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AS BLAISE AND HARPER HEADED TO THE LIFT AFTER LUNCH, they ran into a clot of sycophants trailing Director Minsheng Lu. A fit, athletic Class I Chinese executive in his sixties, his face refreshed by prosthetic skin-grafting, the director wore a silk cutaway jacket and trousers that displayed a gradient of metallic peach, red, yellow, green, and aquamarine, all blending into each other to create a disorienting effect.

Minsheng's hands were foreshortened, gnarled, and massive as mandrill's paws. His gait and gestures were precise, and his eyes impassive, like a shark's. He advanced in slow strides, like a stalking animal. Something wasn't quite right about his left eye, a feature that had disturbed Blaise the first time he and the director had spoken privately. The left eye was slightly larger than the right one, and it gave his face a menacing look. Long used to Minsheng's deformity, Blaise chuckled now at the way the director's lackeys tried to avoid glancing at the gouged-out eye until a sycophant on Minsheng's left stole a look and shuddered, almost imperceptibly, at the oval holographic lens with an eye image masking a red hole.

A gold sun disk with a blue K-Spot embedded in a white circle studded Minsheng's lapel, matching the smaller one imprinted in his forehead. Having survived many Cloud board wars while he clawed his way up Mythoplex, the board's entertainment division, Minsheng regarded the world through an impenetrable eye that terrified subordinates and executives alike. People whispered that the director was in line to join the board of directors in Hong Kong; as such, none of the restrictions they observed applied to him. Rumors flew that he had ordered eighty Mantis terminations over his career. He had

seven mistresses on four continents. He had conquered numerous wounds and diseases—including laser blasts, poisonings, cancers, tropical fevers, and less exotic maladies such as hypertension, stroke, and other conditions related to his all-devouring drive for power—all without resorting to Medco tech. He had survived everything, including assassination attempts, through a force of will that made him soar above mortality with the effortless levitation. Then there was his reputation as a former Special Forces colonel with genetically enhanced strength and lethal martial arts skills. He had applied these skills to Caliphate troops in personally executed atrocities, a tradition he continued by torturing Slags to death during orgies at his San Fernando Valley estate.

“Blaise, a word with you,” the director intoned when he reached Blaise and Harper.

Blaise bowed from the waist. “Of course, Director Minsheng.”

Harper and the sycophants peeled away from Blaise as he entered the charmed space around the director, a bubble of privilege only the most gifted, ruthless, or brazen could access. The director strolled ahead, leaving behind the others, who glared at Blaise with murder in their eyes.

The director had a private lift. He eye-scanned the door open and gestured for Blaise to follow. As the car shot up to floor 118, Blaise caught the scent of the director’s underarm sweat, metallic with a tincture of gunpowder and oblivion. It made Blaise queasy, this smell of power and death. He suppressed his reaction with silent mantra chants. He glanced at his superior with a carefully controlled smile. Minsheng grinned but kept his good eye impassively focused on the elevator doors.

“Relax. I won’t be grilling you about coding today, Blaise.”

The lift doors opened into the director’s suite, a museum of scented teakwood, bonsai, and a Zen fountain. Along the floor ran seven onyx sculptures of gradually increasing scale, organic ovals with holes in their centers, vibrating on a frequency Blaise found faintly hypnotic. Behind a black desk, a window gave on a vista that stretched beyond L.A.’s garnet and amethyst towers, across San Fernando Valley to the distant foothills. On two walls hung classical paintings of mountains floating in mist; a third featured a painting of the Seven Immortals gathered around the goddess Quan Yin.

The director showed Blaise to a maroon leather couch and sat across from him in a plush chair, his expression as opaque as the onyx sculptures on the floor.

“Would you care for tea?”

Blaise noticed a holographic clock on the director’s desk that said 1:37. Blaise ached to get back to his coding, but there could only be one answer to the director. No sarcasm was possible here.

“I would be honored, sir.”

A tinkle of glass.

Blaise glanced around at a Japanese girl with ivory skin and limpid eyes, draped in a red and gold kimono, hair accented by hairpins shaped like tiny red branches. She pushed a wheeled tea service. Her body emitted a mysterious scent that Blaise found irresistible. He wondered if she was the director’s flesh-toy, but buried the thought beneath his mantra to avoid the Cloud Monitor’s notice.

She served the director and then Blaise. Minsheng gazed through her as if she were glass. He made a tent of his fingertips and pressed them to his lips, his gaze focused on Blaise with disturbing intensity.

“This new series you’re working on. Quite an accomplishment.”

“I’m honored, sir.”

“I’ve just returned from Hong Kong. I’m appointed to the board of directors.”

“Congratulations, sir.”

Minsheng nodded graciously. “The board spoke about your pilot episode. Did Mitsuko tell you?”

“Only about the deadline for final coding to Vidracom.”

“What deadline?”

“Ninety days from now, sir.”

“This project is far too important. I grant you four months.”

“Mitsuko said we’re under contract.”

“I know the Vidracom CEO. He’ll understand.”

“Mitsuko won’t be pleased.”

Minsheng guffawed. “Nothing about you pleases her.”

“Sorry to hear that, sir.”

“She complains about your jibes at her. What of it? She’s irrelevant. Replaceable in a heartbeat. Only you matter, ultimately. And we both know sarcasm is a good way to cope with the tension between neurofeed and one’s actual thoughts.”

“My thoughts are one hundred percent patriotic, sir.”

“Relax, Blaise,” Minsheng said. “Even I have the occasional errant thought.”

Despite Minsheng’s reassurance, Blaise’s armpits bled cold sweat at the prospect of being caught in the crossfire between Mitsuko and the director. It was essential to walk the razor’s edge with them, and he had no idea where the director was taking this interview. Was Mitsuko behind this, laying a trap? Was Minsheng testing him to expose actionable thoughts? If the Cloud Monitor picked up an errant brainwave, a subconscious hint of dissent . . .

The girl bowed to the director. Blaise watched with furtive lust as she

wheeled away the tea service with mincing steps. When she was gone he turned to the director, whose good eye exposed a fierce, fleeting emotion Blaise had never seen before. It vanished in an instant as Minsheng cleared his throat.

“You have a level-three security clearance, correct?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Excellent. Excellent.”

He considered Blaise with what appeared to be calm regard and made a short, correct bow of the head. “We’ve watched your development with great interest.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“In seven years you’ve accomplished more than most game planners do in a lifetime. A bold achievement after two years of exemplary military service.”

Blaise wasn’t sure how to respond. Why was the director complimenting him? It didn’t make sense, coming from a man whose aloofness was legendary.

“Oh, yes,” Minsheng nodded. “I say this without hyperbole. No, no, we recognize superior talent and are inclined to reward it. Tell me, how would you feel about a promotion?”

Blaise pictured life as a senior executive like the director. A life without coding: a borderless tundra where nothing could free him from the cold, dead hand of grief and chaos. The prospect terrified him almost as much as the Mantis.

“A promotion, sir?” he gulped, the words catching in his throat.

The director smiled. “To Class I games supervisor, with a security clearance of five. Working in a private office with a security shield. No more prying eyes from inferiors. Oh, and a forty-percent salary bump. I’ll make your raise retroactive to the beginning of the month.”

Blaise felt a rush of vanity and delight followed by terror. The board never handed down a promotion without extracting a price.

“I’m honored,” he managed, his voice husky with fear despite his attempt to sound blasé.

The director bowed his head again, something an executive never did except to acknowledge a colleague.

“If I may ask, sir, what will Mitsuko make of all this?”

“We’re promoting her to senior vice-supervisor. That will allow her the blue silk jacket. And a director’s pin. Something she’s long coveted.”

Blaise felt his angst ease its grip on his heart. So, he was to survive Mitsuko’s jealousy and resentment after all.

“Will I still report to her?”

“She will continue to head up the games planning team, but with a separate staff. You will report directly to me. Tell me, are you familiar with the Lazarus-D initiative? Or *Homo Deus*?”

“I’m afraid not, sir.”

“Our immortality program for Class Is. I’ll arrange neural training and longevity injections.”

So I’m going to live forever, Blaise thought, trying to process that. He wondered if a board-mandated eternity would include relief, perhaps after centuries of effort, from his near-debilitating regrets.

Minsheng considered Blaise through tented fingers. “Sudden change can be disorienting, even when it opens new worlds,” he said, finally. “But you adapt well to abruptness. That’s why I’m sure you’ll agree with my next request. I’d like you to code a new sequence for *Gilgamesh V*.”

White-hot rage ran through Blaise’s veins at the ease with which the director had robbed him of the creative freedom he had fought so hard against Mitsuko to win. He repeated his mantra to hide his anger.

“My request disturbs you?”

“Not in the least, sir.”

“My executive neurofeed reports your brainwaves have lost their alpha curve, and your pulse is racing.”

“Terribly sorry, sir.”

“I’m only asking for a slight change in your storyline.”

Blaise pushed back against his rage against Minsheng’s intrusion into his holiest of holies. “What did you have in mind?” he managed.

The director signaled for Blaise to rise and then nudged him forward in a slow, counterclockwise circuit of the cavernous office. He stopped occasionally to let Blaise admire one of the sculptures, his good eye black and impenetrable as the abyss of deep space.

“Your hero is a pretender named Gilgamesh. The Babylonian epic has him seek immortality but fail to find it. Whereas your rebooted protagonist seeks an earthly immortality by seizing power in a decaying city-state.”

Here it comes, Blaise thought. *He’s going to gut my series—months of sweat, sleepless nights, migraines, all for nothing—because some bastard on the Cloud board ordered it.*

“That’s correct, sir.”

“I’d like you to code a new twist in the plot, in which the high priestess brings Gilgamesh a vision from the goddess Ishtar. The priestess will proclaim that immortality is attainable from a potion prepared by her temple prostitutes.”

“Excuse me, sir, if I may, but that would . . .”

“This potion, let’s call it Anima, is so powerful, so ecstatic in its effect, that everyone who uses it loses interest in everything else.”

“But wouldn’t that ruin my storyline?”

“I’m sure you can code your way around it.”

Blaise repeated his mantra to calm himself. “And the purpose of this change, sir?”

“To allow Slags, who’ll pirate your series—and Class IV subscribers—to addict themselves. And remain submissive.”

Blaise found the director’s notion absurd. Anima was a hopelessly antiquated approach to delivering pleasure, a prehistoric echo from ages when the pleasure center was only a knot of nerves, fist-smashed by ancient drugs, and not an infinitesimal speck in a vast programmable neuroscape. What could it mean? Had the board descended into madness with this abrupt change in creative direction?

“Aren’t they submissive enough as it is?”

“You never know when a dog could turn rabid. The important thing is, *Gilgamesh V* will be massive. It’ll sweep the awards. We’ll rake in billions to fund the board’s Caliphate war and replenish our own Mythoplex coffers.”

The director rose and padded with quiet dignity to his desk. He passed his hand over a crystal. A wall mountainscape vanished, and a world map materialized. The Cloud Bloc—North America, Europe, Russia, South Africa, the Sudan, and Asia—lighted up. Holographic thumbnails in blue, red, green, and gold glittered, the green thumbnails marking L.A., San Francisco, Toronto, Atlanta, London, Moscow, Beijing, Teipei, Tokyo, Johannesburg, Sydney, and Hong Kong.

“As you know, the Caliphate dirty bombed the cities in red thirty years back. These others, in green, are remaining strongholds under Cloud rule. Power shared, of course, at least for the moment, with our dull-witted allies, the Russians. But how long can our empire last? The global Slag population has swelled to twenty billion. Did you know?”

“No, sir. I didn’t.”

“Imagine all of them—all those billions—as Anima addicts. Uprisings would be impossible. Caliphate legionaries will pirate Anima, too, by the way. Their regime must allow some respite from the squalid misery they subject their armies to.” Minsheng gave Blaise a long appraising stare. “I share this classified information on the assumption that you’ve accepted your promotion.”

A slouching stirred in the room. Blaise cut his eyes toward a huge jointed, greenish leg as it pressed heavily into the carpet.

Minsheng re-seated himself on the couch, where he crossed his legs and

watched Blaise impassively. Blaise felt a surge of despair, followed by resignation. There was no escape. Mitsuko had obviously convinced Minsheng to terminate him. Nothing could be done except to steel himself for it. He glimpsed yellow, enormous fang-like mandibles as they issued a chirruping like millions of crickets.

“Quite an achievement, isn’t it?” Minsheng observed.

The Mantis crawled on spiny legs, and it displaced the air like a fetid ingot with a burning carrion stench. Blaise gasped at the sight of the slimy, greenish thorax, disturbed by the ripple of unseen muscles, like an enormous snake with jointed appendages. The head had jeweled red eyes sprouting from stalks and a triangular snout with pink, wormlike mandibles and palps wriggling over a black maw.

“A team’s been refining it since you left the project,” Minsheng boasted. “It’s the perfect VR assassin, summoned through your forehead K-spot by cloud-based electromagnetic pulse. To an outside observer, the Mantis is vaporware. To your body, however, it’s utterly real.”

Blaise heard its heavy tread approaching. *Let it end quickly*, he thought. *Better than another minute in this lunatic world.*

Minsheng couldn’t help but brag about this loathsome creature, though he had contributed nothing to the Mantis’s actual creation. “Even now your amygdala’s shooting electrical signals to your hypothalamus, raising your blood pressure to lethal stroke threshold. Should its claws close on your leg, your flesh will part as if hacked by a machete. Oh, and how do you like the reptilian skin? A twist to increase the terror, the kind our ancestors felt hiding in trees from carnivorous reptiles.”

Blaise’s heart pounded as he felt the creature’s rank breath touch his face. A horrible death was a shriek away. But then, abruptly, the Mantis vanished, which left Blaise panting, sweat-soaked, and shaken.

Minsheng rose from the couch, approached, and pressed a meaty paw on his shoulder.

“Relax, Blaise. I was only making a point. You’ve accepted your promotion. Your neural scan shows it. I’m deactivating your neurofeed permanently. A Class I doesn’t need the conditioning reserved for lower classes.” A pulsing light glittered in Minsheng’s palm. “Your thumbprint on the contract, if you will. Then no more Cloud surveillance. Ever. Of course, you’re free to surveil subordinates’ EEGs.”

With some trepidation and still uncertain whether the Mantis might reappear to finish him off, Blaise pressed his thumb into the tiny contract icon and heard a faint internal click, nothing more. Then, silence: the silence of the

Grand Canyon in a winter snowdrift. It was a stunning alteration, as if he had lost one of his senses, accompanied by deep relief from the burden of having to suppress his emotions.

“Amazing, isn’t it?” Minsheng observed. “Absolute silence in your mind after a lifetime of neural chatter. Who needs it? You have creativity, passion, independence of thought.”

Minsheng’s toothy grin under his ruined eye made his face a grimace of madness. “You flatter me,” Blaise managed as he had a momentary hallucination of the director biting into his face like a rabid dog.

“You and I live to create, build, innovate,” the director breathed with evident self-satisfaction. “Slags live to breed. Breeding, reproduction. Disgusting! An evolutionary relic. We’re immortal now. We don’t need children. Only pleasure. For example, that girl who served us tea earlier? A new class of pleasure android. A breakthrough in synthetic real-flesh, much firmer than VR holographics. No sponginess.”

“But isn’t the whole concept behind VR to replace naked sensory experience something more vivid?” Blaise blurted, suddenly terrified that the new androids might replace VR and render him and his years of refining his coding talent obsolete.

Minsheng chuckled. “Yet even you have a taste for Slag girls. A harmless pastime. And a good release from VR sensory overload.” He paused to give Blaise a long, appraising stare. “But Blaise, you haven’t visited the Zone in months. And you’ve let your VR subscriptions lapse.”

Minsheng’s words stunned Blaise. Here was the man who had lashed Blaise on to ever greater achievement for the past seven years, the taskmaster who had championed Blaise’s drive to create monster hit VR series that had raked in billions for Mythoplex and the Cloud. Why would he advise Blaise to ease back on the throttle when the *Gilgamesh* series would demand millions of lines of new code?

“My work is my only pleasure now, sir,” was all he could think to say.

Minsheng led Blaise back to the couch and settled into the plush fabric next to him with a smug, satisfied expression that made Blaise want to smash him in the face.

“All work and no play, Blaise. It’s not healthy.”

“I’m so close with *Gilgamesh V*, sir. I don’t want any distractions.”

Minsheng considered him with a paternal smile.

“I believe you lost your wife, whom you called Cherry, two years back?”

Where the hell is he going with this? flashed through Blaise’s mind.

“Yes, sir.”

“Cherry took her own life after human traffickers kidnapped and murdered your daughter Mei. Your EEG scans suggest you feel a certain responsibility. Not so. Your behavior was impeccably correct.”

Blaise glared at Minsheng, then averted his glance, thinking, *One roundhouse kick to the throat is all it would take for you, you son of a bitch.*

“Oh, and that business with Aisha, the corporal you left on the battlefield in Nigeria, eight years back. Yes, I know about that, too. Apparently you carry lingering guilt concerning the incident.”

A voice echoed in Blaise’s memory: a young woman screaming, *Don’t leave me out here, lieutenant!*

“Nonsense. You sacrificed her to save your platoon. You were a superb officer. Your kill rate is legendary.”

“I’m just a games planner now, sir,” Blaise replied through clenched teeth.

Minsheng leaned close to him, and Blaise flinched involuntarily away from his fetid breath. “I want you to take the rest of the day off. A couple of days and the weekend. Make that Zone visit you’ve been putting off. It’ll do you good. Then come back fresh Monday and attack that series with all your skill. A crew’s moving your things into a new office as we speak.”

Minsheng rose majestically and strolled to his desk. He picked up a flat box standing beside it. Inside was a navy-blue cutaway silk blazer with a Class I sunspot medallion pinned to the lapel. He presented the jacket to Blaise.

“Try it on. It’s tailor made.”

Minsheng took Blaise’s old maroon jacket and dropped it in a waste bin. Blaise felt like a trained dog as Minsheng considered him in his new Class I attire.

The director nodded with satisfaction and clapped him on the shoulder. “Congratulations. You’re one of us now.”