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The House of Night and Day

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PART 1 – BETEJË

Chapter 1

The sound of the waste compactor woke him, a deep groan followed by a low rumbling that caused the only window in the room to shudder. Marko Eldfell sat up in bed. The lightweight, synthetic blanket slipped down onto the floor and almost succeeded in snaring a cockroach. The scratching of insect legs against the linoleum fell silent as the cockroach escaped into the darkness under the bed.

He pulled on a t-shirt and simultaneously felt the first stab in his ribcage, just beneath his collar bone. He reached impulsively for the bottle of pills on the bedside table. The container rattled, hollow-sounding in his hand.

One tablet left. Twelve hours of relief, no more than that.

The decision couldn't be put off any longer. It would have to be taken this evening.

Marko stared down at the gene-matched codeine tablet in the palm of his hand. Had he instinctively put things off until there was no other choice? Or did he really believe that the pain would dwindle of its own accord? That everything would be just as it had been before the fateful mission in Georgia, as if by magic? Perhaps. Not that it changed anything. In twelve hours' time the pain would return with a vengeance.

Marko stroked a finger unconsciously over his t-shirt. Through the fabric, he could feel the knotted, damaged skin of his stomach and chest. The loathing surged through him, just as it did when he saw himself. Marko clenched his fist and punched the wall. He hated self-medicating in this way. Hated it as much as he despised the merciless necessity for expensive medication.

Yet another painful tremor shot through him, more urgent this time. A needle of ice.

Torment, pure and simple, like the slicing of a scalpel. He greedily swallowed the pink tablet, all too aware that the countdown had begun.

Marko stood motionless on the cold linoleum until the codeine relaxed him. The light from the advertisement cloud across the street seeped in through the venetian blinds and across the floor like liquid silver. He closed his eyes and opened the *innerSphere*. A mental exercise most six-year-olds could perform without thinking was arduous for him. It was as if the tiny, bioelectronic receptor inserted into the skin just over his left ear was misfiring. He told himself that the problems were a result of the painkillers. All the same, he was worried. If he were to lose contact with the iSphere, his connection to the military bio-apps would disappear; Marko feared the latter almost as much as he feared the now dormant fire in his ribcage.

The military biocentric applications separated Marko and a few hundred other men and women from the rest of the world's population. The bio-apps were directly connected to the nervous system and for a short period of time they strengthened his arms and legs, sharpened his cognitive abilities, improved his night vision or increased his oxygen intake. The military research project had been vetoed when information about the bio-apps had been leaked to The New York Times. Headlines such as *We don't want an army of Frankenstein's monsters* and *Man or machine?* had caused politicians to stem the stream of funding available to military researchers. Since then, there had been a tacit agreement between civil and military authorities that those who had already been *modified*, as it was most politically correct to term it, had to remain in service. In this way, two hundred people had been automatically sentenced to a lifetime of service in the armed forces without any opportunity to appeal the decision.

Marko was one of a handful who had managed to escape from the military detention camp, but freedom was a form of punishment in itself, given the military's untiring search for him. The Masks, as the special pursuit force was known due to the carbon glass visors that always covered their faces, would never give up until he was confirmed dead or imprisoned. The difference between these two alternatives was that those who were apprehended after a short time on the run longed for death. Life in the punishment battalion was brutal, painful and short-lived. If he were to end up in a confrontation with The Masks or any of their lackeys, Marko had decided to save the final bullet for himself.

The iSphere appeared in his conscious mind like a tunnel of ethereal image fragments and chunks of text. As long as he had a connection to the allSphere, the global information cloud, Marko could let the steady stream of information flicker over his retinas. As required, the iSphere's semi-intelligent avatar made him aware of any items of particular interest. But now, immediately after having woken up, it felt better to let the crudely selected information flow around in the virtual darkness behind closed eyes rather than to engage with it.

The iSphere automatically listed a cluster of items based on his own preferences, including two live feeds from NATO's ongoing campaigns in the Turkish caliphate and a longer article on Thule, the northernmost of the seven enclaves. Thule consisted of the region formerly known as Scandinavia, minus half of what was once Denmark and western Norway. And Oslo, of course; the city in shutdown. His grandfather's birthplace. A city shielded from Thule as it had been shielded from the rest of the world since 2085, and with a name that gave children nightmares even 20 years on.

Curious, Marko opened the article on the enclave. A video feed filled his mind with images of snow-covered mountains, sparkling fjords and blue skies. He knew that this was a modified reality, yet there was no getting away from the fact that life in the autonomous enclaves was paradise compared with the world outside his window. But perhaps more importantly; The Masks had no authority there. The enclaves were the final sanctuaries.

Somewhere it was possible to start afresh, like America once had been for so many of his Nordic ancestors. But like all dreams, this fantasy also cost money.

Lots of money.

As things stood, he couldn't even afford to buy the painkillers he so badly needed.

Marko gradually became aware of the icon that indicated that a personal feed awaited his attention. The sender was unidentified, but he was in no doubt about who the message had come from.

The assumption proved to be true; Caliban's face materialised in the darkness. The mafia boss must have been quite a looker in his day, with pure, Slavic features, raven-black hair and skin the shade of freshly-baked cinnamon buns. Nowadays, though, one fold of skin enveloped the next, creating the impression that the flesh beneath the surface was in constant motion. Even so, his eyes were unaffected by this physical decline, retaining an animalistic intelligence, an unruly wildness.

'Good evening, soldier boy.' Caliban's voice was deep, a monotone bass tone. 'Hopefully you get this message in time. If not, that's a shame for you; there are plenty of people out there who'll say yes to the prospect of making some easy money.' Caliban sipped from a glass of straw-yellow liquid, pulled a face and continued. 'At precisely half-past-eleven this evening, Miroslav will be waiting for you outside the northern entrance to Shantytown. He'll inform you of the mission. If you're not there by eleven thirty-five, the deal is over.' Caliban leaned in towards the camera, the corners of his full lips lifting in a sardonic smile. 'Relax, soldier boy. For a tough guy of your calibre, this is nothing. Routine.'

Marko opened his eyes. The afterglow of Caliban's gaze hovered in the air before him as the optical illusion slowly faded. His wristwatch revealed it was 23:05. Plenty of time. The apartment was only three districts from the meeting point. He loosened his watchstrap and held the archaic clockwork in one hand.

The Breitling was a gift from his father, who had inherited it from his father, who had received it from *his* grandfather before him, Marko's great-great-grandfather, back at some point around the turn of the new century. There was something deeply satisfying about holding the watch. He imagined the way that the various springs, screws and bolts fitted so perfectly together. An isolated, orderly universe. An anachronism.

What would his forefathers think of him now that he'd become an errand boy from criminals? Marko held the watch in his hand before placing it inside the drawer of his bedside table.

He knew the answer. Of course he did.

The sound of the compactor alarm was far louder outside. The system for waste management in Tirana had most likely been constructed at some point in the thirties, back when the Albanian capital had experienced a brief economic boom. It was to the credit of the unidentified engineers that the gigantic waste compactor continued to glide majestically through the city on rusty iron tracks, eternally searching for the next full container. And when thirty cubic metres of waste had been compacted to a half-metre thick plate of two metres by six, the waste was automatically transported to the recycling plant on the outskirts of Tirana. But the plant had long since been closed, and in the city, people joked that the mountain of waste was now visible from outer space.

Marko turned up his collar and stepped out in the cool rain. The market stalls lined the street, and the narrow lane was packed with cyclists, pedestrians and motorcycles. The smell of grilled meat combined with the stench of exhaust fumes and sweat in the air. The sea of people rippled here and there. Pan-European dialects mixed with the slang of peddlers and the incomprehensible mumbling of beggars. Marko opened one of the music feeds in the iSphere and allowed himself to be swept away by the lively music feed.

He arrived at the meeting place five minutes early. Miroslav was nowhere to be seen, so

Marko bought a cup of lukewarm coffee, which gave him an excuse to seek shelter from the rain under the cover of the stall's see-through polymer roof.

The entrance to Shantytown was an alleyway between two dilapidated blocks. An advertisement cloud hovered above the narrow passageway showing image after image of *Brisvegas*, the Australian enclave; sun, azure-blue sea and endless beaches. The overall effect was the same as it had been in the feed about Thule. The images from the Australian continent seemed just as realistic as the notion that the endless rain over Tirana would ever cease. Once again, Marko wondered why the giant cloud had been placed above the entrance to the poorest part of the city. Was it there to give the most miserable wretches something to dream about? Perhaps a person had to gaze up at the stars in order to tolerate a life in the gutter, even though the only lights for anyone to gaze up at in the Albanian night sky were man-made.

But what was it that distinguished him from these imagined fates? Was he really not one of them?

'Sergeant Eldfell. The hero of Tbilisi! What an honour this is.'

The unfamiliar voice that resonated through the iSphere was inaudible to those around him, but it sent a shudder through Marko. Someone had recognised him.

Marko turned around and found himself standing face-to-face with a tall, slim apparition dressed in a grey, tight-fitting suit. Large raindrops splashed the shaved crown of his head. The skin above the man's ears bulged. The eyes above his hawk-like nose were dark apart from a golden ring around the iris.

'Are you here to seek a soldier's deliverance? To ask forgiveness for the suffering you've caused others?' the man asked without moving his lips. Immediately alert, Marko took a step out into the rain and grabbed the man by the throat. 'You must be mistaking me for someone else,' he whispered. 'If you sneak uninvited into my head one more time, I'll throttle you, you fucking transhumanist.' The slim man made no attempt to remove Marko's hand. With a gentle expression, he studied Marko's face. His gaze spoke louder than words: he wasn't to be fooled, he knew who Marko was.

'Religious moron.' Marko let go of the man's throat and pushed the palm of his hand against the man's ribcage. He stumbled backwards, tripping and falling over, then smiled at Marko from where he lay in a puddle. 'Your secret's safe with me. The Guide is forgiving. He forgives us all,' he said, this time with his real voice.

The Guide. What a load of crap!

His head bowed, Marko sought shelter under the tarpaulin. The attack on the transhumanist emissary had already attracted unwanted attention, and attention was something that Marko could do without. The fewer who knew that he was here in Tirana, the better. The Masks had informants everywhere.

'So Marko, you're not seeking a religious epiphany this evening?' A strong hand gripped his shoulder. Miroslav's booming voice was unmistakable. With a forced sense of calm, Marko drank the rest of his coffee and turned around.

The former *betejê* master sneered down at him; Marko was shorter than Miroslav, reaching only his throat even at full height. Miroslav's sneer seemed more forbidding than friendly. He had features that told of a long-term, intimate relationship with the brutal Albanian contact sport. The Albanian's face was coarse and harried. His nose veered to the left like a ship run aground while the tell-tale sign of a hastily stitched wound ran from his throat and up to his left temple, where short, greying hair covered the rest of the old scar.

Marko had met Miroslav after he had first come to Tirana, and the Albanian had helped him by providing small jobs and short-term loans since then. The fact that Miroslav also worked for Caliban was something that he only realised later on when he involuntarily contemplated

entering into the flabby mafioso's service. Miroslav had never attempted to recruit him into Caliban's organisation.

Marko liked that about him. In addition to Lenny Bukowski, a former military doctor, the towering Albanian was the only person in Tirana that Marko felt that he could trust in any way.

'Good to see you.' Marko looked over his shoulder. The transhumanist emissary was gone. 'Shall we get this over with?'

'Straight to the point, as always,' Miroslav chuckled. 'Good. The quicker we deliver the goods to Caliban, the quicker we can grab a beer. It's been a while.'

Chapter 2

Miroslav led the way into Shantytown. The narrow alleyway between the blocks led to what had once been Albania's official sports arena before the earthquake in 2067. Now the fallen heap of concrete and steel joists had been transformed into an ant hill of channels, corrugated iron shacks, subterranean chambers, rickety tents and grey cement shacks. Over their heads, electrical cables were lashed to every spire, pier and post. However, it was not the anarchic architecture that made the greatest impact when one visited Shantytown for the first time, but the stench. A cloying stink of rancid oil, rotting meat, dank waste and sewage lingered around one's person long after leaving the area.

'What's the mission?' Marko asked as Miroslav sliced his way through the mass of people like an icebreaker. Most barely noticed them. Their vacant gazes told Marko that they sought escape in their own inner world, iZombies on the eternal flight from the slum that their physical form would never succeed in fleeing.

'We're going to fetch some items from a garage lab,' Miroslav replied. 'Gene transplants,' he added.

'Right.' Marko had guessed that it concerned black market goods. The garage laboratories of Shantytown could deliver anything to those who could pay, from experimental cancer medication to spliced genes to make prostitutes more submissive.

Miroslav stopped in front of a narrow tunnel that led underground. A coiled LED light was twisted around one of the ceiling struts. 'Mr Yamazuka is one of the best in his field,' Miroslav explained. 'Practically an artist.' The Albanian passed Marko a slip of paper. 'This is the payment code. But don't hand it over until you've received the goods. The Chink's a cheat. Almost as bad as the Scandinavians.' Miroslav chuckled heartily and nudged Marko from behind. 'I'll be up here waiting for you.'

The tunnel came to an end at an unpolished steel door without a handle or a lock. Marko rapped the cold metal with his knuckles. The steel barely had the chance to reverberate before he heard a faint voice from a loudspeaker somewhere above him asking a question in broken English: 'What you want?'

'Pick something up.'

'For who?' the voice piped up.

Marko studied the dull surface before him. Caliban wouldn't appreciate his name being used in a place like this. 'Miroslav sent me.'

The reedy voice paused for a moment. Marko caught himself glancing down at the empty handle slot. He didn't need his watch, of course, the iSphere kept track of the seconds, but there was something soothing about watching the second hand as it sailed around the

clock face.

A minute later he heard the snap of a bolt, then the door slid open and Marko found himself staring down the barrel of a sawn-off shotgun; an old-fashioned model with two barrels lined up side-by-side. The man behind the weapon was short, even for an Asian. A thin, wispy moustache dangled over a stern-looking mouth, with a pair of grey eyes peering at Marko from under bushy eyebrows.

‘Careful with that.’ Marko lifted his arms into the air and stepped into the room. The barrel of the gun prodded his stomach, the sensation sending a slight chill up the nape of his neck.

‘Payment. You have?’ the Japanese man asked, lowering the weapon ever so slightly.

‘Are you Mr. Yamazuka?’

‘Mr. Yamazuka,’ the Asian man repeated, nodding.

‘Let me see the goods first.’

Mr. Yamazuka looked to be mulling the idea over for a moment before making his way towards a freezer box at the far end of the oblong space.

Marko took in his surroundings. The room had been painted a shade of blinding white. Two steel benches resembling autopsy tables had been shoved together along one of the longer walls. He could see his own reflection in the gleaming surface; pale skin, blue eyes, and a nose that he personally believed to be a little too broad. His short, pitch-black hair was the only aspect of his appearance not to disclose his Nordic origins. Marko had started dyeing it after he had deserted; a blond man in Tirana was as conspicuous as an honest whore. Even so, the transhumanist had recognised him.

‘Goods.’ Mr. Yamazuka lifted a blue plastic container out of the freezer. Tentacles of frosty mist lingered around the plastic as if something inside resisted the idea of releasing the contents.

‘Open it.’

The Asian stared at Marko sceptically. ‘No open. Destroy goods,’ he protested.

What the hell?

How could he ensure that Caliban would get his goods? Shit. Why hadn’t Miroslav come down here with him? Marko stared hard at the Japanese man. ‘You’re not taking me for a ride?’

‘Ride?’ Mr. Yamazuka repeated, shaking his head helplessly.

‘Fine...’ Marko threw out his hands in resignation. He pulled out the payment code and passed it to the man. Mr. Yamazuka glanced at the row of numbers briefly before handing the blue box to Marko, smiling. ‘Good stuff. Very good,’ he assured him in his high-pitched voice as he nudged Marko in the direction of the door.

Miroslav had disappeared from the entrance point to the tunnel. Marko stopped and looked all around, unsure what to do. An older woman passed him with a row of chickens dangling from a wooden beam she was balancing over one shoulder. Behind her, a small girl on a bicycle with stabilisers trundled along. The small wheels made a grating sound as they scraped against the ground. Should he stay where he was? Wait for Miroslav to re-appear? Or head back to the square in front of the entrance? Marko couldn’t make up his mind. He had no idea where the blue box was supposed to be delivered.

‘Any spare change for an elderly veteran?’ The man who had posed the question was leaning against a makeshift wooden crutch. His left leg had been removed just below the groin. A murky green military jacket hung loose and damp on his lean frame. Marko waved him away. The man remained where he was. ‘Just some small change.’ So quickly that Marko barely noticed it, the man opened his fist and revealed a slip of paper. ‘Just a multicoins or two, please.’ Marko fished a bright, silver coin from his pocket and passed it to the man. In

places like Shantytown, physical currency was still in circulation.

The slip of paper exchanged hands. Marko turned away from the man and unfolded the tiny sheet.

The message was brief: *The allSphere is being monitored. Police agents on their way into Shantytown. Get out! M.*

Had the emissary informed on him? No, it made no sense. The transhumanists rarely involved themselves in worldly affairs, if ever. Any kind of more profound thinking on the matter would have to wait. Marko threw away the note and started running. As he sprinted, he cut all contact with the allSphere and iSphere. The various feeds and streams of information from the global data cloud ended. Marko was now his own, autonomous system. Virtually impossible to trace. Not even a transhumanist could force their way into his head now.

As soon as the connection to the allSphere was confirmed as having been terminated, Marko opened up the military bio-apps. A row of transparent icons spread out in mid-air before his eyes. Using them was risky. In the same moment that he activated the apps, the bioelectronic receptor above his ear would send out a short-wave signal. The alerting signal had been one of the compromises that the military had been forced to accept in agreement with civil authorities when the research programme had been revealed. In that way, it was possible to ensure that misused apps could be traced. The Masks were always attentive to signals of that nature.

The thought barely registered with him before a cloud of brick fragments burst from the wall to his left. The rain of splinters was followed by the resounding rumble of a high calibre automatic rifle. Marko leapt to one side just before another flurry ripped up the cement under his feet. Before him, an elderly man took a few more steps, half of his face blown away. A woman ran over to him screaming, the man having now collapsed. As if by magic, the rest of the street was suddenly deserted.

Marko acted instinctively, choosing to employ his military skills. Without thinking, he activated two of the bio-apps. The world leapt to life with a richness of detail that was incomprehensible to the human eye. The app used to activate hyper-attention notified him of every tiny movement all around him. A quick glance over his shoulder revealed three individuals on his tail. The iSphere's ever-vigilant avatar registered their anatomy, speed and potential patterns of movement on a grid that hovered over Shantytown. At the same time, another app sought to release a combination of alpha-adrenaline and synthetic testosterone directly into Marko's bloodstream. From one heartbeat to the next, his intake of oxygen increased by one hundred per cent, just as the strength in his arms and legs tripled. Marko picked up speed, turned down a blind alley, prepared himself and then bounded over the three-metre-high wall in front of him.

He somersaulted upon landing and was back on his feet almost immediately. Marko found himself in a narrow corridor with brick walls on either side, running from north to south. The outline of the transhumanists' pagoda dominated the horizon to the south. Marko had never been anywhere near the building, but he knew that the pagoda was located in a dense area of parkland. Maybe he could lose his tail there?

His plan was short-lived. Two large figures loomed at the end of the now empty passageway. If it hadn't been for his increasingly well-functioning hyper-attention, the flurry of bullets would have ripped him in two. Marko managed to throw himself to the ground before the projectiles whistled just a few centimetres above him. At the same time, the iSphere warned him that the three individuals that he'd hoped to shake were now at the brick wall. The only way out was over the fence formed of steel plates to the east; a five-metre high barrier topped with barbed wire. An impossible option.

The only option.

The object sailed over the wall just as Marko kicked off from the slippery foundations. With cool precision, the HA-app identified the object as an RG-13, one of the shock missiles employed by the police force. The information distracted Marko just enough to cause his attention to slip for a fraction of a second. But a fraction was all that was needed. When he ought to have grabbed onto the edge of the fence, instead his hand reached for the barbed wire. Sharp, sickle-shaped spikes sliced into his palm of his hand. Even so, he held on tight. Marko squeezed his hands, closed his eyes and embraced the pain like an old friend.

The missile detonated with a hollow boom. The narrow corridor sent the shockwave upwards. It was like an enormous fist grabbing Marko by the scruff of the neck and hurling him over the fence. The world revolved as if inside a kaleidoscope. He loosened his grip on the barbed wire, but not quickly enough to prevent the spikes slicing the skin of his palms to shreds. Marko tried to turn around, but it was too late – his back hit the ground.

A soft landing.

The waste container was almost full. Marko found himself lying atop a jelly-like tower of plastic bags, rotten vegetables, fish guts and something that resembled a skinned cat. The blue box from Mr. Yamazuka's laboratory was still intact. The container quivered. In the distance, he heard a familiar, pneumatic hiss.

The compactor!

Marko glanced over the side. The gigantic waste press was gliding towards him. The machine was just ten metres away. Bewildered, he sat up. The cuts to his palm were deep, and bleeding steadily. However, worse than that was the sensation that anything below his wrist was now as good as gone. Marko stuck his arm inside his coat and straddled the edge of the container. The compactor uttered a metallic snort and skimmed over the mountain of waste. The enormous machine blocked the light of the streetlamps; a mechanical lunar eclipse.

He was about to jump down to the ground when he spotted something moving in the heap of waste. Marko put down the container he was carrying and lifted up a plastic bag.

The intense green eyes of a little girl stared back at him. She was around a year old. The unexpected spectacle made him feeling strangely weightless. Suddenly it felt as if he were in two places at once: in the container, and in the botanic garden outside Tbilisi. Thread-like thoughts shot out from his subconscious like spiders' webs. Children crying. The stench of petrol. The sound of a jet engine. The rumble of the enemy's artillery... no, not artillery.

Something else.

Oh, God!

The uncomfortable illusion was broken as the steel jaws of the compactor rushed in his direction. The air pressure from the powerful machine forced his body down among the heap of waste. Marko grabbed the girl, pulled her close and rolled out through a gap between the press and the container.

The landing wasn't quite so soft this time.

Chapter 3

His Eminence Fernando de Torquemada stood at the expansive floor-to-ceiling window in the office at the top of the building informally known as The Needle. He stroked an index finger absent-mindedly over his greying goatee. From here he was able to look down on the Eiffel Tower and across to the Seine, towards the flickering lights of the 16th arrondissement.

He stood here every evening, gazing out at the city of Paris as dusky evenings transformed into dark nights. As he had done so many times before, he studied his own thoughts for signs of arrogance or anything that might suggest a propensity for self-adulation. As the most high-ranking leader of The Masks, he couldn't allow himself such weaknesses. Only the pious could avoid the corruption of power.

'Your Excellence, the video feed from South America is ready.'

De Torquemada didn't turn to face his secretary, who he knew to be bowing deferentially as he spoke. 'Thank you, Diego. You can begin the transmission.' Torquemada took a few steps away from the window before the image of Paris at night was replaced with a live feed from an apparently infinite jungle landscape.

The image divided itself into a grid of four quarters, with the top two showing a woman running. Well, 'running' was possibly a slight underestimation, Torquemada thought to himself. She appeared to be gliding over the forest floor, propelled by artificially quick reactions, unnatural strength and stamina. The woman was jam-packed with bio-apps, there was no doubting that fact. The image on the lower left-hand side listed the woman's personal data. He skimmed the information listed:

Elvira Vasquez. 31 years old. Born in Mendoza. Officer in the Argentinian President's Guard. Specialist in the field of infiltration and surveillance. Equipped with bio-apps in 2093. Fled the Buenos Aires detention centre three weeks ago.

Did she know about the drones filming her at this moment? De Torquemada assumed so, and therefore also that she understood the fact that fleeing was futile. That it was all over for her. Even so, survival instinct trumped common sense. It was always the case. With detached interest, he followed the drama that unfolded halfway around the world. With the help of the perspective viewpoint in the bottom right-hand corner, de Torquemada had long since guessed where the hunters were directing the woman.

As if by magic, the dense jungle gave way to a gorge with steep, sheer walls. Hundreds of metres below, sharp, volcanic rocks jutted upwards from a funnel-shaped ravine. The woman stopped abruptly. Small stones plummeted into the great chasm below. De Torquemada imagined the hailstone-like sounds as they hit the ground. Elvira Vasquez looked all around her before standing with her back to the gorge, her arms by her sides.

A figure came into view between the trees. In spite of the visor, de Torquemada recognised the feline manner of his uppermost field operator across the board. Wilhelm Krieg. Behind the German's athletic frame, he could see four others half-concealed by the foliage; the rest of the hunting team.

'Lieutenant Elvira Vasquez! You are under arrest for violating the international biomodification convention code, paragraph three.' Krieg's voice was deep but clear. De Torquemada heard no arrogant undertones in his tone. 'Get down on the ground with your arms out in front of you. You have three seconds to comply.'

Elvira Vasquez dropped to her knees as if she had anticipated Krieg's orders.

Suddenly she twisted a hand behind her back and pulled out a slim pistol.

She was fast, but not fast enough. Before Vasquez managed to raise her weapon, there was a sharp crack. The woman's head and chest exploded in a red mist. Krieg lowered his high-calibre *Steyer Patrol* attack rifle and approached the steaming remains of the woman on

the ground. De Torquemada turned off the feed. Krieg had once again executed a mission in an exemplary manner.

Rejuvenated by the successful hunt, Fernando de Torquemada allowed himself a small glass of Martell Jubilee 2015. However, he had no chance to raise the glass of caramel-coloured cognac to his lips before Diego knocked at the office door.

‘What now?’ he asked, slamming the glass down on the marble desk. His secretary met his gaze without blinking, something that was unusual in itself. ‘Your Eminence, the intelligence team just picked up an activation signal in Tirana.’

‘Oh really? We have a few men in the area, as far as I recall. Put them on it.’

Diego didn’t move. De Torquemada stared at him in irritation.

‘What is it, man?’

‘It’s Sergeant Marko Eldfell,’ Diego whispered.

‘Eldfell! Are you certain?’

‘Absolutely certain, Your Eminence.’

Eldfell...

The sergeant had spent five years on the run. Most deserters were caught within six months, but not Eldfell. For five long years, that Nordic bastard had played hide and seek with him. He’d humiliated The Masks as an organisation and de Torquemada as a man.

‘Instruct our people in Tirana to locate Eldfell and keep him under surveillance. Seize him if possible, but under no circumstances must local authorities become embroiled in this. We’d only risk a bloodbath, and worse than that, Eldfell might be killed.’

‘Worse than that, Your Eminence?’

‘Eldfell is special, Diego. I want that bastard brought here alive so I can pick him clean and find out what it is that makes him so different. Do we understand one another?’

‘Absolutely, Your Eminence.’ Diego closed the door quietly behind him. De Torquemada lifted the glass of expensive cognac and downed the contents. He leaned across his desk and opened the triple-encrypted communication link.

Wilhelm Krieg’s response was immediate.

Chapter 4

Marko turned around as he fell. His back was first to hit the asphalt, closely followed by the back of his head. The colours drained from the world around him until there was nothing but a monochrome shimmer remaining. But he retained his protective grip on the girl and clung to the elusive light spot. All the while, the sound of the waste compactor alarm increased in volume – a machine-like doomsday clang that blocked out any other sounds.

How long did he lie there? Marko couldn’t be sure, but eventually he managed to get

back on his feet. Swaying like a drunkard, he switched off the bio-apps.

There was too much going on inside his head.

Far too much.

On trembling legs, Marko hobbled stiffly into an alleyway not far from the container.

The girl he had saved was thin, but not malnourished. When their eyes met for the second time, she smiled, the tip of her first milk tooth protruding from one gum.

The container child.

Marko was aware of this phenomenon. People would take advantage of the compactor to get rid of unwanted arrivals. The girl jumped at the crashing sound of the compacted waste being released onto the transport belt, but she didn't cry. Instead she studied his face with her indecipherable green eyes. Marko turned away. He glanced over at the compacted sheet of waste that now also included the blue box he had collected from the laboratory.

What would Caliban say? Marko wasn't sure, but plenty of stories had circulated about the mafioso's violent temper. Even so, shouldn't Caliban accept his share of the responsibility for the loss of the gene transplants? The mafioso ruled over a legion of informants. It would be odd if one of them hadn't known in advance about the police operation in Shantytown.

'What a fantastic fuck-up.' Marko kicked a beer can down the alleyway. The rattling of the can caused the girl to gurgle gleefully. Marko shook his head in resignation before an involuntary smile forced its way onto his face. His own day might have been a disaster, but the opposite was true for the little one. That was something.

The girl rested her head against his shoulder. She was breathing calmly. Marko decided to leave the alleyway. He took no more than a few steps before the whine of worn-out brakes caused him to stop. The whining was followed by doors opening and banging closed once again, and then a metallic clattering of weapons being pulled from a stand. The police undercover officers hadn't given up searching for him. Marko moved backwards in a controlled manner, into the darkness of the shadows of the windowless brick building.

It turned out to be a mistake.

The narrow alleyway ended with a steep, smooth ALUVEGG that was twice as high as the fence with the barbed wire. Marko looked around him, at a loss as to what to do next. Even with active bio-apps, it wouldn't be possible to make it over the wall, and with the little girl under his left arm and his right fist tucked limply inside his coat sleeve, it wouldn't have helped much to be able to make the jump.

He looked up at the grey night sky. The rain had stopped. In the east, a tiny part of the starry sky was visible. Marko couldn't remember the last time anything like that had happened. Was it a sign? A warning that his attempts to flee were over? A strange sense of relief rushed through him. He had spent five years on the run. Why not let it end here? The police would take care of the girl, wouldn't they? If that were true, then his day hadn't been totally wasted. Marko smiled down at the green eyes that reminded him of another. The girl babbled back at him. Yet another sign. He calmly turned and walked back towards the alleyway exit.

He was just ten metres from the exit when he saw the figure standing in the middle of the

alleyway where the dead-end alley met the street. A motionless figure with their back to Marko. Unsure what to do, Marko stopped. Something wasn't right here; when he stared directly at them, they became indistinct, hazy. The only detail Marko could make out was the person's headgear, an old-fashioned bowler hat.

'Check the alleyway.' The voice of an older man cut through the silence. Shortly afterwards, two men appeared wearing black Kevlar-reinforced uniforms and solid boots, each carrying powerful, high-calibre, loaded Steyer Patrol rifles. Marko clenched his teeth. Held his breath. The men's faces were covered by a thin, silver-ish visor of carbon glass. The surface of the glass reflected a distorted version of their surroundings. These weren't ordinary police officers; it was The Masks. They must have picked up his radio signal when he had activated the bio-apps, and Marko realised that as soon as one of them looked down the alleyway, both he and the little girl would light up like torches in their visors. He wasn't even armed.

One of The Masks stopped directly in front of the mysterious figure. It almost seemed as if the soldier was trying to see through the person standing there, as if he hadn't realised there was someone in front of him.

'The alleyway is clear,' he declared after a few seconds. His colleague grunted in approval before they both carried on down the street. Marko felt his legs ready to give way beneath him. Shaking, he sat down on the wet asphalt with the girl in the crook of his arm. When he looked up, the peculiar figure in the hat was gone.

Marko waited in the alleyway until he heard doors slam and a vehicle driving away. Only then did he venture his way out of the dead-end street. How could the two of them have failed to see him? Was it all a hallucination? A side effect in the aftermath of using the bio-apps combined with the blood loss he'd suffered from the wounds on his hand? If so, this was something new. He'd never had a reaction like it before. Confused, but determined to bring the girl to safety, Marko made his way through the deserted side streets and to the park that the transhumanists had made their own.

The pagoda in the middle of the park was a spherical, observatory-like construction of silicon-grey bricks. Above the entrance, a hologram of the transhumanists' symbol swayed: a stylised, blue-ish human head with bright eyes and a plus sign on the forehead. The hologram tipped ever so slightly forward in such a way that the eyes gave the impression of staring directly at any visitors below.

Marko glanced around him, then bent down and placed the girl gently on the steps of the pagoda. The girl looked up at him in an accusatory manner. Marko put his hands in his trouser pockets and pulled out three pale multicoins. The last of the change he had on him. He could return with more later. If there was any 'later' to speak of, that is – that wasn't easy to say, not now that The Masks were after him, and especially now that he'd most probably incited Caliban's wrath. Marko pressed the call button and quickly moved away from the all-seeing gaze of the head floating above him. His last meeting with the transhumanists hadn't exactly been the friendliest of affairs.

He stood behind a group of trees long after the girl had been picked up and carried inside. All the while, the girl's eyes had burned like green twin suns in his consciousness. 'We'll leave here together,' Marko whispered under his breath. 'One day we'll both leave here together.'

It started to rain.