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# THE DARK COURT

SONGS OF THE SAGE, BOOK 2

BY

VYVYAN EVANS

**NEPHILIM  
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The future of science fiction writing

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### Disclaimer

While this is a work of speculative fiction, it is inspired by events, businesses, incidents, technologies, and theoretical concepts that have some basis in reality. Certain long-standing institutions, agencies, and public offices are mentioned, but the characters involved are wholly imaginary, as is this novel's story.

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**THE BABEL APOCALYPSE**, BOOK 1  
**THE DARK COURT**, BOOK 2

Forthcoming

**THE RISE OF THE MASHIACH**, BOOK 3



רק את מוניקה

*The Mind Chant of the Sage is a means  
of coercive control, an addiction.*

Lilith Errapel King

*All hail the Sempiternal Ruler, our Sage, the oldest being in  
the Elyonim, Head of the Council of the Quessoch. We proclaim  
Your glorious splendor which protects, and banishes all the  
spirits of the destroying angels, gaseous spirits of Satanael,  
Watchers imprisoned in the Chaos. You are the revered keeper  
of their somas, and protector of the Nunciature Evangelion. Oh  
mighty Sage, our Majesty-on-High in the Tower of Songs, save  
us from the dark power of the Mashiach, the she-demon, Lilith.*

The Mind Chant of the Quessoch Apostles  
Translated into Unilanguage English (North American  
Standard) from High Enochian





# PROLOGUE

Lilith King’s transformation occurred on her seventh birthday. That was the day of her *awakening*, in the parlance of the Sempiternals. It was a day cut out of mystery—a beginning and an ending.

Lilith rose early, excited—she knew her father would have a gift for her, something unexpected and perfect; he always did. Her father loved her beyond measure, and she knew it. But as she dressed hurriedly, foreboding also nagged at the back of her mind. The woman who was supposed to be her mother, Plamena, was to be removed, finally. To an asylum in Moesia, near her surviving family in Sofia.

“Family descendants,” her father explained.

Lilith had the impression her mother was very old, although this was belied by her youthful mien—especially in the warmth of late-afternoon sun filtering into her chamber. In the rich yellow-orange light, Plamena’s bedridden features were softened—her shadowed crow’s feet disguised. The madness in her eyes was almost erased.

Lilith’s father insisted it was for the best—more for his own benefit; the girl didn’t need convincing. For the final few months, Lilith’s mother was restrained to her bed rails, cloistered in the farthest chamber on the upper floor of their vast house. The

doctor had ordered it, and her father had reluctantly consented, lest she attempted to harm Lilith again.

Lilith would sometimes spy on her father as he tended to her mother, through the open door, from the safe distance of the landing. She observed the softness in his eyes as he sat at her bedside.

“My Plamena,” he would whisper, wiping the brow of the woman with the crazed expression—the eyes that sometimes rolled back and forth frenetically in their sockets, as if yanked to and fro by invisible steel wires.

For Lilith’s part, her mother always scared her. Throughout her childhood, Lilith’s mother had gradually deteriorated into a dribbling, catatonic mess. At least, until the crazy took hold of her. That’s when her mother heard *the voices*, or so she claimed. That’s when she became dangerous—when Lilith’s very life was in danger.

Lilith feared it must be her fault—that she wasn’t good enough, not deserving of a mother’s love. Shouldn’t a mother love their child? Shouldn’t a daughter love their mother, rather than being terrified of her?

Once, Lilith ventured in, unobserved, while the nurse was away and her father was on a facecall in his grand study downstairs. She crept forward, hoping her mother might open her eyes and smile at her, tell her that she was loved. But her mother never did. And at each subsequent failed attempt to engage her mother, a little more of Lilith became broken inside, until she stopped trying.

As she entered the large drawing room downstairs, her father was already seated at the breakfast table that overlooked the ornamental garden at the rear of the house.

“My little seraph, my birthday girl,” he called out, with a broad smile, as Lilith entered. She smiled too and ran toward him, arms

outstretched, laughing. And as he held her, she leaned into his shoulder, taking in his distinctive smell. He squeezed her tight, longer than usual, as if he didn't wish to let her go. And as Lilith savored his warm embrace, she contentedly gazed out through the windows at the large garden beyond him, where strange shadows dwelled in the afternoon.

Lilith, her father, and her invalid-mother inhabited a very large villa in central Cambridge. Lilith vaguely understood her father was wealthy. But she also somehow knew, even at the age of seven, that he couldn't care less about material things. She was aware he wasn't the same as other men, different from other fathers. And he was famous, that she understood too, something to do with his medical research. Lilith adored him—he made her feel safe. She was his Lily, and always would be.

As a child, Lilith liked the sound of her father's pet name for her—seraph. She imagined it was an allusion to her temper, the flames of her outbursts that got her into trouble at school; Lilith had a prickly disposition even then, announced in advance to all and sundry by her shock of orange-red hair and startling green eyes—"nuclear green," as one teacher had once described them.

But as the years went by, the image that her pet name conjured, of wings on fire and the intimation of the angelic, made Lilith think of both rage and innocence. And later, at the age of twenty-three, after the Monster, any vestige she once had of innocence was gone. Afterward, all that remained was the rage.

In the drawing room on that day, Lilith was just a newly minted seven-year-old, excited and not in the least bit hungry. Once the serving unit had delivered breakfast, Lilith made a hurried, token effort at eating. Her father sighed as he glanced at her plate. So she fixed him with a defiant look, with her emerald-green eyes, and crossed her arms. It was *her* birthday after all.

And as he chuckled in response, she knew he had relented. Lilith hurriedly unwrapped the box, throwing open the lid. Inside was a pair of shiny, red leather brogues. She shook off her slippers and put them on, lacing up, chuckling with glee, despite the lack of socks. She hadn't expected this, but immediately decided she had longed for exactly these all along.

"Shall we go for a walk?" her father asked, while still studying the uneaten food on her plate.

"To test them?" Lilith asked, excitedly.

"To make sure they work," her father replied with a wink. But as he spoke, a shadow feathered his face. "No need for you to be here ..." Lilith studied his haunted expression. She knew what he meant. The medical daemons would arrive soon, accompanied by her father's personal lawyer, to remove her mother in a medical transport. Lilith nodded, glancing down at her feet. She was ready.

"Do you want to say goodbye first?" he asked.

Lilith frowned and looked away. She examined the ornamental fountain in the middle of the small pond outside without responding, watching the blur of refracted morning light through droplets of water. Her father smiled at her faintly. "Get your jacket, I'll go up, say farewell for both of us ..."

Outside, they walked through the streets of Cambridge, toward Grantchester Meadows. It was still early, but already warm. Once they reached the banks of the Cam, Lilith began skipping, holding her father's hand. Her shoes started to rub against one heel. She ignored the discomfort, glancing up at him. He smiled at her; she was happy.

"They'll be at the house now ... She's going home at last, back to where she's from."

"Where are you from?" Lilith asked abruptly, seeking to shift his sadness away from a subject she didn't fully understand.

“I’m not from anywhere,” he replied. “Too many places.”

Lilith screwed up her eyes. Her father’s answer made no sense. “But where were you born?”

“A cave,” came his strange reply. Lilith closed her eyes for a moment, imagining somewhere dank and uncomfortable.

“Was it dark?”

“Not anymore,” he replied. “Now it’s a grotto full of candles, incense, and light.” Lilith was confused. She glanced up at her father.

“What’s a grotto?”

Her father stopped walking and gazed down at her. “A grotto is a sacred place.”

“Did you live there with your mummy and daddy?” Lilith asked, using the Old Standard’s lexicon and grammar—it was still years before Unilanguage’s North American standard became the default variety of English in the Old Kingdom. Back then, Lilith was an unchipped nate, part of the transitional generation; she wouldn’t have Universal Grammar tech implanted in her head until her eighteenth birthday.

“Just my mother,” replied her father. Lilith knew all her grandparents were long dead—she was different from her classmates, whose elderly relatives sometimes collected them after school. The mention of a grandmother caused Lilith to suddenly feel longing for something she had never had—a nostalgic pang for a newly revealed hypothetical absence.

“What was her name?” Lilith’s unexpected question made her father jump slightly. Then there was a distant, wistful look as he glanced down again—not quite at her, more through her.

“Mary,” came his soft reply.

“Mary,” Lilith repeated, tasting the name. Testing it. “What happened to her?” she asked.

“She’s buried in a basilica.” Another strange word for a small child.

“Bas-lika,” Lilith repeated, mispronouncing the word. “What’s that?”

“A kind of church,” her father replied, solemnly. Lilith shuddered. Churches scared her.

By the time they arrived back home, Lilith could tell her mother was no longer there. The low-level growls that usually reverberated around the oak-walled panels of the upstairs landing were no more. Now silence reigned.

After they’d removed their outdoor garments, her father led her into the drawing room. His lawyer was awaiting their return. Upon seeing him, her father became visibly nervous. There was a woman sitting beside the lawyer. She smiled at the child.

“You must be Lilith,” the woman announced, standing. She was well-proportioned and friendly-looking.

Lilith instinctively moved behind her father. He held her hand, and pulled her back around in front of him, kneeling beside her. Lilith looked into his face, confused.

“This is Ms. Wilbur, she’s going to look after you,” he explained softly, before smiling back at the woman.

“Lilith can call me Kaye,” Ms. Wilbur said kindly.

Her father then turned back to Lilith, gazing at her with the kindness she loved. “I have to go away.” He gulped. “You must be very brave, Lily. Because what I’m doing is for you. You’re very special. I believe you will change everything. Not just here, but everywhere.” With that he reached into his jacket and pulled out a small bracelet from inside his breast pocket. He handed it to Lilith.

“Another gift?” she asked, with cautious excitement. Lilith turned it over in her hand. It was silver, with a small, strange-

looking screen on the outer side. The screen was narrow and black, and numbers were spinning in iridescent green, fleetingly across the screen.

“I guess it is. This is a SwissSecure bracelet. It will live with you, expanding as you grow.”

“Is it alive?” Lilith asked.

Her father chuckled. “In a way, I suppose it is. When you’re older, after you’re chipped, the numbers will stop spinning. And then you’ll receive a message from me—two, in fact.”

“Memoclips?” Lilith asked, confused. She knew that was what the chipped adults called them.

Her father dipped his head. “Actually, faceclips. They will explain things ... when the time is right. For one thing, where the music comes from, the Nunciature Evangelion—the Tower of Songs.”

“Music?”

“It will come to you, later today. This music will help you become your potential, but it will also be your one Achilles heel ...” Lilith scrunched up her eyes in incomprehension. “That means it will make you vulnerable. You must never trust the music. When the time is right, the bracelet will settle, reveal the code, and play the faceclip. And after that, when you’re ready, you must also seek out your mother. You’ll know when. She is far more than you think ... I know it’s not been easy for you. But she will have moments of lucidity, she can help you, explain.”

Lilith grimaced and shook her head. “What kind of music?” she asked, avoiding the mention of her mother. She imagined the tinkling piano of her music teacher.

Her father nodded faintly. “That will become clear, in time.” He paused, smiling at Lilith, taking in her face. “I love you, remember that. Always.”

With those final words, Lilith's father clipped the bracelet onto the child's right wrist. It snapped into place with a small metallic sound. He gave Lilith a long, gentle hug, before standing and nodding toward the two adults. Then he turned and left the room. Lilith couldn't have imagined then, as she watched him walk out, his back straight and proud as always, that she would never see him again.





# CHAPTER 1

Park Baek Hyeon's call, summoning me into the office, was unexpected—especially so early on a Saturday morning. He never contacted me when I was off-duty, that was the rule. Even more unusual was the taut urgency in his voice, a hint of panic even; *that* unnerved me—the normally inscrutable Park. *What the hell's so pressing this time?* I mused. *Can't a girl even get this one damn weekend off?* I looked down at the young woman lying next to me. I had gone and done it again, a random hook-up, despite promising myself not to. She was pretty in an emo-goth way, and around twenty, I guessed. I exhaled before shaking her gently. The girl's eyes flickered open.

"You have to go," I whispered. "I've been summoned to work. An emergency. I must leave, right away." She yawned, before turning over and trying to go back to sleep. "I mean it," I snapped, shaking her. "Please get dressed."

I walked toward the bathroom and issued my voice command, "VirDa, bathroom lights," glancing back to check the girl was getting up this time.

Once inside, I stared at myself in the large mirror and groaned. I looked as rough as I felt. My head was thumping from drinking too much the night before. My hair was a mess, my face blotchy and my eyes puffy. I stepped back. *All this will need some work.* I

also had a large bruise on my left shoulder, purple with yellow-tinged edges. *Crap, how did that happen?*

I showered quickly and dressed in a V-neck ruffle blouse and mid-rise dress pants. I applied maroon lipstick and some light rouge and re-entered the bedroom. I felt slightly more human after the shower. The girl was now dressed, perched on the edge of the bed, watching me sheepishly.

“VirDa, readjust walls to daytime mode.” As I issued my voice command, the bedroom wall partition slowly disappeared into the floor, revealing the relaxation area beyond, with a full-wall window twenty meters away giving out onto the large, illuminated hanging gardens dropping many stories below terrestrial level. I allowed myself a small smile of satisfaction—my duplex penthouse was in one of the original deep Earth-scraper constructions with all the original features. I had one of the best views of the artificial waterfalls in the entire sector, cascading down through the bore-wells that veined this level of the Manhattan schist. I was high up, just one level below terrestrial, and it was worth every e-Continental. This view never got old.

My dressing area completed its rotation, as the floor panels finished moving into daytime mode. I peered into the iris scanner on my weapons safe; the door unlocked with a click. I took out my kydex shoulder holster and coil pistol. I hooked the holster on, followed by my black leather jacket over the top. I then picked up an elastic band from the top of a high-gloss acrylic, auto-stow drawer. I pulled it over my right wrist, up against the SwissSecure bracelet that never came off. I hooked the elastic band up so that it wasn't visible under the cuff of my blouse. Then I stepped into my brogues and stooped to lace them.

There was a cough; I looked up. The girl was studying me with narrowed eyes.

“You some kind of lady cop or something?” She paused, studying me. “But then how can you afford a place like this ... exclusive West Village Earth-scraper sector?”

Before I could respond, the familiar tone of a high priority alert vibrated in my ear implant. I pressed the skin on my left wrist; my holotab, an eighteen-centimeter translucent screen, projected out from my wrist chip. I blink-activated the ‘new messages’ icon. A meeting invite began scrolling across one screen quadrant, using my full title: *High Commissioner Lilith King, Interpol Special Representative to the United Nations*. It was quite the mouthful, but I had earned it!

The meeting was to be chaired by Assistant Secretary-General Lejeune. *What the hell? High level. This must be really serious.* I’d heard of Ms. Lejeune; never met her, though. Her reputation preceded her—one scary lady, although I admired what she had achieved. The meeting was scheduled to take place in the Security Council’s Counter-Cyberterrorism Command, at UN Plaza, no less. I was invited in my capacity as *Special Investigator*. I raised one eyebrow—no one had told me.

I saw from the invite that Park, my boss, would also be attending, as was a Director from the World Health Organization, and some civilian—a medic from Columbia University Medical Center.

I was startled from my holotab by a VirDa exterior proximity chime; it reverberated around both floors of the penthouse through the in-ceiling speakers. In my peripheral vision I glimpsed the girl jump. Then came the sound of banging on the front door. It was muffled down here in the now-enlarged sleeping area, but persistent.

“What was that?” the girl hissed, her face a frozen mask of alarm.

I hibernated my holotab with a blink command and drew my weapon. "Someone's at the exterior door ... gun activate." I was taking no chances—the nagging feeling of being followed, being surveilled, had been growing in intensity. Clyde would tell me I was just being paranoid. But if there's one thing life had taught me, it was you could never be paranoid enough. The capacitor status symbol on the barrel of my weapon began glowing green, in far-field charging mode.

"Never heard a hail chime like that before," the girl muttered.

"VirDa, display external visual sensors." With that, a section of smart LED wall panel across from my circular bed faded into off-white, before displaying the live feed of the corridor-tunnel outside the apartment entrance. I breathed a sigh of relief. I put my gun back in the shoulder holster.

"You know her?" the girl asked, now standing, peering nervously over my shoulder at the large display.

"She's my neighbor, closest thing I have to a mother ..." I replied, as I took in the gray-haired woman on the screen, still in her dressing robe.

I jogged up the stairs to the interior security vestibule. I heard the girl puffing as she trailed behind. The entrance hail light was flashing adjacent to the apartment door. "VirDa, open door."

Kaye Wilbur was standing in front of me; she looked a wreck. Her eyes were red, as if from crying, or maybe lack of sleep, and she was wringing her hands.

"Lilith," she gasped. "It's Avie, I don't know what to do ..."  
As the elderly woman looked past me, seeing the girl, she recalibrated. "So sorry, Lilith, didn't realize you had company, and god it's early," she muttered, glancing down instinctively at her left wrist without actually activating her bioclock.

"It's fine, she was just leaving. Why don't you tell me what's

up?" I peered into Kaye's face. Streaks from dried tears marked her wrinkled face, wisps of uncombed hair strayed at odd angles.

"You have to see for yourself," Kaye replied, leading me toward the vertical transit tube. The girl followed me out as I heard the lock activation of my apartment behind me.

"She's been like this since I got her back from the Up-skilling procedure." Kaye seemed desperate as she spoke.

"Been busy at work ... should have checked in," I muttered, as guilt pricked me. After all, I had gifted Kaye her larger three-floor condo immediately beneath mine, so I could be there for her if she needed me. It was the least I could do.

We followed Kaye into the transit tube. The LED smart ceiling panels powered on as we took our seats around the capsule's perimeter. We exited into the vestibule on Kaye's level; the corridor ceiling panels cast an eerie glow around us.

"I've had the doctor here three days in a row now. Even the strongest sleeping pills aren't working. He doesn't understand it either. Avie hasn't slept for four days straight. And now it's really bad, she's changing. I'm scared I'm losing her. I didn't know who else to turn to."

As Kaye led us toward her apartment entrance, the girl whispered in my ear: "Up-skilling. Isn't that the new vagus implant thing that they do at LifeWorks?" I nodded. "Heard about it on MyPlace broadcasts. I don't qualify, not one of the lower soc-ed certs. I have a Professional cert," she continued proudly.

"Good for you," I muttered tersely back at her.

As Kaye activated her condo door, the girl made to follow me inside. I paused and turned to her. "I think we can say goodbye now. I'm sure you understand."

"Can I see you again? You're so pretty, and an amazing body. It was fun last night." I involuntarily clenched my jaws. She

hurriedly activated her holotab and began directing furious eye-gaze commands at the screen. I knew what she was doing: sending me a proximity invite, sharing her contact details. I'd have to deal with that later.

"Take care," I muttered, gesturing back toward the transit tube. "Street level's that way." The girl turned and slouched away. I watched to make sure she left, before following Kaye inside.

As soon as the apartment door closed, I heard guttural growls through the early morning darkness, coming from one of the lower levels.

"She's in her room," Kaye muttered, leading me down one set of stairs. Inside Avie's room it was dark, the night shields still activated on the light-shaft windows overlooking the hanging gardens far below; the smart LED wall panels were still in nighttime mode, just a faint golden glow.

As I stood on the threshold of the room, next to Kaye, I made out Avie's outline. She was sitting on a chair in the center, still in her pajamas, only the silver luminescence of her holotab visible, floating above her left wrist.

As my eyes adjusted, I saw that Avie was glancing around the room with frantic eyes. It was as if she hadn't even noticed us. And she looked pale and emaciated. It had only been ten days since I'd last seen her, just before she left for the LifeWorks campus in Toronto, so full of optimism that she would be able to turn a corner, to finally have some prospects.

But this wasn't the same young woman I'd known all her life; the once joyful child I'd taken for walks when I was back during the holidays from boarding school as a teenager. She was almost unrecognizable.

Avie stood up and then suddenly sat down, pulling at her long, dark brown hair. The holotab screen moved around maniacally

as her left arm made jerking gestures in the air. If I hadn't known better, I would have suspected she was on something; that somehow the poor girl's mind had snapped.

"I can't get there," Avie snarled, not quite at the screen but not to anyone else either.

I heard Kaye's involuntary yelp next to me—pain, concern, maybe even a premonition of losing her daughter.

"Avie, it's Lilith. Where are you trying to get to, honey?" I asked, trying to sound soothing, unsure whether to enter the room, what that might provoke.

Avie glanced at me as if suddenly noticing us. Tuted and shook her head.

"The lottery ... I can't get to the next level." Avie paused before standing abruptly again. "I can't take it."

"Take what?" I asked quietly.

"Sitting," she rasped back at me. Avie twisted her body in an abrupt jerk, jumping forward. She was staring right into my face. Then she suddenly turned to one side, before clawing with her hands and arms as if fending something off.

"Will the same happen to me, like the other Unskills?" Avie asked, now peering straight into my eyes, sounding strangely calm.

"Other Unskills? Which others?" I asked, before glancing at Kaye to see whether she knew anything about this. Kaye threw me a nonplussed look.

And with that, Avie swung her left arm in front of me so that her holotab veered forward. I glimpsed the logo on the open Lucky Dip gaming app. It was a fiery phoenix with flaming wings, glancing over its left shoulder, on a black background with the logo underneath: *Be reborn: A new you today* in multiple languages. Numbers were spinning in a maze level, within the app. Avie was on level fourteen. I knew users had to complete all fifty

levels by the weekly deadline to be entered into that week's lux-unskill job lottery.

As Avie continued moving, the holographic screen passed through my hand in midair, disappearing as the projection vanished, before reappearing on the other side of my open hand. My Eye kicked in. And there it was, the rush of an emotional halo. But this halo was unlike any I'd ever experienced before. There were voices—thousands, maybe millions, screaming in shrill unison, as life was being sucked out of them; the cries, some pleading as I felt them wither and move into silent death. I jumped involuntarily, before leaning against one side of the doorway, feeling nauseous. For the first time in a long time, I had experienced an emotional halo that scared the living daylights out of me.





## CHAPTER 2

The hover cab jerked upward, making a detour to a different skyway. NYPD restrictions were already in force due to the downtown protests. The maneuver made me feel nauseous. I gingerly leaned back against the headrest of the passenger cabin, still feeling rough. The beautiful music inside my head was barely audible. The Melody kept me sane, and it was always there unless I drank, which dulled its sound. Last night I had definitely overdone it, even by my standards.

I gave a half-tap on my wrist chip, activating my bioclock. *Christ, I knew it! I'm going to be late.* But what choice did I have? Kaye was a mess, and I had to do something for the sister I never had. That was me, all action and looking out for others—I had arranged for Avie to be hospitalized. It was clear she needed medical assistance. But now I'd never get to UN Plaza on time. And I'd forgotten about the civil disobedience planned by the Anti-Automation protesters. Moreover, to cap it off, an emergency ordinance meant the closure of some airways and city sectors due to likely counterattacks from Dark Court cultists. From my apartment in the Earth-scraper sector, it was normally a five-minute ride to the United Nations HQ. Not today. Worse, Turtle Bay itself was being targeted by the protesters; that was exactly where I was headed.

Other hover cars crept past in the opposite direction, along the stacked airways above the museum-buildings sector of old Manhattan. As I glanced out of the side window at the Chrysler and MetLife buildings, dark shapes appeared to be writhing in the early morning shadows of the streets below, as if lurking in the heart of the East Side, just for me. I just couldn't shake the feeling of being followed, no matter how hard I tried.

There was a vibration alert in my ear—I activated my holotab. *Dammit!* It was a reminder that I hadn't responded to the girl's proximity invite. Embry Tonks. *So that's her name.* I knew I would never see her again. I never did. I never could—relationships, they just weren't my thing. After years of therapy, the diagnosis was that I was scarred by love, maybe even scared of it. I paid a lot of e-Continental's to be told what I already knew. I issued a dark laugh at the irony, before directing a blink command at the erase tab. With that, Embry Tonks's ID and contact links were permanently wiped from my holotab. A twinge of guilt briefly arrested me—I hated ghosting people. And she was sweet. But there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it; except to try and forgive myself for my dysfunction—exactly what Clyde always advised.

As I anxiously parsed the updated ETA details on the autopiloting VirDa's holographic screen, I received the second high-priority ear alert of the day. Incoming Interpol mail. I activated my holotab again—a briefing report sent from the team at the UN's Counter-Cyberterrorism Command. It was prepared by one Dr. Ousmane Diouf—the WHO Director whom I would soon be meeting in person. Apparently, he directed responses to global medical emergencies.

As I began reading, my heart nearly stopped: they were calling it Fatal Insomnia. Only Unskills were affected, and just those

who were attending LifeWorks facilities for the Up-skilling procedure. *So that's the emergency. Avie! Please not her*, I thought.

My hands started shaking so badly my holotab jerked around in front of me; I could barely read. I took some calming breaths, anxious to find out more about what they were labeling a global pandemic.

It was all bad. Sentinel had triggered a yellow alert for a global spike in sleep deprivation fourteen days ago. Yesterday evening, as the earliest diagnosed had started dying, the alert had been upgraded to amber. The live ticker on the Sentinel database in Geneva showed 1,143,751 confirmed diagnoses of insomnia. And well over 57,000 dead and counting. The entire Up-skilling program had now been placed on hiatus.

Cases of insomnia had been reported across four federations, three republics, and one kingdom. Twenty-four national territories in total, spanning Tier One and Tier Two states. It was only twelve hours ago that Sentinel had issued the automated warning for a global medical emergency. The first cases dated back six weeks, the same time that the global Up-skilling program went live. But the standard diagnosis for chronic insomnia required four weeks of sleep deprivation, as acute cases typically resolved themselves earlier than that.

As I pored over the electronic files, graphics, and maps, I learned that the Up-skilling program was open to just the three lowest soc-ed classes: Unskills, Semiskills, and Skills. But inevitably, the majority of volunteers for the program were Unskills, and seventy-five percent of them had now been diagnosed with symptoms. The other two soc-ed classes were unaffected.

Before I could read more, the autopilot hailed me in the passenger cabin. "High Commissioner King, I regret to inform you that access to UN Plaza has been denied."

“What?” I exclaimed. “I work there, I’m preauthorized.”

“It’s a new NYPD ordinance, just transmitted. Airway access to UN Plaza is restricted until at least noon, due to rioting in the vicinity, throughout the Turtle Bay area.”

*Just my luck*, I thought, although it stood to reason that Start Apollo and his latest million-person protest would target UN facilities. After all, the UN had meekly acquiesced to the whole automation agenda pushed by the leading Tier One states. The whole wheeze was run by and effectively for the upper social classes. Only now did they pay attention to the Unskills; now that cities across the automated world were burning. The Unskills were angry. They were permanently unemployed with no prospects, and just a UN-sanctioned federal handout to live on. The demogrant was a pittance, barely enough to scrape by. Hell, I would be angry too.

“What about airway access from the other side, from the East River?” I asked.

“I’ll plot a detour,” the autopilot replied, before maneuvering into a different airway.

As we crossed back through the lower Lexington airway, circling in the direction of Roosevelt Island, I had a better view of the protests unfolding below. The terrestrial pedestrian and transit corridors of Midtown East were teeming with Unskills. Virtually every vertipad I could see had been doused with accelerant and was on fire. Traffic couldn’t land. Police security droids were in low-flying formation above the transit corridors, attempting to disperse crowds, pushing them into the already congested pedestrian corridors. In one sector, below the city airway junction-stacks, a squadron of droids had deployed a low-flying sonic cannon unit. I watched grimly as protesters fell over in its path like tenpins, flailing on the ground in agony, clutching

their ears. The device was designed to mess with the ear implant, triggering a neural shock in the language chip. *It has come to this*, I mused, more than troubled by what I was witnessing.

As we approached the Queensboro Bridge airway, the hover cab was now close enough to terrestrial level to pick out the details on the holographic signs. Protesters were waving all the usual ones: *Human Rights Not AI Rights. Abolish Automation. We Want To Work. Unskill Don't Mean No Skill.*

The traffic ahead of us slowed, before coming to a halt. My cab bobbed around in midair, between the LED lane markers, while we waited for the congestion to ease up.

I still had my holotab open, so I activated the local MyPlace news bulletin. There was a live feed from a satellite-TV drone hovering above the ground below. A large pocket of counter-protesters, hooded Dark Court extremists, was moving steadily along an adjacent transit corridor. They were headed toward a large group of Unskills, kettled into a now overcrowded pedestrian corridor by the NYPD drones.

As the Dark Court cultists approached, they began heckling the Unskills. They were accompanied by wheeled daemons supporting a Dark Court holographic banner—an image of a hooded watcher standing atop a high tower. The cultists were better funded—they could afford droids. There was a range of alternating displays held aloft by the daemons' flexi-lift extenders. The vile slogans read: *Vote 4 compulsory sterilization. Useless Eaters. Say no to moral depravity.* Chants of "pedos" from the Dark Court extremists could be clearly heard above the din of droid sirens and the screams of innocent Unskills being crushed in the mayhem.

A scuffle broke out as a small group of Unskills clambered over the thermoformed barrier between pedestrian lanes,

marching toward the procession of Dark Court extremists. A close-up showed a hooded Dark Court cultist pushing over a female Unskill, before grabbing another one by the hair, viciously dragging her ten meters across the polycarbonate surface. The counter-protester was wearing a balaclava with a Dark Court logo. From the physique, clearly male—the Dark Court cultists invariably were. He spat on her, before mouthing something. The shape of his snarled lips was unmistakable, a by-now-familiar refrain: “Sterilize her!”

A formation of armed drones arrived. *About time!* One began broadcasting warnings for the Dark Court mob to disperse.

“I can set you down on the FDR Pedestrian Corridor,” the autopilot announced. “I’ve located one vertipad still functioning.” I deactivated my screen. At least I could walk from there.

The cab dropped onto the vertipad and taxied down to the pedestrian disembarkation bay. I glanced around before jumping out. This pedestrian corridor, on the bank of the river, was deserted—probably due to NYPD restrictions in force. I pressed my wrist chip again, activating my holotab. I scrolled through the menu with gaze commands before blinking to select the mapping app. I blinked to select the best route; the holographic map began projecting onto the screen floating in front of me. I started walking quickly, shoulders hunched. Within a few minutes, once I turned a slight bend, the sixty-five-story glass façade of the UN Secretariat building rose up into view, around eight hundred meters ahead, gleaming in the morning sunlight.

But just then, twenty meters in front of me, a small group of Dark Court cultists emerged, out from a side corridor. I grimaced—this only meant trouble. There were four of them, this time with cappa hoods covering their heads, obscuring their faces from sec-cam and LS orb identification by NYPD droids.

They were no doubt trying to imitate their beloved, so-called *adjudicators*, the self-appointed, anonymous leaders of this vile cult of violence and misinformation. The cultists were dressed in black from head to toe, including leather pants and tunics. They even wore black, tactical Kevlar gloves.

The cultists spotted me. “Let’s get her, boys,” said one voice. Then I heard raucous laughter.

They moved toward me, cutting off my route to the UN employee East River entrance. And as they approached, they pulled out neural shock sticks, sheathed in cases worn around their belts. Of course, just my luck. The long, thin devices were illegal, and for good reason. If applied for more than a few seconds, they could result in permanent brain damage or even death. I steeled myself—this was the only way through.

As I neared, the group appeared surprised I was still heading toward them—not the response they expected. I would never run away again, not since that night in the Black Forest, twenty years ago. Sure, I had been through Interpol’s basic combat training, back in the day. For what that was worth. But since the Black Forest, I had taken self-defense training to insane levels, obsessive as always. You could say I had elevated it to the status of a dark art.

“Looks like an Unskill to me,” snarled one as they drew closer.

“Very pretty, like the bright orange hair. Let’s first have fun with this useless eater,” quipped another. They fanned out, to encircle me.

Once surrounded I stopped, turning slowly, facing each one in turn, speaking clearly. “First, I’m a Superior soc-ed. Not that it matters to you lowlifes. I would take you on anyway. And second, I suggest you drop your weapons, and walk away before y’all get hurt.”

There was momentary silence, before vicious laughter erupted. “Oh, we have one with attitude here. Let’s get the bitch,” said another, the leader maybe. I glanced over my shoulder as he moved in from my rear. His cappa had fallen off his head, slightly revealing his face. This was the same cultist that I’d seen dragging the woman by the hair. As I reached under my jacket for the handle of my coil pistol, pulling it from my kydex holster, he raised his neural stick to strike me, while rushing forward. I spun around and twisted slightly—his striking arm missed. But my evasive action meant that my gun spilled from my hand, skittering across the polycarbonate surface away from me.

The cultist glided past, now off-balance, flailing at thin air. And as he missed me, he began falling, skidding along the ground, grazing his face on the polycarbonate surface which left striations across one cheek. As he lay dazed, his face on the side of the polycarbonate surface, weals of blood began trickling down his face. The laughter of the other three suddenly stopped dead.

Another, slightly taller, moved forward, cussing at me.

“A slippery whore, aren’t you,” he snarled as he eyed me up and down. “Although, a bit too skinny for my taste.”

I eyed *him* up and down. “You’re definitely too thick for mine,” I retorted, arching a brow. That did it—I had gotten under his skin. He dashed at me, growling.

Self-defense training had taught me to aim for vulnerable areas. Not the chest, that tended to be ineffective. And not the knees—too much precision was required in the heat of the moment. As the cultist lunged, front on, I went all in with a groin kick. He was at exactly the right distance from me as I drove my hips forward, leaning back slightly while I kicked forcefully with my right leg. I used my lower shin and the ball of my foot. I struck him hard, feeling the soft tissue of his groin flatten and



separate under his pants, before he howled in agony, dropping to the ground.

“Oops, did that hurt?” I asked, in a mock-simpering voice. The injured cultist rolled around like a crazed animal, clutching his groin, eyes tight shut, making a high-pitched howl.

I made to retrieve my pistol from where it had come to rest, but I was cut off. The remaining two cultists moved forward in tandem, behind me on my left and in front of me to my right. The cultist to my left suddenly darted behind me. I felt his breath on the nape of my neck, his arms squeezing around me, as he attempted to incapacitate me with a bear hug attack. Meanwhile, the second one moved forward, now with his neural rod raised, ready to strike as I stood helpless in front of him.

As soon as I felt the arms of the first cultist wrapping me from behind, I bent forward from the waist, shifting my weight, making it difficult for him to pick me up. This also gave me the angle I knew I now needed to throw elbows from side to side. And in the split second before the second attacker could reach me, I threw the cultist behind a double elbow strike, a sharp sequence into either side of his body, aiming at his kidneys. I heard him wince in pain, as he involuntarily released me, keeling forward. His head was now low, directly behind my back. I repeated the elbow strike, one-two, making sharp contact with his face. I heard one cheekbone crack, as the force of my strikes sent the cultist tumbling backward, making a strange, almost inhuman gurgling sound.

And as the second attacker reached me, his neural rod moving forward high above his head, I jabbed with my right hand, throwing a heel palm strike. I aimed for his throat, flexing my wrist, making sure to recoil the strike. The cultist’s head snapped up and back in an unnatural way. I watched in grim fascination

as he tottered backward, before toppling to the polycarbonate surface, making a sickening, cracking sound as his head hit the ground.

Without warning, I heard shaky breathing immediately behind me. And too late, I realized the leader was back up, about to ambush me. I heard the snicker of a neural rod being activated, and then paroxysms of agony—a burning sensation wracked my entire body.

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When I came to, I was pinned to the ground, splayed on my back. My arms were being held down and out, one by each cultist, while the leader stood over me, leering down at me. The fourth attacker was still unconscious, a couple of meters away. I craned my neck to get a better view—blood was oozing from beneath his cappa as he lay motionless on the ground.

I didn't know how long I had been out, but this wasn't good. The leader bent down over me, jerked the lapels of my leather jacket, pulling it open, and began ripping at my blouse. Buttons scattered around me on the polycarbonate surface, glittering like small pearls in the early morning sun.

"You'll get what's coming to you, now," he snarled, as he exposed my flesh.

I smiled faintly up at him. "Why the gloves?" I asked, as he fumbled, attempting to wrench off my bra. He smiled and pulled off the Kevlar glove from his right hand.

"You're right. I should enjoy these titties with my bare hands."

And as the Dark Court wannabe-adjudicator touched my skin, I closed my eyes as my Eye opened. The emotional halo came. But this was a rush of hate, a locomotive of black anger, speeding

out of him. He was a Semiskill, while his two older twin sisters had been certified at the higher manual class as Skill soc-eds the year before him.

He jumped back, suddenly startled, as he felt my Eye on him—I had already started to burn him. And his surprised reaction caused the other two to loosen their grip on my arms, just for a fraction of a second. But that was all the time I needed. I was up on one knee in a flash and grabbed the leader by his still outstretched hand. Now my Eye locked into him—he was stuck. I twisted his arm behind his back in a half-Nelson, forcing him down so that his face lay sideways against the polycarbonate surface. I pressed one knee down with force into the small of his back, maintaining pressure. And holding his bare hand behind him, I continued to burn him. Creases began spreading out across his face, as he lay helpless, motionless, snared by my Eye, as I absorbed his time. Once I'd burned a decade I stopped, releasing him. That was sufficient—a cautionary warning for the others.

I stepped back, glancing around at the two remaining cultists to assess their next move. They were still on their haunches, a couple of meters either side of me. They each stood slowly, gasping as they watched their stricken comrade beneath me, gingerly attempting to push himself up from the ground. He was now visibly older; his face had aged. He glanced down at his hands, the smooth translucence of youth no longer quite there. As he managed to stand, he looked toward me, fear visibly puckering the lines of his face beneath his hood.

“So who’s next?” I asked, fixing the remaining two with a piercing look. They each began backing away. “Leave those, and you can go,” I commanded, gesturing toward their neural shock rods. The two cultists glanced nervously at one another before dropping their weapons; then they turned and fled. I moved

forward, picked up the two shock rods, and tossed them into the East River. I moved toward the still unconscious cultist, kicking his fallen neural rod into the river too. I then turned back to the one remaining Dark Court member. I pointed to the rod that he was still clutching. Before I could say anything further, he meekly threw it into the river, before taking a step farther back from me. I stooped to recover my fallen weapon and placed it back in the holster under my jacket.

“What are you, a witch?” the cultist asked, his voice now quivering with fear.