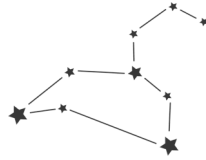


CHAPTER 2 A DARK DAY



“Incorrigible humanity, therefore, led astray by the giant Nimrod, presumed in its heart to outdo in skill not only nature but the source of its own nature, Who is God; and began to build a tower in Sennaar, which afterwards was called Babel... intending in their foolishness not to equal but to excel their Creator.”

—De vulgari eloquentia, Chapter VII

ELLIOTT DIDN'T HAVE time to cry out before he reached the threshold of the crosswalk where the electric barrier would go up in an instant.

Instead of being bashed aside by the barrier, he sailed on into the intersection and crashed into the side of the vehicle waiting there. He fell backward onto the pavement and groaned. The door he'd just bounced off opened with a pressurized whir.

“Are you okay?” Lara called from inside.

He jumped into the car and waited until the car was back in motion to answer. “I am now,” he said through his teeth. “Thanks for the pickup.”

A scowl quickly replaced the look of relief on Lara's face. “It looks like your program to disable the crosswalks and suspend the mag-lev work. Can we not cut it so close next time?”

"I'm hoping there isn't a next time." He reached out and rubbed her hand. Outside, the town was already becoming a dot on the horizon.

From the backseat, Slush poked her gray and white husky head over the front seats, startling Elliott. He gave her head an enthusiastic rub with his other hand.

"The Wraith did perform very well," he noted.

Lara huffed and pulled her hand back. "Can we please not call my car that? No more codenames. Our lives already feel too much like a bad spy movie. I'd like to have a semblance of the Normal."

Elliott frowned. The Normal was their inside way of referring to the lives they had lost when they discovered Project Alexandria's manipulations and endeavored to stop them. It represented their hopes for a future after Project Alexandria's fall. "Sorry. The car did great. Between the new quick stop program and the routine for hiding us on the road network, I think we should have an easier time traveling."

A little furrow over her brows deepened by a fraction. She sighed, settled down into her seat, and began tapping on the car's display console. Part of the ruse that protected them was how very much the car looked like any normal vehicle on the road. All cars were self-driving, governed by the local, state, or national network, depending on the road traveled. Between that and the mag-lev technology that powered and suspended them, creating a program to mask the car's location from the authorities was an exceptional challenge. One which Elliott was surprised to discover he had successfully overcome.

The silence stretched. From the way she flicked a glance at him now and again, he knew she wanted an explanation. He wasn't at the pickup spot and hadn't signaled danger.

He cleared his throat to speak. Lara turned on the sound for the news report streaming from the car's holographic display. The volume felt loud for the enclosure of the car.

A voluptuous black woman with shiny gold streaks in her

hair was introducing the next segment. A clip from an interview began. The interviewer was a Japanese man with salt and pepper hair and a wiry beard. He spoke quickly, likely to keep the news bite short.

“Thank you, Kiari. Tatsuo Hideyoshi here, and I’m with the esteemed Victor Almundson. Welcome, Dr. Almundson.”

A chill ran through Elliott as a dramatic melody played for effect. His hands unconsciously clenched the plush fabric of the car seat. Slush growled from the backseat and ducked out of view.

“Doctor, thank you for taking time from your busy schedule to meet with us. This is a pleasure.”

Dr. Almundson was shaved bald and had sharp features. His genetically altered skin masked the fact that he was nearly seventy. The bulky man steeped his fingers and bore a grin of unnaturally whitened teeth. Almundson’s eyes weren’t solid black in this press junket, unlike during his conversation with Director Ohlmstadt, which Elliott witnessed shortly before Almundson executed the other man. It was hard to say whether the natural coloring now was less unnerving or more, given the stark change.

“The pleasure is mine. After all, what is time but another facet of the material world around us to master? Like gravity, the atom, and the human genome. All the universes’ mysteries are revealed and overcome.”

“In time,” Tatsuo replied, wearing a knowing smirk.

“Quite so.”

“Speaking of mastery, you’ve made another leap, haven’t you?”

“Indeed. The boundaries of the human mind are forever erased.”

“A bold claim. How so, Doctor?”

“As everyone knows, Project Alexandria, the pinnacle of mankind’s achievements, was brought low. Slandered and

sabotaged by siegers driven by an extremist agenda to keep the world from knowing true equality and unity.

“I won’t color such an atrocity with any remarks beyond this. They have failed and failed utterly.”

Artificial applause accompanied the statement. Almundson seemed aware of it or perhaps anticipated it. He held up one finger, demanding silence. “A bold attack on the future of mankind demands a bolder response. They burned down our library, but we shall rebuild it as a tower. An unassailable bastion of unity and equality that will carry man into the heavens and beyond. We call it the Babel Initiative.”

Elliott’s grip on the car seat tightened and he leaned back. The biblical story of the Tower of Babel ran through his mind. The reference felt oddly religious for a man avowed to be an atheist.

Dr. Almundson continued, “We shall achieve a unity seen in the fable of Babylon’s first ziggurat. Imagine no more language barriers. No more cultural gaffes or limitations of time and distance between thoughts and information. This is the Babel Initiative’s promise.”

Tatsuo looked like a star-struck teenager. “That is quite an impressive promise, Doctor. How do you plan to bring about this utopian vision? Surely not with the limited computers distributed by the governments.”

“Of course not. Your insight is without compare. That was a fatal flaw of the system after the Cloud Wars. But no more. We cannot protect the external machinery from ignorant fearmongers. We can, however, create a system beyond their ability to overcome. The Babel Initiative is that system.”

Almundson flourished to the invisible audience. “There will be no barrier beyond crossing. No problem unsolvable. No height we will not soar above.”

Suddenly, Dr. Almundson looked directly at the camera. His stare felt directed straight at Elliott. The man’s eyes bored into Elliott. The icy chill from before enveloped Elliott, and he tapped

on the console without getting any closer to the image of Dr. Almundson than needed. When the console changed to a benign weather report, he gasped. The chill lessened.

What was that?

“Can they really do that?” Lara gaped at the display.

“I don’t—”

Elliott was cut off by the display switching to a rear camera feed of a black SUV careening toward them. “*Rear impact imminent,*” the car’s alert system announced.