

WHERE FROM HERE

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THE NAKED PEACOCK PRESS

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For Dennis

Written by a human for humans

HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS

ARTICLE I: A virtual line drawn along the peaks of the central mountain range shall constitute a military demarcation border between the opposing forces. Furthermore, the entire continental Upper Plateaus is hereby set aside as a Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). No armed forces shall be allowed inside the DMZ with the exception of civil authorities responsible for maintaining law and order among the indigenous tribes inhabiting this region.

AMENDMENT 1: To enhance cooperation and understanding, the two sides shall establish a means for cultural exchanges and the trade of goods to promote domestic commerce. Joint academic and scientific ventures should be encouraged. To implement this amendment, a permanent node for managing the aforementioned activities will be constructed on the border and placed under the direction of the previously established civil authorities. The increase in the number of personnel necessitated to source and maintain these additional efforts inside the DMZ will be decided by a joint committee.

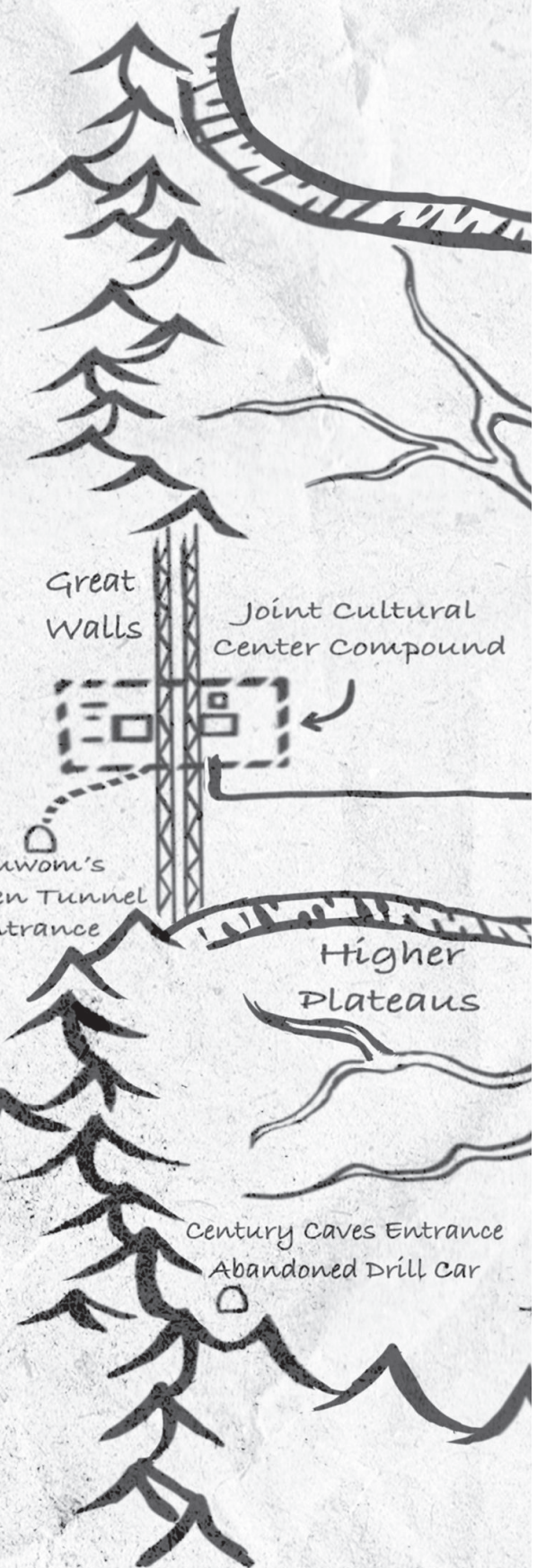
ARTICLE XII, AMENDMENT 1: Whereas the uninhabited lands and waters of the South Pole are designated as off-limits to both sides, this amendment sets aside a tract in which to establish a joint research endeavor, its sole purpose to access the artifact buried in the ice and perform scientific investigation, the ways and means to be further defined by a joint committee. This tract of land shall henceforth be identified by its Native name in all official transcriptions as, "Alaelo." In addition, the entire territory south of the 75th Parallel is hereby designated as a military free zone.

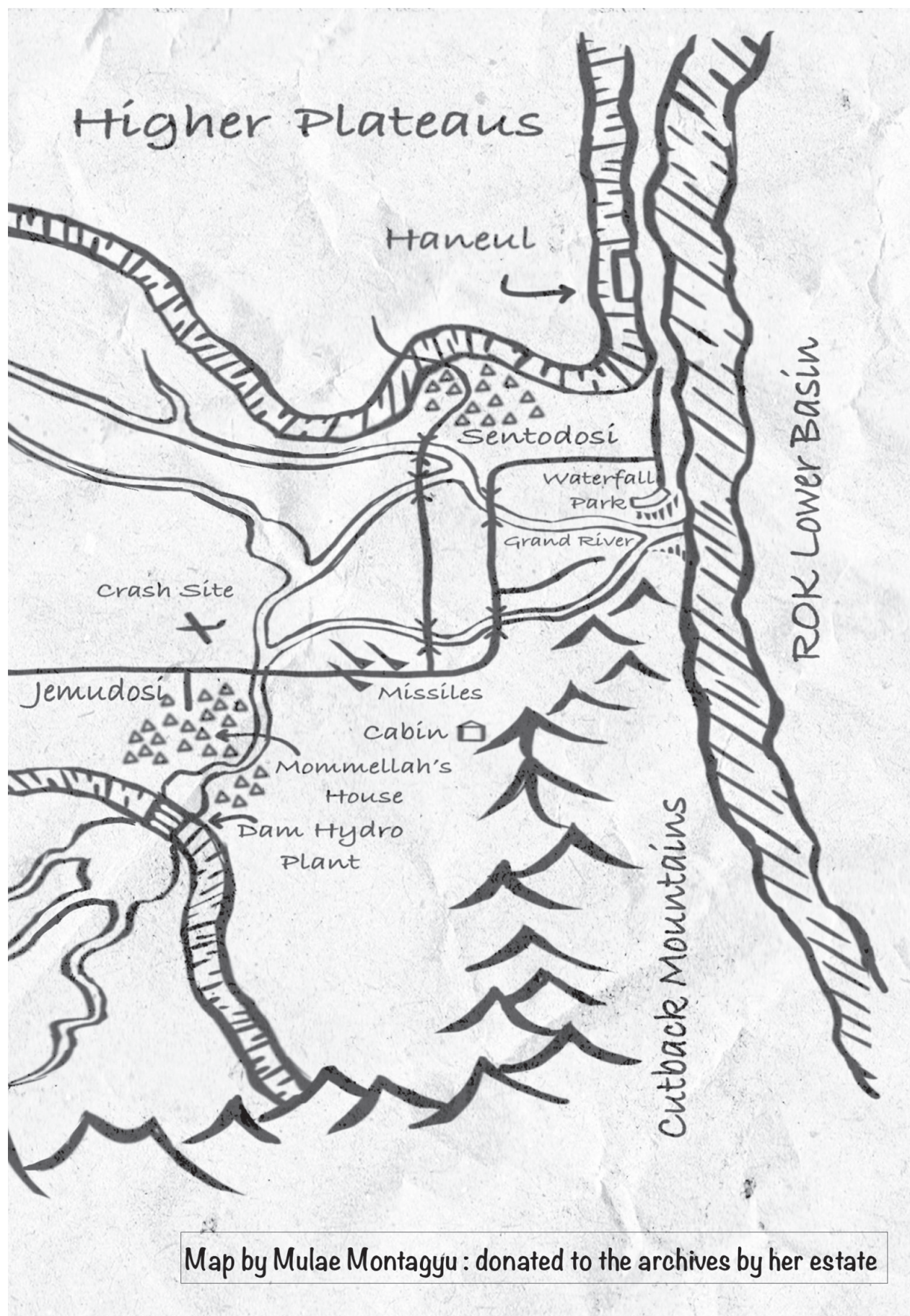
- EXCERPTS FROM THE SECOND CELESTIAL ARCHIVES, FEATURING EARLY-CENTURY ARMISTICE DOCUMENTATION BETWEEN THE SUN KINGDOM OF REI-JIN (SKOR) AND THE REPUBLIC OF KANTOR (ROK).

-  Mountains
-  Cliff
-  River
-  Road
-  Cave Entrance
-  Crash Site
-  Cabin
-  Missile
-  Dam
-  Bridge
-  Building
-  Settlement
-  Great Walls

SKOR Side of the Upper Platesu

Nosebridge Mountains





Map by Mulae Montagyu : donated to the archives by her estate

ALAELO

As he did almost every morning, Dr. Deul Blackstar had started his workday at the Alaelo Joint Research Center with a staff meeting co-led by his SKOR counterpart, Jimmi Chino. Inside the warm control tower that overlooked the site, he had a cup of coffee and studied the list of maintenance requests. The South Pole's bitter cold and icy winds constantly wore at the compound's housing units, the warehouses, the operations buildings, the access roads, the power and communications systems. You name it, something was always breaking. He'd been here longer than anyone else, first on the ground to oversee construction and equipping the facilities, then bringing in and orientating the staff. Five years since he'd last seen his family.

He'd likely never see them again.

The solid black airship had appeared suddenly from the gray overcast sky, setting down on landing pads reserved for supply shuttles. But when the ramp lowered and soldiers charged out, he knew they weren't here to deliver fresh fruit.

After a hasty exit from the control tower, Deul now ran down the icy road to the thermal drill staging area, lucky to have evaded the troops who had set out searching the compound and rounding up the fifty ROK scientists and fifty SKOR scientists

stationed at Alaelo. Sweat soaked the inside of his heavy insulated parka and pants. His ragged breaths crystallized in the freezing air.

Jimmi, shorter and well-rounded at the waist, struggled to keep up. He also realized what was happening.

Ten years ago, during a subsurface mapping flight, orbital scanners discovered far beneath the polar ice an unusual formation. Fantastic would better describe the gargantuan artifact. It was in fact a structure of some sort, made up of a series of expanding ellipsoids buried deep in the ice and anchored into bedrock. They named it “Alaelo” after the legendary city thought to have been built ages ago before a global apocalypse reshaped the Earth’s surface.

Deul jerked his head and stopped to look behind him. Muzzle flashes and the rapid tat-tat of gunfire erupted from the compound. People he’d worked with for years, his friends, were being shot, killed—they were unarmed—this was murder.

Jimmi pulled on his shoulder. “We can’t help them.”

Deul shook his head, disgusted and angry, and then ran on. There was still something they could do. The only thing.

When the structure was first discovered, scientists immediately concluded that its ancient builders possessed technology far superior to theirs—which led hawks in both militaries to assume it held tech they could use to develop advanced weapons. And so, to prevent warring over Alaelo, the Joint Research Center had been commissioned to exploit whatever they found for peaceful purposes—but after years of drilling, with the research team on the cusp of reaching the structure, one side had sent their military to take control.

Didn’t matter which side the soldiers were on. They had to be stopped.

If the thermal drill staging area had been any farther away, Deul wasn’t sure he had the strength to make it. The only running anyone did at Alaelo was on the treadmill in the small exercise room. But he did make it, and Jimmi too.

Centered on a flat plain of bluish ice, a colossal framework of

girders and beams, densely fitted with supporting equipment and machinery, surrounded a massive hole in the ice. The thermal drill, ten stories tall and with a diameter a tenth of its height, rested in its holding cradle. Modified from a last-century intra-solar rocket, the drill's command module was at the top, its mushroom-shaped heat dome at the very bottom and all the mechanical systems placed between them.

Huffing, hands on knees, Deul caught his breath and asked, "What's the plan, Jimmi?"

The hefty SKOR scientist gasped as he spoke. "Break the drill. Can't let them get to the artifact."

"How are we going to do that?"

"Smash the pilot controls. Puncture the fuel tanks." Jimmi looked at him desperately. He had to know the soldiers would coerce other scientists on site to make repairs in short time. "You got a better idea?"

When in operation, a pilot guided the drill into the ice by using the modified rocket engines to vary the temperature across different sections of the dome attached to its nose. The dome superheated the ice melt. Pipes in the drill's hull carried the steam to its rear and released it to the surface. A metal sleeve with guiderails were placed in the hole behind the drill as it sank. The crane pulled the drill back to the surface for daily resupply and crew changeout.

"We take the drill down the hole and freeze it in the ice," Deul said. "I'll work the gantry crane and move it into position. You get inside and prepare to descend."

Jimmi took a deep breath and jogged away.

The drill usually had a crew of four, and the crane its own operator and riggers. They'd have to manage with just the two of them—by taking a lot of shortcuts and violating his strict safety rules.

Oh well. They were going to die anyway.

"Use the stairs," he called out to Jimmi. "The soldiers will see the elevators moving."

Jimmi waved his hand. It was at least two hundred steps up to the drill's crew-access hatch.

At the framework on the other side of the hole, Deul climbed the same number of steps to the crane's control cab. His job as site lead required him to be familiar with everyone else's job, but knowing how to perform a task was quite different from doing it. He had only just begun to reorient himself when Jimmi called from inside the drill command module.

"Ready here, Deul."

That was quick. Jimmi must have tossed aside the drill's pre-operation checklist.

The loading procedure entailed moving the drill from its holding cradle and positioning it over the hole. A trio of three-pronged spokes projected from the drill's upper, mid, and lower sections. The spokes' tips fit into the guiderails that ran from the top of the hole to the last installed sleeve at the bottom of the hole. Because of the precision required in making the connection, a computer program normally controlled the operation.

Deul switched to manual control, much faster, made to be used in an emergency only. But the soldiers would take notice once he began moving the drill from its cradle.

The stick controls allowed him to move the gantry crane's massive bridge beam along two axes. First, he brought the drill out from its holding cradle and positioned it over the hole—a light flashed green indicating the drill's top alignment was within tolerance. Another status light, currently red, was tied to relays which analyzed the position of the drill's bottom, now suspended just above the hole's surface. Four tethering links at each quadrant connected the drill to the crane. To maintain top alignment, and at the same time adjust the bottom, he needed to raise or lower a link to tilt the drill.

With just a twitch of his finger, the drill moved ever so slightly. The alignment indicator flashed from red to orange, and for an instant blinked green, but then turned orange. The crane's boom controls were much more sensitive than he first thought.

He selected a different quad link to adjust. As he tapped the control stick, the light turned green—but just as he lowered the drill into initial position, the light turned orange. The spokes didn't mesh perfectly with the guiderails. A loud pop sounded when the tips snapped into place.

"Easy now," Jimmi cautioned. "You crack the hull and when we start drilling the steam will leak inside and cook us."

Deul tweaked the entry rotation by a fraction of a degree and then rechecked the drill's vertical angle to ensure it matched the hole's alignment. Counterweights rose as he lowered the drill into the hole, the crane's control cab dropping down a shaft in the framework in tandem.

He looked up from his work screen. From the main compound, headlights cut through the polar gloom. A small convoy of tracked vehicles headed their way.

They were running out of time.

When the drill was completely inserted and the top flush with the ground surface next to the hole, he released the crane's tethering links; the free weight of the drill transferred to its massive sprockets, pressing against the vertical rails, bringing a groan from the support sleeve that rounded the hole.

A walk bridge automatically extended over to the crew access hatch.

Before he left the control cab, Deul detached the recovery cables. The drill used its own gravity-drive to descend but needed the crane to ascend. That meant once he and Jimmi took the drill down, to bring it back up, the soldiers would have to climb down the hole and reattach the cables.

Deul hurried to the drill. He closed the hatch and quickly donned a full-body heat resistant suit.

"We should just fire the rocket burners now," Jimmi said. "Warp the sleeve as we go down and wedge the drill in the hole."

"That would work," Deul said. "But don't you think we owe it to ourselves and our friends to at least get a look at the greatest discovery of our lifetime."

Jimmi bowed his head and nodded.

Deul took a seat at the drill controls. “Once we get close to the frozen melt water at the bottom of the hole, we go half thermal,” he said. “Do that and we’ll be pumping hot water behind us instead of steam. After we sink down to the artifact, we anchor the drill and seal the access hatch. The water above us will refreeze before the soldiers can get inside, and then the drill will be buried under the new ice.”

Jimmi pushed the gravity-drive forward. “The annual armistice re-negotiations begin tomorrow. With neither side able to get to the artifact, maybe the diplomats can talk their way out of another war.”

Deul switched on the drill’s forward lights and watched the monitor. His wife, Envoy General Dre Blackstar, would represent his country as the lead ROK armistice negotiator. Their daughter, Joette, would be at her mother’s side.

The drill slid rapidly down the hole.

They were almost halfway to the bottom when a gruff voice boomed from the control cab’s comm speakers.

“This is Commander Rush of ROK Central Command. We have a pulse missile pointed at you. Stop the drill or we will fire.”

The soldiers were ROKs. Deul looked at Jimmi. “My people.”

Jimmi shrugged. “I’d have bet money they were SKORs.”

Rush’s voice turned softer. “It’s over, Dr. Blackstar. Shut-down the gravity-drive. We’ll lift you out. I promise you won’t be punished.”

“Let them shoot,” Deul said. “They’ll destroy the drill and collapse the shaft.”

The drill continued to speed down the hole. No more threats came from Commander Rush—no pulse missile either.

Deul checked the monitor. A glassy surface reflected the drill’s forward lights. “We’re almost to the ice cap, Jimmi. The layer that formed after the last drilling operation is very thin. It shouldn’t take long to melt down to the artifact.”

A loud thud came from the upper hull.

Jimmi switched to the rear cameras. A soldier with rocket-boots stood on the hull above them. Another soldier flew down, bringing with her an additional recovery cable.

“They’re trying to latch onto us.”

Deul clicked on the comm transmitter. “We are commencing thermal burn, Commander Rush. You need to get your people out of the hole.”

“We can’t wait, Deul.” Jimmi turned to the burner controls. “Firing engines.”

The drill shuddered as the rocket engines that heated the dome flamed on. The icecap turned almost instantly to liquid. The command cab filled with a sizzling sound as the superheated water passed through manifolds attached to the drill’s hull and exhausted behind them.

The soldiers were instantly washed away.

Deul’s stomach twisted. He swallowed hard and turned his eyes to the steering controls. The drill lurched downward, out of the guiderails and beyond the last installed ring wall. He controlled direction into the virgin ice by shifting the rocket engine’s fiery exhaust to point at different sections of the dome’s perimeter, using the temperature differentials to steer the drill’s nose toward the nearby artifact.

“Shutting down the burners,” Jimmi said shortly. “The dome is hot enough now to melt the rest of the way to the artifact.”

The drill slowed, penetrating the remaining layer of ice, cooling as it descended, soon bumping against the top of the artifact.

Deul deployed the triple bracing discs, sending them unraveling from the hull above the thermal plate and slicing into the sides of the hole. The drill vibrated heavily as the anchors wedged into the ice. There would be no pulling them out now.

They had practiced these next procedures many times. But this would be the very first attempt at gaining access to the artifact.

“Injecting coolant,” Jimmi said. The chemicals reduced the

dome's temperature and chilled the meltwater in the space between the bracing discs and the artifact. "Beginning slush extraction," he said a few moments later.

Deul switched the monitor controls to display the forward view cameras. A large circular space, bound by the hole's ice walls and shaped somewhat like a torus, now existed between the drill's curved heat-dome and the artifact's upper surface.

According to previous scans, the artifact was made of a series of expanding ellipsoids, a structure so massive that this tiny section of the upper ellipsoid's spherical surface seemed flat.

He and Jimmi took off their bulky silver suits and put on their parkas. According to the thermal drill's exterior sensors, the last injection of coolant lowered the temperature in the space to match the ice. It would be like working inside a refrigerator.

A gangway led down from the command module to a storage pod packed with a diverse supply of cutting tools. Readouts from the previous scans had also indicated that the artifact's outer wall was made of a metallic alloy flowing with a type of electromagnetic current. Cathodic protection of some sort they assumed—which meant after countless centuries in the ice, the artifact still had a working power source.

They carried the heavy equipment through the maintenance shaft centered in the next three pods and then past the modified rocket engines. The bottom hatch opened to a view of the rocket thrusters that heated the drill's dome. Man-size holes in the dome's plating allowed fluids and vapors to escape up the drill's peripheral manifolds and release behind it.

Jimmi placed a portable ladder in one of the holes.

"This has been your show from the beginning, Deul. You deserve to be first to set foot on it."

Deul nodded thanks and stepped down the ladder slowly, reverently, imagining the glorious race of people who had built this fantastic structure and wondering what the world had been like then. He knelt and touched the artifact's dimpled surface, running his gloved fingers over its amber colored skin.

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Jimmi walked a complete circle around the cavity between the drill's inverted dome and the top of the artifact. The coolant had turned the hole's ice walls a shiny green. He pulled a proton torch from the equipment cart and ratcheted a cutting head.

He stamped his foot and said, "This looks as good a place as any."

Deul waved a hand scanner over the surface. "Can't tell how thick it is—or what's on the other side. Hope it's not explosive."

"Thanks. I'll be sure to keep that in mind." Jimmi placed a shield over his helmet visor. Then he knelt and put the torch to the artifact.

Deul turned his eyes away from the blazing tip.

The torch didn't even scratch the surface.

"I'll try another place." Jimmi moved over a few steps and restarted the torch. "It's no use," he said shortly. "We're not getting anywhere."

Deul opened the accessory kit. "Try switching from the laser bit to a plasma bit."

Jimmi changed heads and put the torch to the artifact once more.

If this didn't work, they were done.

Suddenly, the artifact's exterior flexed into oscillating ripples. A loud humming came from inside.

Jimmi yelled over the noise, "What'd we do?"

As if sliced by an invisible knife, thick horizontal and vertical lines began to etch the artifact's surface. And within the lines, its skin began curling into itself—leaving a rectangular opening.

"I guess we knocked and someone answered," Deul replied. "And it looks like they want us to come inside."

The drill lights cast his and Jimmi's shadows toward the artifact, their silhouettes disappearing inside the opening.

There were no visible steps, but once Deul placed a foot over the opening, he began to sink inside the artifact. The interior absorbed his handlight's beams.

Jimmi lowered next to him. Then the opening sealed, leaving

them in utter darkness. But hardly a thought passed before a pinprick of light appeared. The light grew larger, coming closer and closer.

Deul muttered to his friend, "I think we're about to find out who that someone is."

An object began to form inside the ball of light; a roundish head took shape along with gangly arms and legs that sparked and crackled. The strange creature that manifested from the light then stood before them, its face featureless except for eyes as black as night.

"What's happening?" Jimmi said. "I can't move."

A numbness also spread through Deul, from his feet and up his legs to his arms. The creature spoke to him, but he heard it with his mind and not with his ears.

"Two," it said. "Not one?"

Deul started to speak, but then a sharp pain shot through his head. His mind filled with memories, events of the past few hours playing in reverse sequence.

"Two," it said again. "Not one?"

The pain increased as the speed of the intrusion into his mind increased.

Next to him, Jimmi screamed, and his head tilted forward.

Just as Deul lost consciousness, the creature brought its face close to his. Its eyes blinked, and it said resolutely, "One. Not two."

CHAPTER I

JAMWON

NEVER THE SAME

All SKOR children from ages nine to eighteen received a gift from the King on their birthday. Back when Jamwon turned nine, a soldier in dress uniform delivered to him a gold-trimmed red box. He remembered excitedly running his fingers over the royal seal. His initials were stamped in the wax! But he waited for his father's nod before opening the box. Inside was a polished slate placard with delicately painted lettering, which he was to later hang on his bedroom wall. With his parents and uncle watching, he proudly recited the prime edict, the first of ten.

There is no greater authority than the King, no greater purpose but to serve him with every breath and every thought.

Then, suddenly, unexpectedly, and unbelievably, government agents burst into his family's home. His uncle wrapped his arms around his shoulders, holding him back as his parents were shoved to the floor, placed in restraints, and dragged out of the house. His mother and father were later charged with treason and imprisoned, though he did not know where.

His uncle, Legate Brigadier Sakura, took him to his home at the Joint Cultural Center and raised him as his own son. Jamwon disliked the JCC at first—and not just because he was bitter at life. The Upper Plateaus were remote, nothing like the lively

SKOR capital city where he was born. And because only the handful of permanent staff were allowed to bring their families to live with them, there were only a few students his age at his new school. But Joette was one of them.

Since the JCC was built to foster good relations, ROK and SKOR boys and girls were allowed to associate together. He learned to play the violin only because she was in the joint music class. Every field trip she signed on for, he made sure to be included. As he and Joette grew older, they began to meet in secret, at least once a week.

They were children no longer.

This very night she sat across from him at their favorite table in Mommellah's store. There was the usual candlelight, a view of their host's pond and garden. They sipped glasses of cold tea while vegetables cooked in a hotpot on the table. But no pleasant ambiance, not even the pleasure of her company, soothed his unease. Every new year had brought more responsibilities and less free time. Slipping away were the days of trekking the Upper Plateau's remote sites together, the friendly campfire conversations, and these quaint dinners far away from prying eyes.

"I've been promoted to Executive Officer," he said.

"Congratulations. I'm sure your uncle is very proud."

"What? No. It's a disaster. Every administrative issue coming before the Legate Brigadier is now passed on to me to mediate. And my working in the command section puts my comings and goings under intense scrutiny, nothing like it was as an engineering cadet. I know I've promised before not to talk like this. I know it's dangerous. But we have to leave these lives behind, Joette, or we will never have one together."

The look she gave him was as if he'd stabbed her in the heart.

His talk was treasonous, but he knew Joette felt as he did. More than a spark kindled between them, their love but suffocated by cruel circumstances. Circumstances they could change.

Joette sat her glass down. She favored her mother, Envoy

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General Blackstar, even more when she became serious, a slight narrowing of her brown eyes, a calm to her face.

“We are not children anymore, Jamwon.”

She sounded like the General then too.

“No. Not for a long time.”

He could be just as reserved. Like her, he’d been taught diplomatic skills. And he was fully prepared to use them.

“Then we have to quit acting as if we were,” she said. “If we abandon our lives and run away. Think how small our world would become.”

“Would you rather stay trapped in a life someone else made for you?”

“It’s not like that.”

“Friends don’t lie to each other, Joette.”

Her voice faltered. “I wish things could be different. I really do.”

“I think you’re giving up. And you want me to give up. But if we give up what we love, what’s the point in living?”

“It’s not fair for you to say that.”

Before they said more, Mommellah rushed into the room, her flushed face as red as her hair. She nervously wiped flour from her hands onto her apron.

“A policeman is outside looking at your GoBikes,” she exclaimed.

Joette pushed back from the table.

“Relax,” he said. “We met here by coincidence and decided to have dinner.”

Mommellah hurried away and answered the knock on her door. They heard her apologize about the sign on the door showing the store was closed and then lie that her sister must have forgotten to flip the sign to show the store was open.

The policeman asked to come inside.

The door shut.

He asked if she had customers.

“Two,” Mommellah answered.

Jamwon motioned to Joette to eat her food. They always made up an alibi whenever they were together—just in case someone saw them together—but this was the first time having to use one.

The floorboards creaked as footsteps came down the front aisles, past the shelves filled with dry goods and canned vegetables, past the section of bookcases filled with antique items that Mommellah called her knickknacks.

A hulking man wearing the brown uniform of a ROK Reservation Police Officer walked through the arched passageway and into the dining room. The officer directed his eyes at him, then to Joette, and then back to him.

“That your SKOR transport outside, sir?”

“Yes.” He offered the officer his credentials. The diplomatic stamp gave him access to all unrestricted areas on the ROK side of the DMZ.

“What are you doing here?” The officer read off his name. “Legate Captain Akaitaiyo?”

Jamwon held his spoon up and smiled at Mommellah. “I collect Native Primals antiques and heard the food here was also good. Which it is.”

The policeman studied his documentation as if he’d never seen anything like it before.

Jamwon sipped his tea. “Is there a problem, officer?”

“Someone reported seeing your transport parked next to a ROK GoBike,” the officer replied. “Kind of unusual this far from the tourist attractions.” He looked over at Joette.

“I’m also a collector,” she said. “And the Captain is my peer at the JCC. We were discussing a joint work issue.”

Jamwon pursed his lips. She didn’t stick exactly with their alibi—but everything she said was true.

He had no qualms about lying to the enemy. “If one of us has to leave, she was already here when I arrived.”

“Officer, can I get you something to drink?” Mommellah asked, sweetly.

“No. Thank you.” The policeman stared at Mommellah, then him, then over at Joette. “I’m finished here.” He handed back his credentials. “Enjoy your visit to Jemudosi, Captain.”

“Sis!” Mommellah called out to her sister. “Pack some scones for the officer to take with him.”

The officer politely refused but took the pastries at Mommellah’s persistence.

After the policeman left, Joette just sat with her hands in her lap.

He’d never seen her so afraid. Fraternization with the enemy carried career-ending consequences, but just being suspected of having an improper relationship with a SKOR would embarrass her mother and taint their family name.

“I don’t understand,” she said. “No one’s ever reported us before.”

Her train of thought was going in the right direction. He just needed to keep her on that track.

“Or maybe this was just the first time we were still here when the police sent someone to check.”

“Do you think he recognized me?”

Jamwon took another sip of his tea. No doubt the policeman recognized her. The officer would have quite the story to tell his friends later. His superiors might feel compelled to push the report of his encounter with the Envoy General’s daughter and the SKOR Legate Brigadier’s nephew up the chain of command, maybe even to the highest level. Joette was likely already beginning to dread the possibility of having to face her mother.

“Maybe,” he said. “But if they knew about us, we’d have already been arrested.”

Mommellah laughed nervously. “That policeman will forget all about it after he eats one of my scones.”

Joette stared at him. The seed he’d just planted in her mind would make deep roots.

He rose from his seat and offered his hand. “Let’s go for a ride.”

She ignored his hand and walked out of the store, pausing in the shadows under the canopy-covered porch.

Mommellah's store sat at the edge of a bluff along a row of rustic three-story buildings. The roofs were covered by layers of sticky bark, the siding made of rough-sawn timbers scorched with fire to prevent rot and protect against insects. Interior light edged several of the curtained windows on the second and third floors, where the residents who worked in the shops on the first floor resided.

An enterprising but simple people, the Primals were a collective of indigenous races who inhabited the Upper Plateaus. They were descendants of a fragment of Earth's population who survived underground after a long-ago global catastrophe.

Jamwon looked at Joette and hunched his shoulders. "I don't think it was the Primals who reported us. They never get involved in our affairs."

Joette shook her head. "We can never come back here."

He couldn't have put it clearer.

Under a moonlit sky, Jamwon hopped onto his GoBike.

"I'll go first and engage my cloaking shield when I get to the main road. You cloak your bike when you leave here. If the policeman is somewhere watching, he won't be able to follow us."

The dirt road from Mommellah's store merged into a maze of small streets. Powered by thin cables winding from tree limb to tree limb, dim yellow globe lights illuminated the intersections. Driveways led to residences and small shops hidden in the dark woods.

He and Joette always made a game of racing to the Century Caves, taking backroads and open fields across the vast Upper Plateaus. Her cloaked GoBike appeared as a slow-moving red dot on his display. She seemed in no hurry now.

At the outskirts of the Primals enclave, he throttled his GoBike and sped down the narrow two-lane highway toward the Cutback mountains.

He checked his display. She loved going fast too.

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Deep in the wilds, he turned onto an abandoned road. The overgrowth left only a small opening in which to navigate the ancient stone pavement, his hover transport weaving like a busy needle through the forest's midnight green. After passing a vine choked bridge, he spun onto a wildlife trail skirting a large algae-clogged lake, finally stopping at the bottom of a vertical cliff where the Cutbacks joined with the Nosebridge Mountains. Jagged gray stones covered the ground, the rubble from ages ago when a miner punched through from inside the mountain.

He powered off his transport and sat listening to the night sing its melody, the wind rustling through the willows and the cypress, the sounds of croakers and the call of sleepless birds. The spicy aroma of Hadrone trees permeated the air. No one would ever think to look for them here.

Leaves scattered and whirled as if a miniature tempest came up the trail. Joette decloaked her GoBike and pulled next to him.

She was right. They could never go back to Mommellah's. She should be thinking also that there may be no going back anywhere.

Jamwon kicked the GoBike's hover jets to max and lifted to the opening of the pilot tunnel. Once inside, he accelerated, passing smaller tunnels of granite and marble, all part of the vast underground network the Primals used as places of refuge during wars between the ROKs and SKORs. He and Joette had often come here looking for Love Stones. But only once had they discovered one of the unique Primals artifacts.

Far from the entrance and deep under the Nosebridge mountains, they parked next to a pile of hand-size oval stones that he and Joette had found over the years. But after checking the stones for flecks of paint or engravings, they turned out to be just plain rocks.

He took a small handlight from the GoBike's storage compartment and started down a puddled tunnel branching off the main. The handlight soon brought into view a drilling machine, wedged into the rock and abandoned decades before.

Connected to the back of the drill was the circular crew pod, not much bigger than a small windowless room.

Over the years, he and Joette had made improvements to their little hideaway, filing down jagged edges to keep from cutting themselves, sweeping out the dirt and debris, and installing furnishings. The interior they'd painted with buckets of paint pilfered from the Joint Cultural Center warehouse; Blue, Joette's favorite color. The old rugs, salvaged from the SKOR museum's rubbish bins, gave a nice sense of warmth to the place.

Joette came inside and walked over to the cabinet he'd built. She set the table while he went to the sink he'd recently installed and filled a pot with water.

"How did you do that?" she asked.

"I ran a hose to a sump in the tunnel floor. The pump is rated for domestic use and groundwater is probably all right to drink, but we'll boil it to be safe."

As the water heated on a camp stove, he opened a case of SKOR field rations, and together they sorted through the packages to find one that contained a dense fruitcake.

Joette blushed when she caught him staring at her. Before his eyes, she had grown from a girl in pigtails to the young woman before him. Maybe in a thousand years, their cultures would merge, a ROK and a SKOR free to pursue a relationship without the fear of retribution—but not in their lifetime. He'd realized long ago if they did nothing, they'd eventually have to go their separate ways, become responsible citizens, act as if they as a couple never existed.

She sat up straight, her hands on the table, her fingers folded tightly together, her knuckles white. "That was a good story we told the policeman. And my mother has seen the picture book of Love Stones that I bought at Mommellah's store. She knows I go there sometimes. And like you said, if they knew about us. . . Well. We just have to stick to the same story."

He scooped a strong measure of instant coffee into their cups and stirred.

"If it comes to asking questions, you know it will be your mother and my uncle asking them. Keeping a secret is one thing, outright lying about it is another. You sure you can do that?"

"I wasn't suggesting we lie. We just say we are acquainted. That's the truth. People have seen us together at school all the time. I've met your uncle. My mother shook your hand at graduation."

A lone lightcube, attached to the ceiling and powered by a cord connected to a spare GoBike battery, illuminated the room. Her face was clear to him. She wanted to be convinced that things could be different.

"Did you never think we might get caught, Joette?"

"No. I was always careful—"

Her databand started buzzing. Joette looked at the device on her wrist and said softly, "My mother." She didn't answer the call.

Jamwon took her hand. "I have something to show you."

Just down a side tunnel was the shop they had built, where they stored tools and materials while renovating the drill car. He pulled the tarp off his prototype AirSled, modified from a hover-bike and a wrecked drone, enhanced with components he'd fabricated.

"There is an island we call Irwon just off the southern coast. It's part of the Primals reservation. I've purchased an old farmhouse that overlooks the ocean. Tourists aren't allowed to go there. SKOR officials and police seldom visit, but the mayor will warn me if and when they might come. The sunset from the porch is amazing. It's perfect. We can fly there right now."

She looked at him and shook her head that was halfway a nod also.

"Here's what we do Joette. When you don't show up back home, Mommellah's is the first place they will look for you. She'll tell them you went to the Century caves at the other end of the mountains to look for Love Stones. Your mother will think you were in a cave-in. They'll look for you, but they will never find you. You won't have to face her."

He took her hand. "I know you want this too."

Joette folded her arms at her chest and walked by his side back to the drill car.

She put away the rest of the rations while he wiped the table.

"But what will I do in this town, this farmhouse, Jamwon?"

"Whatever you want to do. The garden needs to be completely reworked. The roof leaks. Windows need repaired. But you've always said how you like to get your hands dirty. It's a fishing port, so we can take boats out to the seamounts. There are lots of places to explore. We'll never be bored."

Jamwon tilted the table up into its wall alcove. Then he lowered the back of the benches so they slid down flat, forming together with the seats into a bed, something new he'd recently built.

She looked at him. He answered before she asked.

"I thought we might need to stay here longer if something did happen," he explained. "If you don't like the farmhouse idea, we can look somewhere else if that's what you want to do. Here. Help me spread this out."

Joette took one side of the futon he'd brought, and together they laid it on the bench-bed. A red pillow for him, a blue one for her.

He held out his hand for her to sit next to him.

She remained standing on her long legs. Her slender arms at her sides. The light soft on her smooth lemony skin.

Finally, she sat.

Her hair was tussled from wearing her helmet.

He reached under the bed and pulled out a toiletry kit packed with items he'd bought at Mommellah's store.

"You've thought of everything," she said.

From the kit, he picked out an antique hairbrush made of silver.

"Let me do it," he said as she reached for it.

She turned with her back to him, and he began slowly

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brushing her fine black hair, following the brush with his other hand to smooth the strands in place.

“You would lie to your mother about us,” he said.

“How do you know?”

“Because you know she might tell my uncle, and I would be punished too.”

“Yes.”

Jamwon put the brush down and massaged her back.

“No matter what happens, we will always be friends.”

“Is that enough?” she asked, turning to face him.

He took her hands in his and leaned closer. He kissed her cheeks and then her forehead.

Joette pulled slightly back, her face questioning.

“What does your heart tell you?” he asked.

Her eyes softened.

“I love you,” he said. “But you know that.”

Jamwon pressed his lips to Joette’s. The heat of her body seeped into him, her warmth melding with his, their movements awkward and learning, this new dimension all at once both thrilling and scary, and then... No words can describe what followed, only that he knew at that moment they would never be the same again.

CHAPTER 2

JOETTE

SEPARATE BUT EQUAL

Just as the sun rose over the Upper Plateaus, Joette steered her GoBike into the JCC maintenance bay and parked. She ignored the usual check-in with the vehicle dispatcher and headed straight to the staff locker room. She splashed cold water on her face, pausing to rest her hands on the sink and look at herself in the mirror. Her brown eyes glared back, behind them a mind that felt as if full of angry bees.

She looked as unapproachable.

Lack of sleep had left her with a tired frown. And of all days to be running late, today was the worst.

Three loud chimes sounded from the wall speakers. A precursor signal to the official start of a new day.

Joette tied her uniform's headpiece in place, a blue yangmori with a silver ribbon that designated her rank. She took one last look in the mirror. Here was the Envoy General's daughter, progeny of a thousand-year-old dynasty, next in line to achieve greatness. Only she knew what a fool she really was.

The ROK museum was a ten-minute walk from the maintenance bay, five if Joette ran, which she did, saying over and over in her mind, 'He's just an acquaintance. We went to school together.' She had never outright lied to her mother, but neither had she

always been completely truthful. When she'd said that she really didn't like hanging out with the other children in her school, what she meant was she'd rather be with Jamwon. Or when she'd said she was going to Mommellah's store for dinner and then spend the night there, she didn't say that he would also be there and be sleeping in a room down the hallway from hers.

But neither had her intentions been defiant.

Even as a child she saw that a friendship with Jamwon was a good thing. One day, with him in his uncle's position as Legate Brigadier on the SKOR side and her as Envoy General on the ROK side, they could work together to do away with the armistice and forge a permanent peace between their countries. Besides their language and culture, they were not so much different. From the back, ROKs and SKORs looked the same, but where SKOR facial features were like stones just fallen into the river, angular and hard, ROK faces were like pebbles that had been in the water for centuries, smooth and polished. And inside, they were the same, blood and bone, and like all people, beautiful in their imperfections.

As much as she tried to convince herself that everything was going to be all right, by the time she reached the museum, her nerves were even more on edge.

It was going to be a long day.

On the main level, the museum's foyer showcased a colossal star-shaped room, its open ceiling protected from the elements by a shimmering forcefield. Inside, a fair-size crowd had gathered for the armistice re-negotiations opening ceremony.

Joette walked to a staircase and went up a couple of steps to get a better look. Across the white marble floor, her mother, Envoy General Dre Blackstar, waited with members of her staff under a gigantic banner that boasted in bold green letters: THE GREAT ARMISTICE—200 YEARS OF PEACE—SEPARATE BUT EQUAL.

Tall, slim, confident, like one of the statues of her forbearers on display in the museum, the Envoy General looked stately in her

dark-blue, silver-trimmed uniform, portraying a larger-than-life, I'm-in-command posture.

Hardly a day of Joette's life had passed without lessons in military history and governance, physical training and diplomacy, all preparing her to one day take her mother's place. The Envoy General deserved to place her trust, her honor, and her titles in the hands of someone worthy of them. That's why she'd planned to tell Jamwon at Mommellah's last night that they could no longer see each other. But it was so hard. For a while she'd known that Jamwon loved her. She'd seen it in his eyes and the way he acted around her. It was a young, foolish love. She'd also known if she didn't push back, he and his dreams could destroy them both.

And then the policeman showed up. And then at the drill car, he'd been so persuasive. She had also wished things could be different, had herself thought that if a relationship between a ROK and SKOR was allowed, she might even come to love Jamwon in the same way he loved her. But what happened between them last night wasn't love. It was selfish, and she hated herself for it. She hated him.

Three loud chimes signaled that the ceremony would soon begin.

Joette made her way across the room, having to squeeze past a group of children on a school trip. A young girl with braided hair and wearing a shirt she'd bought at the gift shop saluted and greeted her with the traditional salutation printed on her shirt.

"Be brave."

Joette curled her fist and kissed it in reply.

The Joint Cultural Center entailed such a bizarre paradox. For centuries the surrounding lands had been a hotly contested battlefield, and now, children and shops and cafes had taken the place of soldiers and rifles and cannons.

She squatted to get eye-to-eye with the girl. "What's your name and rank, cadet?"

"Maple. Student 3rd Grade. Thank you for asking, Lieu-

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tenant.” The little girl beamed and pointed to a twisted green rope around her sleeve, “I’m squad leader today.”

Joette forced a smile. Mandatory military training in ROK schools started in the first year. Training every citizen to be a soldier made for a very large army. Just in case.

“I see that. How many under your command?”

“Twenty, Lieutenant.”

“What are your orders?”

“Observe and learn, Lieutenant.”

“Where is your emergency assembly area?”

“North Playground, Lieutenant.”

Joette unzipped a pocket on her shoulder bag and pulled out a round metal disk with a yellow and green striped ribbon. She pinned it to the girl’s shirt next to the badge all children received for visiting the JCC.

“This decoration is for outstanding knowledge of rules and regulations.” She reached into another pocket and handed the girl a coupon. “And this is to treat your troops to a refreshment later at the Air Warfare Park.”

She handed the girl the spare handlight she kept in her sleeve pocket. “And this is for you, to help keep track of your squad when you’re down in the tunnels. It’s a little dark in places, so—”

Speakers in the walls buzzed and crackled followed by an announcement.

“ATTENTION. ATTENTION. PREPARE FOR ORDERS.”

Cadet Maple’s eyes sparkled. Joette patted the girl on the shoulder, encouraging herself as well.

“Be careful.”

In the museum’s current footprint, an ancient fort once stood, and all that remained of it were wide stone steps leading down to a labyrinth of archaic tunnels and bunkers. Most of the subterranean spaces were interconnected, some by road and rail lines, uniquely and efficiently arranged to support post-modern war efforts. The map on the wall at the top of the steps showed

that the tunnels originated at Haneul, an abandoned forward operating base at the edge of the Upper Plateaus. The old underground complex was deteriorating and dangerous, and except for areas kept in safe condition to allow tourists, had been sealed off for decades.

Now assembled around the top of the steps were the Envoy General and her senior officers, Security Chief Wolgye and First Officer Gachon. To their sides, a half-dozen government officials and legislators from the capitol tried hard to look important to the arc of cameras and reporters facing them. Behind the news people, a small crowd of tourists and a few JCC staff gathered this early morning to enjoy the pomp and circumstance.

Joette stood in the back, hoping no one noticed her. She should be standing next to the General. What lie would she tell if asked why she was so far from her mother's shadow?

Gladly, she didn't have to face that question.

An audible awe rose from the crowd as two Regalion Knights, towering and splendid in their shiny armor and flowing blue capes, marched up the ancient steps and posted to the side. The Knights were personal guards of the ROK government's ruling council. Only a few key staff knew a Select was to attend today's event. Select Jongo was also a close friend of the General. Tonight, the three of them were to have dinner together. Joette couldn't imagine anything more awkward. What if her mother already knew about the policeman seeing her with Jamwon? What if she already told Jamwon's uncle?

Joette hung her head. She would lie to protect him. When her mother asked why she didn't return her call last night, she'd lie to protect her, the family name. But it would be the last time. She was finished with Jamwon and his stupid dreams.

The Knights turned and faced each other in unison, stamping their heavy boots and leaning their spears forward until crossed. When the room at last fell quiet, the Knights pulled their spears slowly back as the Select came up the steps—not Select Jongo. A pudgy bald man wearing a very yellow and very ornate suit

appeared. The General introduced him as being Jongo's Deputy Chief Advisor for Cultural Affairs. His fat mustache drooped at the corners of his mouth and covered the top half of his smile.

"Today marks 200 years since the initial signing of the current armistice," he began, "and..." The deputy went on spouting his prepared political speech. Joette listened politely, a little sad for her mother that Jongo had not come.

Jongo's surrogate spoke of how much had changed since that fateful day 200 years ago. The Republic had established embassies and consulates with the SKORs, had developed vibrant trade markets. Corporate liaisons traveled routinely between their borders—though highly regulated. Ongoing academic and scientific exchanges continued to frame a culture of friendly relations. Tourists from both countries visited the JCC and both sides of the Upper Plateaus. The future looked bright for the age-old enemies.

"We and our neighbor to the west have mutually benefited from these many years of peace, and we look forward to even better relations in the next two hundred years," the deputy said with raised voice. He paused and smiled to a smattering of applause.

Many of the tourists waved tiny flags they'd bought in the gift shop. ROKs held high the Republic's colors, the sky-blue fabric sewn with silver thread, the national symbol embossed in the middle, which was a hand, held upright with the third finger pinned under the thumb and the other fingers pointing up. A scattering of SKOR tourists waved their solid red flag with the SKOR King's family emblem of five concentric gold circles.

Joette clapped softly. She shut her eyes and wished to be far away from here. Her father worked at Alaelo at the South Pole. Maybe she could ask him to arrange a temporary position, just for a few months, just a little time to wrap herself around work and forget about Jamwon, about what happened last night. She cupped her hand on her face. How could she have been so stupid?

A young woman emerged from the cluster of people listening

to the speech and approached. She waved her hand in front of her face and said, "The more he talks the more it smells like shit in here."

Joette managed a smile.

This was Lieutenant Lixor, Security Chief Wolgye's top assistant, and one of Joette's few friends. Lixor had a heavyweight wrestler's build and sported a drastically short haircut. Some people found her no-nonsense personality abrasive. But at the JCC, where the art of diplomacy was practiced daily, it was nice and felt genuine when someone wasn't exactly tactful and sensitive.

A man in the back of the crowd turned to frown at them.

Joette motioned for Lixor to step away so they could talk. "Did you know Jongo wasn't coming?"

"Just found out. And doesn't it seem strange that at the last moment this guy switches places with her?" Lixor had a hooked nose, a long chin, and a determined glare much like the predator birds that hunted near the security fences. She squinted, which made her look even more hawkish. "The government's shaken up about something. Did you know the military went to Level I readiness?"

"That's traditional," Joette replied. "The reserves are mobilized every year during negotiations."

"Not every last grunt with a gun they don't."

"Come on. You know nothing is ever as it seems. Uncertainty is what keeps our army on our side of the walls and the SKORs on their side."

Lixor straightened her jacket. "Maybe."

"Um, can I ask you a favor?"

"Is it legal or illegal?"

Joette stiffened. If she asked Lixor to let her know if Security Chief Wolgye ever received a call about her being at Mommellah's with Legate Brigadier Sakura's nephew, more questions would follow. Would she lie to her friend too? Who could she trust?

"Oh my. Look at your face. I'm just kidding," Lixor said.

“It’s nothing. Never mind.”

The Deputy Chief Advisor for Cultural Affairs finished speaking and disappeared down the stairs with the General and the gaggle of officials. Joette straightened her back and adjusted her yangmori.

“I guess I’ll see you at dinner.”

“They’re serving Galley Special,” Lixor said. “So maybe we should go eat at the Primals Markets. Be more private too...in case you change your mind about that favor.”

Joette smiled and patted Lixor’s cheek. Then she turned to walk through the dispersing crowd. The JCC galley cooks used leftovers to concoct dishes that never lived up to the fancy names they gave them. And her secret was too consequential to share.

If her mother discovered the truth, she’d fire Lixor for not reporting her. She’d strip Joette of her titles and send her away. Her mother’s sister’s daughter Rosalyn, first in her class at the capital military academy, would be promoted as her proxy.

Joette’s stomach turned at the thought.

At the bottom of the ancient stairs was a wide roundabout, carved into the bedrock ten centuries ago. Pathways to the tunnels she usually showed tourists split off left and right—but today, during the annual negotiations, only designated staff were allowed here.

Across the solid rock floor, Security Chief Wolgye stood by an iron-bar gate, holding it open and waiting for her to come inside the restricted area. A big fellow with puffy ears and a crooked nose, Wolgye often shared his “gray-haired” wisdom with the younger staff. His was an easy job. The biggest security incident at the JCC might involve a tourist losing their access pass or an occasional drunk at the famous Great Wall Bar and Grill.

“Glad you could make it,” Wolgye said with his usual snark, but oddly without his familiar accompanying grin. His eyes were as red as his face, and he looked as bad as she felt.

“Is Select Jonga still coming today, Chief?”

"I imagine she's in a hole in the ground a lot deeper than this one."

"What?"

She followed Wolgye to a large room behind the gate. The rock-walled space was normally empty, but today there sat a group of specialists from NMHQ, the top tier of the military command, sent to support the armistice re-signing.

A narrow corridor led from the room, the walls and ceiling reinforced by thick wooden beams blackened by age and smoke. The tunnels always felt damp, always seemed too dark no matter how well illuminated. All the General's junior staff took turns escorting tourists around the JCC. Once she was promoted, she wouldn't miss having to go underground anymore.

The tunnel turned, and where tourists were usually lined up to get a look at the next attraction, a platoon of soldiers armed only with handguns stood along the walls. At the end of this tunnel was another normally closed gate.

A soldier scanned the ID chip implanted in Chief Wolgye's wrist and then the one under her skin. Since the armistice was signed 200 years ago, few people ever stepped foot inside this next area, described on tourist brochures as 'Mouth of the Storm.'

Its ancient interior had also been transformed for this special occasion.

On the other side of the gate, in the inner space between the front and back of the ROK Great Wall, digital monitors covered the bare rock. To her left, engineers had set up a portable hologram stage. The government officials who'd come with the Deputy Chief Advisor for Cultural Affairs sat stiffly in two rows of bench seats, their anxious faces pointed to a monitor on the exterior wall. Outside, across a wide grass field loomed the SKOR Great Wall, dew on its gray block stones glistening in the morning sun. It was said, that over the centuries, over ten million soldiers had died fighting in the gap between the walls.

Joette took a seat at an oblong table behind the benches. An Intel Officer from NMHQ looked up from his portable worksta-

tion and handed her a secure handset. The Regalion Knights and the Deputy Chief Advisor for Cultural Affairs—his name was Jokim, she remembered him saying—dominated the area by the hologram stage.

Jokim seemed a little anxious. He didn't have any reason to be. The armistice hadn't been amended for two decades, and then just an administrative clause added to establish the JCC. The only difference in procedures this year was that it was the SKOR's turn to take the initial step.

The whole affair was scripted like the plot of a play: First, a lone soldier will emerge from the SKOR Great Wall, march toward the ROK Great Wall and stop halfway—which cues the General's representative, First Officer Gachon, to walk out to meet the SKOR soldier. Gachon then indirectly suggests that the ROK commander meet for discussions with the SKOR commander. Following procedure, the SKOR soldier will then make a gesture to summon his commander and their aide-de-camp. Gachon should then raise his hand in a likewise manner to signal the General and her escort, Security Chief Wolgye, to proceed outside. Finally, the SKOR commander will propose the armistice continue per the status quo—which basically meant—you ROKs keep your armies on your side of the walls, and we SKORs will keep ours on our side. The General will then say something like 'All right. See you next year.'

They'd be done in time for lunch.

Jokim stepped forward and announced with a ceremonial flourish, "Envoy General Blackstar, by the powers vested in me by the Select, I bestow upon you full authority to negotiate a binding armistice with the SKORs."

The General said nothing, her cool composure unchanged; she'd heard these same familiar words every year since she'd assumed command.

"But," Jokim said with a huff, "if the SKORs ask for anything besides continuing the cease fire as is, you must immediately refer the request to me."

Joette startled, trying to register in her mind what he'd said. The SKORs never asked for anything more, at least not since she'd been alive. The Intel officer sitting across from her shook his head and muttered, "Alaelo."

Alaelo? What could it have to do with this? Her father hadn't mentioned anything unusual the last time they talked.

Jokim's face turned red. "Do you understand, Envoy General Blackstar?"

"I do," replied the General. "But I think it is a bad idea to have an amateur involved in the negotiations."

Jokim frowned at the slight but stepped aside to take a seat at the benches.

The General's voice carried forth clear, calm—and surprising. "Lieutenant Blackstar. Report!"

Suddenly everyone was looking at her. Joette had been concentrating on what Jokim had said, and hearing her name seemed so oddly out of place. Her surroundings seemed to close in. She stood. Her feet moved. And a few steps later, she faced her mother. Habit brought her to attention, and a learned reflex raised her arm to salute.

First Officer Gachon handed over his web belt with the ceremonial knife and a bottle of water. He was relinquishing his position—to her.

Joette felt light, astonished. There was no higher privilege than to just be one of the few people to step foot inside these hallowed grounds.

Gachon took a medallion pinned to his collar, the symbol of the Majduel-ida, the messenger of peace, and placed it on Joette's uniform.

And now, she'd be the one to go out and meet the SKOR soldier.

Security Chief Wolgye moved to stand next to her.

The General sized them up and frowned. "Before we go out to face the enemy, it's customary for the officer in my position to say a few words of encouragement." She let her statement soak in.

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“I give you the same exhortation the honorable Marshall Ahyeon Blackstar gave his lieutenants two hundred years ago.” She paused briefly, and then said, “If you need to go to the bathroom, do it now.”

Everyone, even the soldiers at the table, chuckled. A few civilians sitting at the window laughed softly.

Joette sighed. It was only a joke to ease the tension, a rare moment shared over the decades by a lineage of warriors charged to spearhead the fate of the world. She’d trained all her life for this moment.

“I doubt the Marshall said that as politely as you, General,” she kidded.

Her mother took her aside and lowered her voice.

“No. I am not my forebear, as I’ve never expected you to be me, Joette. You will find your own way. But right now, I want the person I trust most at my side.”

“What’s happened at Alaelo, mother? Is father all right?”

“There’s been an incident. You’ll find out more soon enough. But, for now, just remember. There’s a reason you wear that knife. When the talking stops. . .”

Joette nodded. “Fighting always follows.”

She tightened her belt and walked to face a massive assault door in the ROK Great Wall. Instead of a swarm of soldiers rushing out to battle the enemy, she’d go out alone, a single soldier on a mission of peace.

A surge of pride welled up inside her. She hadn’t just been born to this. It was in her blood.