed Miriam's hand. “Everybody knows where I live anyway, but I do not think the Secret Service will move a finger against me, unless the Archbishop authorizes it, and I doubt he will.”

“Now that you mention the Archbishop, he got an emergency call and left in a hurry after the dinner at my place.” Miriam could not explain why, but she suspected this call had something to do with the other events of this evening. “He told Mom to wait for him in her office. Do you want me to call her?”

“No, I don't think it is a good idea.” Martin turned around to look at Cary. His face could not resist a subtle smile. This was the almighty Warrior, the only hope to stop the Umbrella. How come she did not know anything about her powers before the Messenger contacted her? It seemed like she needed some kind of code to activate these powers, but in this scenario, the powers were somehow connected to the Zone, meaning they were not natural, but probably engineered implants. “Cary, I believe the Messenger cannot contact you anymore. However, there must be a replacement from the Zone ready to step in and communicate with you; otherwise all this makes no sense. Have you heard anything from the Hackers?”

“I can hear some static noise when I try to reopen the channel myself. Maybe you are right and someone is trying to contact me. The Messenger told me I should be able to make a call-back as well, and initiate a two-way communication.”

“Have you tried?” Martin asked the question, but he already knew the answer. She had not tried because she was scared. “You should try. You need more instructions. We need to know what else must we do to protect you.”

“Honestly, I didn't feel comfortable doing it before.” Cary responded with an apologetic smile upon her face. “But now that you are here, I feel safe. I will try right now.”

“Wait a second!” Daniel intervened taking Cary's hand. “I know you saved Cary from the Secret Service, but you are the Chief Inspector of the CPU. How can we know this is not a trap?”

“Hey kid, trust me. We all are new players in this game; only Miriam is a veteran, if we can say that. The same way I trusted you when you said you were not a Questioner, you must believe me, I am helping here.”

“Yes, maybe you are right.” Daniel nodded but kept staring into Martin's eyes. “But maybe you want to use us to get to the Zone? You are a cop and a believer, right?”

“I guess I am still a cop and yes, I do believe in many things, but I got many questions like anybody else. I want to find the answers. Listen kid, I'm not saying I sympathize with the Hackers, because I'm not. I'm not saying I'll join their fight, because I don't think I will. But you got to believe me; I'm not acting here as an undercover cop or anything like that. I'll never put myself blindly on the side of something about which I have too many doubts.” Martin changed his focus from the kid to her sister. “Too many strings are linking my family with the History of this Kingdom. I believe that I have the right to know the answers to most of my questions and I'll do whatever is necessary to find these answers, trust me.”

With that said, Martin left the kitchen again and went to the living room. He turned on the screen and tuned in to one of the public news channels. A beautiful young woman was talking about the new advances in the education programs. There were no breaking news to alarm the city dwellers. But he knew something was happening inside the bowels of the Old City. He was expecting the Archbishop to call him at any time, asking questions about the girl. What would he answer? That the girl was under a CPU investigation and the Secret Service had kidnapped her? His godfather would not swallow that. The agents must have informed him that Miriam was also involved. He would suspect this was a conspiracy linked to the Zone. However, the Archbishop would rather try to get him into some sort of settlement than use violence against him. If Monsignor Carlo knew for certain who this girl was, he would probably ask Martin and Miriam to leave the girl alone and stay away. Otherwise, he may let Martin keep the girl.

The Intercom beeping did not surprise him. However, the caller was not expected. Martin saw the face of his Second Inspector. He was not at the office. Something seemed familiar in the surrounding. Martin did not wait any longer and opened the channel.

“Hey Boss, we have a situation here.”

“What is it now?” Martin was trying to guess where Daryl was located and what could be happening now. It could be something related to the events of the night involving the Warrior.

“The Archbishop called us some minutes ago. You were not available in the network so I took the call. He reported an accident in your mother's house. I got our best squad ready and came here.”

“Wait, what kind of accident he reported?”

“Let me finish, Boss.” Daryl looked at the bed beside him. He was in his mother’s bedroom; Martin could recognize it now. On the bed there was a still body. “We found your brother in law unconscious in the bedroom, but no signs of the Archbishop. Our doctor examined the victim and he suspected, by the marks in the neck, that Arthur Goldman was strangled almost to death. He is not dead, because miraculously the heart is still beating and his lungs are still breathing, but the doctor said that the oxygen starvation damaged the brain and put him in a coma. We are taking him to a Hospital right now.”

“Wait, are you saying than Arthur is brain dead?”

“It may be so, sir. The ambulance will take him to the Old City General Hospital. I must notify your sister, but I prefer if you do that for me, Boss.” Daryl looked at Martin with imploring eyes. “I started a full investigation. The third we opened today. I think you should let me handle this one while you take care of the other two.”

Martin knew that Daryl was referring to the crime scene at the Seminar and the false suicide of Doctor Hauptman. The CPU technicians confirmed what Friend had told him. The old Professor died of a heart attack, not because of the bleeding from his open wrists. The superficial scan could not find anything wrong, but the killer had made a gruesome mistake. Why cutting off the wrists and making a bloody mess if the Voice could just let the body alone, as if the man had died of natural cause? This was a message, some sort of warning. The Voice expressly wanted him to know that the old man was killed.

“What did you find so far?”

“The victim was strangled, and the person who called us was the Archbishop. This fact introduces Monsignor Carlo as the first record in the list of possible suspects. What do you think? I would start from there. I need to speak with his Excellence, and for that, I may need your help to navigate faster through the bureaucracy.”

“Did you check the video from the security cameras?”

“Empty, the signals were erased just before we came here.”

“I see.” Martin knew a lot more than his clever Second Inspector, but he could not tell him. “Listen, Daryl, I need a big favour from you.”

“Whatever you need Boss.”

“I’m afraid this is the beginning of many things that will happen in the course of this night. I need you to stay alert and have all our Guardians ready. If you have loaned some of the programs to the guards or the agents, I want you to call them back home.” Martin wanted to be sure his main weapons were safe in his hand. “I will call you soon. I’m going to look for the Archbishop.”

“I understand, Boss. Another thing, when we were arriving at the house, we saw a blue van of the Heavenly Guard rushing in the opposite direction.”

“I see. Thanks, Daryl, we will keep in touch. I’m closing now.”

Martin ended the communication. That bastard of Father Frank strangled his brother in law. He probably called the Archbishop to cover for him. Martin had always wonder how that bald giant became the Bishop of the Old City. Father Frank may lack personality and charisma, but he was a clever man. The Bishop not only used Monsignor Carlo, abusing of their long time friendship, but he also had his mother's support now, or how come he was naked in Donatella’s bed? Miriam was looking at him. She heard him talking about Arthur.

“Well, tell me something, for God's sake.”

“I’m sorry, Miriam, I was thinking.” He was telling the truth. It was not his intention to hide his conversation with Daryl from his sister. “Arthur is in coma. Daryl is taking care of him. He is sending your husband right now to the General Hospital.”

“I need to go there.”

“I know.” Martin responded without looking at her. He knew it was too late for Arthur. If the was brain dead, the only thing that may function, if he got lucky, was a total reboot. Everything depended on for how long was the oxygen supply cut off. “Listen Miriam, I know Arthur had a mission to accomplish. He saved Cary from being captured by the Bishop and his guards. He fought with his bare hands and alone against a foe twice stronger than him, just for the sake of saving the Warrior. On the other hand, I believe something big is about to happen tonight. There is something I forgot to tell you. The Professor didn’t die of natural causes. His heart attack was induced. He was killed.”

“Why you didn’t tell me before? Who killed grandpa?”

“Let’s say that the killer faked a suicide to send a warning. He killed the Messenger and now he is after the Warrior.”

“Do you know who this killer is?”

“Yes, I cannot prove it, but I believe the Voice is behind the killings and I'm going to see that bastard now.”

Cary and Daniel joined them in the living room. They had been listening. Miriam took a seat beside her brother. She knew about the existence of the Voice. The Hackers had been trying in vain to identify the supposed leader of the Servants. But nobody had ever seen this person.

“Do you know who the Voice is?”

“Yes and no, I cannot be sure.” Martin takes Miriam's hand. “My intuition could be wrong, but I have my suspicions and I hope I can solve the mystery tonight. Therefore I need you to stay here with the kids.”

Miriam squeezed her brother's hand. She missed Arthur already. She looked at the two kids watching, silent, standing in front of them. They were just children, for God's sake! They shouldn't be here, but the Lord worked in mysterious ways, as grandpa used to say, half serious half joking.

“I'm sorry Martin, but I can't let you go. You have a primary mission to accomplish, and you know it. You are the Hammer. You have to protect the Warrior.”

“How do you know that I am the Hammer?”

“The Warrior also knows that you are the Hammer. You can ask Cary.”

The girl nodded without saying a word. She knew Martin was the Hammer from the moment he rescued her from the Secret Service agents. She felt the signal inside her head as soon as he got closer. Daniel was the only one that looked surprised. He only knew that he was the Courier. All this stuff about the Hammer and the Warrior sounded like gibberish to him, but he suspected that there had to be some rationale behind this game of nicknames. He was still having a hard time believing that Cary, his girlfriend, was the mystic Warrior of the Hackers. Now he had to swallow that the Chief Inspector of the CPU had also a role to play in the obscure legend written in the New Book.

“It was she who told you that I was the Hammer?”

“No, Cary did not tell me anything. I knew it. Grandpa told me long time ago, when he implanted the code in your mind.”

“I cannot believe this!” Martin stood up and looked at her sister with anger in his eyes. “Why didn't you tell me?”

“I could not, Martin. Your code would activate only when the Warrior was ready to be awoken. Friend did that this morning. If I had told you before, you simply could not believe me, trust me. Grandpa decided that you should be the Hammer.”

“What if all this is just a product of the Professor's fantasy? Maybe he invented all these stupid names and inserted them in our brains as part of a play written by a delirious mind. What if the Zone is just a myth and the Hackers another fairy tale?”

“Maybe it is as you say, I can't be sure. But you met Friend, and he is working for the Zone. That could be some sort of evidence. What do you think, detective?” Miriam grabbed Martin's hand again. “Listen, faith is the act of believing in something you are not sure if it exists or not. Believing in the Lord and in the Kingdom has nothing to do with faith. We have them here. We can touch them. We can smell the Kingdom everywhere we go. The Zone is the only thing that is keeping our imagination alive, a mystic place where people are not chained by the Umbrella, a place where people can think freely and believe in whatever they want. The Hackers don't want the destruction of the faith. On the contrary, they want us to have faith again, in our own future, in something that we aren't sure of, because it doesn't exist yet. We have to succeed, Martin. There is no other way. Therefore your mission is more important than anything else. You can't leave and let the Warrior here alone, not even with me. Cary will need to contact back the Zone. The Hackers will tell us what to do next.”

All eyes turned to Cary. She felt embarrassed. She had been trying unsuccessfully to open a communication channel back to the Zone. She had improved her control of the Umbrella. She could manipulate with her mind any source of energy she focused on. Maybe she needed more time to learn how to establish telepathic links outside the system. Maybe the Zone had to contact her first.

“We can't wait.” Martin looked back at the girl. She was the Warrior. She had to be. But he also remembered Friend's last words. He had to be careful with the Voice and the Servants. They were the real threat. They were after the Warrior. Staying quietly in his apartment, doing nothing and waiting for the Zone to send the next set of instructions, was not an option. The Servants would make their move soon. “I know I have to do this, Miriam, trust me. I have to find and confront the Voice, before the Servants know where the Warrior is. Because they will eventually find out, believe me. We are running out of time.”

“I trust you, Martin. You are the Hammer and it is supposed you would know better than anybody else how to protect the Warrior.” Miriam nodded giving her brother a look of understanding. “But we are in this all together. If you feel like we must do the first move, then let's do it together. We have the Warrior. She has powers. Let's use them.”

11:00 PM

Monsignor Carlo regained consciousness when the cold made him shiver too badly. He had been stripped of his clothes and tied up to a metal chair. There was almost no light, just a dimmed glow, coming from a solitary candle, placed in the corner between two stone walls. He had no clue where he was. He only remembered being assaulted by two guards in Donatella's house. They must have drugged him. That was the only way he could have been brought to this place without resistance. He tried to reach the Umbrella. He was being kept out of the system. How could they do that? Without the Umbrella he felt even more naked. He looked down his body. He was naked. Who was behind this? Monsignor Carlo screamed for help. It was getting too cold, the shivers intensified. He was afraid he was going to be sick. Then he heard some steps behind his back. He could not turn his head, because his neck was tied up to the high back chair. He could barely move his fingers and toes, the rest of his body was physically restrained, his arms, chest, waist, knees, wrists and ankles strapped mercilessly to the metal frame of the chair.

“Who are you? What do you want from me? I'm the Archbishop, you know. Listen to me!” Nobody answered. He felt a hand resting on the back of his neck, the almost tender caressing of a finger. His captor went around him. Now Carlo could see something. It was a young priest, dressed with the white cassock of the Seminar. The man had some wires and some clamps in his hands. “What are you doing? I told you I'm the Archbishop. In the name of the Lord, I command you to release me!”

The young priest looked at him for a second. His grey transparent eyes were burning with the fire of a madness that scared Carlo. His skinny face, long blonde hair, white dress and mild manners, conferred him a soft delicate touch. He was attaching the clamps to different areas of Carlo's body. The Archbishop could not believe this. He was going to be tortured with electric charges, like it happened to the political prisoners in the Old Times, in the wildest uncivilized regions of the world.

“You got to be kidding. What the hell is this? Get off me, you pervert, don't touch me!” Carlo started to scream really loud. “Somebody help me!”

His captor ignored his cries. The priest finished his job and went back to his position behind the chair. Carlo felt a pair of warm hands resting on his shoulders, long fingers softly playing with his hair, touching down his neck and upper chest. This bastard was enjoying seeing him naked, vulnerable, and exposed. The young man was touching him. He must be a sadist. What did he want from him? Maybe he wanted money? The Archbishop was too clever to believe he had been kidnapped only for a ransom. Like an answer to his question, he heard a voice inside his head.

“Hello, my old friend, I hope the kidnapping and transportation were not too much of an inconvenience for you. I know, it's cold there, but soon you will feel warmer, trust me. You already know who am I, right? You know who we are. We are here to make a deal with you. But first I want to show you the persuasive methods we can use to help you understand better your options.” The voice inside his head was unknown to him. It sounded distorted and distant. “My assistant has attached some tiny clamps to certain sensitive parts of your body. These clamps are supporting the ends of wires connected to an electric generator. The current of low voltage will rather make you feel a pleasurable tickling rather than pain, believe me. But there is a catch. A Level Zero program is inside your mind. It's mastering your neural system as we speak. It will use the electric currents to pinpoint the nerves being stimulated and their connections to your brain. Once they are located, it will be able to do miracles with that pleasurable vibration, believe me. It can make you feel the most unbearable pain you have ever felt in your life. You will beg us to stop. You will do whatever we ask for, trust me.”

“Who are you?”

“Come on, don't be a child, you know who I am.”

Monsignor Carlo was afraid to say it aloud, but he suspected who the demon inside his mind was. The Voice had finally decided to show itself. The Archbishop knew that, at some point, the Voice would have to make contact. The founder of the One Church and the leader of the Servants were meant to meet anyway. But Carlo did not expect this would happen this way, the Voice being in total control of his mind. Obviously the circumstances of the meeting were not the most desirable for him.

“How can you be inside my head? What do you want from me? You can't keep me here forever.”

“For every question, there is an answer. I can get into any mind I want, inside or outside of the system, believe me. In your case, we needed you to be outside of the Umbrella, away from your Protector. In order to keep you out of the system all the time I want, we needed a little help, a serum which disrupts the entry point, similar to the Fryers effect. You have a needle inserted in the back of your neck. This is why your head had been restrained. The second question is the most important one. What do we want from you? We want three things from you. First thing, we need you to make a recording recognizing that you were a spy working for the Zone, something like a public apology, you know, for deceiving everybody with your false promises. Second thing, we want another recording where you officially resign to your position of Archbishop and ask for the pardon of the Lord and to be sent into exile, saying to the East Provinces. And the last thing we want from you is making public your relationship with the widow of Colonel Crawford, and saying that you used her for political gain, that you truly never loved her, as simple as that, nothing more. These are the three points of our negotiation here. You

don't need to say anything right now. We know your current answers, but don't worry, they are going to change. You are willing to suffer and unfortunately you will. And then, slowly, one by one, you will concede us our three wishes. With that we will end the show and everybody will be happy, trust me. Do you want us to start the show now?"

The Archbishop needed to gain some time. The demands showed that this person was crazy. He thought that the Voice was a clever organizer, someone worthy of meeting some day to discuss the future of the Servants and the Church together. Now he saw that the Voice was absolutely insane, thinking that he could accept these three points.

"Listen, you know I can't accept that. But before you kill me, tell me who you are. I wanted to negotiate with the Servants for a long time ago. I thought that the Servants were a genuine representation of our most devoted believers. The Church would be proud to collaborate with the Servants."

"Really? That is very touching! The thing is that the Servants don't want anything from you, or the Church, as a matter of fact. Let me be clear. If you cooperate and accept these terms, you will be transferred, sane and safe, in no time, to an island in the Eastern Province. The place is a secluded monastery in a beautiful location, perfect for reflection and meditation, which, I believe, you are going to need a lot for the rest of your life. It will also be less traumatic for everyone else, not only for you. But if you resist, even if you prefer to die rather than accepting our requests, we are going to have no mercy. Trust me when I say that I truly don't want to get to that point, for the sake of our old friendship, but we aren't allowed to feel pity, and eventually all this could become a very nasty business, and all because of you. Believe me, my friend, I will blame your death on your own blindness and stupidity. The funny thing is that, once you are dead, we would have achieved exactly the same objectives of our demands. Do you understand?"

"Then, why not kill me at once, and spare me the pleasure of this conversation?"

"It's a good point. But I wanted to give you a chance to be clever at least once in your stupid life. You should know better by now who are we. I mean not the Voice, but the face behind all this."

"I have my suspicions, but I also have my doubts." The Archbishop heard the young priest behind his head handling the generator. They were ready to begin. "But I want you to tell me. I want you to have the balls to tell me who are you, the one talking to me now."

"I'm sorry, my friend. I have no name and no face, I'm just a voice. I could be a man or a woman. I could be a close friend of yours or a forgotten young priest, like the one helping us here. I could even be yourself, just a voice inside you coming out of your sick mind."

“That's very funny.”

“No, it's true. There is no way you can tell.”

“You are just a crazy bastard, thinking of becoming God." Monsignor Carlo was trying desperately to gain more time. “If you were the Lord I could understand why, but you...”

“You better stop being sarcastic, believe me. That does not help. Well, now is your last chance. Will you accept these terms?”

“No, and a thousand times I will not. You will burn in hell, filthy pervert!”

“Very well, we proceed then with the first round. I didn't want to, but you are not giving us more options. I will know from inside your head if you really want to say something valuable, and only then we will stop the pain. No need to beg or ask us to stop. Don't try to deceive me saying you are ready to negotiate just to stop the procedure. No dirty tricks, my friend, don't forget that I am inside your mind. I will know if you are being sincere. Get ready, my friend, because here we start.”

11:30 PM

Donatella was desperately trying to find the access to the underground crypt. She had the plans of the ancient building in her Display Station. Father Frank was gone to his office. He was assisting remotely to the urgent meeting of the Conference. Donatella asked him to let her see the Archbishop, but her request was denied. Father Frank promised they will meet Carlo soon, the three of them together again, like in the old times, but for now, there were other more important things to take care of. He needed her to contact the Assembly and explain to the leaders of the congregations that everything was under control, that nothing had actually changed in the Church, that the Archbishop was being impeached for negligence and other charges, that the Bishop of the Old City was the acting chief of the Church, waiting for the Conference to approve his interim position until the Assembly elected a new Archbishop. Father Frank had everything planned with anticipation. He was following a precise script, which Donatella was trying badly to catch up. Fortunately, she had accepted the priest's advances towards her. That placed her in an advantageous position to follow up closely with the events unfolding fast in front of her eyes.

When Father Frank entered her office this evening, she immediately knew that something big was about to happen. Monsignor Carlo had left the dinner at Miriam's apartment in a rush, and asked her to wait for him in her offices at the Cathedral. Father Frank, who was supposed to be in her house, waiting for her, came suddenly to her office in a hurry, speaking simultaneously to several people in the Intercom. When Father Frank finally had time to speak to her, he explained that the Warrior was a girl being tracked by every law enforcement agency in the city, and also that, by the way, the Archbishop had been arrested for suspicions of cooperating with the Zone.

Donatella could not believe Father Frank was accusing their best friend of treason. The Bishop told her that Monsignor Carlo was probably innocent, but the move was necessary for saving the Kingdom. He must be elected the new Archbishop to execute his long term plan, because he and the Lord think that it is the only way to succeed. She just had to trust him and the Lord. When she asked what will happen to Carlo, Father Frank promised that nothing will happen to their old friend, that the Archbishop will not be hurt, but transferred to a secure place, outside of the province, where they could go visit him anytime they wanted.

Donatella did not believe a word of what he said to her, but Father Frank was moving his pieces at the speed of light. The Heavenly Guards were supporting him in every step. He sent all the available patrols out to the streets and had the Ministry and the CPU building ready to be occupied. He was only waiting for the confirmation from the Conference to call the commanders of the Secret Service and the CPU officers and ask for their support and loyalty. If any of these agencies rejected his authority, his guards would storm the respective building and take control of the command chain. On the other hand, Father Frank was waiting for Donatella to hand over to him, on a silver platter, the Assembly of the Congregations. Once she had the leaders convinced that this was the natural succession process, he would call the Assembly for the election of the new Archbishop, in which he would be the only listed candidate.

There was where Donatella saw her chance. She did not have the power to stand alone against Father Frank in this military coup. Trying to ask the Secret Service or the CPU to follow her orders would be difficult and risky. She thought of accusing Father Frank of treason and demanding some action from the Conference, but the truth was that the gossips about her and Carlo being lovers were no secrets to anyone in the Divine City. Father Frank had probably sent to the Temple some fabricated evidences of the Archbishop's links with the Zone. If she tried to get support from the Conference, Donatella would be discredited and in no position to demand anything. Her only possibility was to defeat Father Frank in the Assembly's election where she had an enormous influence among the local leaders and the average churchgoers. She had been warning Monsignor Carlo for many years, but the Archbishop always trusted Father Frank. Life demonstrated that he was wrong and she was right, but now it was too late for amending anything.

Father Frank had the Archbishop incarcerated in some obscure crypt under the basement of the Cathedral. She was worrying about his safety, even when Father Frank promised not to hurt Monsignor Carlo. She could not trust this man. For a second, she thought of calling Martin in the Intercom and asking for help. But she knew Martin would be angry and could respond harshly against Father Frank. Her son would probably make some dangerous moves with his CPU against the Heavenly Guard, and she did not want Martin getting involved. She must act alone.

Donatella placed a call for an urgent conference in the Intercom with the leaders of the Congregations. Most of them were now online. She explained the situation. She told them about the Archbishop being charged of having secret dealings with the Hackers. She mentioned that Father Frank was assuming control of the Church and was requesting their support in this difficult moment. She clarified that an election should be called immediately and that she would prefer to have an open list of candidates. One of the Church leaders asked her if she was thinking of running as a candidate, because many of the believers would certainly feel more comfortable having her as the new Archbishop instead of Father Frank. She smiled and said that she had to think about it. The online conference call ended with the approval of a resolution in support of Father Frank's temporary authority as interim Archbishop, conditioned to an exhaustive report of his actions against Monsignor Carlo. This last addition came from Donatella, but Father Frank did not have to know.

A beep inside her head signalled a call coming in the Intercom. It was Martin. She was tempted to block the call, but at the last second, she decided to take it. He seemed upset. He said he had been trying to reach the Archbishop in the Intercom, but Monsignor Carlo was not in the system. Donatella explained that she had no clue where Carlo could be. She asked Martin to go to Miriam's place. She was worried about her. Martin responded that Miriam was with him at his apartment, that Arthur had been sent to the Hospital, that her son in law was in coma, that someone tried to strangle the artist in her house this evening. Donatella acted as if she knew nothing about it. She said she could not understand what Arthur was doing in her house. Martin did not have time to explain. He was coming over to see her. Donatella tried to stop him saying that she was very busy right now, but her son insisted. Things were on the move. He needed to talk to her, in person. He was on his way to her office as he spoke, together with Miriam.

The call ended just before she heard a knock at the door. Father Frank came in, followed by a young priest who locked the door behind him. She had seen him before, in the Cathedral, but she knew the young fellow was not part of the staff. He was probably one of the assistants at the Seminar. She was almost sure that she had seen him there too. Father Frank looked tired. The Conference accepted his request. He had been officially appointed the interim Archbishop. The Secret Service was now under his command. He needed to speak to Martin. Donatella asked where was Monsignor Carlo. Father Frank

did not answer. He was again busy in the Intercom, talking to someone. The young priest was standing on guard beside the door. Was she being arrested too? Maybe more guards were outside, waiting. Father Frank ended his conversation and approached Donatella. He put his heavy hands on her shoulders. She was still sitting in front of her Display Station, but the monitor screen was off.

“I have bad news, my dear. Monsignor Carlo is not longer among us.”

12:00 AM

Martin missed his PTU. He was driving her sister's car. It was not that bad, actually, pretty good for a vehicle made by Universal Movers, but it could not make sharp turns at the intersections and the computer was too mellow when responding to the accelerator pedal. Miriam was beside him in the passenger seat. Daniel and Cary were in the back. They were approaching the parking lot near the Celestial Square. Martin took a look at the monument in the centre of the square. Powerful reflectors illuminated the bronze figure of his father. He wished he could stop, and get closer, maybe ask some questions directly to the dark face of the statue. Who knew, maybe the spirit of his late father was roaming around that place. But it was supposed that his father's soul must be with the Lord, watching from above or from that obscure dimension where Friend and his companions were waiting before coming here. Martin stopped the car, but stayed inside, looking around through the windshield.

“Cary, take your time, but I need you to derail the Shield and any Protector you can detect in the area.”

“I'm on it.” Cary concentrated. She could feel the energy streaming around her. She could sense the electromagnetic fields flowing in currents like the wind in a hurricane, following the patterns set by the rotation of the planet's core. She had been experimenting with them. She did not need the Umbrella to see the Shield and the Protectors. “I can take down the Shield of the Ministry, but the Protectors are locals.”

“If you take out the Umbrella in the area, the Protectors will be of no use and I can still use my Guardians.”

“As soon as the Umbrella is off, we will not be able to use the Intercom. We will be left without communication.”

Cary was right. He needed the Intercom to keep a channel open with the Warrior. But he thought of everything. He always kept in his apartment a pair of old walking-talkies, the same devices the ancient police departments used for communication. They could work on a public frequency. At least, he was still having access to the CPU

network. Before leaving the apartment, Martin spoke again with Daryl. The Second Inspector updated him with the latest news. His godfather had been arrested and accused of treason. Father Frank had been appointed the interim Archbishop. Nobody knew where Monsignor Carlo was being held prisoner. Martin instructed Daryl to have the Guardians ready. He knew Father Frank had been trying to locate him in the Intercom, but he blocked the calls. If the priest spoke to Daryl, the Second Inspector knew what to say, his boss was Martin, and the Chief Inspector was on his way to see him in person. Father Frank would not dare to override his authority in the CPU, not before speaking with him first. Martin offered one of the walking-talkies to the kids.

“Here, take this. It is an old communication device. It works similar to the way the Messenger used to speak to you, through standard radio frequencies, but it has a limited range of five kilometres. They are tuned to each other and they will automatically search for the correct channel. You just press this button to talk.”

“Is it like an old cellphone?” Daniel looked at the device. He had read about it before. Like the cellphones, they disappeared from the market shortly after the Umbrella. He took the walking-talkie that Martin was handing to them and pressed the button. Martin's unit beeped in one of the Chief Inspector's pocket. “This is cool.”

“Just tell me when you are ready?” Martin looked at Cary. She was busy with something inside her head. Miriam took her hand. Cary smiled at her. Martin did not feel comfortable leaving the kids behind. The guards could find the vehicle. The Secret Service must be after them too. They could have followed the PTU, even when he took all the precautions. Cary had everybody out of the system during the trip, just in case the Secret Service agents had attached a Sentinel to one of them. There also existed the possibility that Father Frank had sent Security programs after him. In any case, they were better staying unreachable through the Umbrella. “Remember the plan. You stay low, hiding here in the car. Cary will monitor the system from outside, to detect any sudden surge of energy in the area. Daniel, you keep a visual around the vehicle. We can't have a Protector on the car without the Umbrella, but I can set an outbound Guardian. It will work almost in the same way, nobody will be able to enter the PTU without the code. I'm sure everything will be fine, but if something happens to us, each of you will have the code imprinted in your brain. You must deactivate the Guardian and escape. If someone attempted to forcefully enter the car, the Guardian will react expelling the intruder. If a guard approached, you must explain that you are under a Guardian, arrested by the Chief Inspector of the CPU and waiting for me, that I'm inside the Cathedral and will be back soon. If anyway, something went wrong, here take this Magnum pistol. It's the same model the Heavenly Guard uses. You aim, press the trigger and the target will be immobilized for around five minutes. Is everything clear?”

“Yes, Hammer, everything is clear.” Daniel answered enjoying the thrill of having a Magnum pistol in his hand. He was a man with a weapon now. He liked calling Martin now by his pseudonym from the Zone. “I aim and press the trigger, easy and cool.”

“You will use it only as your last resource, is that clear?”

The kid nodded and placed the pistol under the back seat. Cary looked at Martin straight into his eyes. She was done with the Shield and now was turning off the Umbrella in the whole area surrounding the Celestial Square, including the Cathedral and the Ministry. It worked like a rehearsal of what the Hackers had been waiting for, the Umbrella going down everywhere in the city.

“The Shield is down, the Umbrella is off.”

“Time to go.” Martin extended his right hand to Daniel. The kid did not know what to do at first, until he realized the Chief Inspector was waiting for a friendly handshake. Daniel smiled and grabbed Martin's hand. “Take care of the Warrior for me, Courier.”

12:30 AM

Father Frank said he was upset. Donatella had to believe him. He explained that some sort of strange interference got into Monsignor Carlo's head. He suspected the Hackers did some dirty trick. Carlo fought all he could, but the intruder electrocuted the brain and his heart was weak and failed. Donatella was really very upset. She did not believe a word of what this pig was saying. Did he think that she was stupid? The Archbishop had a powerful Protector around him. He could be arrested and physically restrained but nothing, absolutely nothing could get into his mind, unless he had been forced outside the system. Did Father Frank put her beloved Carlo at risk by placing him out of the Umbrella? The priest cried that he did not know. The guards had Carlo immobilized and drugged to bring him here. Father Frank thought that the thick concrete walls of the crypt may have affected the connection with the Umbrella. Everything was very confusing. He had ordered a detailed investigation of what happened. Father Frank had no chance to speak with Carlo. When he went to see the Archbishop, Carlo was already in agony. He called the doctors. They did what they could, but the heart stopped beating.

“I want to see him now.”

“I’m afraid that is not possible, my dear. The doctors took him to the Ministry. His body is being thoroughly examined as part of the investigation.” Father Frank had to put more force with his hands on Donatella's shoulders to keep her seated on the chair in front of her desk. “Listen, I promise we will find the killer, trust me, but now we have to move on and continue with our plan.”

“But you promised...” Donatella was about to irrupt in a cry, but she was the Ice Lady. She fought back the tears. She would not give this monster the pleasure of seeing her suffering. “You had promised to not hurt Carlo.”

“In the name of the Lord, my dear, how many times I have to tell you that I have nothing to do with Carlo's death. He was killed by the Hackers, trust me.”

“I need to speak with the Professor.”

“What did you say? How come you don't know that Doctor Hauptman passed away this afternoon? I'm surprised your son didn't tell you anything. He found the Professor dead in his penthouse. I read it in a report that Martin sent to the Heavenly Guard.” Father Frank was not expecting this surprise request from Donatella. The Professor's death had been handled with strict confidentiality by the CPU, following direct orders of her son. This bastard of Martin kept his secrets too well, even from his own mother. “I'm sorry, my dear, I thought you knew.”

“I guess I'm missing a lot lately.” The shock of knowing about the Professor's passing could not overwhelm the pain she felt inside for Carlo's unexpected death. “Did you kill the Professor too?”

“Come on, my dear, how can you say things like that about me? I though you knew me better after all the time we had share together recently. You know we have been planning this together. You knew I had to arrest Monsignor Carlo to protect him from his own enemies in the Church. You knew the Professor was a sick man. He was senile. He took his life to avoid more humiliation.”

“The Professor killed himself? That is crazy! And you pretend me to believe that? How did you know it was a suicide?”

“I told you, I read the report from the CPU.”

“When you did that? You did not have time for anything, except for your damn coup.”

“Listen, Donatella, I don't have time for your rants right now. I have a simple question for you. Are you still with me?” Donatella could feel the priest's hands, like two claws, hurting her shoulders. She gained nothing by confronting him now and here.

Nothing! She must calm down. Father Franks knew she had to. There was no other option, unless she was willing to take the risk of turning against him, a desperate action which could cost Donatella not only her own brain, if not her life, but that of her children too. Father Frank placed a kiss on top of her head. "Please, my dear, you have to trust me. By the way, I need to speak to Martin, right now."

A knock at the door made the young priest come alive. He looked at Father Frank. Something must be wrong. He was not in the system anymore. The guard would have sent a call in the Intercom before anybody could knock at this door. But for some inexplicable reason the Umbrella was not working. Father Frank nodded and smiled. What could be happening to the system? Without the Umbrella there was no Protector. Anybody could walk in and attack him physically. However, he felt safe. The guards were not that far outside. The Secret Service was under his command. The Conference gave him the authority.. The Congregations were supporting his temporary appointment. He was the interim Archbishop now, the most powerful man in the province.

"Open the door."

1:00 AM

Daryl was back in his office at the Crime Prevention Unit. He left Arthur in the Hospital. The doctors needed more time to investigate. Apparently it was not the lack of oxygen which caused the damage to the brain, but an unknown surge inside Arthur's head that fried his neurones, leaving him like a vegetable. The heart was also affected by the surge, but Arthur was young and strong and his heart survived, keeping the vital blood flow to the brain. There was a small chance of recovery using conventional treatment. The doctors were not very optimistic, but they would try everything in their hands to reverse the coma without doing a total reboot, which may work or not anyway, and in case it did, the procedure would leave the brain of the young man like the one of a newborn baby.

Daryl had a call in the Intercom with the High Commander of the Secret Service. They were long time friends, colleagues. Many times they helped each other in solving difficult cases. The Commander told him that four of his agents were attacked few hours ago by Martin, who setup Guardians on each of them. The Chief Inspector kidnapped a prisoner that his agents were bringing to the Ministry for interrogation, following direct instructions of his Excellence, Monsignor Carlo. The Commander tried to reach the Archbishop, but his Excellence was out of the system. He tried to reach Martin too, but the Chief Inspector blocked his calls or was also out of the system. The Commander did not want to take any action before he spoke to either of them. But no long ago, he received a call from the Bishop. Monsignor Carlo had been arrested by the Heavenly

Guard, accused of treason. Father Frank was now the interim Archbishop and, therefore, his boss. His Excellence requested information about the incident involving the four agents. He answered that the incident was currently under investigation and a report would be sent to his Excellence as soon as possible. The Commander wanted to know if the Second Inspector knew anything about this issue. Daryl answered that he spoke to Martin before, but the Chief Inspector did not mention anything to him and had not been reachable since then. He thanked the Commander and promised to keep him informed.

Daryl had already told Martin about this conversation with the Commander of the Secret Service. The Boss must have known something was in the making when he requested all the Guardians to be ready for action. It was hard to believe that the founder of the One Church, Monsignor Carlo, had been accused of treason. Fortunately, the Boss was still the Boss. Daryl did not know what exactly Martin was planning to do, but he could not see how the CPU could oppose alone, with just a few dozens of Guardians, against the Heavenly Guard and the Secret Service together. Besides, the Boss had not asked him about his personal loyalty. What would he do if he got a call from the Ministry, announcing his promotion to the position of Chief Inspector, together with the order to arrest Martin? He prayed to the Lord for never receiving that call. But anyway, he had to do something. He must find Martin. Daryl sent again an urgent request for a dual channel within the CPU private network, but there was no response from Martin. He could sense the connection was there, but some sort of strange interference was blocking the channel in either direction. He could not establish communication with Martin, but the Boss was still having access to the Guardians, hopefully.

His Display Station turned on automatically. There was a Red Flag flashing on the screen. The Umbrella was under attack. The system had been disconnected in the vicinity of the Celestial Square, in a range of around three kilometres. Several guards patrolling the region were out of the system as well as the security personnel of the Ministry. The Heavenly Guard had responded by sending out scouts with portable scanners. They were looking for some kind of super fryer, sabotaging the Umbrella. However, due to the late hour, only a few guards were available. They were asking for immediate support from the CPU.

Daryl followed automatically the procedure in case of a Red Flag. He left a message for Martin in both the Intercom and in the private network. He sent a response to the Heavenly Guard coordination officer explaining that the CPU was taking over the situation. He called his night shift squad. Daryl was going right now to the Celestial Square.

1:30 AM

The force field was inside his head. He could not move, not even a finger, barely his tongue in his dried mouth. Miriam was at his side. She was also suffering, in agony for the pain. He wanted to hold her hand but none of his muscles was responding. Their neural links had been entirely severed. How could this thing have happened to him? How could he have been so stupid? When they came in, their mother greeted them with the usual smile, not too warm, not too cold, just in the middle. She was the Ice Lady after all. Then there was also this blonde priest. Martin had seen him before, at the Seminar. He was the young assistant to the Master Supervisor. Martin wondered what he was doing there, in her mother's office, and why the door had been locked.

Father Frank acted amicably as usually. He invited them in. He offered them a seat on the white sofa by the window. He wanted to speak to both of them. He had been trying to reach Martin the whole night but the Chief Inspector had been probably busy with his investigations and could not take his call. Martin decided to let him talk before asking any question. Father Frank started by explaining his encounter with Arthur in Donatella's house, and the mysterious girl, which he believed was a major threat to the Kingdom. When Arthur attacked him by surprise, he defended himself. He knocked out Arthur with no difficulties, but the girl escaped. He was about to call Donatella and ask for advice when he noticed that the young man was not responding. Arthur was breathing, but unconscious. He called the Archbishop and told him to come over. Almost at the same time, he received a communication from the Special Investigations Unit of the Heavenly Guard saying that Monsignor Carlo had been caught conspiring against the Kingdom. The Archbishop received a visit from the Professor this morning. Doctor Hauptman was a sick man, but in his senility, he ended up collaborating with the Hackers. Somehow, the Professor blackmailed the Archbishop to work for the Zone, because Monsignor Carlo accepted. The Special Investigations Unit succeeded setting up a Listener in the Archbishop's office. He saw the evidences which he immediately posted to the Divine City for analysis. When the Archbishop came to the house, Father Frank felt afraid and said nothing to Monsignor Carlo. The Bishop left the Crawford Mansion, and called in the guards. They arrested the Archbishop and took him to the Cathedral. Since the Hackers had made a bold move and rescued the mysterious girl, who had been taken prisoner by the Secret Service, Father Frank wanted to be sure the Hackers would not try to do the same with Monsignor Carlo, and he sent the Archbishop to the crypt under the basement. Apparently, the solid walls of the crypt interfered with the Umbrella, and Carlo's Protector stopped working. The Hackers, probably frustrated by his arrest, decided to terminate the Archbishop. They killed him using one of their secret weapons, which Father Frank would exhaustively investigate with the help of the brightest brains from the Ministry of Science.

These were extraordinary circumstances. Father Frank had to act in defence of the Kingdom. He truly wanted to save Monsignor Carlo, but the Hackers outsmarted him. Maybe the Zone also forced the Professor to commit suicide this afternoon. Father Frank asked for advice to the Lord. They had been in direct contact, almost on a daily basis, for

the last couple of years. The Council and the Conference approved his steps. He had been appointed interim Archbishop, while the Assembly of the Congregations would call for an election in a few hours. He already spoke with the Commander of the Secret Service and the Chief of Staff at the Ministry's offices. Donatella had been of great help in getting the Assembly ready for the urgent election. He knew the Chief Inspector had been very busy and did not want to interfere with Martin's investigations, but he needed to speak with him and his sister about the recent events, which had touched their very close friends. He wanted Martin and Miriam to know that he had been also a loyal friend of the Crawford family since the very beginning and that, under his mandate, the siblings could always count with his entire support and favour.

Then it was Martin's turn to talk. He stood up from the sofa and got closer to the Bishop. Miriam followed him, standing by his side, confronting the steel gaze of Father Frank's blue eyes. Martin had some questions which he wanted to ask his Excellence. Father Frank nodded and smiled, apparently without concerns. Martin asked where he was the night before, when Father Roland was killed in the cellar of the Seminar. Father Frank answered right away, without blinking, that he was sleeping in his private quarters. His security guards could confirm his alibi. Martin asked where he was when the Professor was killed this afternoon. Father Frank looked at Donatella, and smiled condescendingly. He was with their mother at her house and, after she left, he stayed there until Arthur and the girl surprised him sleeping in the bedroom. Until that moment, everything was going well, a peaceful and civilized dialogue. But then, Martin made the first mistake. He pushed the priest too hard against the wall. He asked Father Frank how he knew that the Professor had been killed, when he had not told to anyone, not even to his mother. Martin asked how Father Frank could know the circumstances of the Professor's death, if the CPU had kept the investigation highly classified. Donatella added that Father Frank had supposedly read a report about the investigation. Martin smiled and asked how the Bishop could read something that never existed. Father Frank looked around. Donatella was staring at him, smiling in triumph. He had been caught, stupidly caught by a simple cop with a stupid question. Martin saw the weakness in the man and made the second mistake of the night. He called a Guardian and set it up against the young priest, who was getting ready to jump on him. The assistant screamed in pain while being immobilized. Martin's next step was to setup a second Guardian on the interim Archbishop, but Father Frank was doing something weird with his face. Instead of running away or attacking Martin with his massive body, his face was all red and distorted, sweating profusely. Martin should have noticed these signals and understand that the Bishop was concentrating on something inside his head, something as unexpected as unthinkable and terrifying.

When Martin first sensed the force field, it was already too late. Somehow, the Guardian he had ready to fire against Father Frank had stopped working. The code was derailed and the program was rendered immediately unusable. Before he could make any move, he felt something cold and wet slithering inside his mind. He shivered and tried to

get rid of the unpleasant presence, but it became stronger. Next thing he knew, his muscles were reacting to the invasion with uncontrollable spasms. Finally, they stopped. Then it started to hurt everything inside his body. The pain was unbearable. Every single nerve was being attacked by the monster inside his head. His sister was also under the same effects. The mysterious weapon, which was being used against them, was undoubtedly a Level Zero program and did not need the Umbrella to get into their minds. Martin saw his mother scream, she wanted to help her children, but Father Frank lifted threateningly up a finger. He could easily do exactly the same to her, if she did not stay calm.

“Why you had to spoil everything, Martin? Were you not smart enough to just observe, listen and shut up? Who do you think you are, to come here throwing Guardians against people as if you were the Lord or something? For God’s sake, could you think of your mother, at least a little? Please, Donatella, you better stay seated there and listen and don't make a move. Now it's my turn to talk, and I will talk a lot. I had enough with this goddamn family.” Father Frank looked at the blonde priest, still under the effects of the Guardian. He approached the young fellow and touched his face. “This poor creature knows too much now. It's all your fault, Martin. I had been working too long and too hard for this day, and I can tell you, nobody will spoil it, absolutely nobody, not even the Lord. This boy over here had been of great use, a loyal Servant. However, in the contract signed by every Servant, it is written that their service goes beyond the physical life of the body. Therefore this cute boy will serve the Lord in the other dimension now. The rest of you can watch, so you will know how it's done, my friends, without hands, just with the power of my mind. Look!”

The young man stared terrified at Father Frank. He also looked at Martin, his eyes asking for help. Martin could do nothing. He had not means to do anything, neither with his muscles nor with his mind. The Chief Inspector was not able to use the Guardian to help the young man and give him a chance to fight the Bishop. The Guardian kept the boy immobilized, but defenceless against the terrible weapon that Father Frank was slowly injecting into his mind.

“I call it, Josephine. I do not know why I have this weakness for female names. In secret I baptized the Cathedral with the name of Dolores and I would have called the Old City, Hellene or Margaret. What do you think? Anyway, my Josephine is a unique invention, developed exclusively for me by some fellow Servants in the secret labs of the Ministry of Science. Technically, this weapon is still under testing, but it had performed very well today, exceeding my expectations. This magnificent program can handle up to a dozen of entry ports, simultaneously, in a range of a few hundred metres, maybe more, or just one at a much larger range. The force field varies and it's hard for me to control it. I am still learning and Josephine too. I guess it works similar to your Guardians, producing the same neural effect, but unfortunately, it is designed to attack the nerves in a brutal way, with the purpose of maximizing the pain. Our scientists discovered that pain

response is the best way to amplify the force field; therefore I need only one Josephine to do the job. With her alone, I could easily take care of an entire squad of the best trained agents from the Secret Service. Now, the hard part is to know how much force should be applied on the specific target. For example, when I took care of Father Roland at the Seminar, which I did remotely from the comfort of my own bedroom, he died before we could do much harm. My young assistant was in charge of the physical aspect. I can take down one person at a very long range, but one person only, and the target has to be out of the system. Therefore, I need help, sometimes just for a few seconds to let me in, sometimes more time.” Father Frank again touched the young priest’s face with a finger. “Our friend over here is a Fryer, a very powerful one. He placed his anomaly at the service of the Lord. He became a Servant. He did all the dirty job for me. He took care of capturing and drugging the victim, disconnecting the target from the Umbrella, watching over to keep it out of the system, and when a specific pain in a body part was needed, he also provided that, using electric clamps. When Josephine enters into a mind, it does first a quick exploration to evaluate the mental strength. Some information is stored in the surface, but sometimes it is found deeper, in the subconscious layers. In the case of Father Roland, we were not expecting his Firewall to detonate like a bomb as soon as we tried to dig a little deeper. I have to recognize that the Hackers are very smart people. We knew that Father Roland had been recruited by the Secret Service, probably with the task to spy on us, the Servants in the Seminar, but he was truly working for the Zone. We saw the chance to extract from him the name we needed. We wanted the Messenger. Actually Father Roland gave it to us, anyway. He fought bravely. I did not expect a simple soldier like him resist that much against Josephine. I can tell you, my friends, this program is a beast, you have not seen anything like this yet, believe me.”

Father Frank looked around. This was the first time he had unleashed Josephine, his custom made Level Zero program, on three people at the same time. The only one he did not want to touch was Donatella, but he was keeping an eye on her. She seemed terrified, muted by the horror of seeing her children suffering. She was smart. She was probably thinking what she could do to stop this. The Ice Lady was looking at him, imploring with her gaze, asking him not to hurt her children, as he promised. He would see what he could do, but for now, he needed to finish with this wonderful recount of his geniality. He finally had found a receptive audience. He decreased the force field enough to mitigate the pain in Donatella’s children. He wanted them to listen to him, to hear every word he had to say. Besides, he needed more energy to finish with the assistant. Father Frank felt truly sorry about this young fellow, but he could not afford the risk of leaving behind the shadow of someone who knew too much about him.

“Well, to finish my story, at the end Father Roland did activate his Firewall. A powerful discharge invaded his brain. We were hoping to control his mind in the first stage to avoid that fatal move, but we failed. We only had a small window to dig in his memories before they were erased. This damn Firewall, when it explodes, for a fraction of a second, the doors are unlocked. This was enough time to find clues about the real

identity of the Messenger. We wanted much more than that but we could not get it. This man was a Questioner. Martin probably knows how difficult is to retrieve information from a Questioner. Anyway, we put all the pieces of the puzzle in place and found out that the Messenger was our venerable Professor. My assistant paid him a visit this afternoon. His case resulted much easier than I thought. The old man was in the balcony, outside of his powerful Shield and also outside of the system. Josephine penetrated his mind just as easy as a man enters inside his lover. Once we took control, the old man begged us to kill him. He knew too much and his Firewall was a very old model. He had been counting with his Shield. He felt overconfident with his custom made Protector. But in the balcony, the Professor was out of the range for the Shield, and his Protector could do nothing being outside of the Umbrella. When he finally activated his Firewall, we had some time to explore his mind, before the brain turned completely unusable. This is how we found about the Linker. We could not find any other clue, but knowing the identity and the role of the Linker, was a huge advantage, especially when few minutes later, I had the Linker in front of me, in the company of the dangerous Warrior. My assistant did again the dirty job with the Professor. We wanted to send out a message to warn the collaborators of the enemy about what the Servants were capable of doing. We knew that nobody would believe that Doctor Hauptman could kill himself.”

“You...bastard, pig...”

The lowering of the force field allowed Miriam to move her sharp tongue and expel these bitter words with a great effort. Father Frank looked at her, flattered by the insults and her bravado. He laughed and applauded.

“I know, I am all that, but well, ask your mother how this bastard pig makes her happy in bed, and if you want, you can ask for the details.” Father Frank laughed louder. Martin was also feeling the relaxation of the force field, but in his case, it was still too powerful, maybe he could babble something, but not an intelligible word, not yet. Father Frank had not noticed, but Martin saw his mother reading something in the Display Station. “Anyway, when I had the Linker in my hands, it was easier for me to do the job myself. I knocked him out and entered his mind. The Firewall cannot be activated while unconscious, but there is no way you can dig inside a dormant brain without getting a lot of rubbish. I needed him to be awake. I used my program to produce pain, to make him come back screaming like a pig, but he did not. I do not how he did it, but Arthur activated the damn Firewall before I could even ask him a single question. He always was a coward...”

“He ... was... braver than you...”

“Come on Miriam, it hurts me seeing you suffering just for the sake of insulting me. Stop talking, for God’s sake, and listen. Watch me how I did it to your husband.” Father Frank took the young priest’s hand and kissed it. “Yes, don’t get me wrong if I

called him a coward. I kissed his hand too. I always was impressed by his art, but he never spoke to me, which was perfectly fine since I prefer to pass unnoticed. Arthur could not kill himself, his heart did not stop beating, but his brain was of not use after the surge. Maybe because I had him knocked out first, and he was barely regaining consciousness when I tried to dig in, but the surge did not affect his heart, or maybe his youth saved his life, who knows. Anyway, he survived and I could not get anything out of his mind. However, I already knew something was going on, and I could not take any more risks. The moment to act had arrived. I ordered the arrest of Monsignor Carlo, whom I lured alone to Donatella's house without his Secret Service agents. My guards took him by surprise, immobilized and drugged him. Once I had him over here, in the Cathedral, I used again my noble assistant to help me. I could not take control of Carlo's mind for a long period of time while I was being busy with other stuff. My assistant injected Carlo with a serum, also developed by my agents in the Ministry of Science. This serum deactivates the entry port, doing something similar to what a Fryer does, but you can control the time of the effect by the amount of the substance in the bloodstream. It is very expensive to produce and my supplies are limited, but in the case of the Archbishop we needed time to explore his mind, while asking him to surrender to us. I promised Donatella to not hurt him and those were my intentions, honestly, but then he took me by surprise. He also had a Firewall installed in his entry port. How could this happen? I thought that only the Questioners had these damn Firewalls. I guess the Archbishop had asked the Professor for one of those secret programs manufactured by the Zone. Who knows what other dealings these two were having on our backs, Donatella? Maybe the Archbishop also had a Receptor and listened to the instructions sent by the Messenger. Who knows? I never trusted Carlo. I was in love with him, literally speaking, since we were teenagers, students at the Seminar, but he never loved me back, at least not with the same passion. He used me. He wanted me to support his One Church and bring over to his movement the young priesthood. An army of young priests, like our beloved assistant here, always had followed me, not him. I may lack charisma and personality, as many people say, but I have a privileged brain, and those who had been touched by me, became immediately my loyal followers. This is how I started this new movement, the Servants of the Lord. I realized, at some point, that the Old Church was doomed. Trying to keep it alive was a political suicide for my career. I accepted Carlo's invitation and switched over to his Church, but I never forgot three things he did to me. First he never truly considered me his best friend, for which, I recognize, I was terribly jealous, especially after he became a close friend of Colonel Crawford. The second thing he did to me was to destroy the friendship I had been building with Donatella. He seduced her and became her lover. I cannot say that I was in love with you, my dear, at least it was hard for me to see it that way at that time, but I really expected the three of us to keep a beautiful friendship together, based on mutual respect and true loyalty. I could not stand seeing you two kissing that day in the Sacristy. It was like a shower of cold water on my head. I felt a sharp pain in my heart. I think I was never the same person again after that. Maybe I did love you both too much, I mean in a platonic way, or maybe, what the heck, maybe in a physical way too. I think I had some wet dreams about the three of us in bed and other

dirty thoughts like that. But that doesn't bother me anymore. These are things of the past now, only memories which no longer hurt my soul. The third thing he did to me was to make me his second in command, his grey shadow, his invisible helper, a loyal dog who would never bite the hand of his master. Well, he was wrong. This humiliation, knowing too well that I was ten times smarter than him, lasted for thirty years, thirty fucking years! He thought this was going to last forever, that I could succeed him only after he died of natural causes with a peaceful smile upon his beautiful noble face. But here I am now, banging his old girlfriend, in control of his Church, master of life and death. That makes me feel like God, you know, but not like the Lord, mostly like the Creator itself."

"Please, you promised to protect my children."

"Well, my dear, and what do you think I have been doing all this time? I tried to warn Martin to stay away from the Professor and from the Hackers. I knew Miriam was a sympathizer. There was nothing I could do about it, but I know there are some secret developments going on in the Ministry of Science, new technology being tested to brainwash people without destroying memories with sentimental value. I thought that, maybe in the future, we could repair Miriam's mind, to have her on our side for good. But, as you can see, everything I tried, failed miserably. However, there is still a small chance I can do something for them, at least for one of them. But first let me show you what Josephine can do."

"When you became the Voice?"

Martin's words came out of his mouth as good as normal. He had managed to regain control of his tongue. Father Frank smiled happily. At last he had made Josephine to keep control of the mind and the muscles, while partially unfreezing some of them, like the tongue and the mouth. Father Frank wanted to hear what Martin had to say. A second opinion was always worthy of attention.

"Well, that is a long story, but we have some time now. Our faith was suffering greatly from the pragmatism that was suffocating the society. The Lord needed my help. I had some old friends from the Old Church who shared with me the same worries. They were working for the Ministry of Science. With the blessing of the Lord, I ordered a Level Zero program capable of digging deeper inside the mind, a mix of a Guardian with an Interrogator. We added also the ability to work outside of the system by using standard radio frequencies. It took some years to perfect the program. A couple of years ago, I had Josephine ready. Then the Voice appeared suddenly inside us." Father Frank smiled softly at Martin. "Yes, maybe you are not going to believe me, but that's the truth. I'm not the Voice. Nobody knows who it is. I like to think that it is the Lord. The Voice convinced us to work together, to follow its instructions. It asked me to find out who were the traitors working for the Zone. We had our suspicions, but we needed the whole truth. The Voice knew about the existence of the Messenger and the Warrior, but I wanted their real

identities. We had to stop the conspiracy. The Voice became our guide and helper. It could get inside any mind anytime it wanted. I needed people loyal to me and to the Voice. We infiltrated the Heavenly Guard, and even some agents from the Secret Service were recruited, but mostly, I concentrated my efforts on the Seminar. The Holy School was under attack. A bloody battle was going on between the true believers and the false prophets, who promoted subversive ideas instigated by the Professor with the silent complicity of Monsignor Carlo. We wanted to have something solid, in writing, a scripture to expand the crippled Unavoidable Truth. This work is now almost completed. Everything was going perfectly fine until the Zone started to increase its presence among the weakest of us. The Hackers have also a scripture, something called the New Book, where they have put together a set of instructions of how to destroy the Kingdom. The Secret Service found some evidences about this book, but they did not pay much attention to it; obviously because Carlo was not interested. He wanted only more personal power. He regretted giving up his sole authority within the Church. My Servants did also a wonderful job in the Divine City. We infiltrated the Council and some of the Archbishops were openly sympathizing with our movement. We managed to reject Carlo's proposal. This, I think, dragged our friend to seek the help of the Professor and the Zone. Big mistake! My Servants found out about it and we had no other option but to take control of the Church and save the Kingdom.”

“That is a lie and you know it!”

Donatella could not stay silent any longer. Father Frank ignored her remark. Martin seemed to focus into listening, but his brain was working fast. His Guardian had been disabled. He was trying to get in touch with Daryl through the CPU private network, but the damn program was interfering with the communication. His mother was still sitting at her desk. He saw her typing something before. If the priest discovered what she was doing, she would be in trouble. He needed to gain some more time.

“I understand your motives. Let me speak to the Voice. It doesn't have to be this way.”

“Come on Martin, don't play the smart ass with me. You came here to arrest me. You are already sold to the enemy. How did you dare to lift your arm against us? I don't have any control over the Voice, but I am the Archbishop now and I know what I'm doing. I can't allow you to become an obstacle for our plans. Anyway, we don't have much time for this.” Father Frank turned around to face his young assistant. “Good bye, my friend, you served me well, but the destiny of the Kingdom is at risk, every heroic journey requires sacrifices. I promise you will be remembered.”

The young priest could only make some indistinguishable guttural sounds. The program had him bent on his knees on the floor. The pain was drastically increasing. His face was totally distorted. His eyes were moving uncontrollably. Martin felt pity for the

poor soul. He was just another victim. The young fellow had been brutally manipulated by this monster who was torturing him now, ready to kill him. The kid was trying to resist, but his brain could not stand the pain any longer. He wished he had been a Questioner. He would have activated the Firewall and killed himself long time ago. Now the program would destroy him without mercy, amid an agony of unbearable pain. It was attacking every neurone, slowly entering in resonance with every sensitive nerve in his organism. Everything was hurting inside his body, it was just pain and nothing more. His heart was beating faster. His muscles, though frozen, responded with some awkward spasms. Finally, his brain gave up, shutting itself down. His heart stopped. The man fell flat on the floor. The young assistant was dead.

2:00 AM

Daniel looked at Cary. They had been spotted. A guard entered the parking lot and noticed the solitary car parked on a corner. The kids were hiding low in the back seat. They watched the guard approaching. He had a flashlight in his hands. Miriam's PTU was not a private model, it lacked the high privacy glasses of the more luxurious cars. There was no place to hide under the seats. The guard came closer and aimed his flashlight against the closed windows. The powerful beam illuminated the interior of the vehicle. The guard saw them and focused the light on their faces.

“What are you doing here?”

Daniel and Cary could barely hear what the man was saying. The windows were sealed. The doors were locked. The guard tried to force one of the doors but as soon as he touched the car, an awful pain inside the head made him retreat. The Guardian functioned as a psychic barrier. Nobody could get closer to the vehicle without the code. But the guard did not get it. He insisted and screamed at the kids.

“Get out of that vehicle, right now!”

“We have been arrested by the Chief Inspector of the CPU. He put a Guardian upon us.” Daniel cried out as loud as he could. He pressed the button of the walking-talkie. He needed instructions from Martin. Maybe the Chief Inspector could convince this guard. There was no response. The device was silent. The green LED displaying the connection, turned orange and then red. Daniel screamed again to the guard, trying to explain the situation. “We can do nothing! The Guardian will not allow us to do anything. This is why you can not touch the car and we can not get out.”

“I said, get out of that vehicle, now!”

The guard may not have heard what Daniel screamed at him or maybe he did not believe it. In any case, the man was stubborn. He lifted a piece of broken brick from the pavement and threw it against the car. The rock hit the glass of the rear left window. The Guardian could deter people but not inanimate objects. It worked on the brain by producing an instant shot of electric charge and great pain on the most sensitive nerves, similar to what a Protector would do. Only a real Shield, by manipulating the magnetic field, could create a true kinetic barrier. The glass shattered in millions of small pieces. The tiny chunks were blunt and could not cut the human skin, but the effect was terrifying. Daniel and Cary had barely time to hide even lower on the back seat and take cover.

“We have to do something.”

Daniel reached for the Magnum pistol. He looked out of the broken window. The guard was getting closer again. Cary understood there was no other way or the guard would continue bombarding them with rocks until they gave up. Besides, the man may call for backup if the situation became too complicated.

“Okay, we do this.” Cary grabbed the door handle. “I open the door as if we were getting out and then you fire at him. Ready?”

“Yes.”

Cary opened the door. The guard was looking at the floor, probably seeking another piece of broken pavement. Daniel took the Magnum pistol with both hands, aimed at the guard and fired a beam of green light that hit the man on his right leg. The guard screamed and fell down to the floor. Cary got out and inspected the damage. The man was frozen, with his eyes wide open staring at her. Daniel joined her. He looked around. The parking lot was empty.

“The effect will not last.” Cary knew what Daniel meant. In five minutes the guard would recover and they would be doomed. “I think we better get away now. Martin and Miriam had been gone for almost an hour. Maybe something went wrong. We should escape now.”

“Where we will go? We have no place to go.”

“I don't know. We take the speedway and drive the car far away from the city, while you continue trying to contact the Zone.”

“No, we can't do that. We can't leave Martin and Miriam behind.” Cary grabbed the fallen guard by an arm. “I just deactivated the Guardian. Help me drag him to the car.”

We can tie him up with something and, in case of emergency, we can always fire the pistol again.”

Daniel nodded and helped Cary, taking the guard by the other arm. The man was heavy, but they managed to put him inside, in the driver's seat. Cary searched the vehicles for some ropes or wires, but found nothing. Daniel removed the belt off the guard's pants, the shoes and the socks too. With the belt, Daniel tied up firmly the guard by the ankles, and did the same with the wrists, using the shoe laces. He opened the man's mouth and pushed in the pair of socks. Daniel sat on the passenger seat, holding the pistol in one hand and aiming it at the guard. Cary activated again the Guardian. They looked at each other and smiled. They were fighters. Daniel hoped he could intimidate the guard without having to use the pistol again. He did not know how often this weapon could be used without damaging a human brain. The guard was a middle age man, grey hair, but still in good physical shape. He was staring at Daniel without any expression, his face muscles still not working. He could not move, not even blink. His eyes were getting watered, tears running down his cheeks. Cary looked around. Everything was under control, at least for now. The parking lot was still empty.

2:30 AM

Father Frank had just killed a human being in front of the Crawford family. He was a merciless monster. Miriam, if she could, would have closed her eyes, but she was forced to stare at the poor man being tortured and destroyed from inside. She spent like five minutes ranting against Father Frank, calling him names, frustrated for not being able to move and slap that pig in the face. Martin used that precious time to see if he could do something. The Guardian he used against the assistant was idle now, not having a live brain to target. The force field of the program inside his mind had been weakened enough for him to be able to talk and blink. Maybe he could try to reach for the Guardian and attack the Bishop. But no matter how much energy he tried to gather, the program intensified the pain as soon as it detected any attempt of Martin to get free,. He finally gave up. He was going to die. At least the bastard only mentioned him. Maybe he would spare his mother and sister. Anyway, he hoped the kids could escape and some day come back for the priest, the Servants and the Voice, and justice would prevail. He looked at his mother. Martin did not know for how long he would be able to move his eyes. He loved his mother dearly, in his own way. Donatella remained calm on her chair. She was looking straight at Father Frank. Her face, like usually, did not display the least sign of emotion.

“Listen, Father Frank, these are my children. You promise me never to harm them. Remember? But I know you did the same with Carlo, and you did not keep your word.” The priest tried to say something, but Donatella stopped him with a gesture of her hand.

“No, let me finish. I have a business proposition for you. Let them go. They will be shipped out of the province and I will deliver this election for you.”

“My dear Donatella, you should know better than anyone how much I wish I could make you happy, but my principles are my priority. I can't take any risk, especially not with Martin. I'm sorry, Martin, nothing personal, it's just business, but I can't let you live. I wish you would have been left out of all this. I thought I had a deal with your mother. But the Lord works in mysterious ways. On the other hand, I will not touch Miriam. She will be spared and you too, Donatella. I will send you both to a monastery in the Far East province. You will not be able to leave that place, ever.”

“Why not spare Martin's life too? We all can go together to that monastery and we will never come back. I promise .”

“I can't trust you, my dear, and especially, not Martin. He is a cop. He is a fighter. He will find a way to get out of the exile. No, I'm sorry, but I can't spare Martin's life.”

“In that case, let me tell you something, piece of shit.” Donatella crossed her hands under her chin, her elbows on the desk, her deep ocean eyes nailed on the smiling face of Father Frank. “I just sent a challenge against you to the Assembly. I will be running as the other candidate in this election. And I can assure you that your chances of defeating me are extremely scarce. If you want me to fix this election for you. If you want me to clear your path to the Episcopal throne, let my children go, now.”

Father Frank, after killing his assistant, had turned the whole force of the program against Martin and Miriam. He increased the intensity. The siblings could not speak anymore. In desperation, Donatella was playing her last card. Father Frank knew of her enormous influence in the Assembly of the Congregations. If she ran against him, he certainly would not have a chance. He could not let that happen. He would have to kill her, if necessary. How come she was willing to take that risk, knowing sufficiently well that he really meant danger?

“I have enough of this.” Father Frank turned his face to Martin. The Chief Inspector felt the program getting stronger inside his brain. He barely could understand what the priest was saying to his mother. “Donatella, we know too much about each other. I only have to send certain video files to the Assembly, and after that, my dear, you can be sure that nobody will dare to say your name aloud again anywhere in the Kingdom.”

“I also have some video files, professionally edited. You appear in them like an abuser, blackmailing me, taking advantage of my situation. We will see whom the Congregations are going to believe.”

“You can try it if you want. Maybe you could delay my final victory, indeed. Because I would need some time to discredit you as the widow of a traitor, the man who wanted to stab the Alliance in the back. I have access to the secret archives of the Allies army. I may also mention that you were the long time lover of a corrupt man, Monsignor Carlo, who sold his soul to the Hackers.” Father Frank smiled looking at Martin. He intensified the force field of the program. The pain was excruciating. The program was squeezing every cell of Martin's nerve system. Not even the stiff muscles could sustain anymore the weight of his suffering body. Martin fell on his knees to the floor. “You know, my dear, I forgot to tell you that you are a fucking whore!”

“And you are a fucking moron!” Donatella stood up for the first time. Martin, in a last effort, focused his gaze on her mother. She was holding something black and shiny in her right hand. “I guess you never expected this from a whore. Take this, you son of a bitch!”

A flash of light blinded Martin for a moment, followed by the noise of a thunder which exploded in the middle of the room. The smell of smoke and of something burnt invaded his nostrils. He turned his eyes to where Father Frank was one second ago, but he was gone. He realized that, slowly, the force field was receding and he could turn his head more to the left. He found the priest on the floor. Half of his head disappeared, one eye was missing, the other was open, the mouth still smiling. Blood was flowing out of the big hole on the side of the head, where the right ear used to be. The wall had been sprayed with a mix of pink and grey matter, probably the rest of what had been the brain of Father Frank.

Martin could sense that Josephine, the Level Zero program, which had been in control of his mind until now, was not longer inside him, probably gone to oblivion once it lost the connection with his master. The code was now a wandering orphan in a cloud of innocent electrons floating around. Who knew and who cared? He was free to move again, slowly regaining control of his entire body. The pain was gone. Miriam helped him to stand up from the floor and both siblings were quick to join their mother who was waiting with open arms. Donatella embraced her beloved children. On the desk, the Display Station was blinking with a message from the Conference. The Congregations have just accepted her nomination. Martin paid attention to the object that his mother had left on the desk. He never saw one before. He had read about it and seen some pictures, but never one real and that close. It was a gun, an ancient artifact, a military weapon, a lethal one.

“It was your Father's gun.” Donatella turned off the Display Station and took Martin's hands. Miriam had her arms around her mother's shoulders. “When the weapons were banned, my duty was to give this gun to the Ministry, like everybody else did, but I forgot about it. One day, doing some cleaning in the house, I found it. I brought it here, to my office, with the intention of giving the gun to Carlo, but again, I forgot it. It has been

here for years, in the second drawer of my desk. When I met your father, he taught me how to use a gun and, even when I always hated the firearms, I was not bad at shooting with them. At some point, I realized that I was going to use it. It was hard to take off the safety latch without that bastard noticing, but when Miriam screamed at him, I got my chance, and I had it ready. My proposal to him was false, just for the sake of seeing what he would say. I was going to kill him anyway, for what he did to you two and to my Carlo.”

Martin's mind was now functioning again as the brain of a cop, the brain of a detective. There had been two murders here. One followed the pattern of the other two under his investigation. The young assistant was killed by Father Frank. And the Bishop was killed by his mother in self-defence. Everything looked very simple, indeed. However, the presence of a real gun complicated the situation. Lethal weapons had been banned for years in the Kingdom; their concealing, not only their use, criminalized with the heaviest punishment available, total brainwashing in Rehabs, a complete reboot of the mind and a new identity from scratch. No matter what the motives could be, nobody was allowed to kill with a banned weapon, not even the Lord. To demonstrate the existence of Josephine, the killing program, would take time. Any investigation which required the participation of the Ministry of Science took forever to come to a conclusion. He would have to find witnesses, browse for clues in the seclusive Ministry of Science, start a hunt for the Servants working there and fight alone against the Voice. That was almost a mission impossible, especially when he had other things to do like, for example, protecting the Warrior.

“Listen Mom, listen very carefully. The Bishop was not the Voice, but he was the real killer. I found about it and came here to arrest him. He used some type of Level Zero program to get into people minds and kill his victims. He did that to the priest from the Seminar and to the Professor. The same way, he also tortured and killed the Archbishop and this young man, here in front of us. He tried to kill me too. I had my father's gun hidden in my apartment, which he gave to me before he died. I came here with the gun because I suspected I could do nothing against a Level Zero program. I fired the gun against his head when he tried to kill me. There are no other witnesses besides us, and the entire area is out of the Umbrella. My Guardians could not record anything, they were not working. Since Friend told me that the Voice was the killer, I have been gathering some materials about the Servants in the dossier which I keep in my Display Station, in my office. You must tell this version to Daryl. Now, we have to go. I mean Miriam and I have to leave. I believe you will be safe here.”

“Where are you going?”

“Away from here, as far as we can.” Martin looked at her deep ocean green eyes. How come that kid could have exactly the same eyes as his mother? “We can't risk being arrested under an investigation that could be manipulated from the Divine City. We don't

know the extend of this plot of the Servants. They will retaliate for the killing of the Bishop, trust me. We need to find a safe place for us and some other people we are helping.”

“Are you with that girl?”

“No more questions, Mom, I'm sorry, but I believe it is the best for everybody.” Martin knew his mother too well. She was the Ice Lady. She was going to be fine. “We love you.”

“When I will see you again?”

“Soon, I hope.”

Martin kissed his mother and took Miriam's hand. Donatella Crawford hugged both of her children. They would be always her small ones, no matter how grownup they may appear to the rest of the world. Her eyes were wet, but she did not let a single tear escape from them. She was the Ice Lady, after all. Donatella smiled at her children, kissed them and let them go.

3:00 AM

Daryl and his men had been searching the area for almost two hours without finding anything. Some vehicles were parked in the underground garage of the Ministry, others in the reserved parking of the Cathedral and also in the open lot of the Celestial Square. He checked every single one of them, but all they were registered in the name of officials and people he knew worked in the Buildings. He had been trying to reach Martin in the CPU network, but something had been interfering with the communication. Maybe the Chief Inspector was within some powerful Shield. He could be inside the Ministry or in the Cathedral. Daryl could not guess, but had to wait for his Boss to contact him.

Daryl told the driver of his van to turn back and head to the office. He would not go home until he could speak with Martin. The vehicle entered the roundabout to exit the Celestial Square. There was no Umbrella, no Intercom. The Heavenly Guard and the Secret Service were communicating with the CPU using their respective internal networks, which were sharing a common frequency for exchanging messages in between. The main dispatcher from the Heavenly Guard wanted to speak with him. Daryl opened a dual channel. One of their scouts had sent a silent stress call through the network. They pinpointed the location to a place in the central area of the Celestial Square. Daryl had just double checked every single corner and found nothing. The dispatcher said that the guard could only send a quick view of the location, the signal looked like the interior of a vehicle. It lasted a fraction of a second before going blank. Daryl was the closer to the

parking lot. He saw there were no more than a dozen of cars. He promised the dispatcher that he would go back and check each of them in person, just to be sure. Daryl closed the channel.

The white van turned left and back into the parking lot of the Celestial Square. Now there were only three cars left. One was registered to Donatella Crawford, the Deacon of the Cathedral, who was probably still inside the building, doing some late work. Martin had told him many times that his mother was a workaholic. The other one was registered to the Bishop. Well, he was now the interim Archbishop. Surely his Excellence had a very busy night. He could be in the Ministry or in the Cathedral. The third one surprised him. It was registered in the name of Miriam Goldman, Martin's sister and Donatella's daughter. She could be visiting her mother in the Cathedral. Anyway, Daryl decided to approach this vehicle first.

As soon as the car got into his view, he noticed something wrong. One of the windows was broken. It had not been broken when he first took a look at the vehicle from a distance, during his previous inspection of the parking lot. The van stopped in front of the Universal Movers four seats PTU. Daryl and a couple of officers jumped out of the van and approached the car. Their flashlights hit the windshield. Something was moving inside.

“CPU here, get out of the car!” Daryl got closer. He saw people inside the vehicle. He took another step forward when, suddenly, he got stopped by a psychic barrier. Daryl recognized a CPU Guardian configured upside down over the car. The program was being used as a kind of Protector, a clever idea. Daryl did not wait a second more. He used his code to deactivate the Guardian. His men surrounded the vehicle. “I said, get out of that car, now!”

First, a boy got out, followed by a girl. Daryl set his flashlight against their faces. He recognized them. The boy was the same that Martin took with him when he was investigating the case of the destroyed Listener from the Secret Service. The girl was the one that had an arrest warrant issued by the Ministry. She was probably the super fryer that had put the entire area out of the system. This girl was dangerous. Without asking more questions, Daryl set a couple of Guardian upon each of the kids.

“You are being arrested by the CPU for crimes against the Umbrella. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can be used as evidence in the trial and during the investigation.”

One of his men inspected the interior of the vehicle. He found the missing scout from the Heavenly Guard tied up and gagged. He was not in a very good shape. A Magnum pistol had been used many times against him. These kids were criminals of the worst type. His men helped the guard on his feet. The man said he was kidnapped and

stoned several times by these crazy kids with a pistol. Daryl told the guard to get in the van. They would take him to the closest Hospital for observation. The other detective, who was still looking inside the car, found the pistol that belonged to the guard and the other one which the kids had been using against him. He also found an old walking-talkie. Daryl commanded his men to recover all the evidences. He pushed the kids against the side of the van. The Guardians were heavy. The boy and the girl could barely breath. Daryl relaxed the programs. He wanted an explanation, now. Who put them in that car? Who setup the Guardian they had on the car? Why they attacked the guard? Who was keeping the area out of the Umbrella and why and how? But the kids did not want to cooperate. Very well, he would take them to the office. The Interrogator would find whatever he wanted from them. He turned to his men, and was about to tell the kids to enter the van, when two dark figures appeared in the distance, walking towards them in the parking lot. Daryl aimed his flashlight against the intruders. Maybe these kids were not alone and had some backup? But before his mind drifted any farther away, looking for a possible explanation, a familiar voice reached his ears, making him freeze on the spot.

“Daryl, stop right there, it's me, Martin!” The other officers, after hearing the voice of their boss, stopped whatever they were doing and stood firm in attention. Daryl stepped forward to meet the Chief Inspector. Martin shook his hand. Miriam was with him. She smiled at Daryl. “That's my sister's car.”

“I know.” Daryl could sense some tension in Martin's voice. “These two kids were in the car, Boss. They broke the window, as you can see. They also kidnapped a guard. They used a stolen Magnum pistol. I believe the girl is the one which everybody is looking for, the Fryer that has knocked out the Umbrella in the whole area, and also the one that probably stole a Guardian from us and had it setup upside down, to protect them while they were hiding inside the vehicle.”

“That is a very clever theory, my friend, but it is not exactly the truth.” Martin came closer to the kids and deactivated their Guardians. “I did setup the Guardian on my sister's vehicle to protect these kids. I had these two under my custody and was afraid that the guards would try to o the kids from me while I was away. I guess they defended themselves as well as I can see a guard tried to arrest them.”

“Yes, sir, the same guard was the one who threw the rock and broke the glass.” Daniel wanted to help. Martin wished he better did not. “We told him, but the guard ignored our warning. We are sorry, but we had to keep him immobilized while we were waiting for the Chief Inspector. We were following his instructions.”

“Please, Martin, that doesn't make any sense to me.” Daryl looked at his Boss trying to understand exactly what was going on. “I guess you have a good explanation for all this.”

“Daniel, nobody asked you anything. Please, keep your mouth shut and get back in the car, right now, the two of you. Please, Miriam, keep an eyes on the kids.” His sister nodded and got also inside the vehicle. Martin turned to Daryl and placed his arm around the shoulders of his second in command. “Listen, my old friend, forget about these kids. I have more important things for you to take care right now. The Bishop had been killed. The body is inside my mother's office.”

“How come that happened? Who killed him?”

“I did it, a lot of blood, let me tell you. I shot him in the face with this.” Martin softened his grip on Daryl's shoulder. The Second Inspector turned to face him. Martin showed to Daryl his father's old gun. Daryl was impressed, he never saw before a real military gun. “Father Frank was a serial killer, a member of the Servants. I have a dossier in the office. It is called the Voice. You will find there some good pieces of information, I promise. Now, listen to me very carefully. I want you to take our men inside the Cathedral, to seal the building and start the investigation of your life. My mother is there in her office, waiting for you . She is an eyewitness. Please, be gentle with her.”

“But Boss, where are you going?”

“Away for a while, my friend. I know I can trust you.”

Martin left Daryl standing there, scratching his head, in the middle of the parking lot. He got into the driver's seat and started the engine. The CPU officers still remained in attention saluting their superior. The Chief Inspector drove the vehicle away from the parking lot, crossed the roundabout of the Celestial Square, this time without looking at the solitary statue of his father, and entered Main Street, but instead of going south to his apartment, he took the opposite direction, to the north, towards the exit to the Speedway. He needed to leave the city as soon as possible. He pressed deeper the accelerator pedal. Martin missed terribly his sport car.

3:30 AM

Donatella Crawford was sitting on her comfortable chair, in front of her desk, with her Display Station turned on. She looked for a second at the mess on the floor and on the walls of her otherwise neatly clean office. Blood and rests of human brain were splashed everywhere. This did not bother her at all. What was blood? What was the human brain? Just pieces of an organic type of life that happened to exist on this wrecked planet, the remains of what could have been an human being, but was not. That monster did not deserve such an elevated treatment. How come she could have been so naive to think that in politics everything was fine? She believed in the Kingdom of the Lord, in the

high ideals of a perfect society with no violence, no poverty, no diseases. She hoped that some day even death would have been something of the past. But human greed resulted much bigger than what she could imagine. It was certainly much bigger than an army of naked men flying in the sky, with their ridiculous feathered wings on their backs. It was even bigger than a divine being which came from who knows where, to end up crossing his arms, and watching us from a distance, with a gentle smile, wondering what the heck was he doing here.

Donatella had not wasted time. She had been placing some calls as soon as the Umbrella became available again. She called the Commander of the Secret Service. She asked to see the body of Monsignor Carlo. The officer excused himself, but denied her request. Only the Archbishop could override the instructions he had received to keep the body out of sight, while the investigation was under way. She was tempted to explain that the interim Archbishop was lying dead on the floor of her office, with his head blown off. But she just nodded and closed the channel. She called the Chief of Staff. The man was sleeping peacefully in his bed, with his lovely wife, enjoying a wonderful dream in which he had received a raise and had bought a brand new PTU from Western Movers. She asked him to call for an urgent meeting at the Ministry. When? Now! Was the interim Archbishop aware of this? No. She wanted to scream that the stupid moron was dead, but instead, she closed the channel. Everybody needed a new Archbishop, as soon as possible. She also wanted to update his contacts at the Assembly of the Congregations. These nice people were not going to sleep tonight. She was about to place the call when the door swung open and Daryl, the Second Inspector of the Criminal Prevention Unit, entered her office followed by three officers in their impeccable white uniforms.

4:00 AM

Daniel Swifts was watching the world outside, going by, through the smashed window of the car. The air was cold and the wind was noisy, despite the limited speed of the Personal Transportation Units manufactured by Universal Movers. Cary was holding his hand. Daniel was thinking of his grandaunt. She must be desperate calling all his friends. Maybe Oscar told her something. She may be calling right now the Heavenly Guard, asking for him, demanding to see him. All his childhood memories were tied to this strong woman, the one than never married, the one that sacrificed her entire life for him. They were poor, never starving, but poor. He always dreamed of becoming someone important, a recognized scientist, with a good pay and travelling abroad. He wanted to move to a nice apartment downtown and give his auntie a better life before she died. He never saw pictures of his parents. Auntie always said that pictures were like ghostly anchors, holding back chunks of the souls, enslaved on paper. At least, she had her live memories of them, but he had none. She said Daniel looked a lot like his mother, except for his deep ocean eyes, who nobody knew from whom he got them, maybe some gene hidden in his forgotten family tree. He asked many times about his father, but in this case,

the mystery was even greater. Auntie did not keep any connection with his father's family. She said she only met him once, and she did not remember his face very well, but she thinks Daniel had something of his father in his face, maybe his chin or his ears. Who knew and who cared? Well, he did care. But there was nothing he could do about it. The fact was that his parents were gone, and he was alone with his auntie.

And now he was an outlaw. The Heavenly Guard, the Secret Service and the CPU were after him. He was the Courier, a Hacker, a criminal. Why he never thought before of becoming a Questioner? He wanted to be a Historian because he was obsessed with the past. The present, before Cary, never called for his attention, and the future could only be guessed by knowing well the past. In the past he found many questions, and only a few answers, too many riddles were still hiding the truth in obscure passages. These questions really fascinated him. Searching in the History books, he found many clues that made him wonder about the present. The greatest mystery was the Zone, a place free of the Umbrella, where the Hackers were hiding. Officially that place did not exist. It was like a myth created to explain how the Hackers could get away from the CPU and the guards. When he found the piece of paper with the list of the forgotten Annunciations and the watermark with the name of the Zone, he realized that it was not a legend, that the place must exist in some place on this planet. Later he did not have time to think about this discovery. He was forced into becoming the Courier, a role for which he had been chosen by someone, maybe the Messenger, and he was still wondering why.

When he shot the guard with the Magnum pistol in the parking lot, Daniel felt not the thrill of the fight, but a sad realization that he was hurting a person, probably a father and a husband. Maybe he was not born to be a fighter. Maybe his parents had been simple working people, looking for a happy life together, wanting to have a normal family, a modest house, maybe a car, and friends to share together their happiness. Maybe that was life after all, and everything else was just a fantasy, a stupid attempt to make us feel like nothing was ever enough, for the sake of wanting to have more, always more. Push ahead, go the distance, never give up, be a winner! Maybe what people really needed, what people really wanted, was a normal life, as simple as that. Daniel closed his eyes. He just felt tired.

4:30 AM

Miriam was thinking of Arthur. How was he doing? Was he still alive? Would he ever recover, or his brain would need to be rebooted and a new identity created for him from scratch? In this new identity he may be a truck driver or a doctor. He would not be an artist. She would not be his wife. This Kingdom of the Lord sucked. She would have preferred seeing him dead than being someone else. It was just not fair, not for him, not for her.

Martin slowed down the car, the broken window made the wind too noisy in the speedway. There was no traffic at all. They were the only ones travelling in the middle of the darkness. They left behind the lights of the suburbs. In the richest of the provinces, the cities were clean and well built, perfectly planned. It was not like in the south or in the east, where cities were like monsters, eating everything they found in their unstoppable growth, expanding without limits, millions of poor huts surrounding the urban centres. The Kingdom tried to put a stop to this madness, but after thirty years, the scars were still visible. Miriam travelled to the south twice for vacation, one before she married and the second time with Arthur. Some people loved being tourists and did travel to exotic places every year. They wanted the sun and the warmth, but only for a week or two. They always came back to their comfortable life in the cold cities of the north, to their safety under the grey skies.

Miriam remembered when, still being a small girl, she was very excited the day the borders came down for good. Many people were afraid that millions of starving southerners and easterners would invade their clean cities, take their jobs, bankrupt their sterilized societies. In fact, thousands migrated north and west, but also thousands went south and east, looking for a better climate and more joy and some sort of authenticity in life, bringing with them their entrepreneurship and technological skills, helping in the development of stronger economies over there. But most did not move. They had their families ties, their traditions, their dead relatives buried in the ground. The Kingdom had done many good deeds, no doubts. No everything was bad, she knew that. Some people thought that the Hackers wanted to destroy everything. The reality was that the Hackers wanted to keep what had been achieved in the Kingdom that was good and functioning well. They wanted to keep the Energy Grid, the Worldwide Welfare, the Hospitals, the Academies. Even the Umbrella was good if it was appropriately employed. What the Hackers did not want was the cretinism of a system that destroyed the individuality, that transformed everybody into a little piece of a humongous machine, ruled by the ones who got most of the benefits and wanted even more, stretching to the limits the thin fabric of the world. This was what the fight was about. She was proud of being a Questioner and soon, she hoped, she would become a proud Hacker too.

5:00 AM

Daniel had his eyes closed. He wanted her to think that he was sleeping, but she knew he was not. He just did not want to talk. Nobody wanted to talk. Martin was driving in silence, listening to classical music in the background. Miriam was probably remembering her husband, the Linker. Cary felt sad about them. Was she truly worth the life of a man as talented as Arthur Goldman? She wanted to believe that she was. She would try as hard as she could to become the Warrior that everybody was expecting from her. She was not even thinking about her mother. She knew her mother would be fine. Her mother had Stephan now by her side. The man was not bad at all. He made good money and took care of her mother. She had been cruel to him, but she had her reasons.

She was actually mad with her own father. How did he dare to disappear without saying, at least, good bye to her? She used her hate against her stepfather as a sort of childish and unconscious revenge against her own missing father.

Cary squeezed Daniel's hand, but the kid kept his eyelids shut tight. She looked in front of her, into the rear mirror. Her gaze met Martin's eyes. She felt like there was some sort of connection between the two of them, something totally hidden deep in their minds. Maybe the Hackers implanted some type of matching pheromones under their skins, who knew. This man must be around the same age of her father. Maybe that was the reason why she trusted him from the first moment they met, when she immediately realized that Martin was the Hammer.

She knew what Martin wanted from her, what everybody here wanted from her. She was still keeping the Umbrella out of the whole vehicle, without any major effort. But Martin wanted her to contact the Zone. For God's sake, she had been trying for hours without results. Where was this damn Zone? Martin was driving blindly, just going away from the city, in the direction of the desert. Maybe he had the intuition that the Zone, if that place really existed, had to be under some dunes in the desert. She would think the same way. But the desert was huge. Without the exact location, they would not find it. The car would not run out of fuel, the Energy Grid reached every corner of the planet, but they would need food and water, especially in the desert. Besides, if the Heavenly Guard decided to go after them, it was easy to pinpoint their location using the satellites of the Global Traffic System and follow the magnetic signature of the PTU. The guards could also remotely shut down the engine and cut off the link of the car to the Energy Grid. She remembered she had this as a math problem in an exam in high school. How to locate a fugitive vehicle and shut it down. They could not afford driving around forever. Cary closed her eyes and concentrated again. She searched the airwaves looking for a signal, a frequency where someone should be calling the Warrior.

5:30 AM

He had been driving for almost two hours. The sky was not longer the dark blanket that offered him a false sense of safety. The stars were turning off, one after another. The moon was never present. Long grey clouds were stretching in the horizon where the sun soon would be struggling to make his spectacular entrance. Their vehicle was still the only one on the speedway. Sometimes a solitary vehicle crossed in the opposite direction. Probably someone from the nearby villages commuting to the city. Martin was not concerned about the other cars around, but the patrols from the Heavenly Guard were known to travel often on the speedway looking for Fryers. However, if the guards really wanted, they could remotely stop their PTU, shutting down the energy supply from the Grid and send choppers to catch them.

The thing that most bothered him in this very moment was the absence of a real plan. He was hoping that, by now, the Zone would have contacted the Warrior. But that did not happen. He knew that Cary had been trying. He could see her through the rear mirror, her pretty face looking like a stone washed by the ocean, expressionless, concentrated. These damn Hackers should be aware of what was going on. They should know by now that the Hammer was on the run with the Warrior. He had been tempted to ask Cary to let him get in the system for few seconds to contact his mother. The CPU network only worked in the vicinity of the urban centres, never beyond the suburbs. In the countryside they always relayed on the Umbrella. But connecting back to the system was too risky. The guards or the Secret Service could setup a Listener in the vehicle or a Sentinel to follow them wherever they went. He could not afford this risk after everything they had been through in the city.

He believed that the Zone must be located within a distance no more than two hundred kilometres away from the city. The Hackers would not risk being too close, but he remembered the Professor telling him that sometimes some of them went into town to visit family. He guessed the desert could be the right place, somewhere safe, away from the traffic and the urban life, rarely patrolled by the guards. To the south and the west, the city almost connected with other towns in this overpopulated region of the province. To the east, the ocean was the natural frontier, unless the Hackers had constructed an underwater base, which he doubted they could have kept in secret, besides being too expensive to build and to maintain. The Zone was supposed to be an abandoned military base that somehow escaped the inventory of the Allies army after the war. That made sense to him. But then, where was it?

During the trip, Martin had been thinking of what to do next. He wanted to deliver the kids and her sister, sane and safe, to the Hackers. But he had not taken yet any decision about him. Martin never asked himself profound philosophical questions about his life, his goals or his future. He lived his life following a simple scheme, eat, drink, work, make love to a girl he would pickup a Saturday night in the local cafe near his apartment. He liked enjoying a good movie, or a book before sleeping, and to start everything all over again from the beginning the next day. He had always been surrounded by important people, Monsignor Carlo, his mother, the Professor, the Bishop. He let them worry about politics and the theological debates about the Kingdom. He loved his sister, and only because of that, he knew about the Cell and the Zone, but he never got really involved. As the Chief Inspector of the CPU, he tried to be fair as much as he could, under the circumstances. He always tried to help his fellow citizens without asking what were their beliefs, releasing from custody the occasional Questioner captured by his men, verbally warning the people who raised too many flags in the Umbrella, avoiding sending Fryers to Rehabs, unless the person insisted in being fixed. Martin did not remember the last time he spoke to the Lord, maybe ten years ago, more? He asked the Lord for help in finding a girl for him. This was all he did. He never told this to anyone, not even to Miriam. The Lord smiled benevolent and wise, surrounded by the

golden light, his favourite scenario, and said that love was an exclusive mystery of the human heart. Sometimes it could be found in the slow flow of a creek or in the fury of a thunder storm, sometimes in the terse surface of a young skin, sometimes in the flaccid wrinkles of an older one. The constant search was what really mattered, the Lord said to him. Martin was not very impressed. Well, what kind of advices were those? Martin asked himself afterwards. He could have said exactly the same things, if he had wanted to sound profoundly poetic or ridiculously extravagant. He never felt the euphoria that others mentioned after meeting the Lord. On the contrary, being honest, he felt a hint of deception, boredom and also frustration. If this guy was supposed to be the ultimate authority for resolving the conflicts of the human soul, he better stopped asking stupid questions, if he did not want getting back stupid answers.

However, there was a pragmatic side he had to take in account when deciding what to do next. Could he go back to the city and continue being the Chief Inspector of the Criminal Prevention Unit? He would have to face a trial, no doubts. Justice, like in all the times and places of this world, was merely an expression of the ones who held all the keys that opened all the doors. Depending on the balance of power, between the few that may be willing to speak out in his defence, and the many that would love sending him to Rehabs and get rid of a nosey cop, he could win or lose the trial. No, obviously, coming back to the city could not be an option. The other possibility was to follow Miriam and the kids and join the Hackers, hiding forever under the protective shadow of the elusive Zone. He was not a dreamer looking for a romantic adventure. This fight against the system still seemed to him like a meaningless madness, an utopia with no feet on the ground. The Hackers could not defeat the Heavenly Guard, the Secret Service, the CPU, the Army, the flying naked guys and the almighty Lord. The Hackers thought that after the Umbrella went down, they would be able to enter openly into more minds and win the people over to their cause, until the majority of the population would be ready for launching a revolt against the system. But the Hackers seemed to forget about the guards, the churchgoers, the military and the priesthood. Maybe the Hackers thought that the rest would just stand still, watching them, doing nothing? No, Martin did not believe the Hackers had a chance. The Professor was a dreamer, but Martin was not. Monsignor Carlo had the best chance of reforming the Divine City from within. He could have defied the greedy Council with his moral authority, backed by an army of agents from a powerful Secret Service. But now Monsignor Carlo was dead. The Servants would ally with the Council. A strong faith for a strong Kingdom would be their motto. Shit! What were the chances of his mother and her peaceful congregations against the forces of corruption and money nicely packed within a cleverly designed propaganda?

Coming back to the basis, the option of seeking refuge in the Zone was the only reality he could face now. He would not join the fight, he would ask for protection, a friendly exchange of favours between the Hackers and the Hammer for delivering the Warrior to the Zone. It was the least they should be able to do for him. He could live with the Hackers, watching them, studying them, giving advice when asked, but he would not

fight against the system. He was not a fighter, for God's sake, he was a detective, just a simple cop.

6:00 AM

Friend had been flying over the wrong roads. The Hackers were not expecting their precious cargo to travel openly via the speedway. They thought the Hammer would take the side roads, a web of confusing, poorly kept, rarely used, barely paved roads that lead out of the city into the countryside. Friend had been looking all over around the northwest area in a radius of more than three hundred kilometres. Finally their scientists hacked the Energy Grid and made some calculations. The Zone knew the connection code of the Personal Transportation Unit. It took some time to work out the hundred of numbers in the computers. The triangulation of the vehicle position concluded that the PTU was moving on the speedway, following the direction north. Friend received the message and immediately set course to the speedway.

The traffic was growing every passing minute. The morning sun was already climbing up in the horizon, over the ocean. Someone could look up and see him, like a giant golden bird, flying not too high, below the morning clouds. Friend was not afraid of the occasional onlooker noticing his presence up in the sky. He was more concerned about the Heavenly Guard sending the choppers after the PTU.

The news from the city were very contradictory and unreliable. The Divine City had sent a Special Envoy from the Temple. The Hackers suspected that this person would try to take over the Ministry, overriding the decisions of the Assembly of the Congregations. Everything depended on the position of each commander of the law enforcement agencies. In any case, the Temple was demanding a thoroughly investigation of the events which had just taken place in the Old City. The pressure on the provincial authorities to take action against the fugitives would soon escalate no matter who won the battle of power in the city.

Friend reached the speedway and started flying north. He should be soon over the spot, if the calculations were correct. He was getting tired. He could not develop the same speed as he did two hours ago, when the search started. The Messenger did not have time to setup a backup frequency for the Warrior to contact the Zone. The death of the Messenger took the Zone by surprise. The Hackers had been trying randomly to establish a connection, but all in vain. It took hours to go through all the possible channels. The only chance they had to find the Warrior was through visual inspection. Sending out vehicles to intercept Miriam's PTU was too risky. Once outside of the Zone, the Hackers were easy prey within the Umbrella. They were lucky that Friend was with them. The flying creature was the only one who could get out of the Zone without being in the system.

Friend flew over a dozens of cars and trucks before he finally detected the magnetic signature of Miriam's PTU. He was lucky, there were no cars near. Friend started the descend in circles. The creature got in front of the windshield, flapping fast his wings to avoid being hit by the vehicle. His big black eyes met the surprised gaze of Martin. Friend made a signal to the driver with a hand. Martin nodded and followed his instructions. The vehicle stopped in a rest area at the curb. Friend dropped down on his feet beside the passenger's door. Miriam opened her window.

“Listen Martin, the Zone is very close, on the other side of the speedway. Take the first exit to the right and follow the ramp to the unpaved road beneath. I will guide you from the sky. We will be there in less than fifteen minutes. Is everybody fine?”

“Yes, everybody is fine.”

Martin answered with a smile of relief. Friend got up in the air. Martin restarted the vehicle. Few metres ahead, he turned to the exit of a ramp that took them under a bridge of the speedway. The roughness of the unpaved road made the PTU enter into the off-road mode. The variable viscosity suspension was working smoothly, making the ride more comfortable for the passengers.

Martin followed the golden silhouette of Friend in the sky. The vehicle was swallowed by a cloud of dust. Martin focused on the path ahead. The local road seemed to lead to nowhere in the middle of the desert. Miriam squeezed her brother's hand and rested her back on the seat. Martin looked back through the mirror. Daniel had Cary embraced in his arms. Soon they would be all under the safe cover of the Zone. Martin smiled, almost happily, and then he heard a voice inside his head.

"You did it Martin." He could not recognize the source. It sounded far, deep and distorted by the static. "Well done, Hammer, well done!"

"Who are you?" Martin asked with a thought inside his mind.

"I'm the Voice."

The End