



THE DEATHS OF TAO

WESLEY CHU

**"THRILLER-STYLE PLOTTING,
A FINE BLEND OF GENTLE
HUMOR AND SHARP SUSPENSE."**

Barnes & Noble Review

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Wesley Chu



To my loving wife and most favorite person in the world, Paula Kim

REPRISAL

The path of a vessel is strewn with the dead. The journey of a Quasing even more so, for it that constant cycle of life and death that will take us home.

Huchel, Genjix Council – Eastern Hemisphere, the Quasing of King Solomon

The lone black car slunk through the dark, unlit streets, a ghostly shadow creeping past the decrepit warehouses and abandoned storefronts along the South Capitol at the outskirts of Washington DC. Sitting in the car, Jill Tan glanced out the tinted windows at the darkened, snow-dusted shapes of the washed-out world. Tonight's meeting with Andrews was another bust. There had been far too many of these dead-end nights of late. And each time a deal didn't pan out it put the Prophus one foot deeper into the grave.

Having to sit down with the first-term senator from Idaho, the leader of the slightly-crazed and lowly regarded Trinity Caucus, was a stark reminder of how precarious the Prophus' position was in the United States. Their influence in American politics was slipping, forcing them to reach out and deal with the fringes of government. When a schmuck like Andrews could dictate terms to her, Jill knew they were in trouble.

You should have pushed harder on the Poseidon Bill.

"No one's vote on a bill is worth a committee chair, Baji. I'm not going to hold Wilks or the Prophus hostage to that half-term hack."

Our orders are to make sure the appropriation passes by any means. We desperately need those resources rerouted to us. What is a two-year chair to us?

"I'm not going to sell the farm. It's bad precedent."

We are still three votes down in the Senate.

"I'll dig them up somewhere," Jill murmured absently as she studied the whip count. She wasn't nearly as confident as she sounded, though she wasn't sure why she bothered feigning confidence with Baji. Her Quasing knew everything she did and then some. Still, maintaining the facade was second nature to her. You didn't survive working as an aide in Congress long showing weakness.

She looked out the window again. Leave it to Andrews to plan a meeting in a place like this. He didn't want to be seen with her, he said. She would taint his reputation. Just who did he think he was? The meeting had lasted three hours. In the end, he had given her the runaround and made outrageous demands that he must have known she could not accept. Dealing with him wasted precious time and effort, neither of which Jill could afford to lose.

She checked her watch: 9.14pm. A mountain of work waited for her back at the office. She'd be lucky to make it to her bed by three. Well, it wasn't like she had much of a private life anyway.

Maybe you should reconsider that date with Doctor Sun. He is an MD, not to mention one of Wilks' big donors.

"Baji, I'm fully aware of what the 'Doctor' title in front of a guy's name means. That man is boring, self-centered, and probably a sociopath. And he has yeti paws. What do you use to

pick men besides an MD anyway?"

That is about it. That and they are not hosts.

"Worst criteria I've ever heard."

Hardly. Look at Roen. A host and not a doctor; where did that get you?

Jill harrumphed and went back to work. Her personal millions-years-old alien was wise and knowledgeable, but her matchmaking philosophy was straight out of the eleventh century. Still, Jill's romance batting average had been pretty dismal of late. The very thought of dating even with someone not repugnant, felt wrong.

"Damn that Roen," she said.

A blinding light suddenly appeared from behind and rammed into the rear of the car. Then another came from the side and punched the front, spinning it around.

Ambush!

"Are you alright?" asked Shunn, her driver and one of the men on her security detail, though he was the one with blood trickling down his forehead. Chevoen, the other bodyguard had already gotten out of the car. Jill could hear the sound of gunfire rattling the side panels.

"Stop checking on me and get out," she snapped, pulling out her Ruger. "Get word to Command. Defensive perimeter. Follow my lead for a retreat." She got out and took cover behind the door. Gunfire filled the air as several shadows appeared out of the darkness. She leaned over the trunk and engaged the dark figures. Two bullet holes appeared in the panel centimeters away from her face.

One flanking you on the roof.

She put her back to the car and scanned the roof just in time to see a dark figure duck behind cover.

"Prophus!" a voice called. "We wish to parlay."

We are surrounded. Two Genjix on the opposite rooftop as well.

"They just jumped us, Baji. Why would they want to talk?"

Only one way to find out. See if you can buy some time. Chevoen must have sent out a distress signal.

"What do you want to talk about?" she yelled.

One of the Genjix appeared and held up a phone. Jill kept him in her sights as he approached. When he was within five meters, he tossed the phone to her. She caught it and brought it up to her ear.

"Hello, Jill," a smug voice said across the line.

She scowled. "Simon."

I hated Biall even before I became Prophus.

"You've repeatedly ignored my calls to your office, so I took more drastic measures. How was your meeting with Andrews? Fruitless? Of course it was. We got to him two months ago. You Prophus are a little behind the curve these days."

Jill bit her lip. "Well, good for you. We both know Andrews is a one-term senator. I hope you didn't pay too much for him. Is there anything else, or are you just here to gloat?"

Two more to the right. Total of eight in range of vision. Take out the one on the rear roof first.

“What’s our escape path, Baji?”

Side street to your rear.

Simon continued rambling, as if he wasn’t aware that she was in the middle of a standoff with a dozen guns pointed at her. “Gloating is human. The Holy Ones demand better of their vessels. In fact, we want to work with you. A little bipartisanship if you will.”

Jill didn’t buy it. The last time Simon offered bipartisanship in Congress, the Genjix reneged and caused the financial meltdown of the real estate market. Of course, their people had bet on the collapse and made billions from the betrayal. Scratch that. The Prophus weren’t betrayed; they were outmaneuvered.

“Actually, Hogan would like to deal with your boss,” Simon said. “Can the misguided senator from the land of Lincoln spare two hours for the noble senator from West Virginia?”

Jill exhaled in exasperation. “All this because you want a meeting?”

“Next time, take my calls. I’m not to be trifled with.”

“Let me guess. The South Korea Destroyer contract? The East Seas Minerals Sanction? Or the Japanese IEC Standards Tariff? Which one?”

“Among others. Call it a grand package.”

“What are you offering?”

“I’ll send your assistant my terms tonight. You will present it to Wilks in the best possible light, and then we will both be praised for working across the aisle. Is that clear?”

“Why would I want to help you?” Jill said.

“Because if you say no, my men will kill all of you.”

“Then I guess I don’t have much of a choice. I’ll need time to look your offer over, though.”

“You’re not in much of a position to talk terms, but take some time to think it over,” he said. “I want your confirmation by next week. By the way, Baji, Biall still owes you one for the Revolutionary War. Here’s a partial payment.” Then he hung up.

“What happened during the war?”

Biall’s vessel at the time was the nephew of Lord Sandwich, First Admiral of the British fleet. He was promoted to captain and sent to the States. My host, John Paul Jones, captured his frigate. Then they gave him a sloop. I sank that. Then they put him on a desk job at the port of Yorktown. When I raided the port, I kidnapped him. Lord Sandwich had to pay ransom three times for the lout. He has held a grudge ever since.

“I would hold a grudge too if I were him.”

Jill tossed the phone back to the Genjix agent. “You got your meeting. Now back to your masters, dog.”

The Genjix agent looked at her and smirked. “We have orders to let you live unless you cause trouble. The others don’t. Kill them!” he barked.

“No!”

The exchange the next minute was deafening as all sides opened fire. Her two Prophus guards, however, were outgunned and out of position. The Genjix made short work of them and before long, she was the only one left alive. Jill huddled behind the car door and reloaded too angry to mourn the men who just died protecting her.

“Your people are dead, betrayer,” the Genjix agent shouted. “Drop your gun and come out

You are free to go. Otherwise, your life is forfeit.”

Drop your gun. There is no other way to survive this.

“Baji, shut up. They killed Shunn and Chevoen because they could. Show me their positions. Now!”

Images flashed in her mind of the Genjix kneeling on top of the roof behind her, the two to her right leaning against the van that had rammed them, and then the commander of the ambush who was speaking with her. Jill stood up and unloaded her clip at the three grouping successfully taking out two more thugs. She didn't stick around to count her kills, though, booking it toward the side street.

“Take her down!” someone yelled.

Bullets kicked up dust all around her as she sprinted down the narrow sidewalk and turned into an alley. Something about running here reminded her of Roen, that bastard. A lot of things reminded her of him these days.

A moving shadow on the roofline of one of the buildings caught her attention. She flattened against the wall and scanned for movement. Then she heard the tramp of footsteps to her right; ten or so Genjix by the sound of them. Jill crouched, taking cover behind a dumpster, and peered over the top. Nearly a dozen men and a white unmarked van bore down the alley toward her.

Looks like a Penetra van.

“Well, there goes hiding as an option.”

The advent of the mobile Penetra scanners had changed the course of the war in the past three years. When the Genjix had first completed the Phase I Penetra Program and invented a scanner that could detect Quasing within a host, it had little effect on the war, because the machines were the size of houses. However, over the past few years, the Genjix had successfully miniaturized the scanners. Now Penetra vans were everywhere and the Prophus were finding it harder and harder to avoid detection.

There are too many.

“I've had worse.”

It was just brave talk though. They both knew that. As much as Jill had trained over the years, she was never going to be Sonya. Baji's previous host had trained Roen to be an agent, and had been one of the Baji's favorites. She was captured by the Genjix while trying to rescue Jill and Roen during the Decennial and had died at the Capulet's Ski Lodge in Italy. Baji had never forgiven Roen for Sonya's death and, in a way, had not forgiven Jill either.

Jill leaned over the side of the dumpster and took three shots. One of them found its mark while the other two bounced harmlessly off the van. She ducked just as a hail of bullets banged the dumpster like a drum.

Two on the near side are creeping forward against the wall.

A quick image flashed in her head of two men crouching, edging closer toward her, using the dumpster to stay out of her field of vision. Jill exhaled again and aimed at the position in her mind, taking a Genjix agent square in the face. Another barrage of gunfire exploded around her, and she distinctly heard someone call out for a suppression rotation.

“I wish I had a grenade.”

Might as well wish for a rocket launcher while we are at it.

Jill bit her lip, her mind racing to find a way out of this trap. Maybe she had something almost as good as a grenade. The Genjix agents were getting close. She dug in her purse and pulled out a small can of pepper spray. She hefted it in her hand and leaned toward the side.

You are not that good a shot.

“Positive thoughts, please.”

Baji was right though; Jill was at best an average marksman. They were going to overrun her position at any moment. And it wasn't like she could hide with that Penetra van close by. She leaned over the side and rolled the can toward them. Then she took aim and pulled the trigger in rapid succession. She missed her first three shots. Flashing lights from the barrel of pistols exploded around her.

Pull back!

Jill ignored Baji and continued to focus on the can. She expended another burst, her fifth shot finally finding its mark. The can of pepper spray exploded and a cloud of capsicum burst into the air. Immediately, the Genjix in that area began to cough. She pulled back, but not before a bullet grazed her cheek. Jill clenched her teeth and stifled a cry. That was too close.

The Genjix were distracted right now. Jill had to move before the cloud dissipated. She sprinted out from cover down toward the end of the alley, firing blindly behind her. She suddenly felt a searing pain as one of their bullets grazed her thigh. The impact knocked her off balance and she fell to the ground. Her pistol skidded across the ground.

Jill cursed and reached for it, clawing and dragging her way across the alley. All she could think about were Cameron and Baji. She had failed them both. One of the Genjix agents appeared and kicked the pistol away. Then she felt the air whoosh out of her lungs as another stomped down on her chest.

“Give it up, Prophus,” a voice said. The van lights closed in; she was surrounded. At this point, she had only one choice: get them to kill her to save Baji. She lashed out with her good leg and swept one of the agents. She grabbed for the foot of another. A blow to her head left her woozy. She closed her eyes and waited for the next, which would either end her life or knock her unconscious.

Soft pattering sounds began to rain down around her and all the Genjix agents suddenly fell over. The van screeched and then veered into the wall. The driver got out, falling to the ground as he clutched his shoulder. More pattering sounds came and he stopped moving.

Jill sat up and looked at the dozen still bodies; it looked like a war zone. With a grimace, she stood up and tested her injured leg. The bullet hadn't hit bone. She took a handkerchief out of her purse and tied off the wound. She then limped to the end of the alley toward the main street. Her phone rang.

Jill dug it out of the purse and answered. “Hello?”

A gruff voice came across the line. “You tell Command to send better security next time or I will jam chopsticks through their eyes!” Then he hung up.

“Asshole,” she muttered, scanning the rooftops.

An asshole that saved your life.

“Least he could do was offer me a ride.”

Jill left the area as quickly as her limp would allow. The Genjix would send a cleaning team

soon. It would be wise to be as far away from here as possible. Fifteen minutes later, she made it to a major intersection and saw a local bar on the corner. She was about to continue on when she stopped, a small smile appearing on her face.

“Oh hell, I deserve it,” she muttered and walked inside.

You are bleeding. Now is not the time for a drink.

“Now is the best time for a drink.”

She walked up to the counter and ordered a margarita.

You are not being wise.

“This *is* me being wise. I almost ordered a shot of tequila instead.”

Baji knew better than to press the issue. The bartenders gave the dried blood on her cheek a curious glance but otherwise left her alone. What little wisdom she had must have fled after the second margarita. She moved on up to tequila shots, downing two in rapid succession. That helped dull the pain. All she could think about was the close call; how she almost lost Baji and almost never saw Cameron again. And then she thought of Roen. She clenched her fist, downed the last shot of tequila, and slammed the glass down on the table. With newfound purpose, she hurried out of the bar and hailed a cab.

The sooner we get back to safety the better.

“I’m not going to a safe house.”

Where are you going then?

“I’m going to go find my husband.”

BUCK'S

The crash. A calamity. With over six million Quasing on board, the ship had accidentally passed through an asteroid field and was crippled. It fought to stay intact longer than was thought possible. Courageously, the ship limped through space, dying and desperate to find a place to land. That was when we entered your galaxy.

The Grand Council identified a planet in this solar system that contained atmospheres the Quasing could survive in, though the planet offered them in billions of tiny moving pockets. It was then we realized these pockets of atmosphere were the indigenous life forms on the planet. We had little choice and set a course for the planet we now call Earth.

Tao

The biggest mistake of the twentieth century. Go.

"I'm going to have to say that art school rejecting Hitler's application, leading him toward that career choice of becoming a mass murderer. That or New Coke. You?"

The Japanese sneak attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 or the 1948 presidential election when the Democrats failed to elect Henry Wallace as Vice President.

"Never got over it, huh? Over half a century later and you're still bitter."

Wallace was Roosevelt's spiritual successor. The world could have been so much different.

"You're just mad because he was the closest you ever got to being president."

I spent two decades maneuvering him for the presidency!

Roan Tan pulled into the gravel lot in his Chevy Impala and studied the cars parked there: Jimmy's; Amy's; Chipmunk Voice Weird Guy's; the owner, Dan's; and the Raisin's. He checked the mirror for any blood on his face. Some of the fighting on the roof had gotten very up close and personal.

He noted his sunken cheeks and the four-day fuzz on his chin. His black hair, cropped in a crooked faux hawk, was tangled and uneven. Satisfied, he parked the car, reached into the back seat for his cowboy hat, and stuffed his pistol into his jeans.

He got out and circled around to the front. One thing about rural roadside bars off the highway in the middle of the Appalachians, the patrons were usually the same folks coming in and out, and there wasn't a bouncer patting you down. That last part was especially important. Roan felt his knife sheath slide down his ankle. He'd have to poke a tighter hole soon. His new weight loss regime of eating only once a day must have reached his calves.

He swung the door open and tipped his hat to Amy, the bartender. She was the hottest young thing within a hundred kilometers, which, truth be told, was probably a sample size of about a thousand and most of them men. He also suspected she was pushing forty.

"Charlie," she nodded. "A late night? We're closing in a bit."

"Just a drink or three, ma'am," he replied. "I'll be out of your hair soon enough."

"No worries, cowboy," she smirked.

You know she does not believe you for a second...

"I'm practicing for a time when I have to really pull it off."

When that time comes, let us hope your life is not depending on it.

Roan wasn't that oblivious. He knew she didn't call him cowboy because she actually thought he was one. He tried his best to emulate the southern mountain dialect of the people here, but he sounded silly. Still, it amused the locals, and over the past year, they had grown to tolerate his presence. It was one thing to be a stranger, but it was another entirely to be one who tried to fit in. It's those who didn't try who tended to piss them off. Still, he was a novelty here even after a year and they often took turns playing guessing games trying to figure out what crime he was hiding from. The consensus was he was running from tax fraud.

You really should just drop it.

"When in Rome, Tao, when in Rome."

I lived in Rome for centuries. The last thing the Romans wanted was for the non-Romans emulate them.

There was an old sound system playing Buck Owens on cassette. Roan knew it was Buck Owens because the bar rotated the same four tapes every night, and he was berated extensively the first time he asked about this giant of American music. He actually thought Buck sounded a little flat but that could just be the tape after a million playbacks.

Door in the back ajar. Garbage can blocking exit. Shotgun behind the bar. Two men at the far booth. Looks like Howie and his inseparable friend again.

Chipmunk Voice was at the far end of the bar, where he usually sat with his eyes glued to the television, a rickety old tube set that still had dials. Roan half expected to find the television broken every time he came in, and marveled at that wonderful piece of American ingenuity. They really didn't build them like that anymore.

Raisin was sitting by himself at the booth closest to the door. He waved at Roan and beckoned him over. Roan averted his eyes and pretended not to notice the ancient man who smelled like he had been buried and recently dug up. Instead, he took a seat in the middle of the bar where he could keep an eye on both the entrance and the exit.

"What'll it be, handsome?" Amy said in her sandpaper voice. She called everyone handsome, but Roan secretly harbored the suspicion that she really meant it with him. "The same?"

He nodded. "Wait," he patted his pockets; it felt light. He had brought one of his fake identifications with him tonight and had forgotten to transfer his money. "Cutty," he said dejectedly. "Neat. No, better make this one on the rocks."

Cutty gives you headaches.

"So does not eating."

No, that just makes you grumpy.

Amy brought over two glasses of brown liquid and slid one toward him. "Got your usual Glen. I'll just put it on your tab, and this one too." She winked. She thought she was doing him a kindness, but frankly, Roan would rather just get the Cutty than buy her a drink.

He suppressed his sigh and raised the glass. "To the finest lady this side of the mountain." They clinked and emptied their glasses.

She brought the bottle out from the shelf and poured them both another drink. This was about to get expensive on his dime. "So what kept you so late from visiting me tonight, Charlie?" she asked, twirling the bottle in her hand.

“Shooting a dozen guys trying to kill Jill” seemed like the wrong thing to say.

Roen lifted the glass to her eye level and tipped his hat. “Had to check chemical levels at the plant.” The local industry in this region was chemical processing and it was common to carry odd hours. Usually, no one batted an eye at his alibis.

Amy leaned in close, her finger running along the rim of the glass. “So what else you got planned tonight, muscles? This ol’ bottle and I are all by our lonesome.”

Roen hesitated. On the one hand, she revolted him with her ashen face, yellow-stained teeth, and inane prattle. On the other hand, she did come with a free bottle...

The door opened with a loud creak. “He’s already got plans,” a strong, clear voice butted in, the sound traveling all the way through the entire bar. Roen didn’t need to turn to know who it was. Instead, he took the bottle out of Amy’s hand, poured himself a double, and threw it down.

Amy looked over lazily at the new voice and turned her back to it, pretending to be wiping the counter. “Sorry, honey, we’re closed.”

“I’m not here for a drink,” Jill said as she took a seat next to him.

“Get her one anyway. Tequila for the raging tempest,” Roen said.

“I’m here to talk to this son of a bitch.” She swung a closed fist with a thumb extended out toward him.

“Want me to get rid of her, handsome?” Amy asked. “Who is she anyway?”

“She’s just some—” Roen said.

“—wife,” Jill growled.

And all the good will Roen had worked so hard to build here went up in a puff of smoke. Amy shot him a look that could kill a buffalo. “No good bastard swamp snake,” she hissed and poured Jill the shot of tequila. “Here you go, honey, this one’s on his tab.”

Jill smiled sweetly at Amy, and the two shared a drink on Roen’s dime. The next hour went by awkwardly, the ladies lambasting him as if he weren’t there. When he shook his glass for another drink, Amy just shrugged and answered, “Pay your tab first, deadbeat,” and proceeded to pour Jill another shot.

My advice is to run. I see no path to victory here.

“Thanks, Genghis. At this rate, I might have to start washing dishes if I’m going to cover this tab.”

Amy even walked Jill out of the bar when she closed shop, going as far as hugging her and telling her to “take care of yourself, sweetheart, and watch out for the snakes that slither back into your life, you pretty little thing.”

And then Jill and Roen were standing alone on the deserted gravel lot of Buck’s Bar. They walked toward her car in silence. “She’s sweet,” Jill smirked. “Now I understand why you left me.”

“I left you?” Roen’s voice shot up two octaves.

Steady. Do the countdown.

If Jill had been anyone else in the world, his fist of fury would be dropping bombs right now. Instead, he closed his eyes and counted down from fourteen, enunciating each syllable one by one. He used to count down from ten, but as the years went on and the situation

worsened, a higher number became necessary. When he had calmed down, he opened his eyes slowly and studied her face. There were dark rings around her eyes and her usually straight brown hair was mussed up. Roen reached toward her and touched the cut on her cheek. "We need to get something on that, or it'll scar. How are you?"

She knocked his hand away. "I think what you meant to ask was how is our son?"

"I'm not asking in the order of importance," he ground his teeth. "How are you?"

"Alive," she shrugged, "for now."

"How is Cameron? Does he miss his father?"

"He doesn't know his father!" Jill snapped.

"I'm not the one who forbade visits," he snapped back. "Might I—"

Stop.

"Tao, butt out."

Stop. Now. You dummies are quarreling in a parking lot at two in the morning off the side of a highway. You can go ahead and be stupid with each other, but at least have your shared idiocy some place safe where I am not endangered.

Roen sighed. "Come on, Jill, it's late. We've both been drinking. Let's talk at my place."

She narrowed her eyes and her mouth curved upward. For a second, the old mischievous Jill he remembered was back. "Inviting me over? That's a bold move. Daddy's been asking where in Africa you Fedexed yourself to. Now I get to save him from needing vaccination shots."

"How are Louis and Lee Ann?" Roen asked. No doubt both her parents wanted to string him up and use him as a piñata. It was really too bad. Roen had spent an inordinate amount of effort to get on Louis' good side. At first, Louis didn't think he was good enough for Jill, but he softened when he saw the engagement ring. Then he hardened up two minutes later when he found out it was going to be a shotgun wedding. He didn't soften again until Cameron was born.

"Busy taking care of your son," Jill replied, deflating. "I just couldn't do it. Couldn't take care of my own son with all that's going on. I'm a terrible mother."

Roen saw a tear sneak out of the corner of her eye and roll down her face. He reached over to embrace her. She socked him in the shoulder. Roen bit his lip and held his hands up in surrender. At least she still hadn't learned how to throw a punch yet, else this conversation might become painful.

He was a bit uneasy about Jill's parents taking care of Cameron, though. He knew that regardless of what happened between them, Jill would never badmouth him, but who knew what poison her parents, Louis especially, were whispering into his son's ears. "How did you know I'd be at Buck's anyway?" he asked

"Because you're always here after one of your watch-over-Jill escapades," she shrugged. "Don't think the Prophus haven't kept an eye on you. You're not as off the grid as you think you are."

She has a point. You have been maddeningly predictable lately.

"On the subject of which, by the way," she added, "who's your mole in Command?"

Roen shrugged, feigning innocence.

“Who’s our leak?” she repeated, emphasizing each word. “Come on, your having access to mission tactics and playing shadow on some of my assignments means some jackass with misplaced loyalties is feeding you intel. Who’s the dunce?”

“Not some of your assignments,” he grumbled. “All of them. I’ve watched your back on all twelve of those crap missions Command has sent you on over the past year.”

“Fourteen,” she corrected.

Roan shook his head. “Costa Rica doesn’t count. You didn’t even bring your gun. And I arranged for you to be watched in Paris. And a mole won’t be much of one if you knew, would it?”

“I don’t need your help.”

“Sure you don’t,” he said gruffly. “You had tonight completely under control. Come on, my place isn’t far. Follow in your car. We can finish this conversation at a secure location.”

Jill looked like she was about to protest but then thought better of it. Baji must have seen the wisdom of his proposal. It must have killed her to agree with him. A small victory. Baji barely ever conceded anything to him, and she was like this before Sonya died. It must be ten times worse now.

They got into their cars and drove another six kilometers west deeper into the Appalachians, two lonely sets of headlights weaving through the darkened hills. Eventually, he pulled off the highway and traveled down a sloping gravel road to a dried up ravine. He parked under a small ledge that hid the car from the sky and got out. Moments later, Jill pulled up next to him.

“Either you live in a tent, or you lured me here to murder me,” she mused, looking around.

“After you, my lady,” Roan smirked as he gestured magnanimously at a crooked myrtle tree growing out of the slope.

Jill rolled her eyes and peered underneath the tree. She whistled when she discovered a concrete tunnel burrowed into the ravine covered by a rusty gate. “When you said you were going underground, you really meant it,” she said, impressed. “Gone to live with your kind?”

“Are you calling our son half-rat?” he teased.

“My looks, my brains, thank God,” she answered.

They passed through the gate and walked down the dark tunnel. Roan flicked a switch, and a series of dull yellow makeshift lights buzzed on one by one, illuminating a tunnel that continued on for a good fifty meters. They walked in silence for a ways, their footsteps making a series of dull thunks that echoed all around them.

“How did you find this place?” she finally asked.

Roan kicked a rock and watched it bounce around the circular tunnel. “When I left the Prophus, I needed a new supplier. A lead pointed me to Old Alex, a recluse selling illegal munitions. He was a doomsday prepper who bought this old nuclear missile silo back in the Eighties and turned it into one of those underground castles. What we’re passing through right now is the exhaust of Launch Pad 2.

“The old man hated the government and thought the world was involved in one big conspiracy. Went on for hours about them coming to take his guns and his Bibles and his moonshine. Finally got busted trying to buy a Soviet tank. Died of lung cancer in prison. Guy never believed in hospitals. Thought they’d harvest his organs or something. Who’d want his

dirty kidneys I'll never know. He had no family and all his friends had four legs. When I found out he died, I moved in. Now I have a lifetime supply of munitions to play around with."

They reached the end of the tunnel where a large rust-stained door and a high-tech electronic keypad not unlike the ones on their safe houses barred their way. Roen muttered a phrase in front of a microphone and put his eye in front of the scanner. The door beeped and hissed open, and they entered what could only be described as his living room.

It was a massive silo that spanned upward so far a person couldn't see the ceiling. The room was filled with mismatched furniture; some looked like Roen had found it at a garage sale while others looked like pristine antiques. There was a couch that Jill swore was an authentic French colonial antique, and then a tacky coffee table made from carriage wheels. Three shelves of books lined one side of the circular room. There was also an air hockey table and a lifting bench on the far end. On the near side was a set of six LCD televisions stacked on top of each other.

"Living out your Bruce Wayne dreams, I see," she remarked. "It's actually quite impressive. I spent the past two years imagining you were living it up on some beach in Panama surfing all day and hitting on the locals at night."

"That was the first six months," he grinned. He gestured at the barren kitchen. "Mi casa es su casa."

"Anything respectable to drink or did you go native with the moonshine?" she asked.

He took out a half bottle of bourbon and two glasses "Little low on ice," he apologized as he poured her a glass and mixed it with water. "You're staying for the night?"

Jill shook her head. "I need to be back on the Hill in..." she checked her watch, "seven hours."

Roan took the glass away from her. "It's a three-hour drive. Stay or you get water. Tao would probably like to have a few words with Baji."

"I'm not sure Baji feels the same way. Give me the drink. I'm a big girl."

Roan hesitated before handing the glass back to her. They had more pressing issues to fight about than her drinking habits. He sat down on the couch opposite her and leaned forward. "So how is our Cameron?"

"Sprouting like a weed. Throwing kicks and punches better at three than his daddy at thirty." Jill offered the first sincere smile he'd seen all night. For a few minutes, they forgot about their past and fell into the world of their son. Roan was briefly overcome by guilt and pain as she detailed Cameron's first time on a bike with training wheels. For a few moments, their problems over the past two years were put on hold and they were a family again, sharing proud pictures of their son.

An hour later, she was still regaling him with the latest adventures of three year-old Cameron. It had gotten late and both of them were exhausted, barely able to keep their eyes open. They huddled close together. Roan could smell the faint aroma of smoke, blood, and alcohol over her. It made him even more protective as he held her gently.

"You did this on purpose," she murmured sleepily. "I need to get back to Washington."

Roan mumbled something incomprehensible as he wrapped his arm over her shoulder and closed his eyes. And for that brief moment, they were a couple again.

BAJI AND TAO

The ship burned up entering Earth's atmosphere, breaking into several pieces that rained death across the face of the planet. It had been bred to harden its membrane when exposed to the high heat of atmospheric entry. It was the only thing that saved us from complete annihilation.

The bulk of our people were vaporized with the main portion of the ship when it crashed into the ocean. Several hundred thousand of us survived in the fragments that were scattered across the Earth. I was in a section of the ship that crashed into the depths of what is now known as Africa.

Tao

"Hello, Baji."

Jill's eyes fluttered open and focused on Roen looking down at her. She pulled away from him and moved to the other end of the couch, a twisted look of anger on her face. "What do you want, Tao?"

Tao, through Roen, leaned forward. "Right now, I want to talk to my old friend. How are you?"

Baji shook her head in disbelief. "You have some nerve to ask that. Things are terrible. In fact, in the history of our six hundred year war, including that fifty years I spent in the Tower of London, this is the worst it has ever been. Maybe if you had not run out on us, you would know."

"Come now, the Tower of London was nice as prisons go," Tao said mildly. "Besides, you know me better than that. When have I ever run from this war?"

"Then where were you when Capulet's Ski Lodge fell? Where were you when Dubai and Ankara were invaded? Were you with us defending Central Command when they came to Denver? Right when the Genjix brought the hammer down, you disappeared."

"Our bases in those cities were casualties the moment the Genjix infiltrated the old network. My presence there would not have made a difference."

Baji stabbed a finger into Tao's chest, pushing him back. "Six Prophas and a squad of thirty held off four hundred Genjix in Boulder for five days. Reinforcements were three hours too late. Do not dare tell me the great Tao could not have made a difference."

She leaned back and buried her face into her hands. Tao could tell Baji was exhausted.

"We have lost two hundred to the Eternal Sea this year alone. Newly acquired intel uncovered a prison in Tibet holding approximately two thousand agents and hosts. What could be so important for you to run out on us?"

"The Genjix are playing a different game now, and it has nothing to do with controlling humanity." Tao grimaced. "We were not doing a good job of winning the old way regardless." He stood up and walked away, then rounded on her, suddenly furious. "I warned them after the fall of Toronto. I told those fools to initiate the guerrilla protocol and go underground!"

Baji stood up and glared. "And when the Keeper did not listen and ordered you to focus on

other objectives, you left in a huff. And with you, Jill's husband and Cameron's father." She threw her hands in the air. "Did you imbeciles stop to think about the consequences? They were a family. Did you two selfish bastards ever consider what you put her through?"

"Do not put this on Roen. She threw him out of the house!"

"That is because he disappeared for months at a time on off-book missions. On your orders, I might add!" she snapped. "He was not there when she was struggling to raise his newborn."

Tao lowered his eyes and whispered. "Roen struggles with this more than you can imagine but it was important. He understood."

"You felt it was important! And make no mistake, it was your plan. That imbecile obeys you like a trained dog, so it could not have conceivably been his idea."

"It had to be done," he said more emphatically. "The information I received out of South Korea was too important to ignore. The Keeper chose not to put resources into it. I did what had to be done. Command has been dropping the ball more and more these days."

"By hiding in an abandoned missile silo in the middle of the mountains?" She raised her voice. "By stalking our communication channels and popping up whenever it suits you?" Baji shook her head and turned away. "I have known you since the Inquisitions. You have never been predictable. In a way, that made you the most human of us all. And Sonya paid the price."

"It always goes back to Sonya, does it not?" Tao snapped. "People die in war. Edward died. Do you think I did not mourn him?"

She stalked back toward him. "Yes, it always goes back to Sonya. Edward died on a mission in the line of duty. He accepted the risks. You had twenty years with him. Sonya was just coming into her own. She was going to be one of my greatest hosts, and Roen robbed me of her potential. She left Metropal to save him. He was the reason she was captured. She died for your idiot host because he had a brain freeze and went after his stupid girlfriend."

Tao frowned. "The stupid girlfriend that is your current host? With the way you treat humans, maybe you should fight for the Genjix."

Baji's left hook just missed Roen's nose. Fortunately, with the sluggish control the Quasing had with their hosts, Tao blocked it, if barely.

Baji moved her face very close to his, rage flashing in her eyes. "How dare you!"

Tao had sharp words at the tip of his tongue but he stopped himself from going further. "I apologize, Baji. Sonya meant a lot to Roen as well. His guilt still consumes him."

"As it should." Baji walked away and sat back down on the couch. She looked up at the tall rounded walls that used to house a nuclear missile and then at the picture frames that lined the wall. There was one of Jill, four of Jill and Roen, and nearly a dozen of Cameron and Jill. At the far end, opposite the entrance, hung a map of Earth. Several dozen push pins of assorted colors dotted the landscape. There was another smaller map of the eastern seaboard. It too had several pins stuck into it.

Baji hesitated and grimaced. "I like what you have done with the place," she said finally. "At least he is not as much of a slob anymore."

Roan shrugged. "He even washes the dishes every night."

"That is because she is not around to clean up."

Baji finished appraising the room and took a seat on the couch. “So did you find what you were looking for? Is this information worth not being in the fight?”

Tao put his hands together, mimicking how Roen posed when he was deep in thought. In truth, Tao could have Roen stand on his head and still think just as clearly, but he enjoyed acting human when he was in control. “Remember the theory I had two years ago? The one everyone mocked?”

Baji smirked. “Which one? Past couple of years, you’ve become a grocery stand tabloid.”

“The one with—”

Jill’s phone beeped and then nearly a dozen messages appeared. She frowned and looked up at the metal walls. “How is reception here?”

Tao shrugged. “There is a signal repeater set up for his phone’s frequency. Everything else is a crap shoot.”

She went over the texts and gasped. “I need to get back!” She stood up and shook her head violently. Jill’s eyes glazed over for a moment before they refocused; she looked confused. Her expression slowly changed to one of concern.

“Oh, my God,” she gasped, scrambling for her jacket.

Tao grabbed her elbow. “What is going on?”

She bent down and put on her heels. “The Genjix just crippled the *Atlantis* off the coast of southeast China. There are a hundred Prophus on board and two hundred support personnel. It’s our last flagship.”

“What was it doing there?” he demanded. “The South China Sea has been under Genjix control for the past five years.”

Jill shook her head. “I’m not sure. Only thing I know was they had to rendezvous with a team embedded on the mainland.” She hurried toward the exit, stopped, walked back to Roen and gave him a quick kiss on the mouth. “That’s for saving my life.” She broke off and ran out the door.

Tao ran to the exit and called after her as she was leaving. “What is Command going to do?”

She turned back. “They’re mounting a rescue mission.” She paused. “Roen, Dylan was on board the *Atlantis*.”

Tao clenched his fists and hollered after her. “Wait. I’m coming with you.”

He closed his eyes and punched himself in the face.

TRANSITION

There is much debate among the Quasing about which Earth creature was the worthwhile vessel. Many consider it humans for their advanced cognitive thought. I believe that weakness as free will is a redundant ability in vessels.

Truth is, the Tyrannosaurus rex and their theropod cousins were the greatest land reptiles to ever walk the earth, and they were also the greatest vessel for one sole reason: there was no other creature on this planet blessed with such a harmonious combination of ferocity and feeblemindedness.

Our true Golden Age on Earth was during those millions of years when we ruled through the giant lizards that walked the planet. They did not aid in getting us home, but for that period of time, we were all kings.

Zoras

Devin Watson was having a bad day. An hour ago he was meeting with Prime Minister Wen and Admiral Wu in Beijing for a private lunch, discussing the placement of the South Sea Fleet and the recent military action off the coast of Taiwan. Then he suffered a heart attack and was now lying in a very uncomfortable bed surrounded by a team of doctors at the 30th Military Hospital. The prognosis was not good; he was dying.

“We can circumvent the transplant list and get you a heart immediately,” one of the doctors was saying. “One can be delivered within two hours. We will need to prepare you for surgery right away. You will not last the night without the procedure.”

Devin grabbed the doctor by the sleeve and pulled him close. “How long before I can get out of this bloody room?” he said in between labored breaths. “My work is too important to leave unattended. What are my odds of a full recovery?”

The delay is unacceptable.

The doctor hesitated. “Sir, this is your third heart attack in five years. At your age, it will be several months before you can leave the hospital. You may never fully recover.”

“I am sorry for my state, Zoras.”

You have been a devout vessel, Devin. However, your frail body betrays us. Your time is at an end. Call the Adonis Vessel.

“We are nearing a critical stage. A transition would surely put the plan at risk.”

I have spoken. Initiate the transfer protocol.

“As you wish, my Guardian.”

That could only mean one thing. Devin looked down at his broken body and grimaced. He had hoped to hold up a few more years. The ProGenesis project was his conception after all. It would have been glorious to see it through.

Devin waved the doctors aside and beckoned his aide Amanda. “Get me a glass of Pappy bourbon, neat, and a Habanos Cuban cigar.” The team of physicians protested, telling him it wasn’t advisable in his current state. One even had the audacity to remind him that this was hospital and that smoking wasn’t allowed. Devin zeroed in on the fool and spoke in clear

Mandarin. "If I had a gun right now, I'd shoot you. Now, all of you, get out!"

The two guards standing in the room drew their pistols. The doctors fled, stumbling over each other in their haste to get out of the room. When he was finally alone with Amanda and the guards, he began to issue orders in rapid succession. "Have all departments prepare a full status report. Call Palos and have his team prepared for vessel transfer. Recall Enzo from the Hatchery and send him to Qingdao. We leave after I finish my drink."

Amanda bowed and left the room. A few minutes later, she returned carrying a silver plate with a cigar, a glass of golden brown liquid, a pill, and a Shilin knife. Palos, head of Devin's security detail, was with her. Devin stared thoughtfully at the silver plate as she placed it on his lap. These were his last rites and he was wearing a gown. It wasn't how he thought his life would end. But then, Devin never thought he'd die a natural death. Well, as natural as someone in his position was ever going to have.

He motioned them all to be quiet as he caressed the cigar, first sniffing it, then cutting the ends, and lighting it. He took a generous puff and exhaled with pleasure. It had been two years since he had last smoked one. The bourbon burned his mouth, and he relished the sweet flavor of honey and spice. After twenty minutes of bliss, when the glass was empty and the cigar nothing more than a stub, he nodded to Amanda.

"Let's begin," he said.

She bowed. "May I have the honor, Father?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Enzo will need you." He turned to Palos. "I need a volunteer. Not your old friend. You will be needed as well." Palos nodded and left the room.

Moments later, Saldhana, the oldest man on his guard detail, walked in. He prostrated next to Devin's bed, his forehead almost touching the ground. "Father, I have the honor."

Devin put a hand on Saldhana's shoulder. "You are worthy, my son." Devin closed his eyes and took a deep breath, saying a prayer to the Holy Ones. When he was ready, he gave final instructions to deliver his body to his wife and ordered those around him to provide Enzo the support he needed to deliver the Genjix's will. Then he picked up the Shilin knife.

The transfer ceremony will not be necessary. Make it quick and painless.

Devin hesitated. "As you wish, Zoras."

Then he looked around the room. "Praise to the Holy Ones," were the last words out of his mouth. Then he picked up the cyanide pill and swallowed it. Moments later, Devin Watson, senator of the state of Alabama, father of four, grandfather of nine, High Father of North America, and a member of the Genjix Council, was dead.

"Praise to the Holy Ones," the voices in the room echoed.

Immediately, Zoras moved out of Devin's body and floated into the air. The agents in the room prostrated themselves and waited. He moved in circles, flitting back and forth before settling into the transfer vessel. Saldhana uttered a shocked cry of pain and he spasmed on the ground for several minutes. He finally recovered and nodded to Palos. The security team formed around Saldhana and they all left the room in unison.

Amanda broke off from the group to instruct the hospital staff on returning Devin's body to his family. Minutes later, they were in a caravan of limousines heading toward the airport. Within an hour, they were up in the air heading toward Qingdao.

Enzo sat at the edge of the infinity pool at the edge of the high cliff overlooking the lush canopy of Santa Rosa National Park. He was a near-perfect specimen for a human. His build was taut and muscular but not bulky, and he walked with the grace of a dancer. Chosen for his genes and natural physical attributes since birth, he was a handsome man: tall, with high cheekbones, chiseled features, and a completely symmetrical face. Symmetry, of course, was the scientific formula of beauty. And in Enzo's case, it was common knowledge at the Hatchery that he was even more beautiful than most. Not only that, he could run a marathon in three hours, shoot an eight centimeter target with a handgun at fifty meters, and run any of the countries in South America better than their current leaders. Like all his brothers raised at the Hatchery, he lived and trained to serve one purpose.

The financial figures of the Eurozone's trading day sped by on a small ticker at the bottom of a tablet resting on his lap. Above the ticker, a chart of Genjix owned assets on the New York Stock Exchange, Tokyo Stock Exchange, and the European Stock Exchange fluctuated in real time. The Genjix were up for the day. The rest of the world, not so much. The state of the Euro was a small cause for concern, though their analysts had correctly predicted this outcome and their liability shield was keeping them safe from the brunt of failing world economies. Enzo picked up his glass of Macallan 24, careful to keep only two fingers touching the glass, and took a sip. On both sides of him, half a dozen of his brothers and sisters, all in similar states of relaxation, sat on recliners analyzing the aggregate data from today's world events broken down into a series of numbers and charts. A report from their South American operations flashed across his screen. He gave it a quick glance before shelving it into one of his archives. South America was of little concern to him.

"Brother," Danette, who sat next to him, said, "The Minister of Finance in Sweden just resigned. Wasn't he one of ours?"

"The position is about to become one of ours," he corrected.

"Supplies of natural gas are down in Spain as well. The Pegasus operation is based there. Why is the Euro Council suppressing it further?"

Enzo turned to another sister. "Jeanine, answer that."

She nodded. "Operations in that region consist of less than one percent of our global presence. Prophus dealings are estimated to be at three."

He turned back to Danette. "Hurts them more than it hurts us."

The group fell back into silence as they continued deciphering figures and reports. Enzo pulled up a three-month history of Genjix figures compared to what they believe the Prophus owned. It painted a flattering picture with the two sides moving in opposite directions.

Enzo finished his scotch, stood up, and stretched. He walked to the edge of the balcony and looked out at the breathtaking view below. The jungle grew in all directions as far as his eyes could see. A single bead of sweat dripped from his brow, down his cheek, careening off his jaw. The gentle churning of the water in the infinity pool was soothing to the ear, though the peace was occasionally broken by the sound of combat approximately thirty meters away. To his left, a young woman butchered the Portuguese language.

Enzo, one of the oldest on the training floor, tore his eyes away from the jungle canopy and looked at the hive of activity in the main training room of the Hatchery. Azumi was talented in many things; languages were definitely not one of them. Her recital of *The Art of War* in Portuguese from memory was an embarrassment. Austin should be nearing half his hundred

lap swim by now. Matthew and Akelatis' sparring session had just finished the second round.

As usual, Elder Mother sat on her throne, overseeing the day's studies. Nearing eighty, Enzo wondered what she was like before she was posted here. Once a very high-profile operative, she was one of the principal architects of the Hatchery program and ruled over them with an iron fist. Being the only blessed vessel, she was at the same time a parent and god to them. This was the Holy One's third and most successful attempt at building such a program. The first two, originating during World War II with the study of eugenics, had mixed results. This third program, however, had been decidedly more successful. Already in the past ten years, eighty-four Adonis Vessels had made the transition. Enzo was currently one of nineteen assigned to Holy Ones. The rest of the one hundred and forty-seven incubates were in different states of training and readiness.

Elder Mother saw him studying her. "Enzo. I see you have completed your appraisal. Come forth and tell me what you've learned."

Enzo tilted his head at Elder Mother and made his way past the infinity pool to the sparring mat. Austin was still swimming at a steady pace. By Enzo's calculations, Austin should be on his seventy-ninth lap in the twenty-five meter length pool, assuming he had maintained the pace he had set when he began. Knowing Austin's fitness and the state of his health, he expected a degradation of roughly fifteen percent.

Enzo winked at Azumi as he passed and was rewarded with a slight stutter in her recitation. He stopped at the foot of the bamboo mat as Matthew and Akelatis completed their round. Enzo settled down and waited, watching with professional interest as two of his younger brothers beat each other senseless. Ten seconds into watching the fight, he knew Akelatis would win. Matthew was constantly half a step slow in his counters, especially on his right. There was a blossoming bruise just below his eye on that side; it must obscure his vision. His arm also displayed an ugly welt just above the elbow. Akelatis was not strong, but had a quick release with his lead leg.

Enzo began to recite his analysis, starting with the technology market in the States and the recent five-day decline of the Dow. Then he proceeded to tie the Dow with the recent fall of the euro in the currency markets and how it was affected by austerity measures on fringe economies of the European Union. Then he moved on to the rise in prices of concrete and industrial cranes, which had had a significant jump of fourteen percent in the past month.

Seven minutes into his analysis, Austin walked out of the pool and approached the mat, standing at attention on the eastern side of the mat. Doing some quick math, Enzo made a mental note on Austin's conditioning; he was twenty percent off his initial pace. The fight in the center of the mat ended with Akelatis chasing a retreating Matthew off the floor.

Elder Mother had long since stopped listening to Enzo. Her focus was on the melee. She beckoned them back to the center. Enzo continued his monologue about the recent drop in heroin prices on the black market as Elder Mother gave his two brothers her breakdown on their fight. Akelatis would make a fine field commander for a mid-level Holy One. Matthew was fated for an administrator's life. Neither was Council material though. Then again, few were. Currently, there was only one Adonis Vessel worthy of the Council residing at the Hatchery.

"Austin, join us," Elder Mother said. The lad bowed and took position next to Matthew and Akelatis on the right edge of the mat. Then Elder Mother finally gestured for Enzo to approach. He bowed and took position at the end of the line. Elder Mother put her hands

together between Enzo and the other three and then opened them. She was setting up a one versus three fight. The men split up into the two groups and faced each other.

“Would you take these odds?” she asked.

Unconsciously, Enzo flexed his shoulders and felt his back crack as they loosened up. All three were younger. Austin might be stronger but he was the most green and his boxing style was rudimentary. Akelatis was the quickest, preferring taekwondo as his style. He had also injured his left hamstring a week ago. Matthew had the most experience, preferring to fight with judo. He had pillow punches but was the most tactically sound. Judging by his posture, he was also gassed. This fight would come down to how much energy Austin had expended during his swim. Several more factors ran through Enzo’s head as he considered his options.

“Well,” Elder Mother said.

“In this scenario, Mother, do I have the option to withdraw?”

“The combat is optional, though once you engage, you are committed.”

“And the prize for victory?”

“Significant.”

“Very well then. I accept.” He bowed and walked to the middle of the mat. The three men exchanged glances and spread out to both sides of him.

“You believe this an equal fight?” Elder Mother asked.

“If I believed it an equal fight, Mother, I would not have accepted.”

Elder Mother smiled. “Your assessment of this situation is correct. Azumi, please join your brothers and see if you can balance the scales.”

Behind him, Enzo heard the sloppy recitation of Sun Tzu’s masterpiece end and Azumi’s light footsteps approach. The situation had just turned dire. Azumi’s standing in combat was just beneath his. In fact, she had the ability to win one in ten against him. Add in the others and he stood no chance of victory.

“Tilting the scales heavily in their favor hardly seems balanced, Mother,” Enzo murmured, retreating slowly to one corner of the mat. He could not afford to be surrounded.

“Imposing your will and strength over another is a sign of your superiority. Enzo, you believe you stand above your siblings, that you are their better. Prove it.” Elder Mother turned to the other four standing opposite of him. “Children, you are to beat Brother Enzo until he loses consciousness. Begin.”

The fight attracted several new viewers. A small crowd of his brothers and sisters gathered around the mat to watch. Many of the servants stopped as well to watch the spectacle. Enzo had to be careful. Even in training, he could lower his standing among them, and that standing would be important for all these future leaders of the Genjix.

Enzo’s mind raced. This was not a situation he could win on his own, yet Elder Mother would not put him in a situation that did not have a solution. They spread out, cutting off his escape routes as they closed in on him. He anticipated he had about twenty seconds to solve this encounter. It came down to his opponents. Matthew and Austin would not change the outcome of the fight regardless of which side they fought on. Akelatis was injured but the most malleable. Azumi would give him the decided edge but would require the highest price.

“Sister,” he called out, not looking her way. “Why do you fight me?”

“Mother has ordered it so,” she answered. “And I obey, praise be the Holy Ones.”

“Mother,” Enzo kept his voice calm. He had to work hard to appear in control. “What if Azumi chooses to not engage in this encounter?”

“She must,” Patron Master said. “Or she will stand guard at the west wing for the next two nights.”

“Sister,” Enzo said quickly, “I offer to take your place at guard if you come to my side.”

“Your offer gains me nothing,” She cracked her knuckles and stretched her shoulders and settled into her Muay Thai stance. The other three were already closing in. If they were smart they would attack immediately to prevent him from negotiating with Azumi. However, none was willing to lead the charge against him.

“Then what do you wish?”

“Such an open ended question, Brother. I wish for world peace and a Holy One.”

“Something I can offer you.”

“It seems there is not much you can offer me at this time.”

Before he could respond, Matthew lunged. Though he was the least threat, he recognized that any successful negotiation with Azumi would turn the tide to Enzo's favor. His decision to attack was tactically sound, if not a bit suicidal. Just as he charged forward, Azumi turned and threw a forearm to his neck, leaving him writhing on the ground gasping for air. A murmur of surprise swept through the audience. This turn of events surprised everyone, including Enzo. However, he quickly reappraised the situation and pressed his attack on Akelatis while Azumi destroyed Austin. The melee was short and ugly. Akelatis and Austin were no match for them. The fight ended with Akelatis unconscious on the ground and Austin suffering a dislocated shoulder. Enzo glanced at Azumi and nodded. She gave him a quick two finger salute and walked off. Elder Mother smiled.

“At this time” is what should have given her away. Enzo had thought today's test was for him. It was then that he realized that he was just a part of the test. Azumi was Elder Mother's real focus. Now Enzo, an already blessed vessel of the Council, was beholden to her. That future favor was far more valuable than anything he could offer right now. Furthermore, her standing in the Hatchery had just skyrocketed. She had proven to be a cunning vessel. Enzo bowed and was about to leave the floor when one of the servants came in and whispered in Elder Mother's ear. She listened attentively, her eyes locked on Enzo.

“Enzo,” she called out. “You have been summoned. The plane leaves within the hour.”

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