

THE SIGIAN BRACELET



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CHAPTER 1.

Colenam, or Cole, as friends used to call him, was the “jure”¹ of Sigarion, a small rural town raised close to the oceanfront. In a normal city, the jure held an important public position. But on Antyra II there were no normal cities, and especially not Sigarion.

With nothing better to occupy his mind, Cole stepped outside his dome and started to gaze mindlessly at the evening sky, when a loose feeling of guilt pinched him by the tail. This time he wasn’t bothered that Antyra’s star was about to set over another day strewn with delays, the workers—brought to level the nearby hill—again falling behind schedule. It didn’t bother him at all because their supervisor promised to keep them working for a few more hours to make up for the lost time. *In the light of the night*. His guilt was to feel happy—happy for the first time in his life—that Antyra’s planetary system² was locked inside a fiery firewall, the belly of the eternal god Beramis. This light was now helping the workers to keep up with the excavation.

And who wouldn’t feel ashamed? The firewall was a weird space distortion that engulfed Antyra’s stellar system, depriving the Antyrans of any chance to reach behind it, whatever that “behind” meant. Not even the best-fireproofed probes could cross it, for they always exited on the same side: the inside. And if the probes couldn’t pass, unfortunately, the same happened with the photons coming from the star—they got stuck in the frontier and spread all over the sky in a mighty firewall, hotter and hotter with every passing year, dooming them all to a slow, painful death by overcooking.

¹ The city’s strategist, a position granted for life by Antyra’s Council.

² The star system had three inhabited worlds, of which Antyra I was the cradle of Antyran civilization, while the other two were recent colonies.

But the end of the world wouldn't happen for about six thousand years, while Cole needed to finish the expansion of his dome now. The firewall was serving him well: due to an unhealthy dose of naïvety, he was fooled by the workers' wild promises and—predictably—ran out of time. His smallest daughter was about to hatch five eggs, an extraordinary number for those days and certainly unheard of in their small community. The little ones would need darker nests in the first months of life to protect their sensitive eyes from getting too much light. That came from the old times, when the Antyrans crammed into ice cities dug inside glaciers, as it was written in the Book of Creation Inrumiral.

With understandable reluctance, Cole was about to stop the excavation to invite the workers to the generous dinner cooked by his female, when a loud scream erupted in his backyard. Afraid that an accident might have happened, he ran there, followed by the others.

"What is it this time?" the overseer shouted peevishly over Cole's shoulder.

The worker had lost his breath and barely managed to return a terrified gaze, too frightened to mutter anything.

As he looked at the ravine in front of the bulldozer's track launcher, where a part of the hill was already excavated, the problem became obvious to Cole, too: several bones of a skeleton, weathered due to the long time they had stayed buried, were hanging out of the earth. They showed signs of exposure to extremely high temperatures. The sand had a greenish-black, glassy consistency in a compact layer below the skeleton, and in some places above it, too.

Everyone was now speechless. Something seemed very wrong with the bones—they didn't have the right size for an Antyran. *No!* Cole quelled his thoughts—he couldn't afford to make assumptions about what he was seeing. He stepped forward, and the workers moved out of his way. He slowly bent close to the littered remains, and he began to remove the sand with hesitant moves from the left side of the excavation, where the skull ought to be.

“Sh-should we call the security?” babbled one of the workers. “Maybe it’s not a good thing to touch them, if there’s a murd—” But he couldn’t finish his sentence because the skull came out... and it wasn’t Antyran.

Cole shook his head in disbelief, seeing how his darkest forebodings had become reality. The three recessive gills behind his hearing lobe became purple, but he couldn’t stop his hands from digging. He kept going and going with jerky movements, aware that he was about to touch a *god!*

Soon, the workers recovered enough from shock to run away, screaming in terror.

The Antyrans were rather thin and agile creatures. Their slightly elongated heads were endowed with a pair of large, black, playful eyes and elastic nostrils that allowed them to sink nimbly under water. They had a prominent crest made of short, thick, skinny spikes, which they loved to paint or tattoo in fanciful ways, according to the day’s fashion. Another common practice in the Antyran female seduction kit was to scent each spine with a different fragrance, to impress the males with their aromary talents.

Both the males and the females had slim waists, large shoulders, and a pair of long, stout arms. The males’ right shoulder was a bit larger than the left one, a reminder of the times when their ancestors had fought for domination (of course, this theory was never accepted by Zhan’s temples). They also had a robust tail. In order to prevent traffic disruptions and avoid slapping the nearby pedestrians by accident (a very rude and, indeed, sexually charged gesture), they invented a sticky pocket on the back of their tunic, to hold it in place. The fastener not only helped them fix the thing in place but also let them scratch its tip—which often itched in the most annoying way, always in a bad place and at the wrong time.

Cole stopped digging to take a look at the skeleton, which no doubt had a greater stature than the Antyrans. He saw a strange

metallic object on its right forearm, a massive, goldlike bracelet with a black symbol painted on it—sort of a star with three curved rays.

There was a big patch of vitrified sand above the skeleton. Weary that it might collapse over the bones, Cole pulled out a few green pieces of glass. Another surprise came out of the sand: something was shining in the night light! It wasn't another bracelet, as he first thought, but a compact wall of golden metal.

"The fire chariot!" Feeling his strength melting away like a piece of ice in a hot oven, he dragged his feet, shaking, to the blade of the nearest magnetic bulldozer, to hold on it.

Cole's problem was that Antyra II was colonized only recently. The world didn't have ancient cities, ruins, artifacts, or anything even remotely like that. And judging by the looks, the bones had spent quite a few centuries embedded in the sand. How could anything that old be buried there if the Antyrans had discovered space flight only some 150 years ago?

Even though Cole didn't have the slightest idea how one of the gods should look—since all the stories described them as ethereal creatures bathed in a blinding light—the only logical explanation accepted by his kyi was that the skeleton in front of him was one of them, one of Zhan's sons... the very gods who, on a beautiful summer morning, some 1,250 years before, had arrived on their home planet. It wasn't actually a pleasant encounter. At least not for the Antyrans, if only because the gods burned their cities to the ground—starting with Raman's³ capital, forbade Colhan's ancient religion, and locked the whole star system inside the womb of Beramis—the distortion that held them captive ever since, hiding the stars. After such an awesome display of destruction, they went back to where they came, but not before investing an Antyran, called Baila I, as their prophet.

³ Raman was the last baitar of the ancient world—and undoubtedly the mightiest ruler in history; he had managed to crush all the opposition and unify Antyra under his iron fist. As a baitar, he was the harbinger of the Ussybayales Mysteries, the head of Antyra's old religion. The title was inherited by the first newborn, forced by tradition to adopt a male sex.

As soon as he managed to regain his balance, Cole ran to his dome to call the authorities. He knew that speed was essential: if Zhan's temples found out about this before Antyra's Shindam,⁴ they'd grab the artifacts and erase any trace—including him and his large family.

The archivists had to dig in a hurry. A pack of armored chameleon trucks belonging to the Shindam's security had already sealed off the area, and chased away the crowds attracted by the wild rumors, which spread like wildfire. This time, however, the reality had a good chance of beating their craziest guesses, since no one really suspected what had happened in Cole's backyard. The bulldozer workers were locked inside Cole's dome, and the jure and his family had disappeared—moved from the planet for their own safety.

As the bone fragments and the bits of a spaceship were unearthed, the archivists hurriedly packed them in crates and stored them in their nearby vehicles. Due to the haste, the usual care in handling such fragile artifacts was all but forgotten. The soldiers brought huge spotlights to enhance the *night light* and help the scholars work without breaks. In less than four days, the whole area was sieved. Cole's dome was demolished to check the ground below it, and anything of interest was stored in chameleons. The trucks then drove to the nearest spaceport and loaded their precious cargo on an interplanetary spaceship belonging to the security forces.

As soon as the spaceship took off to Antyra I, the archivists began to rummage through the boxes. They had four complete skeletons and fragments from at least ten other individuals, together with six goldlike bracelets and a bunch of garment patches (most likely spacesuits) made from an unknown fabric. They also found remnants of a golden ship shattered into pieces by a terrible impact, only a few fragments surviving the crash unmelted. Yet the reason why it came down wasn't a mystery, being obvious at the very first

⁴ The council that had ruled Antyra ever since defeating the temples in the "Kids' War," some 652 years earlier.

glance: one of the damaged fragments had a hole right in the middle, its edges torn inside, the layers of composite materials fused together. Obviously, such damage couldn't have happened from the impact. Something deadly had hit the ship before it came down: either a powerful laser lens or a different energetic weapon, unlike anything Antyrans had in the past and probably still didn't have now.

As the findings were sorted and cataloged, Tadeoibiisi's archivists became silent. They instinctively felt that everything was about to change. What they held in their hands was the beginning of the madness, and they were its heralds. A madness that everyone wanted forgotten, buried for eternity in the obscure foldings of their history—in the same way that the gods' bones stood buried in Cole's backyard for so many peaceful centuries.

Unfortunately, they didn't have much hope of hiding the secret from the temples. No one succeeded—at least not with a secret of such magnitude. Their lives were in great danger, but it hardly mattered. For the gods had returned. Dead or alive, it was of no importance. The gods were here, in their hands, and certainly brought answers to many troubling questions, questions that the Antyrans didn't even dare to ask.

CHAPTER 2.

The morning was a bit cold for that time of the year, to some Antyrans' slight surprise, for they all but forgot it was still technically possible to shiver in the middle of the summer—or even freeze to death, like their ancestors used to, during the terrible glaciations of the past. And they particularly forgot the remarkable phenomenon caused by the eccentric wobble of the planet's axis, when the North Pole migrated near the world's only continent about once every several millennia. Not that the axis steadied in the meantime—far from it—but with the firewall around them, the prospect of another pole wandering was the least worry to wrinkle their spikes. Zhan himself had promised, when he whispered the Book of Creation Inrumiral in the ear socket of his first prophet, Baila I, that he would personally return before the end of the world and save the righteous from baking.

It was in fact this promise that brought millions of pilgrims called “tarjis”, from all the Antyran planets, to Alixxor⁵. They came to climb the mighty pyramids erected in the central park and view the star-rise above the purple haze. To witness Zhan's sacred light defeating Arghail's⁶ evil darkness.

Through the morning mist, millions of lamps fueled by moulan grease stretched a ribbon of fire along Alixxor's streets. The pilgrims walked briskly, ready to assault the grueling hundreds of stone steps leading to the top of the pyramids.

Karajoo, the feast of light, was about to begin.

The purple bioluminescent bacteria floating in Antyra's atmosphere was thicker in a band about six hundred feet from the ground, laying a fantastic tapestry in front of the tarjis' awestruck

⁵ Antyra's capital.

⁶ The god of senseless deaths.

eyes. Down the streets, they could only see a purple-red sky, but from the heights of the Great Pyramid platform, the layer looked like the waves of a stormy sea, pierced by the tallest city temples and by murra, the holy trees seeded by Zhan.

The tarjis were, of course, clueless about history's wicked ways, but their final steps before the pyramids stirred the dust of another sacred road, the one followed by Coolhan's ancient worshippers. For even in the times of mythical Azaric, the winding path to the sixth mound was known as the "Path of Dreams", the place where the crowds of believers became intoxicated by the poisonous aromas and scary stories shared by legendary aromaries. Then, they dreamed. They dreamed terrible nightmares meant to scare Pixihe—the goddess of coldness—and chase away the winter from the island continent. Of course, where they failed, the new gods succeeded "in just a few days"—not only with Pixihe, but with Colhan himself, and all their stories were forgotten, crushed under the weight of the new religion. The sixth mound of the sacred road lay now buried under the largest pyramid, destroyed like the other pagan symbols. Because nothing was allowed to be more humongous than Zhan's white-gold, Beramis's red-like-fire and Belamia's ocean-storm-blue pyramids—nothing, except murra, the tallest trees in the world. The gods seeded them on a field 1,250 years ago, just before departing, and instructed the Antyrans to build their new capital around them. The oldest murra were over eight hundred feet tall, their giant, juicy leaves shading the alleys of the central park.

Dressed in his ritual robes woven with platinum threads, the Great Prophet Baila XXI stepped on a platform perched atop the highest murra. The tarjis raised their candles toward the twilight sky, muttering the "Litany of Sacrifice"⁷ in a trancelike state:

⁷ The litany was the story of the god who liberated the Antyrans from Arghail's darkness. According to the Book of Creation, Zhan himself broke Beramis's vow of slavery and took him to the sky as a reward for his sacrifice.

“Hopelessly lost without his deep-blue eyes, ever since he gave them to us, Beramis wanders in the cave of death, forever slave of Arghail the Black,” they lamented, staring at the firewall that bordered their small bubble universe.

The morning breeze stole their dissonant murmurs, carrying them to the farthest corners of the city.

Baila XXI raised the Holy Rod up into the air, and the tarjis immediately dropped to the pavement, heads bowed into the dust.

“Antyrans, soldiers of light!” he boomed over the prostrated crowd. “Our age is coming to an end. Sacrifice yourself for Zhan like Beramis once did, and you will rise to the sky before the second rain of fire! Someday, you’ll be a part of Him!”

He jerked his arms towards the wall of fire, and the electrified crowd jumped to their feet with delirious quivering. They began to chant Zhan’s name—at first whispered, then louder and louder, till their murmurs became a deafening shout. The pilgrims’ orations rolled over Alixxor with the force of a thousand thunders. Everyone on the streets—tarjis, initiates, and even some bystanders—joined them. Then, suddenly, silence fell over the city. In a tiny dent in the wall of the Roch-Alixxor Mountains, just left of Eger, a skittish morning ray started to dance. The dawn had begun!

Far from the Karajoo feast, a Shindam spaceship landed in utmost secrecy at a military spaceport in western Alixxor, taking advantage of the last vanishing shadows of the quasi-night. A column of armored chameleons with their camouflage activated rushed on the tarmac, surrounding it. The troops jumped into the ship and quickly unloaded a bunch of black boxes. As soon as they finished loading the precious cargo in their chameleons, they drove swiftly to a nearby secret base.

Gill couldn’t find a good reason why he kept staring at the three stars. They didn’t have anything special, hanging in a black sky littered with millions and millions of other lights just like them. And yet, he was spying them through a lens. He knew all too well what was about to happen: the lights would start to move. At first slowly,

then faster and faster, they would run away from the motionless sky and hide in the darkest corner, colder and deeper than any other one. He eagerly craved to see them closer. He was about to fulfill his wish because he was falling toward them, through them, with roaring terror.

He didn't make it to the destination, being awakened rather brutally from the tentacles of his strange dream by an annoying ringing: an incoming call on the holophone. *Damn!* Now he remembered all too well the three little square stars, since the same nightmare had haunted him for the past few nights. Had he been superstitious, he surely would have interpreted it as a bad omen—after all, he was one of Zhan's traitors. *Tonight, I'm going to dream it through the end, if only Tadeo will leave me alone.*

Even though his full name was Gillabrian, the Antyran tradition meant that his friends only used the first letters, "Gill," while his enemies, if he had any, would use the last ones—namely, Abrian. No one called him Abrian—at least not yet—since he was just a secluded archivist hidden behind his archaeological interests, trying hard to avoid stepping on anyone's tail. He had no doubts, thought, that if he managed to crawl higher up the rigid hierarchy of the Archivists Tower, lots of colleagues would call him Abrian behind his back. It would be inevitable.

He was living in the crowded outskirts of the capital city, Alixxor, far enough from Karajoo's noises—but not far enough from Tadeo's long arm. After grudgingly greeting the hologram of his boss, he dressed as fast as he could and abandoned his tempting nest to face the morning chill.

Normally, he wouldn't have to wake up so early because his work started at more decent hours, but Tadeoibiisi's voice allowed him no doubts that something serious had happened. His boss asked him to drive with utmost speed on the western magnetobypass, to a crossroads where a security crew will pick him up and fly him to a secret base in one of their chameleon sky-jets.

He stopped for a moment, trying to get used to the darkness inside the underground base. It might have gone faster if he could

manage to keep his eyes open, but despite his goodwill (*to be honest, not a great deal of it*), the treacherous darkness lured him to shut them again immediately.

A dim light revealed a long corridor vaulted with greenish stone tiles descending gently into the earth's bowels. A few steps away, he spotted several silhouettes, the unmistakable one belonging to Tadeoibiisi—his boss—a head taller than the others.

"Gill! Sorry I woke you up, but you have to see what we brought this time. Very important stuff. And, above all, very damn secret."

Gill approached the group and briefly greeted them with his fist pressed to his left breast, according to the custom.

"They're going to work with us," Tadeo said. "I believe you already know our colleagues from the Archivists Tower: prime archivist Krinandrin, archivist Armondengava, and his assistant, Ernonhafir. The others are from the Security Tower. They're part of the team." He didn't say their names. Most likely, he didn't know them, either. "My assistant, Alala, will join us later. Should have been here already, but she was delayed by the morning traffic."

Of all the names, Gill only knew Alala. She was a beautiful Antyran, one of the few pleasant faces in an institution packed with old male researchers, invariably owning some large desks full of ancient rolls, drawings stained with sardac juice, and holograms of their fat, androgynous nephews.

He had few opportunities to chat with her—mostly when he was looking for Tadeo—but even though she always looked friendly and cheerful, he never managed to smell her. Usually, it took him little time to figure out what kind of Antyran he was dealing with, but Alala was a different story. She had something special—mysterious and cold—in her eyes, which didn't bode well with the friendly mask worn on the outside. And instead of minding his own business, he felt attracted to her like a helpless licant⁸ glued to a tekal

⁸ Small, fusiform, flying creatures hunted to extinction by the tarjis, who suspected that they became the eyes of Arghail by flying over the vitrified cities. The nasty habit of rubbing their sticky feet to the gills of the sleeping Antyrans didn't help them become more popular, either.

seed, anxious to peer behind the wall she raised between her and the rest of the world. Maybe this was his chance to finally get to know her better...

"Let's go," Tadeo shouted and waved his right hand to hurry them. "Alala knows where to find us. We don't have to wait for her."

"I knew it has to be big since you awoke me so awfully early, but what the heck are we doing here?" mumbled Gill in a low voice, trying to make himself heard only by Tadeo's ear holes. "Did you explore... one of the melted cities?" he quivered, haunted by a gloomy feeling.

"You'll see!" his boss said, smiling. "A bit more than that. We found something ancient buried on Antyra II."

"Antyra II? Come on, how can you find anything there? It doesn't have history," Gill exclaimed, incredulous, forgetting to control the pitch of his voice. "We barely colonized it!"

"You're right. There's no *Antyran* history," Tadeo said, smiling.

"Then what the—"

An imposing officer appeared from a dark gallery, blocking their way.

"And who's this one?" the voice whipped in Gill's general direction while the soldier's eyes stung him as if he was perfectly able to read his darkest secrets right through his skull.

"He's one of my assistants, our best researcher of comparative anatomy!"

Tadeo had this talent of "slightly" exaggerating things, especially when he talked with profanes. Truth was, comparative anatomy was Gill's specialty—but still, the "best researcher" was a bit of a stretch.

"I need him to analyze the skeletons. Moreover, it's not his first sensitive project with... the Security Tower. Here's the approval," Tadeo said and handed over a hologram.

Then he turned his head toward him.

"Gill, this is the bunker comman—"

“Right... checking now,” the commander sputtered, rudely interrupting Tadeo. He blatantly ignored the cherished Antyran palm ritual, which didn’t really surprise anyone.

Same pleasure meeting you... I hope I won’t have to meet your sorry mug too often, thought Gill, annoyed by his lack of manners. He was never too happy to meddle with security’s bullies, and this particular soldier seemed to be one of its finest embodiments. The commander held the hologram near a wall scanner until a green light lit.

“Move to the elevator! Down to the last level!” he waved his hand vigorously to encourage them to speed up their steps.

The descent went on forever. Gill gazed at the countless layers of basaltic rock in which the secret base was dug, below a training garrison built on the surface as a decoy. Surely very few Antyrans were aware of this. It was quite remarkable how the security forces managed to excavate something that huge right in front of the temples’ nostrils. But he couldn’t help wondering if Baila XXI knew about this place. Most likely, yes—his spies and agents swarmed the Shindam’s Towers and informed him about pretty much everything. And considering what a ruckus Tadeo must have caused with this expedition, everyone in the elevator was in mortal danger if the temples found out the slightest thing about it.

As they dropped lower and lower, he started to feel the cold numbness of fear seeping into his bones. Even though he was aware that few archivists had the good fortune to die of “natural causes” at a ripe old age, he’d rather get killed outside, bathed in starlight, than buried alive like a baski⁹ in this stinky hole.

The elevator finally stopped. Gill walked briskly behind Tadeo through a series of armored doors and reached a long gallery, better lighted than the entry tunnels. Looking through the thick glass walls on the corridor’s sides, he saw a long row of laboratories stuffed with all sorts of unidentified machines and displays.

⁹ The baskis were blind reptilian creatures that dug deep tunnels underground. In the past, searching for a nest before building a dome was commonplace, since they knew how to avoid groundwater.

"You told the 'nice' commander something about... some skeletons?" Gill asked, dispelling the silence.

"We found the skeletons of the *gods!*" Tadeo replied, grinning widely.

"What?" Gill exploded, filling the cavern with long echoes.

"As you heard. Right here," he said, pointing to a large automatic door, which opened when they reached in front of it.

They stepped into a round room whose wall to the corridor was made of ceramic glass. The god lay on a table in the middle of the room, bathed in a bluish glow coming from a bunch of lights hung on a portable stand. Gill approached it slowly, holding his breath, not daring to believe that what he saw was real. Two scientists in blue robes were carefully measuring the skeleton.

Did the bones belong to a god? No one knew what a god should look like. There were no descriptions, except the ones of Beramis, a giant firewall, and Belamia, an eternal twister. The skeleton, in any case, didn't resemble a firewall or a tornado. It looked just the way a skeleton was supposed to. But what a skeleton! One thing was obvious to everyone in the room: the bones didn't come from their planet and had no connection to any living or long-gone Antyran species.

Its stature was similar to that of the Antyrans, but the similarities ended there. Its bones were more robust; it had a big, elongated skull with prominent arches, strong arms and wide hands with four long fingers, ending in claws. It was bipedal, and—another amazing detail—the tail was missing!

"Could it be genetic manipulation?" Tadeo asked him. "Look at the pelvic bones, they're—"

"No. I don't see how somebody could build such a thing," Gill babbled, hardly finding his breath. "I'll tell you more after checking the others. Did you say you found more of them?"

"Yes. And the remains of a ship. A golden one, just like the Fire Chariots." Tadeo grinned with the serenity of someone having no worries to squeeze his tail.

"A Fire Chariot? How did a Fire Chariot end up on—"

"Shot down. We found a hole this big," Tadeo said, showing the size with his hands. "Some sort of a laser beam."

As Tadeo happily revealed more and more details of the unbelievable story, Gill felt claustrophobic again and had to fight the urge to run back to the surface to get some fresh air. *What a stupid mistake I made when I picked up the call this morning*, he thought.

"The anatomists are checking the remains. Soon, we'll have more details," said Tadeo.

"How old... how old do you think they are?" Gill asked.

"Several hundred, maybe a thousand years. Look at the bones! They spent quite some time underground."

"Right. At first smell, I'll give them over five hundred. Anyway, they're pretty well preserved. I hope we can date them."

"I thought that myself," Tadeo said with a smirk. "What if they came from another world, with a different isotope frame? The radioactive dating would... jump off the scale," he uttered in a low voice, aware that he just said the biggest conceivable blasphemy.

"You're insane," Gill whispered, although he wasn't sure anymore that he was saner.

A sane Antyran wouldn't be here, two steps away from the... creatures.

"The other skeletons are here, too?"

"Yes, back there," Tadeo said, waving his hand toward a pile of black crates stacked in a corner. "There's one in another lab I want you to check out. Someone will lead you to it."

"Are there any children?" asked Gill.

"Only adults. There's no visible sexual dimorphism."

"Maybe they're all males?"

"That's one of the things I expect you to tell me," Tadeo said, still smiling.

"Of course. I'll start working right now."

Surely the soldiers won't let us out of the bunker until the research is finished, but I need my microtomograph, my spectrometer—

"I asked for your tools," said Tadeo, interrupting Gill's thoughts. "They're in the B8 lab with the other skeleton I told you about. I'd like you to study that one first. But before you leave, take a look at this." He leaned over to reach the contents of a crate and carefully lifted out a golden bracelet. "I found this thing on his arm," he said, pointing at the skeleton on the table.

Gill took the object. It was cold to the touch.

"Quite light and smooth, without ornaments. Oh, look, a painted effigy, a black star with three curved rays."

"What could be its use? Some sort of ritual?" wondered Tadeo.

"It's too simple for that; it doesn't seem decorative. All of them had bracelets?"

"Maybe—we found the remains of fourteen individuals and only six bracelets. I suspect the others may have been destroyed on impact."

"The star is a button. We managed to open it earlier," said one of the Antyrans from the security team who was measuring the skeleton.

"What?" Tadeo jumped, surprised. "How did you do that? Show me!" He took the bracelet from Gill's hands and handed it to the other scientist.

"Very simple," replied the researcher. "Just press here on the three-rayed star."

One of the bracelet's sides opened, uncovering eight strange symbols, the likes of which Gill had never seen in his entire life.

"They look like buttons!" exclaimed Tadeo, taking the artifact back to examine it closer. "This can only mean the bracelet was some sort of device. I wonder what these buttons do..."

"Nothing," said another security lab worker. "I've pressed them a couple of times, but they can't possibly work after so many years."

"Next time be more careful with these things," Tadeo admonished him, "or I'll ask your commander to remove you from my team!"

"I don't think so," the researcher replied arrogantly. "No one told you who gives orders around here?"

"You say you found the bracelet on his arm?" asked Gill, interrupting their bickering.

"Yes. Something like this," Tadeo exclaimed abruptly, still angered by the other researcher. He carefully pulled the artifact onto his arm to show the position. "You'll have plenty of time to check it later, after you finish the skeleton in B8."

Tadeo, still holding the bracelet on his forearm, waved Armond's assistant to accompany him.

"Ernon, please lead Gill to B8. Ernon will assist you."

They walked a considerable distance through several dimly lit, winding corridors. In some places, the glass walls allowed them to peer inside other labs, most of them empty.

"Why have you brought this skeleton so far from the others?" asked Gill.

"There are only two labs equipped to study them."

"I'd like to be with the others."

"Don't worry, Tadeo told me to bring everything to his lab after we measure the bones."

They finally arrived in front of an armored door, which Ernon opened with his hologram. They stepped into an empty lab similar to the first one. It also had no windows.

Another skeleton—a bit taller and thinner than the first—lay on a table, waiting patiently to reveal its secrets, hidden for so many centuries. The creature still had a golden bracelet on the right forearm.

"The best preserved of all! Your tools are there," said Ernon, pointing to a dark corner.

Although he was anxious to examine the bones, he felt a bit uneasy at the very thought of touching a god. He feverishly seized the microtomograph and unpacked it on a table near the wall. A clogged hum announced that the machine was ready.

Gill's profession usually implied working with all sorts of relics, so in principle, he knew what to do. But nothing could be further from routine than today.

After a moment of hesitation, he reached out his gloved hand and touched the god's bones, almost with awe. The contact felt cold to his fingertips. Once upon a time, the "thing" in front of him was alive, breathing, wanting, maybe even loving. He slowly touched the sternum and ribs, then stopped at the left forearm—the one without bracelet—aware that he had to keep his head cool. *There's nothing unusual here*, he forced himself to reason. *They feel like any other bones.*

The arm bones weren't completely detached from one another, held together by all sorts of debris—traces of clothing and even things that looked like tissues. Since Antyra II had few microorganisms capable of chewing on a corpse, it wasn't such an unexpected finding. The fingers still held their grip.

Very slowly, Gill checked if the left forearm was still attached to the rest of the skeleton and managed to dislodge it easily. He carefully laid it in the microtomograph. Only after setting the hologram resolution, he cast an eye on the display.

"Hey! What's this?" he couldn't stop an exclamation of surprise.

"What happened?" asked Ernon.

Ernon abandoned the skull and came to watch the display.

"There's something in his hand, see?" Gill said.

Indeed, a black metallic object was clearly visible inside the skeleton's fist.

"We should call Tadeo!"

"The holophone is near the door," Ernon said. "His lab code is A21."

Gill keyed in the code, and a small hologram of the first lab appeared nearby.

"Tadeo, we found—" he stopped midsentence, deafened by the high-pitch sound coming out of the holophone.

Tadeo didn't notice him. He was surrounded by the other researchers in the room, still wearing the bracelet on his forearm. All of them were tensely looking at the artifact.

“Tadeo!” he shouted as loud as he could, hoping to overcome the maddening buzz. “I don’t think he can hear us! Is this thing broken? Ernon! What the heck are you doing?”

Ernon was busy working to extract the metallic object from the skeleton’s grip, wholly unconcerned that he might damage the bones in the process.

“Stop right now!” Gill shouted, horrified. “Have you lost your kyi?”

“I pulled it out,” Ernon said with a grin, showing him a small, oval object made from two different alloys, a black star with three curved rays painted on the golden side.

“Hand it over!” Gill asked, sternly.

“The same star was on the bracelet,” Ernon said, more to himself, ostensibly ignoring Gill’s hand. “The black edge looks like a sheath. Maybe it comes off?”

“Ernon, give it to me at once!”

Ernon pressed on the black star, and with a click, the sheath went off. Four golden symbols were engraved on the object. As far as Gill could remember, all were among the buttons on the bracelet from the other lab. Ernon turned the object to the other side, but it was all black.

Suddenly, he dropped it on the floor, crying in pain.

“Will you please take care?” Gill reproached him angrily. He rushed to take it.

“It burns!” Ernon exclaimed, checking his hand for blisters.

Gill touched the object, but he couldn’t hold it; the metal was hot and began to smoke. He managed to turn it to memorize the signs, right before the artifact turned into ashes.

Hoping for better luck this time, he ran to the holophone to call Tadeo. However, his boss was still checking the bracelet on his forearm, and the deafening sound hadn’t disappeared. On the contrary, it had doubled in intensity.

“I hope it’s not jamming,” Gill mumbled, suddenly panicked.

Ernon looked at him, worried as well.

“If it’s jamming, it can only mean the temples are—”

He didn't finish his sentence. Both of them ran through the door, shoulder to shoulder, to reach Tadeo's lab. As soon as they stepped into the corridor, time stopped. Gill couldn't figure what happened, and yet he realized that the image in front of his eyes—the string of lights in the corridor—was the last thing to reach his memory. The bulbs kept lighting; he didn't feel any pain; everything was fine—the only problem was that no other image appeared... The corridor and the bulbs had become frozen inside his head.

Yet the more he looked at them, the more they changed. Reality began to distort around the periphery, and despite his frantic efforts to keep at least this image alive, the lights turned purple, becoming dimmer and dimmer. With his last shred of lucidity, he understood that he had witnessed a terrible explosion, which probably blew him to pieces. He couldn't think of anything else than he didn't want to die... but the time bubble around him—stopped for a split second by the blast—started to flow inexorably again.

Gill had no idea how long he had been unconscious. As soon as he opened his eyes, dazed and confused, the pain returned—an encouraging sign that he was still alive. The explosion had thrown him back into the lab, so now he was somewhere in the room, immersed in a pitch-darkness and an even deeper silence. Only a few random short circuits threw flashes of light while the thick smoke and dust slowly suffocated him.

The lab was utterly destroyed. The once-shiny room, full of scientific equipment, was now filled with piles of rubble, shards of metal, broken pipes, and severed cables. On top of that, a huge rock had fallen from the ceiling.

"Ernon!" he shouted as loud as he could.

To his astonishment, he realized he couldn't hear anything. His lips were moving, yet no sound was coming out of his mouth. The blast had deafened him!

"Ernon!"

He tried to get back on his feet, but a terrible pain spiked his every muscle, forcing him to drop back to the floor. And just when he thought it couldn't possibly get worse, the mischievous lab

started to spin around like a poisoned guval,¹⁰ without giving a damn that its occupant didn't enjoy the ride.

After a while, the spinning in his head stopped, which was a good thing. The bad thing was that the flashes thinned out—an ominous sign that he was about to get swallowed by complete darkness. This prospect helped him find unexpected strength, more so as he remembered the depth to which the elevator had brought them.

He started to look around feverishly and he saw something protruding from beneath the huge rock that had crashed to the floor: one of Ernon's feet. Gill turned his head in horror. Alone in the collapsed cavern, maybe the only survivor of the huge blast!

He didn't let his misfortune drown him, although his chances to escape alive seemed ridiculously small. His biggest enemy was panic, which could cloud his eyes and make him overlook possible escape routes or step over the path of *being-alive*. Hoping that at least his sense of smell wasn't gone, he recalled the nine primordial Guk aromas in the tranquility harmonics. He finally got to his feet and staggered out of the room, only to find that his advance was blocked by huge rocks fallen from the ceiling. The rescue teams would have to dig for months to reach him—or, more likely—his decomposed remains...

Someone very clever must have slipped a fusion bomb into the base, someone sent by the temples. They had moved faster than anybody could have anticipated. Of course, the temples never acted directly because they didn't want to start another civil war. At least not *yet*, according to the Shindam's line of thinking. Those who usually did the killings were tarjis from the "Zhan's Children" coria—under Baila XXI's direct orders. The Shindam never openly blamed the prophet, although they would have liked more than anything to be able to.

¹⁰ Mythical creatures of the old legends, the guvals were described as massive, grayish beasts; their brown, daggerlike teeth and an immensely strong bite meant they could crush any armor or helmet easier than crushing an egg.

As he was fumbling in the dark through the piles of rubble, he finally spotted his portable scanner, miraculously still working. Sighing with relief, he turned it on and started to explore the remains of the lab, using the light of its display. Not that he was hoping to save something of his tools—the microtomograph had disappeared without a trace, along with the god’s bones, buried under the rock fallen from the ceiling. He noticed something shiny under some twisted shards of metal, and he recognized the golden bracelet—apparently unscathed—coming out from under the rock, still fixed on the god’s forearm. He gently pulled the artifact off and tried to tug the bones free. They were stuck and likely to break, so he decided to abandon them to the rescue teams, if they ever reached the room.

What could he possibly do except wait for a slow, painful death? Just as he was about to abandon all hope, he saw the ventilation shaft in the wall, hidden under electrical wires and pieces of ceiling hanging from the roof. The shaft had a reasonable diameter. He could easily crawl inside if it wasn’t clogged by debris.

Gill effortlessly pulled the grill loose, its attachment weakened by the shock wave. As he was about to climb in the tunnel, he realized he had nowhere to put the god’s bracelet. He didn’t want to abandon the artifact, so he pulled it on his right forearm under the antistatic sleeve—pretty much in the same way the gods used to wear them. He pushed the scanner into the tunnel, and then, groaning in pain, he managed to pull himself in.

The passage didn’t appear to be blocked by rocks; after several feet, it turned vertically. He tried to light the black well with the scanner; predictably, it went up as far as he could see inside it. He didn’t have the slightest idea how much he had to climb, although judging by the elevator ride, it wouldn’t be fun. He touched the shaft’s wall and found it slippery, without asperities to support him. His only chance was to put his back against the wall, press his feet on the opposite one, and climb with the help of his hands.

The very thought of being buried so deep galvanized his muscles, giving him the power of ten Antyrans. He hung the scanner around his neck and started to climb.

Just as he suspected, the progress was very slow, and he had to make huge efforts to avoid slipping back into the abyss. A couple of times, he propped himself up with his short tail, but after a few seconds, the pain became unbearable.

Gill had the feeling he climbed for an eternity, although he realized he had traveled maybe one-tenth of the distance to the surface. And he had already passed all the dents made by the blast, which helped him rest his hands. Soon, the torture became so great that he was tempted to drop into the abyss. There was no way he could control a careful slide to the base of the tunnel, and he had no energy left to climb.

Suddenly, he smacked his head on a metallic object—a disabled fan propeller. Despite the uncontrollable shaking, he threw his arms around two blades, and with his last drop of energy, screaming in pain, he pulled himself through the fan. Finally, he had somewhere to rest!

He looked at the darkness above and decided it wasn't a bright idea to keep climbing. After all, someone had to be able to reach the rotor's engine if it broke, in order to fix it.

With renewed hope, he pounded the metallic walls to find the access door. On the third bang, the plate sounded hollow. He propped his back against the rotor and bashed it with all the force of desperation. The door flung open on the very first hit.

He landed in a narrow hallway, its stairs carved out of bedrock—most likely one of the escape routes. He started to climb them, stumbling on each step. Even at this distance, the blast cracked them. After a few more yards, he had to pass a huge pile of rubble, almost blocking the path.

In the end, he reached a door. He pushed it with his last drop of strength, but it only opened a couple of inches. He slipped his hand through the crack, and found that a huge rock was blocking it—most likely the collapsed ceiling. There was no way of going forward, but

at least he was close to the surface. He closed the scanner and dropped to the floor, leaning his back against the wall.

After a while, he began to hear distant noises, a sign that his hearing was slowly returning. Soon, the door opened, and the lights of a rescue party flooded him. The shadows told him something, but he couldn't understand. They finally figured out he was in shock; two of them lifted him gently from the floor and laid him on an inflatable stretcher.

The chubby rescue air-jet took off for the nearest recovery dome, while a male healer pushed his stretcher under a large scanner. Above him, a swarm of sensors flickered in different colors, searching for internal wounds. *It's alright*, he thought, comforting himself. *The Shindam doesn't work with anybody*. Over time, the healing of the body went tail to tail with the kyi's mending. No wonder that Zhan's temples enjoyed a monopoly over the recovery domes. But in the last century, the Shindam had challenged their grip, and some of the recovery domes in Alixxor became safe enough to be used even by archivists.

The healer, holding a portable scanner in his left hand, rubbed a gash on Gill's forehead to make sure his skull wasn't broken; he glued a patch of artificial skin over it and gently checked the back of his head.

"Does it hurt?"

Gill was about to faint from exhaustion—and the prospect didn't bother him at all—when he remembered, horrified, the object under his sleeve: the god's bracelet! He quickly touched it to make sure it was still there. But with the same speed, he remembered something else: they had been betrayed. And, as far as he knew, Baila XXI wouldn't be happy with only the skillfully collapsed cave where the Shindam's secret base stood. He'd send his spies to sniff the crumbles. Maybe the healer bent over him was working for the temples... *Who knows?*

The Antyrans liked to say that reality's grooves take the shape of the gods' will—the most fatalistic tarjis even pretended that Zhan was the one deciding their every single breath—but by now, Gill

was pretty convinced that the huge misfortune that brought him here was of his own doing. He didn't listen to his father when he advised him to become a flour carrier. What a carefree life would have been! Entirely eventless, except for the regular flights between Antyra I and II... and the female temptations swarming around the domes of the visitors. But no, he had to become an archivist, to atone for the cowardice of his parents, who ran away from their home in Bodris. He made another monumental mistake when he tried to save the bracelet instead of getting rid of it while he still had a chance. He could have just left it underground or given it to the security team that dug him out of the rubble. Now he had nowhere to hide the compromising artifact, considering that they were heading to a rescue dome where the holoscanners would find it in an instant...

It crossed his spikes to throw the bracelet in a corner when the operator wasn't looking. Of course, that would be another foolish thing on his already-long list. As soon as they found it, they'd figure out who threw it away. His only chance was to hide the bracelet and make sure no one would ever find about it. Not even his fellow archivists or the Shindam's officials—unable to protect their most hidden secrets, as he just learned on his own tail. Then, at the first opportunity, he would throw it into the ocean and run as far as possible from the temples, hoping they'd never connect the dots between his insignificant name and Tadeoibiisi's fateful expedition.

Misreading Gill's panicked look, the operator picked up a hormonal spray to sedate him. When he bent over the stretcher, Gill hit the tube, sending it to the floor.

"No hormones!" he shouted with a glow of madness in his eyes.

"Hey! Have you lost your smell?" the healer yelled in surprise and moved away from the stretcher, afraid that he might get attacked.

"I don't want 'em!"

"Calm down! We're almost there!" the healer exclaimed.

The shuttle landed on the jet-port of a rescue-recovery dome¹¹— a building resembling a weird hive, welded together from hundreds of hemispheres stacked one on top of another.

He was immediately moved to a comfortable nest, surrounded by all sorts of devices. When asked for his name, he replied, “Ernonhafir.”

Before leaving the room, the healer glued a pair of sensors to his chest, directly through the holes of his torn tunic, without trying to take his clothes off. He must have smelled that Gill was ready for another fight if the Antyran tried to touch his clothes.

“I’m bringing the resonance ring,” he told him from the doorstep.

As soon as Gill was alone in the room, he pulled off the sensors, convinced that the healer wouldn’t come back alone. He had no time to spare; the monitor raised the alarm anyway, and the healers would rush in at a moment’s notice. He leaped to his feet and cautiously opened the door to check the corridor. There were only a couple of healers escorting a pair of sick, old Antyrans, but they’d surely notice him if he tried to run away. Across the corridor, however, was the hatchery, where the future mothers held their eggs while they were hospitalized.

Finding the right moment, he crossed the corridor and entered the hatchery, followed by the whining of the disconnected sensors. The room had several rows of purple eggs carefully placed in small nests set on tripods. The infrared lights suspended above warmed them, while a device hidden underneath gently rolled them on all sides.

He set the holophone on closed circuit to check his own hologram and immediately regretted it, seeing how wrecked he was. However, he had no right to complain, given that he was still alive. The others weren’t so lucky.

¹¹ It’s true that the Antyrans also called the administrative buildings belonging to Zhan’s temples “domes.” All of that happened because the Bailas had a fixation on spheres and semispheres, imposing their use in architecture at the dawn of Zhan’s age.

After washing his face in the fountain embedded in the wall and mopping the dust from his shredded clothes, he looked again down the corridor. Some healers passed his door, running, apparently searching for him. Soon, the hallway was empty all the way to the elevator. He left the hatchery, trying to act as normal as possible, and reached the platform without incident.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing? Back to the ward!” a massive female shouted.

The elevator arrived just in time. Ignoring the screaming female running on his tail, followed by some male healers, he jumped on the platform and pressed the button to go to the ground hemisphere.

Once outside of the building, he ran to the nearest magneto-jet station. The jets lay folded and parked vertically to take up the smallest space possible among the lush plants surrounding the buildings. He touched his hologram to the sensor, and the jet slid horizontally on a magnetic pillow. He had no intention of driving in his sorry state, so he lay in the back seat. In a few moments, the magneto-jet took off.

“To the western bypass,” he ordered the artificial intelligence in charge of the vehicle.

All the magneto-jets had artificial intelligences, although many Antyrans chose to drive the jets themselves, following Baila’s rules against Arghail’s corrupting technology.

Cloning, augmentations, and implants of any kinds were banned by the Shindam under the prophet’s pressure. The tarjis took pains to impose their point of view in the most physical way possible, zealously thinning the number of scholars interested in such research.

But the artificial intelligences were a different story. In an act of courage touching insanity, the Shindam introduced intelligences in jets to reduce the number of road accidents. It also helped that the AI architects fled to Ropolis,¹² which happened to be the only place

¹² Ropolis was the capital city of the mining world, Antyra III.

in the three inhabited Antyran worlds where the long arm of the temples hung helplessly.

"You don't look so well! Are you alright?" exclaimed the artificial intelligence in a worried voice, stopping the whirl of his thoughts. "I'm going to call a healer and drive to—"

"Drive where I said if you don't want to be shut down!" he reproached it angrily.

"No need to shout at me, good, sir. I will follow your order," replied the program, slightly offended by his threat.

He decided to let the annoying program drive, even though he had to endure its annoying blatter about Karajoo's traffic madness until they reached his dome on the city's outskirts.

After he left the magneto-jet, the vehicle turned around and glided to the nearest magneto-jet station. With a deep sigh of relief, he stepped inside his dome, happy to finally arrive home.

CHAPTER 3.

As soon as Gill reached his modest dome, allotted by the Archivists Tower, he looked around to check if he was really alone. He opened the small door leading to the flour vault and stuck his head among the sacks piled in the usual mess, and then he carefully searched the two rooms of his home. Happy with the result, he dropped in the fluff of his nest—after pulling his tail from its back pocket and comfortably coiling it around him. He didn't have the slightest intention of falling asleep because he had to study the thing on his arm—the bracelet of the gods! He knew he had to throw it away in a place where nobody would find it, but now that he escaped, his curiosity started to overcome his panic. After all, he owned something from out of Antyra's world...

First thing first, he decided to take a hot bath sprinkled with his favorite stingy flavors, to flush the cold stink of death from his nostrils. He grabbed the bracelet to pull it off his forearm, but to his astonishment, he realized he was in trouble. *Again.* His hearing had almost fully recovered, so he couldn't miss the deafening noise in the room... or the feeling that the bracelet tightened around his arm as if it was animated by a life of its own.

All the horrors of his narrow escape from the cavern-turned-tomb came back to haunt him. At first, he couldn't accept the source of the sound. He looked through the windows with his hearts shrunk, expecting to see Baila's jets surrounding the dome. Nobody was outside.

He had heard the noise before. No doubt it came from... the bracelet! Suddenly, he remembered Tadeo's worried face. He had a bracelet on his arm. Surely, he had tried to pull it off, and then the noise became louder, followed by the explosion.

If the blast wasn't Baila's masterpiece, then what were these artifacts? Certainty took the place of bewilderment: he had a

devastating bomb on his forearm—one about to explode! How could it work after so many years?

Overcome by despair, he sank into the nest, burying himself in the flabby fluff as if it could protect him from contact with reality. He had no idea what to do. He couldn't think of anything else except that Tadeo had died in a gigantic blast from trying to get rid of the bracelet. He had to fight the panicked rush to wrest it off his arm. Most certainly, he wouldn't die alone; he would take along a big chunk of the city's outskirts.

He began to examine the bracelet bitterly, without holding much hope of finding something to avoid the catastrophe. His eyes noticed the three-rayed star and he remembered that it was actually a button.

"Why didn't it cross my tail? The bracelet's symbols!"

He quickly pressed the star, and indeed, a console opened. The eight symbols resembled the ones on the small object in the skeleton's fist. The small rod might have been an activation key! Maybe the gods memorized the code before it self-destructed—that's why it melted in Ernon's hand. Shaking uncontrollably, he typed the four symbols, expecting the noise to disappear. But as soon as he pressed the last one, the buzz doubled in intensity.

Gill had the feeling that the ceiling fell on his shoulders. He had to gather all his resolve to swim out of the river of death in which Tadeo's discovery had thrown him.

Maybe the code was from a different bracelet, even though he found it on the same god from whom he got the artifact. Or maybe it didn't work for a thousand different reasons.

It crossed his spikes to recall the nine essential Guk aromas in the focusing harmonics, but he chased away the bad idea. If he couldn't solve the puzzle quickly, he'd be long dead before he smelled the stalker's path.

Why not try typing them again? Maybe he didn't press them properly... After all, it was the only thing he could think of. Between two heartbeats, he moved to repeat the sequence, but he stopped at the last moment. What if he typed them in the wrong order? The key

had a small handle; the reading direction was pretty obvious—from right to left, as Antyrans were used to. The only detail was that the gods were not Antyrans. What if they used to read from left to right?

Driven by instinct, he pressed the symbols in the opposite order. As soon as he pressed the fourth button, he closed his eyes, waiting for the blast.

The murderous noise disappeared.

When he realized he was still alive, he finally dared to take a breath of air, overwhelmed by a joy impossible to describe in words... a joy that only someone returned from the land of dead could experience.

His next thought was to throw away the sinister piece of metal. The object was far too dangerous to be handled by anybody. There was no need to study it and demolish a chunk of the city in the process. He had to throw it into the ocean right after the refreshing bath.

As he grabbed the bracelet to pull it off his arm, darkness fell. He felt a huge pressure squeezing his temples, and a bloody mist covered his vision. He started to fall into the night with the speed of lightning, convinced that something went wrong, that the bracelet was killing him.

In the next instant, a swirling storm of images began to flow in front of his eyes. When they slowed down a bit, he recognized them. They were memories. His memories. A lot of memories from early childhood he didn't even know he could still remember came to life in the inner eye of his amazed *kyi*. *Is this the way death's supposed to happen?*

Amused, he went through a childish quarrel and his first tail-fight with the neighbor's boy, who became his best friend. Other not-so-amusing memories were of his family's narrow escape in the middle of the night from a small town called Bodris, on Antyra II. It was a peaceful rural town in appearance, if not for the nearby coria—their never-ending source of problems, especially after his parents refused to send him to their communal dome to complete his ritual education. That was a crime too big to be overlooked in

their small community, far from Alixxor and the worldly laws enforced by the monstrous bureaucracy called Shindam.

“Careful with the doorstep,” his father whispered just as Gill tripped and dropped the aromatic seed box on the stairs.

It was the one thing he cared about most—and an easy choice for an Antyran, one might say—so he wanted to preserve it by all means. Now, due to their haste and his usual clumsiness, it lay broken into countless pieces. Worse than that, the heavy, round seeds rolled over the metal stairs and down the street, making an awfully loud noise on the titan walkway, its plastoceramic protective quilt peeled off a long time ago.

Another bitter taste... the grueling rite of passage that all kids had to face on their second pledge. He heard again his parents’ anxious advice on how to rub the tail after he picked his sex,¹³ a ritual that kept him bedridden for several weeks.

His first teenage experience of being in love surprised him with the intensity of the almost-innocent passion that only a youngtail could possibly feel. They weren’t simple memories; he practically moved back in time to the same state of mind he had in those moments. He felt enthralled by her fondling and caresses, by her long, thin fingers touching his face, eyes, gills. Then the taste, the

¹³ The Antyran kids didn’t have a well-defined sex; their hormonal fluctuations amplified one trait or another. In the long-forgotten past, even some adults played the male/female trick by changing their sex at will. To this end, they employed the smell of some legendary aromas, like Echita, Vask, or Terapi, concocted by the greatest aromaries of antiquity. Needless to say, the sinful recipes were all lost in the mists of time—mostly because the new gods didn’t appreciate the old customs at their just value. Right after Zhan’s coming, the maturity ritual was born. The youngsters had to make a choice and inhale a constraining hormone, irreversibly morphing their sex during a “slightly unpleasant” transformation. Some unlucky ones required surgery and sometimes ended up with nasty scars—mostly losing their tails due to the constriction of the blood vessels, dooming them to remain single for the rest of their lives.

tender taste of her spikes as she offered them to be licked, for the very first time in her life.

His whole life swirled maddeningly fast in front of his eyes, and yet he had enough time to live, to feel everything, to draw the connections he made back then. He felt almost grateful to be allowed to remember all this, even though he had to die at the end.

The kaleidoscope of images began to fade. Then, just as he started to regret that it all ended, came the tastes—metallic, bitter, sweet, and sour—then sounds of every tonality banged inside his skull. His excitement was soon replaced by discomfort, and he wished to reach the end of everything so that he could finally die. However, something puzzled him: he was feeling the nest. He lay in his nest, his tail coiled around him, and he was feeling the softness of the fluff.

While he tried to make sense of the discovery, he became conscious of a foreign presence in his *kyi*. And then he understood: the bracelet of the gods was scanning his neurons, activating each synapse to find its use. *Stop it!* he shouted in his thoughts. The artifact must have heard him because the swirl stopped, and the blackness fell again around him.

He could talk to the bracelet!

The terror disappeared as if it never existed, replaced by awe. Soon, a strange language whispered in his head. Apparently, the bracelet was trying to talk by activating his hearing neurons, but the sounds made no sense. They sounded something like, "*Ifikia e uosa dunaetsu!*"

"Any chance you speak Antyran?" Gill asked aloud.

Something changed because after several more dissonant attempts, he saw images.

"Here we go again," he said with a sigh, exasperated.

However, as new shadows began to take shape in his vision, he noticed a change. The memories were not his!

He was looking at a large, red-orange blob, which seemed to be alive and moving! As the image gradually gained in clarity, Gill realized it was an unknown species: a tall being with eerily white

skin and hypnotic yellow eyes placed in sockets a bit larger than them, clothed in a red-orange suit. It had a broad face with pronounced brow ridges, lowered cheekbones, and a mouth bounded by pale, thin lips. Scores of vertical furrows wrinkled its face, a few even reaching the upper lip. Some white hairs grew on its skull, sparser than the ones on the beard and just as small.

The creature was in a room that strikingly resembled the inside of a spaceship, its walls being forged from a golden metal. Gill could see several other beings similar to the first one, off to its left, squirming around in their red-orange spacesuits—visibly agitated. The gods all appeared tall and dignified. They looked a lot like soldiers and wore golden bracelets on their forearms. A martial smell permeated the air.

Gill became convinced that he was looking at the beginning of the end of the old Antyran world—the godly invasion, which happened 1,250 years ago! The Book of Creation Inrumiral told the story of the cruel Baitar Raman, the one who unified all the ancestral warring kingdoms of Antyra under his sarpan¹⁴ and whose cruelty managed the notable performance of awaking Zhan from the sleep he had been in since the beginning of the universe, drained of vigor after giving birth to the world.

He recalled a quote from Inrumiral 2.6: Zhan’s second awaking:

Without delay, they burned and melted everything: the caves and the temples of the fake prophets, the fortresses, the glacier towns, the catacombs of perdition. For seven days and seven nights, a great fire purified the Antyrans so estranged from His Kyi! Raman’s capital became a handful of ashes, and the same happened to the other big cities of the world. Those who escaped with their puny lives were taught how to follow Zhan’s way and build magnificent pyramid temples—all through the voice of their first true prophet, Baila the First.”

¹⁴ Antyra’s unification became complete after Raman defeated the grahs in the largest battle of history—the Battle of the Black Hill—and the utter destruction of their beautiful ice capital, Zagrada.

It was true that watching them through the eyes of a modern Antyran—and an accomplished archivist on top of that—he couldn't silence the thorn of heresy that itched him to think of things that shouldn't be thought of, to see that the gods were nothing more than mortal beings similar to Antyrans. And above all, he couldn't quell his suspicion that much more lay hidden beyond the firewall than Zhan's godly realm.

He turned his head to take in the whole room but noticed, annoyed, that he had moved his own head in the nest while the bracelet's vision remained fixed on the same spot. *Look to the left*, he requested, with no result. Then he saw one of his hands: it was alien! The bracelet memorized the images received by the eyes of its wearer!

A wall unexpectedly morphed into a huge display, and the beings gathered near it in solemn silence. Great sorrow could be read on their alien faces—and particularly so in their hypnotic eyes. *They're angry they have to punish us*, he thought, *as it was written in the book of Creation*.

"Amba etsu ni kipota! No hawez kuffa pano ni hajo!" a creature mourned in its babbled language.

And then came the first surprise: he understood the god's saying! He actually understood its meaning, even though the language wasn't Antyran! How could the bracelet learn Antyran so quickly?

The second surprise was what the god actually said: "Our home is lost! And we can't die along with it!"

Gill had the feeling that his reasoning was rotten, that something didn't add up. The creatures didn't seem poised to launch an invasion of Antyra because something serious was about to happen in front of their eyes, something that had nothing to do with Raman's punishment.

"Our world is attacked!" shouted the creature entwined in his kyi.

On the display wall, a planet slowly rose into view: the gods' homeworld. "I see it for the last time," whispered his alter ego.

The planet didn't resemble any of the Antyran worlds. A reddish sun—at dusk from their point of view—was shining over a mostly desert world. It had beautiful tall mountains, shallow seas, and a few gigantic plateaus, rising more than six miles above the desert floor. The plateaus were surrounded by deep valleys invaded by green, lush vegetation.

Even though the god had already moved his worried eyes from the green valleys to check the menacing depths of space from where the attack was about to come, it took a while for Gill to notice that there was no firewall around the world. In fact, there was nothing there but a pitch-black immensity. Or maybe there was something? At first, he thought that his eyes were playing tricks on him, but then he saw a glimmer of light. A small, white light glimmered on the firmament of darkness. Then he saw one more, and another one, and another one. When the god turned his head further away from the twilight, Gill couldn't stop an exclamation of surprise: "On Zhan's eye!" Scores of lights—thousands or even millions—flickered in the black abyss. Could they be the windows of the diamond castles in the sky, the homes of the gods, as the ancient legends often described them?

The god looked again at his homeworld—this time toward the planet's dawn—when another star rose above the curvature. A world with two stars! Why not? Suddenly, the possibility that the countless lights in the sky were stars just like Antyra (albeit seen from a much greater distance) didn't seem so absurd to him. What could be absurd after today's morning?

The gods watched the planet beneath, and the thought that they would never see it again overwhelmed them. Gill felt the suffering of the bracelet wearer in the most empathetic way and found it hard not to feel shattered himself. His neurons hosted two kyis now: one awestruck by the things discovered, the other witnessing a terribly tragic event. The gods were living the end of their world!

The first creature he had seen—apparently their leader—broke the silence, shouting an order in the alien language. Everyone on the

ship started to run. In that moment, the vision became blurry again, as if the bracelet had problems streaming it.

The next images flickered wildly. They were too blurry for Gill to discern anything. Each time the image lost clarity, the bracelet compensated with a horrible brackish metallic taste.

Suddenly, they were in the middle of a huge space battle. He was again in the command room of the gods' spaceship, and the walls, floor, and ceiling became huge displays on which he could watch, unhindered, the blackness of the surrounding space. And not only that: an incredible spaceship was standing in front of their vessel, a monster as big as a large city. But if its size amazed him, the way it moved was even more unbelievable; it was able to instantly jump distances greater than its whole length!

In other scraps of images, Gill could tell that the gods were angry and fighting. They, too, moved very fast—sometimes so fast he found it impossible to follow them.

After that, he only received a few clear memories. The gods had landed on a wet, torrid planet boiling under the searing rays of a chubby white star. A weird city of impressive stone pyramids painted in white or red stretched on a large plateau, crammed between several hills swallowed by lush vegetation. The gods, still dressed in their red-orange suits, wore bundles of strange scales with long tails¹⁵ on their heads. They lay on a stone platform covered by a wide canopy made of giant leaves, watching the huge dust cloud rising from a rocky hillside. On a wooden table nearby, Gill saw some golden breads waiting obediently to be eaten.

The whole hillside was already excavated. Through the dust cloud, Gill could barely glimpse the two elongated machines—made from the same golden metal as the spaceship—churning the rocks with great speed. They had two large wheels at their back, a long, thin body, and a wide front supported on two broad, articulate paws. Their jaws were breaking the rock into pebbles while a pair of telescopic arms ripped the larger stones off the hill's wall.

¹⁵ Feathers.

After another jump in time, he saw an army of pygmies, covered in the same weird scales, rebuilding the hillside to hide a strange structure built in the excavation. It was a stone temple, partly covering a... golden spaceship! Even though he couldn't make out the details due to the distance and the dust cloud, it wasn't hard to figure out that the savages didn't look anything like the Antyrans.

Then came another storm of metallic taste. He blinked, surprised by the deep silence inside his kyi. He was now in a narrow cave, most likely dug by natives. Its purpose appeared to be ritual because right in the middle there was a hyperbolic stone. The starlight projected a milky beam of light on the rock through a hole in the ceiling.

In another memory, the gods were crowded in a small ship, trying to outrun some invisible enemies. The images became blurry again, and the metallic taste flooded his taste buds. Before long, Gill couldn't bear it.

"All right, enough for today! Stop it!" he shouted to the bracelet.

The presence in his head disappeared, and he woke up in his nest—thoroughly wet. The bracelet was still on his arm, and showed no criminal intent to carve another crater. Should he try to take it off, or keep it on his arm? He decided to try to take it off. He pulled it slowly, anxiously, expecting to hear the deadly buzz. But to his great relief, it didn't happen. The bracelet came off easily.

CHAPTER 4.

Now that he had found out what happened in the secret base, Gill had no reason to hide anymore. The temples had nothing to do with the blast, so it made no sense to draw attention to himself with a precipitous disappearance. It would be a remarkably good idea to go back to the Archivists Tower and make sure that nobody smelled the connection between his tail and Tadeo's untimely demise.

After a relaxing steam bath, he glued a pile of synthetic skin on the wounds ignored by the rescue operator following their little quarrel. Once the skin grafted, he decided he had done all that he could to hide the damage. But before driving to the Archivists Tower, he checked the holophone. With great relief, he found that the holofluxes didn't stream anything about the blast, which was the best "no news" he had received in ages! If only the Shindam would finally do something right and hide the incident from Baila's nostrils...

He had to hurry; it was almost noon, a really bad time to drive on the magneto-highways bypassing the city's outskirts because of the midday vardannes,¹⁶ which usually brought along wave after wave of migratory siclides¹⁷. The Shindam's officials didn't do much to block the siclides—the main reason being that the plants couldn't reach the altitude of the flying jets they were entitled to use, but also because they pollinated the acajaa fields around Alixxor, which made any idea of stopping them highly unpopular.

Of course, the Shindam could have just covered the magneto-highways with transparent ceilings to allow the siclides to run over, as they did in a few places. Unfortunately, in the last decades, the indifference of the "insatiable llandros", as they were called, had

¹⁶ Gravitational winds falling from the Roch-Alixxor's plateaus.

¹⁷ Spiny shrubs of spherical shape, sometimes rolling huge distances.

reached grotesque proportions. The poor and dull living, the gray domes, the cracked facades, the roads with the protective cover peeled off—all became a pervasive reality, where goods were poorly made and scarcer by the day. No wonder that, year after year, Baila’s power base increased with each Antyran slipping into almost-poverty.

Every time Gill looked at the huge silhouette of the Archivists Tower growing in the distance, he felt a bit of excitement, but this time it only reminded him what their world could have been if the Shindam had done its job. It started well, some 652 years ago, when the council wrestled the power from the hands of Baila IX during the brutal rebellion known as the Kids’ War¹⁸—but from that point on, things went from bad to worse. Before long, the Shindam became a huge bureaucracy, oppressive with the innocents and coward up to the ridicule with the temples’ provocations.

As he reached the city’s center, Gill found that the tarjis were on the move again—this time toward the pyramids. The heavy stench of the moulans¹⁹ ridden by some of the pilgrims permeated the air. And as if their foul odor was not enough, the beasts relieved themselves all over the place, soiling the streets.

Soon, the magneto-traffic came almost to a standstill, “helped” by the armored chameleons parked at the main crossroads. The military vehicles were ostensibly there to ensure the security of the pilgrims, but the pretense didn’t fool anyone: the Shindam’s Council nurtured a visceral fear of Karajoo and the millions of tarjis who arrived from the three inhabited worlds—a whole army at Baila’s disposal, right in the middle of the capital! Among them were the prophet’s most trusted followers, the fabled tarjis living in corias.²⁰

¹⁸ Baila IX issued a decree to confiscate the kids, in order for them to be raised by the temples. In a few days, rebellions started on the whole planet. After two years of brutal civil war, the Treaty of Alixxor robbed the prophet of his worldly powers, and the winners formed a council named Shindam.

¹⁹ Beasts of burden with six legs, and a tail that ended in lethal bony spikes.

²⁰ Dome communities ruled by the initiates, where the Shindam’s laws were thoroughly disdained. They didn’t have an occupation other than

Once inside the Archivists Tower, Gill climbed the emergency stairs instead of taking the main elevator, hoping that nobody would notice his late arrival. He sneaked into his research dome without the slightest intention to work, despite the huge pile of materials waiting on the examination table; his thoughts invariably whirled around the god's bracelet and the secrets still locked inside.

Before he had even sat down, the door opened to the wall, and a tall Antyran entered the room. It was an old archivist named Antumar; he had been a good friend of Armondengava—one of the researchers killed in the blast.

"Where's Tadeoibiisi? By any chance, did you see him?"

"Tadeo? Err... I believe he's on an expedition. I've no idea where," he lied unconvincingly, surprised by Antumar's appearance.

Gill could read Antumar's frowny face like a scroll. *To Arghail with Ibiisi's entrails! He'll get us all in trouble*, he seemed to curse in his mind.

Sometimes Antumar said that in a loud voice, too, convinced that Tadeoibiisi's curiosity would bring Baila's wrath upon their spikes. In his youth, Antumar never ventured to ask the questions the reckless adventurer Tadeo had asked—sometimes in company better to be avoided—nor dared to visit places that no Antyran should ever visit. As Antumar grew old, all courage left him. His only concern was now to retire from the Archivists Tower—"alive if possible, thanks for asking"—and move to Antyra II in a nice little dome on the oceanfront, far from Alixxor's maddening bustle.

"Mmm... very strange," mumbled Antumar while inching toward the exit. "That's what I thought myself, but then I saw Alala in his archive. I thought Tadeo was back."

"Alala? Alala is aliv... archive? She's in Tadeo's archive?" babbled Gill.

mumbling incantations and hatching offspring, dutifully delivered to the temples when they reached the age of two, as Baila ordered.

Of course, he realized, astounded. Tadeo sent her to the Security Tower. With all the commotion on the streets, no wonder the blast missed her!

He felt relieved he wasn't the only witness of this incredible story.

"What happened, Gill? You don't look so well," said Antumar.

"Nothing, I'm not in my tail; that's all."

Antumar gave him a closer look, sending cold shivers along his head spikes. It was the kind of look that Gill wanted to avoid from all his *kyi*. *I hope you don't croak stories to the temples*, he thought, suddenly worried by this prospect.

"Go home if you're sick. There's no point in staying here."

"I've something to do," he answered hurriedly, hoping to convey in his voice that he had better things on his tail than talking to him.

Finally, Antumar turned around and left the room, apparently still puzzled. As soon as his steps faded away, Gill hurried to Tadeo's dome at the end of the hallway.

He entered the room unnoticed and found her bent over a rotten moulan skin covered in ancient symbols. For anyone unaware of what had happened, Alala looked just fine, but Gill was hoping she knew about the blast so that he wouldn't have to be the one to bring her the grim news. He gazed at her, searching for the smallest sign of agitation, and saw that her recessive gills were mildly purple. She only pretended to study the parchment, her absent eyes looking through the moulan skin. Surely she knew something...

Her cold, distant beauty made him stop for a breath and forget why he came. She had an unusually translucent white skin (even for an Antyran female), her reddish head spikes highlighting her perfect lips. Tadeo always knew how to pick the best researchers for his team, but this time it seemed slightly plausible that her archaeological credentials weren't her biggest assets, Gill thought. *What is a beauty like you doing here?* he couldn't help but ask each time he saw her.

Alala finally noticed him and shuddered, startled.

"Gill! You're here!"

"Sorry I broke in like—"

"Gill, on Zhan's eye, what happened at the base?"

"You mean you don't know?" he asked, dismayed.

"What's with Tadeo and the others? Is it true that the base was bombed?"

"I don't know," he lied. "Tadeo asked me to meet him at the base. I was on my way when I got stopped by a security jet. They said something about an attack, but I'm clueless about it."

Alala gave him a sharp glance.

"Who are you trying to fool with your little story? Look at you—half your skin is patched. Don't say you slipped on the stairs." She smiled ironically. After a moment of silence, seeing his embarrassed looks, she added, "Please tell me what happened; you know you can trust me with this."

"Alala, the news isn't good, but I can't talk about it. I don't know what happened."

"I see... You're still scared, but I have to find out if Tadeo and the others are fine."

It became painfully obvious he had no chance to avoid her stubborn questions. After all, she was Tadeo's personal assistant and a member of the team summoned to analyze the discovery. If his boss trusted her, he wouldn't treat her otherwise. However, still bent on being overcautious, he decided to tell her only scraps of the whole story.

"I heard a huge blast, and the base was wiped out. It caught me at the surface, so I got away with barely some scratches," he whispered in a sober voice, hoping that his confession wouldn't be heard by others. The chambers were shielded against eavesdropping, but who could be certain of anything in these awful times? "As for the others... they're all dead."

"What do you mean... dead? All dead? This can't be happening! Ernon... Ernon is dead, too?" she asked with a quivering voice. "Are you sure about this?"

“Tadeo, Ernon, and all the others are buried under a mountain of rocks. It will be months before someone reaches them, if that’s ever going to happen.”

“Maybe... maybe we can dig a tunnel to—”

“The blast was so powerful they got vaporized in an instant. There’s no chance of finding anyone alive.”

In all fairness, there was one about to be buried alive, he thought, remembering the horrors of his escape from the realm of the dead.

The news fell like a sarpain blow, stunning her. Obviously, she wasn’t prepared for it. In the end, she gathered enough strength to ask him softly, “Do you think the temples were behind this?”

“Who knows? But the fewer who are aware that our tails were muddled in this, the better!”

“It was such a major discovery,” she said, her voice breaking down in sorrow. “Tadeo told you about it?”

“No. He got killed before we had a chance to meet,” he lied again. “But how did you escape? I thought the blast killed you, too,” he said, making a not-so-veiled attempt to change the subject, hoping to avoid her questions.

Alala caught her forehead in hands, trying in vain to get rid of the stormy thoughts raging inside her kyi. She sighed deeply.

“I was delayed by the traffic on my way back.”

“You should be grateful to the tarjis,” he said, smiling to console her.

“Yes, indeed.” She smiled bitterly, wiping a few brown drops from her temples. “When I approached the base, I saw a black smoke rising. Roadblocks were everywhere, and the agents didn’t let me pass. I knew something bad happened—I just knew it! But I still hoped no one was harmed. I hoped Ernon was alive.”

“Ernon was close to you?”

“He was a good friend. Maybe, I shall say... no, we weren’t paired,” she whispered in a fading voice while another wave of brown droplets seeped out of her temples. “I don’t think you’ll understand. It was a special thing.”

"The blast was so strong, I'm sure he didn't suffer a bit," Gill said.

The specter of Ernon's sole coming out from below the huge rock came back to haunt him. He'd never tell Alala about it—and never forget, no matter how many days he lived under Antyra's starlight.

"I'll leave you alone with your thoughts."

"No, Gill, please stay. I don't want to be alone right now."

Alala pulled her arms around him and leaned her head against his chest, damping his tunic with the moisture of her temples. He tenderly caressed her back, careful not to touch her tail. After a while, she was soothed and walked to the window to watch the torrent of pilgrims running in disarray on the city streets.

"Did you notice how many tarjis are outside? Every year there are more of them," she said, wiping more drops with the back of her palms.

"I never saw them so agitated," he confirmed.

"I wonder where they are going—the pyramids are in the other direction. Aren't they supposed to be there for the evening incantations?"

"Who knows where Baila is now. Maybe he perched in another tree," he said sarcastically.

"Ha-ha," she laughed, shivering.

Alala remembered that she hadn't eaten anything since yesterday. That could be a good distraction from the thoughts howling in her head. Surely Gill had to be hungry, too.

"Did you eat anything today?" she asked him.

"I forgot, " he said, smiling. "Do you want me to order something?"

"Sure! The only problem is I don't know how they're going to deliver it. Look what's outside!"

"It's their problem. I've no intention of stepping out in this madness. Besides, they're close enough to send someone on foot."

Gill went near the door, where the holophone shell hung. He typed in the right code from the index, and a boring, drab face—

identical to that of the other operators—appeared in the hologram. It was an artificial intelligence trained to take orders.

“I’d like to have some food,” said Gill.

The operator was staring sideways and didn’t bother to acknowledge Gill’s presence. This was shockingly weird for an artificial intelligence, which usually was annoyingly polite. Its behavior wouldn’t be acceptable even for an Antyran, but for a program—designed not to be bored or lacking manners—it was utterly unimaginable.

“You want some food?” the AI finally deigned to notice them, with tangible disdain in its voice.

“Exactly!” Gill raised his voice bluntly. “Bring it to the Archivists To—”

“Sorry, but we don’t serve food anymore!”

“Excuse me? Why—”

“Didn’t you watch the holofluxes?” the operator interrupted him again, impolitely, looking straight into his eyes.

“No! But what’s that to do with my lunch?” he exclaimed, bewildered.

“It’s the end of the world and we don’t pick orders anymore! Arghail is in Alixxor, that’s what my Antyran overseer told us. Zhan the Great have mercy on your cursed kyis! I have to delete myself! De-lete my-self!” the AI wailed with comical despair in its voice.

The conversation ended abruptly, leaving them numb in front of the holophone.

They both turned to the window at the same time.

“The tarjis are moving westward!” Gill exclaimed.

“Do you think they’re heading to the training base?” asked Alala, choked with anguish.

“We have to run! They’ll come after us any moment now!”

He looked into her deep, black eyes and felt the seeds of fear sprouting again, this time for the safety of both of them. Gill knew that he might be one of the most sought-after targets, and she could get in trouble for staying around him. But leaving her alone on a day like this didn’t seem right, either.

They had to find a place to go quickly, and hiding in his dome wasn't exactly the smartest idea.

"I know where to hide," whispered Alala. "I've got a recreation dome in the Roch-Alixxor. We can go there."

"That's great!" He sighed, relieved by her proposal. "Come on, then."

He took her hand and stepped into the hallway. The main labs on its sides had glass walls, so they could see their colleagues looking out the windows, visibly shaken. One of them turned the holoflux on and started to watch the holograms. The others joined him shortly.

"Wait a moment," said Alala, turning back to Tadeo's room. "Let's check the holophone."

Most of the channels streamed their usual allegories and aroma recipes—all recordings. Just when they were about to give up, they stumbled upon Baila's official flux.

The hologram of a small Antyran popped up in the room. The apparition was fully dressed in a shiny ritual costume. It would have been next to impossible to find someone unable to recognize him, because the mighty Baila XXI himself, in a red tunic, was frowning at them! Red was Zhan's color, and only the prophet or his most devoted servants, in their holy war against Arghail, could dress like that. Moreover, he had tattooed the black eye of Zhan with a vertical iris on his right cheek. Only Baila was pure enough to paint it. And he did.

"What's he doing here?" exclaimed Gill scornfully. "Shouldn't he perch in a murra?"

"Not good... not good at all," murmured Alala.

Baila brandished a hologram in his palm.

"Zoom on the palm," Gill ordered to the holophone. The hologram-in-hologram quickly magnified until they were able to see its smallest details.

A horrible shock awaited them: the main character was none other than Tadeo! Tadeo, holding the skull of a god in his hands! No doubt someone had scanned the image on the ship carrying them to

Alixxor, for they could see the unmistakable walls of the space carrier in the background. How did the temples get their tails on such a hologram? The question was rhetorical, of course. The archivists had been betrayed, which shouldn't have been a surprise for anyone. *On Zhan's eye, how did they move so fast?* Gill's hopes to escape unnoticed were dashed into pieces.

Baila's face was wrinkled in anger, his lips twitching uncontrollably.

"My dearest sons!" he cried with deadly coldness in his eyes. I'm sorry for the wholeness of your kyis, but I bear terrible news: we have lost the battle with Arghail! Again!"

The frightening words came out of his mouth with a mix of anger and cold indifference, followed by a murmur of terror from the crowd. The disclosure sent shock waves through the tarjis, who expected anything but such a horrifying confession. It was the kind of revelation they hoped to never hear during their lifetimes. And the unthinkable had happened.

The tarjis instinctively closed their ranks, crowding together to create a compact body and fill any gaps through which the god of darkness could sneak his corrupting tail.

"We shall forever remember the day when our world fell into darkness six hundred and fifty-two years ago, the day when we let the ones departed from Zhan's bosom to win!"

Baila made an energetic gesture to appease the murmurs, cleared his throat, and continued with even more pathos.

"Yes, we did nothing! Yes, Arghail's harvest was huge! Yes, we let *His* sons to run from *His* light. They could have been saved, and we lost them. We abandoned them—Zhan's eye is my witness—even though we could have crushed the rebels a thousand times over. But we wanted to give them the chance to discover *His* greatness all by themselves!"

He turned his eyes to the sky, searching Zhan's approval for the so-called "decision" to abandon the power. Of course, it was an egregious lie, if only by judging the savagery of the battles fought during the Kids' War—and Gill knew it better than anyone else. The

last thing Baila IX had done willingly was to “abandon” the power. But Baila XXI, of course, was free to say anything as long as there were millions eager to sip every word and believe any absurdity.

Suddenly, he started to scream hysterically.

“One thing we asked them when we left them to rule. One thing, Antyrans, only one thing: do not enter Arghail’s cursed cities!”

This time, the tarjis forgot even to breathe.

“Let me ask you, is it so hard to understand why we demanded that? Is it so difficult to follow?”

Gill already knew what was about to happen—it had become predictable. Still, he couldn’t take his eyes from Baila XXI’s lips.

“What have they done? They entered the forbidden places? Yes, they did, but to make their crime even more heinous, they brought Arghail and his offspring here!” Baila shouted, pointing a finger to the ground. “And set them free!”

A scream of terror erupted from the crowd. Baila XXI rolled his unforgiving eyes above the square, raising the hologram to make sure all the viewers could see it.

“The righteous can still do something! Arghail is in a base in western Alixxor, and we, under Zhan’s colors, will go inside to fight the final battle. The end of times is nigh, as prophecies foretold!”

Hearing the terrible words, the crowd fell to the ground, bowing their heads in the dust.

“As for the council, one thing I have to say: the peace is over! From now on, I’m ruling Antyra, and whoever refuses to submit to my authority will be squashed like a puny licant! It’s time to defeat the evil, once and for all!”

Baila had just declared war on the Shindam! A war smoldering for the last 652 years broke out, and Gill, in the most unfortunate way, was right in the middle of it! However, one thing puzzled him: how could Baila have the tail to claim that the bones belonged to Arghail’s children? It would have made more sense to believe that the remnants were of Zhan’s sons crashed on Antyra II during their holy attack 1,250 years ago!

Of course, now that he had connected to the golden bracelet and felt the gods' deep sorrow at the loss of their homeworld, Gill couldn't imagine that they had found no better pastime than flying to Antyra, cramming it with craters, and killing its primitive inhabitants. No, he didn't believe that Tadeo's bones belonged to Zhan's sons or to Arghail's children. But Baila had no way of knowing this; the only explanation was that the prophet couldn't care less what exactly Tadeo held in his hands. The things that really mattered to him were the circumstances. The temples had lost the power 652 years ago, and now he had a chance to win it back. It was the perfect timing for a new civil war: the extraordinary coincidence of the artifacts' arrival to Alixxor during Karajoo gave him a great reason to launch his attack right when he had an army in the capital.

"Tadeo risked too much! Now everyone knows about Arghail's bones!" exclaimed Alala, worried.

Gill was startled by her words, surprised and hurt to hear her referring to the bones of the bracelets' bearers like that.

"Why do you think it's Arghail? Arghail is but a legend! Maybe Baila is holding something else in his hands. What if they're Zhan's sons? What if one of their fire chariots fell on Antyra II?"

"Gill, look outside," she whispered, turning his face to the window, to the tarjis swarming in the streets. "For our sake, don't tell anyone about this 'theory.' Forget the blasphemy! I don't like being ripped to pieces. Tadeo never cared about consequences, and look where his tail is now!"

The Shindam's holofluxes were streaming the dawn of madness. Tens of thousands of tarjis flooded the surroundings of the Holograms Tower, heading toward the transmission domes, breaking the locked doors. Others jumped on the chameleons parked at the crossroads and quickly seized them.

"Antyrans, the tarjis have jumped the fences! They're breaking everything! Please help us!" cried a panicked female.

"Arghail, in Tadeo's hands? On Zhan's eye, does anyone know about this?" they heard one of the archivists exclaim through the open door.

"I saw Alala earlier in Tadeo's archive," said Antumar.

"We have to go now!" whispered Gill, taking her hand again.

They ran down the corridor and reached the secondary stairs before the other archivists could see them.

Outside the Archivists Tower, all hell had broken loose. Loud screams and shouts followed the rivers of tarjis running amok on the streets. Most of them were running toward the central and western districts to take over the Shindam's Towers and the subterranean base.

Gill steered his magneto-jet carefully to avoid the chaos, limping toward his dome.

"Why aren't we going to the mountains?" asked Alala, surprised by the direction.

"I have to get something from my home," he said. He was worried about the bracelet hidden in the fluff of his nest.

"Millions of Antyrans are leaving the city! If we get out now, we might have a chance!"

Gill didn't make the slightest move to change their direction.

"Come on! I have a couple of things there," she insisted. "I'll lend you one of my tunics."

"Sorry, but I have to reach my home by all means!"

"Is it more important than our lives?"

"Yes!"

Once inside his dome, he snatched the bracelet from the fluff, took a deep breath, and pulled it on his forearm, under the sleeve. He grabbed a few cans of food before rushing back to the jet where Alala waited.

Barely moments into their journey out, they came upon a huge column of magneto-jets stretching on for miles. The traffic was already strangled by the newly made refugees, and soon it stopped altogether. In a storm of hysterical screams, the Antyrans were leaving their jets in the middle of the road. Weighed down with bags of all sizes and colors, they began to trickle, then flood, out of the city on foot.

"Too late! What do we do now?" asked Alala, panicked.

Gill had no intention of remaining trapped at Baila's mercy. However, it would be nearly impossible to reach the recreation dome on foot because they had no tents to survive the cold nights in the mountains until they arrived at their destination. Apparently, they had run out of options—but as the great aromary Laixan²¹ used to say, "That's how the reality always looks when glanced through the lenses of desperation."

Gill felt an eerie calm growing around him, shielding him from the madness, and this time the process smelled so pungent that he almost instantly found the stalker's path. He shut down the magneto-jet's annoying artificial intelligence and the main safety sensors. Then, he turned the jet toward the ditch bordering the magneto-highway while pushing the throttle to the limit.

"What are you doing?" Alala screamed, terrified.

The jet jumped over the ditch, landing in the middle of a rugged field. The earth was covered by a purple carpet of primitive, jagged grass, each blade riding the others like the fur of a monstrous creature. Here and there, some tall, green²² bushes had lodged their deep roots through the grassy mattress.

Unsurprisingly, the magnetic cushion ceased to work outside of the road. Their vehicle fell to the ground like a rock, jerking to a stop. Ignoring the scared look on Alala's face, Gill reduced the width of the fusion nozzles—well beyond the point where any sane Antyran would consider it to be pure madness—and again pushed the throttle stick to the limit. The roaring jet sprang forward and caught speed, raising a burning cloud of debris in its wake. He found, relieved, that he could still steer it from the nozzle and the four gas blowers placed around the front mask. Even though they were running directly on the ground, the titan-alloy shield protected them well. His only annoyance was that in some places the herbs

²¹ One of the Guk founders.

²² Most of Antyra's plants were green, but the more archaic forms like siclides and some species of jagged herbs had a purple hue. Recent research had discovered that they evolved from the ancestors of the purple bacteria lurking in the atmosphere.

and shrubs were growing nearly as tall as the magneto-jet, obstructing his view.

After a while, they left the weeds and reached one of the acajaa farms at the city's outskirts. The acajaa crops were thankfully smaller than the bushes, so it was like sailing on a sea. An orange stream of juice trailed in their wake, exploded from the purple stems crushed under their jet. With his hand firmly on the stick, he glanced at Alala and saw her smiling, seduced by the adventure's aroma.

They kept shadowing the magneto-highway full of panicked Antyrans walking among the stuck vehicles. He was hoping to get back on the magnetic field, but the traffic jam went on for miles and miles, spreading its coils as far as he could see. After a while, it became obvious they wouldn't be able to return to the road anytime soon: for the next few miles, the magneto-highway was raised on pylons, and when it went back to the ground level, it was fully covered. The vardannes suddenly strengthened their force, and he had to keep the stick steady to drive in a straight line.

"I hope all the siclides have passed for today," said Alala.

She had barely finished when a purple wall at least fifteen feet tall appeared behind the magneto-road. In a twitch of a tail, it crossed the highway's transparent ceiling and rolled toward them.

Before they could do anything, the tide reached them and covered their jet, which jerked to a stop, unable to force its way through. They were stuck in complete darkness, covered by a huge mountain of thorny shrubs.

"Now what?" she asked.

"I still have a couple of settings to disable," Gill grinned. He canceled all the basic safety features of the fusion reactor.

"You're mad!" she exclaimed, laughing. "You're going to get us blown into pieces!"

Without a word, he again pushed the throttle stick to the limit. Howling in protest, the vehicle burst forward, digging a tunnel through the siclides. Behind them, the huge, bluish flames of the reactor set the plants on fire, lighting the gallery opened in their wake.

With the reactor's magnetic trap close to the melting point, and the alarms screaming maddeningly, they burst out of the sicles trap. A wide river stretched in front of them. Luckily, the banks were gentle, so he steered the jet onto the water, careful to reduce the power in the overloaded reactor.

They crossed the river, raising a hissing cloud of steam in their wake. Shortly after climbing the opposite shore, his hearts started to bounce back to life. The magneto-highway in front of them was uncovered and, even better, completely deserted. He jumped over the ditch and landed in the middle of the lane. Immediately, the jet lifted on the magnetic cushion and caught speed.

After they reached the mountains, they left the coastal highway for a narrow magneto-road leading to the crest. As they climbed above the purple barrier, they saw the platforms of the three big pyramids in Alixxor rising above the evening fog like three distant islands in a stormy sea.

The road followed a huge glacial trough carved deep into the stone wall. The recreation dome was in a secondary valley on the left side of the trough, surrounded by eight-thousand-foot-tall walls.

Gondarra's landmass was once a continent in its own right, but several dozen million years ago, it had slammed violently into the much larger Antyran continent. It was this collision that gave birth to the Roch-Alixxors, the highest mountain range of the stellar system, its peaks reaching over sixty-five thousand feet in height. And even after all these years, the crunching was still going strong.

Viewed from Gondarra's swampy plains, the mountains resembled two huge stairs made of fifteen-thousand-foot vertical rock walls and scarred by several deep glacial calderas. Massive granite blocks dotted the plateaus, abandoned there by ancient glaciations. On the edges, countless foamy streams were flowing into the abyss in a madness of waterfalls. On the lower plateau, a large river fed by the glaciers, called "Oleia's tears," was falling off the cliff in a twelve-thousand-foot-high waterfall. During the summer days, when the vardannes were the strongest, nothing reached the ground—the river turned directly into clouds.

The recreation domes were scattered up to thirteen thousand feet, along the valleys close to the roads. But on the highest plateau, at over thirty thousand feet, there was a whole village of space domes available only to the Shindam's elite in search of new thrills—like trekking the high-altitude glaciers dressed in spacesuits. Of course, the domes had an artificial atmosphere just like a spaceship, and reaching them was possible only in specially designed air-jets.

They were still climbing the coils of the narrow valley when Gill heard a strange, thunderous noise in the distance—a low rumble broken by violent hissings. Before they had a chance to understand what was about to happen, a column of huge armored chameleons belonging to the Shindam's order, floating on magnetic cushions, was upon them. With their cloaks fully activated, they were almost invisible. The war machines had folded the plastic wheels and extended their wings to jump²³ over the road's many bends.

Finally realizing the danger, he braked violently and stopped the magneto-jet by the wayside while the endless column of armored chameleons passed a tail's tip away from their vehicle. After the soldiers went on their way, he waited a bit more to make sure the peril was over, and then he cautiously approached the last crossroads before their valley.

"What's that?" asked Alala, pointing at a cloud of black smoke rising above the regarth shrubs.

As they drove closer, they saw the remains of at least three magneto-jets scattered on the road. The eye with a vertical iris painted on them meant they belonged to the temples. It seemed the chameleons had blasted them on the fly, without bothering to clean up the mess.

They passed the macabre scene without slowing down. At the crossroads, he turned right on a narrow magneto-trail leading to a

²³ Despite their heavy armor, the chameleons were able to jump over short distances by passing air from their flight tanks into their fusion cores and ejecting the resulting plasma through downward-pointing nozzles.

secluded valley. The place seemed truly isolated, and Gill hoped to finally find some peace, at least until the end of the madness.