

Machinae

By Wyatt Wilke

To my mother and father, for helping with everything I couldn't do by myself

PART I:

HOPE

Prelude - Creation

Mach looked up, his eyes falling straight ahead and taking in the sight of his defaced locker. The faded blue color had been vandalized by the striking red ink of markers, used to scrawl clustered, overlapping words. Though Mach could make out words like “freak” or “worthless,” other longer messages attacked his Machinae or his isolation. Yet he ignored the words, never expressing how deep they shot pains through him.

He opened his locker, taking out what he needed—his failed machine—before shutting the door and making his way down the hallway. He tucked the machine—his Machinae—which was in the shape of a dove, between his scrawny arms. He pushed open the front doors of the school, the natural sun a bright blazing contrast to the dull artificial lights that flickered while illuminating the halls and classrooms.

Mach was creating a robot. A Machinae.

He sat down on the ground under the shade of a tree, setting the dove on his lap. He took a screwdriver out of his pocket, holding it between his fair-skinned fingers, each one tainted with dust and oil from past tinkering. He carefully unscrewed the iron plate making up the machine’s plumage. It had the

form of the dove, a pointed steel beak, spherical eyes made of shining black glass, wings and feathers of copper, and a body of iron that extended to its tail.

It was beautiful.

The school he went to always looked more like a rundown factory to him, with endless bleak, colorless and lifeless rooms. It was designed to make people into mindless workers, rather than people of tomorrow who could change the world for the better. They wanted machines, not men.

He didn't *want* to become a machine. He had ambition, ideas, passion, and many more things that gave him his humanity, all of which society wanted to strip from him and throw away. He refused. He wouldn't accept it.

With one final twist of the plastic handle, he fully loosened the screw, releasing the breastplate from the rest of the dove. Mach removed it, putting the piece of metal in the front pocket of his blacksmith apron, where the sound of it colliding and clanging with the other removed pieces of the machine was muffled by the dried and worn leather.

Mach looked inside the mechanical dove, finding the inner workings of it. It was a complex system of gears, wires, and other machinery that would leave any man thoroughly lost. He put the screwdriver between his teeth, clamping down on the plastic handle in the familiar grooves created by his habit of biting his screwdriver.

He took out a thin metal wire from one of the side pockets of his apron, poking around carefully inside the robot until he had moved enough wires to the side to see the miniature engine that powered the whole robot, its core, the centerpiece. The little engine held a purple crystal—*Vitranus*, the lifeblood of

his beloved machine. In the Machinae, the faint glow emanated by the *Vitranus* flowed into the connected wires running throughout the dove. As though the engine was a heart, beating glowing blood throughout.

He had named the dove after himself. After all, it was his child, his *magnum opus*. Mach hoped that this Machinae was only the beginning of a reform, an advancement of Machinae helping shape the world into the utopia he envisioned. In his utopia, Machinae would soar through the skies, spotting fires and far away dangers, stopping them before they could spread. Machinae would roam the streets, hunting rats and other pests. Machinae would live in people's homes as life-long pets and companions.

Ambitious was an understatement.

The violet glow, as bright as it was, wasn't nearly as brilliant as it had been. Mach made a mental note to add more Vitranus into the engine when he got home as he carefully screwed the breastplate back onto the dove and returned his screwdriver to the front pocket of his leather apron.

He stood up, dusting himself off and walked down the quiet road of his town, holding the Machinae carefully, as if it was his child. The town was small and quaint, so it was no surprise that everyone knew everyone else and where they lived. That made it all the easier for Mach's bullies to torment him, whether it be throwing rocks, or insults similar or verbatim to those scribbled on his locker. He walked down the path from the school to the town, a flowing river to his left. At the river's edge sat a real dove, pecking at the dirt in hopes of a worm.

He glanced over his shoulder, whispering a curse under his breath as he saw the wicked expressions on the three boys—all older than he—only a couple paces away. His tormentors. Each one held rocks, ready to use his head for their target practice. Mach held his Machinae tightly, picking up his pace to a run. Maybe this time he could get away from them. Hopefully, before they broke any parts of his machinery.

“You can’t run forever, Mach!” Krae—the most notorious and ‘leader’ of the bullies—shouted after him. The others took that as their cue, releasing an onslaught of stones, each one carefully lobbed in an arc aimed straight at Mach. Most of them missed, thankfully, but some hit him. Each strike of the hard rock on Mach’s shoulder blade created a cheer from the trio of bullies.

His eyes widened in horror as one of the stones perfectly stretched over his head, slamming into the Machinae carefully cradled in his arms. The rock dented the metal, damaging it with ease. Sparks flew from the broken wires and miniature engine. Yes, he had been hit, but bruises were nothing compared to the pain of his machine. He’d gotten tens upon tens upon tens of bruises from his bullies, but the aches of his body didn’t compare to the one he felt in his heart for the robot in his arms.

Mach stopped right in his tracks, the rest of the world dissolving around him. All he could focus on was his Machinae. “No, no, no, no, nonono,” he muttered under his breath, in denial of what had happened. His words blended together as they passed his lips faster and faster. His perfect invention, his *deus ex machina*, his everything—masterfully crafted in every way, shape, and form, and yet it had been ruined all the same by a lucky throw.

Cruel, was life to man.

He held the mechanical dove tighter, his calloused fingers digging into the metal so hard he almost feared breaking it even more. He felt a rush in his veins. Was it anger? Was it a need for vengeance? Was it a need to rebuild and repair what had been so wrongfully broken? It didn't matter, the cause was irrelevant compared to the effect—a burst of energy that went straight to his legs, willing him to run as fast as his body could handle.

So he did.

He ran. And ran. And ran. And ran. Until finally, when he looked up again, he was already at his home. Tears flooded his eyes. Those ignorant imbeciles had ruined everything. They had ruined—destroyed—a machine that could've changed the world for the better. And for what? The rush of dopamine his sorrow gave them? It was pathetic. That's what it was.

Mach rushed inside his house, weaving past his parents, ignoring their callings to him as he slammed the door to his bedroom behind him. He carefully set his Machinae down on his desk, which had become his workbench as of recent years, then collapsed onto his bed.

He cried. He muffled his sobs with his pillow, letting his shoulders shake away the barrier that held back an emotional break down and fall. He felt as though a dam had burst, a dam that held not just his current feelings, but *everything* he had ever felt, from anger to sadness.

After what felt like hours, he brought his face out of his pillow, still sniffing. He wiped his face, feeling shame wash over him. Boys didn't cry,

especially not over silly things like this. That's what his father would say. He steeled himself with a deep breath.

He took the words to heart, moving over to his desk and disassembling the Machinae, carefully placing its parts in marked outlines on his desk, discarding those he deemed unsalvageable. He glanced up at the blueprints of the Machinae propped up against the wall, using it as a guide to take all of the robot apart. He couldn't change the hand life dealt him, but he could change the way he used the cards.

For an amount of time lost on him, Mach began to tinker. He fixed and repaired every dent, bruise, batter—everything, every miniscule detail that was wrong with the Machinae. He would have had to redo everything anyway, this mark of Machinae hadn't worked. What was he on now, Mark 50?

A glance at his blueprint revealed he was off by a hundred. He grimaced, that was a lot. A lot for a self-proclaimed genius and prodigy. Prodigies didn't fail. They got everything right. He ignored the thought, recognizing it as a seed of self-doubt just before it could plant itself in his mindscape. He rebuilt the Machinae, making major tweaks to the design.

He collapsed back in his chair, exhaustion creeping up on him. There was one last step. He carefully took the *Vitranus*, slipping it into the core of the Machinae. A purple glow—significantly stronger than he had seen before, thanks to the increased amount of *Vittraus*—emanated through the beast of metal. He held his breath. Was this the one? Would this one be the one that finally worked?

A minute passed.

Then a second.

A third.

Nothing. Just like the hundred or so Marks before it. He let himself breathe, more out of frustration than necessity. He turned his head to the closed door to his room as his mother called out his name for dinner. He'd have yet another conversation with his parents, the same one, practically verbatim.

"How was school?" his mother would ask him. *"Fine,"* he would respond in his usual mundane tone. Not a word more. *"What about your robot—a Machinae, you called it?"* his father would ask with an awkward smile. He could practically see the cringe-worthy flash of teeth ingrained in his mind from how many times the man did it. *"Failure, again,"* he would inevitably respond. Life would be as repetitive as ever.

He stood up from his chair, walking dreadfully over to the door. His hand was an inch away from the doorknob when he heard a chirp behind him. It sounded as though it were a bird, if the bird had copper windpipes. He froze. Another chirp. Artificial sounding with an undertone of nature. He whipped his head around, seeing the Machinae dove... *working!*

Its eyes glowed a vibrant purple color, its head cocking to the side, mimicking a true dove. Slowly, a grin spread across his face as the false bird chirped yet again. He began to laugh—hysterically, almost. Finally, after months upon months of work, he had mastered the craft of the machine.

He had created artificial life.

He had created the first ever Machinae.

Chapter I - Determination

Hivoc sifted through his wallet as he stood in front of the food stall, whispering a quiet curse under his breath as he felt the engravings on the coins. They weren't enough to buy even the cheapest food item at the stall—and barely enough to get a drink. He was dead broke at the moment. Turns out, being a hired swordsman and protector in a time when people are mostly at peace wasn't a big moneymaker.

He cleared his throat, looking away from the stall owner and beginning to walk away, muttering lies about how he wasn't even hungry to begin with, and that the stall didn't offer anything he wanted. The kind young woman, a family friend of his named Limizella, behind the stall saw through his lie on the spot—the two knew each other too well to get away with lies like that.

“It's on the house, Hivoc,” Limizella said, turning and putting some food on the grill, peppering the beef with an assortment of spices. The smell alone made Hivoc's stomach growl loudly. He looked down at his feet, embarrassed—at his stomach's obvious gratitude and at the fact he needed the free meal in the first place.

“You're the best, Liz,” Hivoc said, taking a few coins out of his wallet and dropping them into her tip jar. It was the least he could do, especially for

someone so near and dear to his heart like Limizella. “I owe you one,” he added on as she handed him the food—hot and fresh off the grill. The mix of attractive smelling garlic, rosemary, and thyme flooded his nose as he euphorically accepted the plate. He took a greedy inhale, taking it in.

“You owe me a lot more than one, Hivoc,” she responded, earning an awkward chuckle of admission from Hivoc. He waved goodbye as he walked away, taking a bite of the carefully made meal, the flavors melting on his tongue. As he walked back to his house, his sword swung in its sheath, batting against his leg as it hung from his belt. He’d deal with that later, when he had the money to afford to fix problems.

Luttecord was a smaller city in the country of Ollown, but it was home for Hivoc. He walked down mostly empty streets, only an occasional passerby paying him no mind—either walking their dog, going on a jog, or some other meaningful commute. When he rounded the corner, his mouth open and food to his lips, he stopped.

The forge, where Hivoc had gotten his sword, had been completely leveled, along with a multitude of other houses surrounding it. It was a terrible sight, with many of the people who lived and worked in the neighborhood standing in shock and despair. He finished his food, suddenly having lost his appetite.

He walked across the street to Krae Fharn—the local blacksmith. Krae had also been a bit short on business, people didn’t have that much of a need—or the spare coin—to go to a blacksmith, but the older man still had fuller pockets than Hivoc. His son, Isticus, was standing there with narrowed eyes, tapping his foot against the concrete angrily with his hand covering his mouth.

Krae was paler and shorter than his son, with deep brown hair flowing past his shoulders. His short, muscular stature, developed over decades of being a blacksmith, was counterbalanced by his kind gaze and forgiving nature. For as long as Hivoc had known him, Krae's face had largely been hidden by a beard and mustache. In his twenty three years, Hivoc had never seen him make a change.

"*Mach*," Hivoc said in a whisper, grabbing the attention of father and son. It wasn't a question of who or why: no one had the destructive power to do this except for one man—Mach Steelspine, the man currently running for, and most likely to win, the presidential position of Ollown.

"A horde of Machinae came while Isticus and I were out getting groceries. We were lucky we weren't home, we could've been human pancakes," Krae said, his gruff voice worn with age. His hair and beard had started turning gray, a byproduct of the stress imposed by Mach's political campaign, which quite literally involved leveling people's houses and rebuilding them.

How he got away with it, Hivoc couldn't say. It was as if he had everyone in Ollown wrapped around his grubby little finger.

A core part of Mach's campaign for presidency was sending his Machinae to a variety of towns and cities, destroying buildings, and then rebuilding them, better and stronger. It had led to the deaths and displacements of hundreds of citizens, but also had lowered homelessness. A double edged sword, as Krae would call it.

"It's not fair," Isticus snapped, throwing his hands up in the air. Isticus was nineteen, but he had the face of his father—a mustache and beard hair just

starting to grow in, taking after his father's deep brown hair and matching brown eyes. However, Isticus' eyes had more anger in them than Krae's. Isticus was significantly taller than his father, and much more lanky, having not trained his body for blacksmithing nearly as long as Krae. He still made quality weapons. He had made the blade for Hivoc's current sword, and Hivoc gave the work the credit it was due. Isticus was just as good a smith as his dad.

"It'll be okay, Isticus; Mach won't get away with this. He'll be stopped, I know he will." Krae placed a soothing hand on his son's shoulder, having to reach up to comfort the taller boy. It didn't exactly have the desired effect, but Isticus still recognized the effort.

"Doesn't change the fact he's doing it in the first place," Isticus muttered bitterly as he walked off. Krae shook his head, looking away from his son and to Hivoc instead. Hivoc gave a small understanding nod, giving Krae his silent sympathies and condolences. The Fharn family would be out of business for a while.

"At least we didn't lose the house," Krae said under his breath, shaking his head with discontent. Hivoc could hear the spark of anger in his voice, mixing with a rebellious determination. Krae added on as he began walking away, following after his son, "Isticus and I are boycotting Mach—we're not engaging in anything that man creates if we can help it, especially those damned Machinae. The boy's right, he's getting away with it now. But he can't forever, not if the people speak out."

Hivoc nodded, wishing the blacksmith farewell. Hivoc made his way further down the street, sharing sympathetic looks and best wishes with people

he passed who were in a similar—or even worse—situation than Krae and Isticus. Mach had done all this—killed people, destroyed their homes, stripped them of their lives seemingly without a drop of remorse.

Then again, it wasn't that simple.

Mach did horrible things, that much was obvious. But for every horrible thing he did, he “made up for it” in some way or another. Every house he destroyed he rebuilt with Machinae as his laborers, reconstructing them better than ever in record time and efficiency. Not only that, he was compensating for the injuries he had caused during the destruction of homes, via robotic replacements and enhancements.

Complicating the situation further, Mach's Machinae had been helping with environmental problems. The summer breeding season in Ollown meant lots of pests—mice, rats, and insects. The sudden burst of insects killed plants and caused the prices of nearly every basic commodity to spike. But the Machinae—bird Machinae specifically—ate some of the insects during that time, which helped lower them by a noticeable amount.

He hated the deliberation he felt, knowing Mach wasn't *just* doing horrible things. Normally, Mach did just enough good things that it was impossible to call him totally bad, but after what he'd seen today, his view on Mach was concrete. Mach was destructive. He would destroy Ollown if he became president.

Hivoc glanced up, seeing a hologram on a tall building—he had walked all the way to downtown, near where he lived. The hologram displayed Mach's face, grinning with perfectly white teeth. On the hologram was Mach's

campaign slogan—“Make it right, make it with Mach,” which was, in Hivoc’s opinion, pretty lackluster in terms of creativity, not that he could do any better.

Seeing the advertisement just after the destruction Mach had caused made Hivoc’s stomach churn with bitter irritation. He narrowed his eyes, shooting a glare at the digital image of Mach before walking along the downtown street. Buildings there were made of a white metal and powered with some underground tech sponsored by Mach to support his campaign. People crowded the streets, pushing past without a word in some mad walk to get to their destination a moment quicker.

Hivoc had always been more of a fan of the quiet life—uptown Luttecord had an atmosphere that downtown just couldn’t replicate, despite the numerous businesses claiming to be more authentic and closer to uptown; however, living downtown allowed him more work, so there he stayed for the time being.

Soon he was past the faux uptown restaurants and cafes, and he arrived at his house. By the time he stepped inside and shut the door behind him, his mind was set.

He was taking it upon himself to stop Mach.

No matter the price.

Chapter II - Headspace

Hivoc sat in front of his computer, hunched over and biting on an old pen out of habit. He glanced at his watch—hours upon hours had gone by. Wasted, in his opinion, on a conclusive and finalizing *nothing*. He groaned, leaning back in his chair, tilting it onto its back legs. He stared up at the ceiling, completely and utterly defeated.

After scouring online for an embarrassingly long time, he had deemed the results inconclusive. What happened to every prominent user who had posted hate for Mach? All that came from them now was radio silence. Chat rooms dedicated to Mach haters? All dead links, and the ones that did exist were mysteriously empty, void of all activity, despite being open for months.

Finally, the smaller newspapers that had printed Mach's misdeeds? Suddenly they lost funding and stopped printing, fading into obscurity. The bigger newspapers informing people of the rise of homelessness? The very next issue they went on and on about just how *amazing* Mach was.

Suspicious, yes, but overall inconclusive. What was he even searching for in the first place? Another ear that wasn't next door or down the street? A group of people who would validate his point of view? Something he could use

to strengthen his belief that Mach was as bad as he had painted him to be? Well, it didn't matter—none of it was found in the end.

Hivoc glanced out the window, seeing piles of rubble that were once staggering buildings shaping the unique skyline of Luttecord. The sight fueled him with rage—rage for himself, rage for others, rage against Mach for the destruction. He glared at nothing in particular, looking back at his computer screen and continuing his research with a renewed determination.

Hivoc scoured the corners of the internet, delving deep—far deeper than he had before, diving straight into the results and continuing on, even when almost all of them turned up little except a suspicious lack of anything in particular. He didn't even look at the time as he continued searching, letting the time pass without worry or thought.

He found an older forum of people, talking bad about Mach. The further he went into it though, the more the users would become suddenly inactive. He buried his face in his hands, a headache pounding against his skull painfully. He had an empty stomach, an empty brain, and a will to just give up for the day. And he was giving up, until a soft knock echoed through his door—his twin sister, Hivah.

“Come in,” he said with his tired voice muffled by his hands, not looking up from them as the door to his bedroom creaked open. His sister stepped through the door, carrying a plate of small foods he liked, a concerned look scrunching up her face.

Closing the door behind her, Hivah placed the plate down on his desk and sat down on his bed. She put a comforting hand on his back. Hivoc wasn't the

most sociable, but even locking himself away for this long rose concern in his sister.

Hivah glanced over her twin's shoulder to look at his computer screen, seeing the mess of tabs and search results looking for any information about Mach. The sight surprised her, considering Hivoc was the politically ignorant one of the two. *Then again*, she thought, biting down on her lip, *with the chaos that's going on right now, it's hard to be ignorant about it.*

She took a deep breath, shifting in her spot on his bed while searching her mind for the right words. She opened and closed her mouth in hesitance, finally shaping her ideas into sentences. "Hivoc, I know it's hard right now," she said, still unsure.

Hivoc huffed. *Thanks, Captain Obvious*, he wanted to say—his empty stomach controlled his thoughts more than he liked to admit—but he held back on saying anything, staying silent and listening to his sister. He slipped his hands away from his face, meeting Hivah's gaze as she continued.

"Do you maybe want to go on a walk? Clear your head? You don't have to, but at least know that the offer is standing if you want it." Hivah stood up, giving a concluding pat to Hivoc's shoulder before striding out of the room, nabbing one of the crackers off the plate she brought for him and eating it for herself.

Hivoc watched Hivah leave the room, staring at the closed wooden door for a minute. The room suddenly felt darker, now that he was aware of the late time. The sun had almost set completely, painting the sky a mesmerizing mix of oranges and purples and pinks. He stared at it, lost in its beauty.

He *really* needed to get out of his room.

He stood up from his chair, his legs aching from being in the same position for so long. He grabbed a bite of food from the plate Hivah had brought in as he stepped towards the door. He stopped with his hand hovering over the handle, looking back at his desk and seeing his sheath—with his sword still in it—propped up against the wood.

Better safe than sorry, he thought, grabbing the sword and connecting the sheath to his belt. It was out of habit, more than anything. He stepped out of his room into the living room, spotting his sister grabbing his coat out of the closet, her own already on. She handed him his coat as he drew close, which he put on without complaint.

“I knew you’d come along,” Hivah said when he had put it on. Her eyes snapped down to his waist, her brow scrunching together slightly when she saw the sheath at his hip. He looked away from her, waiting for her to scold him for bringing his sword with him everywhere. He couldn’t just *not*, though. He needed the reassurance of the blade ready to jump into his fingertips, he needed to know he could defend himself and Hivah—the only family he had left.

He closed his eyes, waiting for the expected words from Hivah telling him off for making his rapier a third wheel wherever they went. It existed almost as a third family member between them, always tagging along even when Hivah thought it was unnecessary.

She didn’t, just turned and started walking to the door. She gestured for him to follow her, which he did. The twins stepped out into the moonlight, the city quiet for the first time in weeks—not even the crickets chirped, not even the

wind whistled, not even the footsteps belonging to nameless faces echoed down streets near and far.

Hivoc and Hivah walked together down the silent streets of Luttecord, breathing in the nighttime air and absorbing the peace the evening provided. The peace was a stark contrast to the destruction Hivoc had seen that morning, in a completely different world than this one. He closed his eyes, letting his feet take him along as he just... existed.

When Hivoc opened his eyes again, he noticed that he and his sister had walked uptown. In fact, they had just passed Krae's destroyed blacksmithy, the rubble still there, looking untouched. As they stepped along the sidewalk, Hivah spotted two young children sitting on the curb with sunken eyes and hopelessness etched onto their faces.

Hivah's face softened, a look of sadness and pity painting her expression. She reached into her pocket and took out a little machine—a trinket of sorts, in the shape of a frog. She crouched down and offered it to the kids, who looked up at her with hesitant trust.

She placed the mechanical frog on the ground in front of them, twisting the winder before letting go of it. In an instant, the wind-up frog began to hop, croak and act alive. The kids' hesitant faces brightened in an instant, giggling at the mechanical frog. It hopped into their hands before stopping entirely. Hivah smiled down at them, waving goodbye to them as she left her handmade invention in their possession.

Hivoc and Hivah continued their walk, approaching an alleyway between brick buildings. Suddenly, Hivah pushed him between the two buildings and

into the alleyway, keeping him against the wall with her hands on his shoulders. She spoke in a whisper, like she was afraid someone would overhear them.

“Hivoc, how badly do you want to stop Mach?” she asked in a deadly serious tone.

Hivoc hesitated, then responded with the confidence he’d had all day. He knew what he wanted now, there was no doubt about it. “I’ll do anything if it means stopping Mach from hurting more people. I mean it.”

Chapter III - Rebels

Hivah nodded slowly as though she wasn't entirely sure. She took her hands off Hivoc's shoulders, stepping back and gesturing for him to follow her. Hivoc stepped away from the wall, feeling confused at Hivah's sudden strange behavior. He went along with her nonetheless.

Hivah led him further down the alley, eventually leading to a dead end. Pushed up against one of the brick walls was a dumpster, while spray painted on the other was inconspicuous graffiti of the symbol representing Mach's political party—a gear with each of its teeth replaced with hammerheads—was spraypainted on another. Hivah glanced around, checking to see if anyone was watching them.

When she was absolutely sure there were no prying eyes spying on them, she raised her fist to the brick wall with the graffiti, knocking on it like it was a door. Hivoc opened his mouth to question why in the world she'd do that, but he was quickly shut up as the brick wall began to open—swinging outward on invisible hinges.

At the end of the pathway was an elevator, with an operator standing and holding a small book in his hand, reading it silently. Hivoc didn't bother to lift up his jaw, staring in astonishment at the created passage for him and his twin,

who somehow *knew* about this. She walked through the opening in the brick wall, going straight into the elevator.

After a moment of hesitation, Hivoc took a stride forward, joining Hivah and the operator on the elevator. The operator pressed the bottommost button on the elevator, the brick wall taking the shape it had once more. The elevator platform began to go down, the lack of doors apparent as they descended. As they went down, the concrete wall in front of them grew darker and darker, and the various graffiti spray-painted onto it became less and less visible.

Soon, the shaft was completely black, except for the faint illumination from a small light on the platform. For a minute or so, it remained like that, going down with a non-descript black wall in front of them, hiding them from the world beyond. And then, light.

In front of the trio was an underground base. What looked like hundreds of people were wandering around, some holding clipboards and looking over destroyed and dissected Machinae while others seemed to be smithing weapons and practicing their swordsmanship. It was nothing like Hivoc had seen before, the walls covered in illegible graffiti and defacements of Mach's image.

As the elevator came to a stop, Hivah and Hivoc stepped out of the elevator, Hivah walking down a familiar pathway through the various machines and training mats, going straight past them like they weren't even there. Hivoc lagged behind, gaping in awe at everything he saw.

"Welcome, Hivoc, to the rebellion," Hivah said, turning back to face him and spreading out her arms to show Hivoc just how expansive it was.



Loud music played in the background while someone tinkered with a robot off to the side, as Hivoc experienced an odd sense of déjà vu. *A spitting image of my sister*, he thought, walking past the person working on the robot with scrutiny and dedication. He could recall many different occasions where Hivah was blasting rock music through their home and creating some new trinket, ignoring his many pleas to turn her music down.

He felt a hand—Hivah’s—grab his wrist, tugging him past the mass of people and machines, and further into the underground base. She led him to a giant steel door—like that of a bank vault. Hivah walked up to the keypad next to the door, entering a code into it. The keypad screen flashed green. The steel door made a loud creaking sound, opening itself by rolling to the side just enough for the twins to slither through the opening.

As soon as they did, the door shut behind them with a loud slam, rattling his bones. Hivoc couldn’t help but feel unnerved. What was this place? Why had Hivah taken him down here? How had Hivah known about this in the first place? So many questions flooded his mind all at once, almost overwhelming him with the flurry.

Hivah didn’t seem to notice his confusion—or did, but didn’t bother doing anything about it—dragging him along through a skinny and barely illuminated hallway, the sound of their footsteps bouncing off the walls and echoing back to them. Finally, after a minute or two of walking, they approached a significantly

smaller room. At least, it was when compared to the gargantuan size of the first room in this mysterious place.

In the room were a handful of people—six by Hivoc’s count—each one doing something different. Two, a young man and woman, wielding masks and protective wear, were busy taking apart and examining a Machinae. Not just any Machinae, a human-shaped one, which Mach had begun mass producing recently.

Hivoc’s eyes widened in recognition as he saw two others among the six—Krae and Isticus. The two of them were working on a sword, Isticus hammering the blade, glowing orange with heat, while Krae held it still, moving it appropriately. He forced his eyes away from the familiar faces.

The final pair was at a table showing a map of Ollown. A man around Hivoc’s age, was pointing a stick at a location on the map and talking to a boy in his late teens, with a ghost of a mustache making its way onto his face.

Hivah stepped forward, getting everyone’s attention with a loud whistle. The two people with welding masks over their heads paused their work, lifting up their masks. Hivoc was surprised, his eyes widening when he found that the young woman behind the welding mask was actually Limizella.

“Everyone,” Hivah started, taking a step to the side and gesturing at me, “this is my twin brother, Hivoc. He’s joining the Rebellion.” Hivoc blinked. *Rebellion?* When Hivah had asked him if he was willing to do anything to stop Mach, he didn’t think she meant becoming part of some underground resistance group. Then again, he *did* say he’d do anything, and he wasn’t someone that went back on his word.

Hivoc nodded weakly, agreeing with Hivah.

“Not happening.” Hivoc looked over to the voice’s origin, seeing the man his age at the map of Ollown stand up. He seemed like the leader of the group, considering the immediate authority and finality in his voice. Hivah narrowed her eyes at him, stepping forward almost protectively.

“Why not, Avion?” she asked. *Avion*, Hivoc thought, looking at the man. He had short black hair and orange eyes. His skin was pale, his clothes mostly made of leather and baggy fabric. Hivoc also noticed an attachment on his belt, one specifically made to hold a sheath—a longsword, maybe? Avion was undeniably attractive, though he didn’t seem like the kind of person who got into relationships. A lone wolf type, more likely.

“Hivah, we talked about this. Everyone who you think should be integrated needs to be put through a test from us *all*. We’re a team. He is a liability. If he is as untrustworthy as he looks, we boost our chances of a spy infiltrating our ranks and destroying us from the inside, letting Mach kill the only threat to his presidency.” As Avion spoke, he walked over from behind the table, stepping closer to the twins.

“Are you suggesting that my brother’s planning on *betraying us*?” Hivah asked, scoffing in offense. She put her hands on her hips, shooting a glare at Avion, taking offense on Hivoc’s behalf. She had a tendency to do that—she was protective of him, ever since their mother died when they were young, although Hivoc was more skilled with a sword than she was.

“Nothing is out of the realm of possibility. Hivah, give me one good reason *why* I should allow him into the rebellion on a whim. We need to just hit him

over the head now and hope he gets enough amnesia to forget this happened.” Avion crossed his arms in front of his chest, now standing in front of the twins, looking down at the both of them—though Hivoc was nearly the same height as him.

Hivah opened her mouth to speak, but Hivoc beat her to it: “I’m strong.” That got Avion’s attention, and everyone else’s for that matter, as everyone in the room looked at Hivoc instead of his identical twin sister. “I’m dedicated too. I’ll do whatever it takes to bring Mach down. I’ve seen what he’s done to Luttecord, and I won’t stand for it.”

Avion and Hivoc stared at each other, eyes locked in a staring contest. Avion searched Hivoc’s gaze for even a hint of deceit. He found nothing, yet he held the stare, some unseen force holding it. Hivoc finally looked away, bending and breaking under Avion’s glare. Avion felt a drop of satisfaction over the small, practically meaningless, victory.

Avion waved dismissively, turning and walking back towards the table with the map in the center of the room. “Find him a room for tonight. Tomorrow we test his word. His initiation is through me and me alone, and therefore it is solely my choice if he passes.”

Chapter IV - Settle

Hivah led Hivoc from the “meeting room” where Avion and the highest ranking rebels, including herself, congregated for planning. She brought him down a flight of stairs, to a short hallway with ten doors—five on each side. It was illuminated by oil lamps hanging from the ceiling off chains.

Hivah walked Hivoc past all the doors with names on them—Avion Inkwell, Limizella Arkin, Xailu McTraw, Isticus and Krae Fharn, and finally, her own, Hivah Blackstone. She walked up to a door without a name on it, taking a pocket knife out of her pocket and scratching ‘HI’ onto the wood, dusting away the chips she scratched off.

“For Hivoc,” she said, gesturing to the door. He rolled his eyes as he twisted the handle and walked into the room. It was nothing special—a closet, a bed, and a dresser. He took off his sheath with his sword still in it, put it on the dresser, and stretched his shoulders.

Hivoc took off his shoes, letting himself get comfortable. “So this is where you go when you disappear everyday, huh?” he asked, sitting down on the bed. It wasn’t comfortable, just bearable. He lay down, stretching his legs and putting his hands behind his head.

“Yep,” Hivah responded, leaning against the doorframe with her arms crossed. With the oil lamps in the room and hall painting warm light on her face, her skin looked almost bronze—both in color and shine. “Though, everyone is normally more welcoming than this. Actually, Avion is always this cold, but you’ll get used to it pretty quickly.” She shrugged, then pushed off the wall, walking over to Hivoc to give an awkward pat to his shoulder. Affection wasn’t her strong suit, that was Hivoc’s role to fill. “G’night, bro. Sleep well, and don’t screw up in the morning, we need you in the resistance.”

Hivoc snorted, then nodded, trying to get comfortable on the bed. Hivah walked away, giving him a salute before shutting the door behind her. Her footfalls became quieter and quieter as she walked down the hall, eventually fading away. Hivoc got up from the bed, scanning the furniture in the room with dissatisfaction.

He hesitated, then began to quietly rearrange it, forcing the room to conform to his liking. When he was done, none of the furniture was in the same place where it started. He took a step back, admiring his work. Now he could sleep peacefully.

Hivoc was just about to climb into bed when the sound of a door opening came from behind him. He turned to find Avion standing there, his narrowed eyes widening slightly at the rearrangement. Avion looked over the room, the confusion clear as crystal on his face.

“*Zhuka soc kaimd...*” Avion said in his native tongue, Azurish, shaking his head and pinching the bridge of his nose. Hivoc didn’t speak the language, but he didn’t need a direct translation to recognize the surprise and disappointment

in Avion's tone. Hivoc stood there, awkwardly, as Avion's eyes slowly went to him, meeting in a soft glare. Hivoc was beginning to think that was his usual expression.

"You... what did you do to your room?"

"What does it look like?" Hivoc asked, testing the waters of Avion's patience. He immediately regretted his words, but it was too late to take them back. Avion glared again, unhappy with Hivoc's unserious words. It was hard to be as serious as Avion always was. Like trying to shine brighter than the sun. Impossible.

"Why did you rearrange the room?" Avion asked, stepping forward. He was irritated, first of all, but curious as well. He looked as though no one had ever done anything remotely like this before. Hivoc shrugged, looking around the room, proud of his work.

"I wanted to, it just didn't feel like me," Hivoc replied, his eyes meeting Avion again. Hivoc didn't usually believe in the 'if looks could kill,' saying, but Avion was very quickly shaking that belief. Hivoc gave him a weak smile, not entirely used to people not being a fan of his antics.

"Go to sleep. It will make your inevitable removal a lesser blow." Avion turned to leave, but stopped at the door, he faced Hivoc, adding, "And do *not* rearrange your room again, Limizella was under the belief we had a rat infestation."

He closed the door behind him, leaving Hivoc alone again. Hivoc was mildly surprised at Avion's hostility, feeling nerves creep up on him for the next morning. He decided to listen to Avion's advice, it'd be better to take bad

news—or good news, for that matter—with a mind that wasn't totally sleep-deprived.

Hivoc took off his shirt and pants, then dimmed the oil lamp by the bed. He couldn't sleep in the pitch black dark, it made him feel alone. He yawned, climbing under the covers of the disarrayed bed and resting his head on the pillow. He lay on his back, staring up at the ceiling, barely illuminated by the lamp.

I wish I'll get in, Hivoc thought, closing his eyes and remembering his mother. She had always told him that, every night, he would get one wish to send to the skies, and maybe, just maybe, it would become true. He took it to heart, wishing on the sky every night. *And that I can stop Mach*, he added as he settled under the covers. He opened his eyes again.

Most nights, when he was a kid, he wished for his father to show his face. He never knew who his father was, and whenever he asked his mom, she just said that he wasn't important, or that he was a man she didn't want him to be, then left it at that. That didn't stop Hivoc from wishing, night after night, for his father to prove his existence to him. He never did.

Hivoc's eyes fluttered closed, feeling the exhaustion of the day claim him. The hand of sleep grasped him, pulling him into slumber.



Hivoc woke up the next morning—a quick glance at the pocket watch in the pocket of his discarded clothes revealed it was 5:30. He yawned, getting up

from the bed and putting on the clothes he was wearing yesterday. He stretched, popping his back and cracking his knuckles.

He wandered out of the room, blinking away the sleep in his eyes as he made his way down the hallway. The only thought in his mind was getting a cup of tea, part of his usual morning routine. He made his way into the meeting room, looking up and scanning the room.

Standing there in the oil lamp light of the meeting room, in yesterday's clothing, wearing the same outfit as yesterday, was Avion. In his hand was a mug, filled with steaming hot coffee, and his orange eyes looked to the side to meet Hivoc's gaze. He quirked an eyebrow, yet greeted him, with less warmth than the liquid he had in his cup.

“You're awake.”

Chapter V - Fit

Hivoc blinked, surprised to see anyone else as awake as early as he was. Avion was surprised too, but it didn't show on his stern face. He turned to fully face Hivoc, taking a sip of his coffee before speaking. "No one else wakes this early," he said between sips of his drink.

Hivoc wondered if that was a good thing. Did getting up around the same time as Avion get him on his good side? He didn't know, he would just have to wait to find out when Avion made the decision to allow him into the rebellion or forbid him from it. Hopefully allow, if his wish did him right.

Hivoc nodded absently, not knowing what to say. He looked down at his feet, an awkward silence filling in between them. Avion cleared his throat, drawing Hivoc's eyes upwards. Avion had a cup of coffee extended towards him, an oddly kind gesture from the cold man.

Hivoc accepted the coffee with a nod, though he wasn't the biggest fan of the drink. He preferred tea, or water, coffee had a bitter taste that put him off. He took a sip, the hot liquid not burning his tongue as it slid down his throat. It was black—which Hivoc especially disliked. He kept his mouth shut about the taste, trying not to offend Avion.

After handing Hivoc the drink, Avion turned to one of the many identical coffee makers lined up along a counter and refilled his cup.

“So, why are you awake so early?” Avion asked, leaning against the countertop and sipping his coffee. Black, without a single drop of cream or sugar. “Normally, no one wakes for another three hours.”

“My day starts when the sun rises,” Hivoc said with a noncommittal shrug, feeling himself loosen up slightly around the other. “It helps to get those extra hours of training in.” He held his mug between his two hands, wondering if Avion would notice if he didn’t drink the gifted coffee.

Avion nodded in agreement, though he seemed absent—as if he was more focused on something else than the conversation at hand. It wasn’t hard to guess what he was thinking of, considering the state of the country and Mach’s campaign for the presidency.

It was a grim thought, but Hivoc was almost certain Mach would win office and become president. Of course, he didn’t want it to be true, but with him mostly supporting the bigger cities of the country, most of the voters were his supporters. The other candidate, Stilgraw Blissoul, paled in comparison to him.

“Who do you think will win?” Hivoc asked suddenly, bringing Avion out of his thoughts. It seemed obvious to Avion in the same way it was to Hivoc. There was only one real answer he could say, though even thinking it seemed like jinxing it.

“I *want* Blissoul to win,” Avion said. *Don’t we all*, Hivoc responded in his mind, more a statement than a question. Nearly everyone in Luttecord saw through Mach’s disguise of good, seeing the ugly evil that lay underneath his

carefully woven lies of good doing. “The numbers speak the truth, though, Mach is leading the race—by a lot, too. We need a miracle.”

Hivoc nodded. It really would be a miracle—a much needed miracle at that. Stilgraw Blissoul had done a lot of good in her campaign to become president, but it wasn’t enough in the face of Mach—because he had done everything she had done twofold, and more. She had helped support environmentalists and brought a species of bird away from extinction. Less than a month later, Mach had designed Machinae to help remove invasive species *and* helped bring tens of species to a healthy place as a result. It was a slap in the face. A guarantee he would win office and get his ideals into the government.

“You mind if I take your mind off it with a sword duel?” Hivoc asked, trying to lighten the mood of the conversation. He took a step back and gestured with his thumb to the hallway of bedrooms for his sword. “I’m sure my skills with a blade will be more than enough to convince you to let me fight alongside you against Mach.”

Avion did a once over of Hivoc, as if studying his figure for the physique of a swordsman. “I will duel you, but are you sure you want it to be the deciding factor for your entrance?” he asked, walking over to a rack where various swords hung on a wall, taking one off and tossing it to Hivoc—a rapier. The rapier was Hivoc’s specialty. It fit his personality, he thought. Quick. Though the way he used it, it came off as impatient, a reflection of himself.

“Are you sure I can use this? I wouldn’t want it damaged,” Hivoc said, admiring the craftsmanship of the blade under his hand. Krae’s work, no doubt.

Krae had certain tells in his works that Isticus lacked—nothing harmful to the blade, Hivoc had just been perceptive enough to notice the little differences in something as trivial as the spots they hammered the metal.

“Nonsense. That one works nicely.” Avion reached a hand over his back, to the sheath he wore around his waist. He drew the sword from the sheath, an impressive thirty inch longsword that gleamed under the lamplight in the meeting room.

Hivoc looked back to Avion, setting his sword down for a moment before stripping off his thick coat—the same one he had put on for the chilly weather the night before—and shirt. “Heavy clothes slow me down,” he explained, saying it like it was obvious, when Avion raised an eyebrow at him.

Hivoc picked his sword up again. “*De yicheha xuch?*” Avion asked him. It was one of the few phrases Hivoc had learned in a few languages. *To first blood*. Hivoc nodded. The duel would be over when one of the swordsmen suffered any manner of wound, from minor scratch to a large gash.

Avion narrowed his eyes, his face becoming serious and stone cold. Hivoc closed his eyes, taking in a long deep breath to steel himself. He felt the nerves, despite his best efforts, linger inside him. His future weighed upon his shoulder in this one, singular duel. If he lost, he would be forced to sit idly as Mach ravaged the nation.

He opened his eyes again, not waiting another moment to attack. He lunged forward, thrusting the rapier forwards to Avion’s core, the sharp tip of the blade extending to his torso. Avion parried with his long sword, sending the lightweight sword to the side.

The sound of metal against metal echoed through the secluded room of the rebel base, acting as an alarm clock for the rebels who were still sleeping. The rest of the leading rebels—Krae, Isticus, Hivah, Xailu, and Quirwin—soon woke up, walking upstairs to the meeting room and finding Avion and Hivoc sword fighting in the center of the room.

Everyone stood on the sidelines, their eyes trained on the two experts with their respective weapons moving in a flurry of footwork and clashing blades. It was mesmerizing to watch, no one could take their eyes off of it, lost in the intensity of the dance of combat.

Time moved at a fraction of reality for Hivoc, his movements trained—robotic in efficiency and perfection. He processed Avion's swings, lunges, instantly reacting in time to save his skin and stop the edge from grazing his skin.

Then, Avion faltered. The longsword was a weapon that relied on defeating its opponent quickly, its weight and two-handed nature tiring the user out over time. Over the same period of time in which the rapier thrived—working with light weight and ruthless speed, stabbing and thrusting and stepping back like a hummingbird dashing through the air.

Hivoc claimed the opportunity he saw take shape in front of him, lunging forward with the tip of his rapier aimed to Avion's cheek. Avion tried to sidestep, but the tip grazed him. For a moment, everything was still. Then, against Avion's cream skin, a drop of blood rolled from the sliver of a cut on his flesh.

Hivoc didn't breathe. No one moved. Avion breathed heavy, sweat trickling down his face. "*Watni Kashan*," Avion muttered under his breath, stepping back with exhaustion in his body. Hivoc waited with breathless anticipation for the words he had wished for the night before.

Avion sheathed his sword. Hivoc's body relaxed, though his mind was in overdrive with grim curiosity. A moment passed where the only sound was the deafening silence of unknowing. Then, Avion spoke, running a hand through his sweaty hair while still breathing raggedly.

"You may enter. But do not assume you are off the hook. I will be keeping a *very* close eye on you until I am positive you mean your words."



That night, Hivoc collapsed onto the bed he had been assigned, feeling the hard mattress under his exhausted body. Avion was no joke. He was a skilled swordsman by every metric, and Hivoc had only won by the skin of his teeth. It had been an excruciatingly close duel, one of the best he had experienced.

After being defeated in combat and catching his breath, Avion had given Hivoc a short look that he had considered to be a congratulation. Following the confirmation that Hivoc had, in fact, been accepted into the rebellion, Avion had refrained from saying anything at all to him.

Hivoc stared up at the ceiling of his room, lost in his thoughts—lost in fantasizing about how he was going to dismantle Mach and defeat him alongside Avion, his sister, and the others of the resistance.

He closed his eyes, feeling himself falling into sleep, even though it was only midday. He had one thought before he fell asleep.

I wish Avion would...

He snored lightly as sleep claimed him.

Interlude - I

“I can’t kill Machinae with a rapier. It’s too thin. Good for skin and flesh, not good for metal,” Hivoc explained, having approached Krae about commissioning a new sword specifically for the machines. The Machinae’s metal skin made his rapier, designed for speed and piercing, almost entirely, if not completely, useless.

“They’re made a’ soft metal, Hivoc. Cheap too. ‘S why there’s so many of them, Mach can mass produce them for a pocket change. Still, I see what you mean. I’ll make a custom rapier—thicker, stronger, weighted instead of light—it won’t be as fast, but with enough training, you’ll used to it enough to tear through them,” Krae responded, Isticus already walking over to the mountain of Krae’s blueprints to find the one they would use for Hivoc’s rapier.

“Oh, and Hivoc?”

“Yes, Krae?”

“Go to Quirwin for the Machinae’s vital points later. The sword’ll be heavier, but it’s still a rapier at heart, it’s meant to pierce, not slash.”

Chapter VI - Damage

Time, for Hivoc, had passed in a blink of an eye. He had been quickly accepted into the rebellion, learning the names of the higher ones he hadn't known before—Quirwin and Xailu. He also learned that Limizella was actually a competent inventor who was only working the food stall for some spare cash to buy parts and fund her education.

Quirwin was a lot like Avion—both personality and physicality wise. They were both serious, definitely strong, and geniuses in their own right. Quirwin was a master with his weapon of choice, a Guandao, and with mechanics. More so than Hivoc was with a rapier. More so than Avion with a longsword, though Avion compensated for the small disparity with his strategic mind.

Xailu was closer to a jack of all trades—smart for his young age, able to fend for himself with a blade against more inexperienced opponents, and bright ideas for plotting against Mach with his weaknesses in mind. Truly an invaluable member for the rebellion.

It was bright and early in the morning, Hivoc was in front of a punching bag being supported from behind by Xailu. Hivoc struck the bag with his fist, sweat rolling down his face as he maneuvered around it, hitting it with full force—moves Xailu had shown him after he had asked for tips in unarmed

combat. Hivoc believed he was too reliant on his rapier, and some experience with hand to hand fighting would fix that up.

“You have to admit,” Xailu said from behind the punching bag, his hands gripping the leather as he held it in place for Hivoc. “Mach *does* have some good ideas every now and then. I mean, it’s hard to argue against giving people in need prosthetic limbs—*really* good prosthetic limbs at that.” Hivoc didn’t respond for a moment, just attacking the punching bag, focusing on the movements of his fists and his body. When he stopped, he was out of breath. He took a step back from the punching bag, wiping the sweat from his skin.

“Maybe. Doesn’t change the fact that he’s done more harm than good,” Hivoc responded, walking over to a chair and taking a seat, completely and utterly exhausted from the intense workout. He somewhat agreed with what Xailu was saying. Mach did have some good ideas sometimes—specifically concerning wildlife conservation. But outside that small bubble? It was all undeniably bad.

“And it’s someone’s job to stop more of that harm from happening,” Hivoc tacked on once he had caught his breath. He pointed at himself with his thumb while he leaned forward in his chair. “Our job. We’re going to be the ones to stop Mach and save the people.”

Xailu, contrary to what Hivoc believed about him, seemed to be discomforted by Hivoc when he said that. Hivoc brushed it off, though. He was aware he came off strong. He also understood that defeating Avion in a swordfight in front of all the leading rebels was quite the first impression, and it had seemed to unnerve Xailu from the beginning.

“Conference alert, boys!” Hivah suddenly exclaimed as they entered the room, drawing both their eyes over to the pair. Hivoc stood up, grabbing his coat from a chair to cover up for the formal meeting. But he needn’t have bothered.

Quirwin and Avion both had their muscular structures on display—Quirwin looking like he just got out of the shower with water dripping from the tips of his black hair, while Avion was still in his baggy pajamas, with a stark lack of a top.

All of the rebels sat down at the table, gathering around and getting settled in their seats. Avion cleared his throat, killing any banter and small talk between them. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the wood of the table and getting straight to the point from his first word.

“Informants have told us that Machinae are targeting the outskirts of Luttecord—destroying infrastructure and injuring those who’ve tried to stop them, particularly.” He pointed a finger at Luttecord on the map embedded in the wooden table. He then asked, “Any volunteers to go stop them?”

Hivoc raised his hand almost the moment Avion asked the question. He still felt like he had something to prove to them—to Avion—despite being fully incorporated into the rebellion. All eyes were on him, Hivoc seeing the slightest glimmer of what was possibly respect in Avion’s eyes.

“I’ll tag along too, just to make sure Hivoc here doesn’t hurt himself destroying the Machinae,” Quirwin said, taking some of the attention away from him, and butting his shoulder against Hivoc’s. He walked away from the

table, moving towards the weapons rack. He grabbed his guandao from it, twirling the long weapon in his hand before stomping its hilt on the floor.

“Be safe. We can’t afford setbacks in a desperate time like this,” Avion said, his voice as cold as usual. He dismissed everyone with a short wave of his hand, everyone dispersing. Hivoc grabbed his sword, which he had put down next to his sheath when he had started unarmed training for the morning. He slid the blade into the sheath, attaching it to his belt.

Quirwin and Hivoc said quick goodbyes, leaving the Rebel base and taking the short walk to uptown Luttecord, which had been attacked and ravaged by Machinae. Hivoc was on guard the entire walk, even though it was a beautiful day—the sun bright and shining against the blue backdrop of the sky—and the smell of delicious traditional foods flooded the streets.

Even though Hivoc would have appreciated the sun any other day, today was not any random day. He had to focus, and that meant ignoring absolutely everything else that wasn’t integral to the mission. He was so hyper-focused that he didn’t even notice Quirwin was calling out his name for a minute now, until Quirwin shouted at him. “Huh? What? Did I miss something?” Hivoc asked, scrambling to get his sword while his eyes searched their surroundings, looking for a threat that clearly needed his immediate attention, considering Quirwin had deemed it so important that he took Hivoc out of his focus.

“Relax, newbie,” Quirwin responded, reaching over with his free hand to stop Hivoc from drawing his sword. “I just wanted to have a conversation with you. Do you know what a conversation is? Or is the only thing goin’ on in your

brain a bunch of little dudes swinging swords?” he asked sarcastically, removing his hand from Hivoc’s wrist.

Hivoc just rolled his eyes at Quirwin, letting his sword stay in his sheath. “What is there to talk about?” Hivoc asked, looking around his surroundings. The farther they got into Luttecord, the more obvious it was that havoc had been wrecked—more rubble from buildings’ remains, more blood on the ground from injured innocents, and even some small hotspots of fire crackling and exhaling smoke into the air.

Hivoc felt anger bubbling up in his stomach, which reached a boil when he saw some straggling Machinae repairing the same buildings they had no doubt destroyed. They were shaped like people, with copper skin and glowing purple eyes. Steam exited the crevices in their metal plates as they worked, grabbing bricks and slathering mortar on them, layering the bricks higher and higher as they rebuilt the wall of someone’s home.

Hivoc wanted to destroy it.

The sight of a Machinae, acting so domesticated and innocent, doing something as helpful as rebuilding the destruction it had caused—it invigorated Hivoc, making him see red. He snapped out of his trance when he realized Quirwin’s hand was on his wrist again, stopping him once again from drawing his rapier.

“Not that one, Hivoc. Why don’t we destroy the ones that are doing actual harm?” Quirwin asked, gesturing with his free hand to the close distance. Hivoc followed his fingertips, seeing what he was pointing to. A legion of

Machinae were there, destroying homes with their iron fists and robotic obedience.

Hivoc and Quirwin both made haste, their weapons drawn and eyes focused on the robots. As soon as they drew close, the eyes of the Machinae flashed purple, locking onto them. The Machinae charged, arms extended like zombies with skin of metal.

Hivoc thrust and slashed with his rapier, damaging and destroying and deforming the Machinae that dared enter his range. He was so busy with attacking the machines, that he didn't realize that all of them were running past him, not paying any attention to him. Every last one, without fail, focused on Quirwin, rushing at him.

Despite the onslaught of metallic beasts surrounding him from all sides, Quirwin didn't seem overwhelmed in the slightest. He spun his Guandao, taking the backstep as he slashed through the metal like butter. A drop of sweat rolled down his brow as he narrowed his eyes, controlling his breathing as he moved as smooth as water.

Hivoc helped Quirwin, taking advantage of the Machinae ignoring him to destroy them without resistance. Even though their muscles began to ache with exhaustion, Quirwin and Hivoc fought on against the army of incoming Machinae, fueled by determination and vigor.

On top of that, people began to form a crowd, cheering for the two as they fought off the Machinae and protected the remaining houses from being damaged. In minutes, Quirwin and Hivoc had broken all the Machinae, and were standing in a field of scraps and sparks.

Quirwin raised his Guandao in the air like a trophy, the people around them cheering for the good deed they had done amidst the tangled wreckage of the Machinae and destroyed homes. A drop of victory in an ocean of loss.



Little did they know, far up in the sky, was a watchful eye. It was mechanical in creation and being, cogs and gears pumping a robotic heart while motors flapped two wings that kept its camera-like eye suspended. It stared and recorded, taking in every detail of the face of Quirwin, creating an exact replica of it in its database, already preparing to paint it onto a wanted poster.

Mach had eyes everywhere.



When Quirwin and Hivoc arrived back at the rebel base minutes later, everything seemed eerily quiet, as if everyone was on edge for a reason unknown to the pair. When they walked into the meeting room, a hologram projected from a small circular device placed on the table caught their immediate attention.

The hologram displayed Mach's upper half next to a repeating video of Quirwin killing Machinae earlier that day. The clip conveniently cut off short, ending before the townsfolk could begin cheering him on. Instead it flashed to

random shots of the people looking terrified and scared, apparently of Quirwin rather than of the Machinae destroying their homes.

Mach began to speak, and Hivoc's blood ran cold.

"The citizens of Ollown. As demonstrated in that clip recorded by one of my Viewers, it is clear that my political opponents will do anything and everything to stop me from saving this country. This man *mercilessly* destroyed my Machinae, which were innocently repairing these people's homes after a catastrophe destroyed them."

A catastrophe you made, Hivoc thought.

"To everyone listening, I encourage you to keep your eyes out for this man. He and his associates cannot be trusted. He is a monster. He is a danger to our society. He is a *terrorist*."

Chapter VII - Discord

Mach had publicly called Quirwin a terrorist. And indirectly, the rest of the rebels too. Hivoc clenched his fist as the hologram began to loop on itself, replaying the same thing over and over—Quirwin saving the day and being called a monster and a terrorist for it. He was outraged, and he could see his emotions reflected by other rebels in the base.

“*Sorona amtest...*” Avion whispered, the anger he was feeling making the foreign words almost venomous as they left his mouth. He stared at the hologram for a moment longer before shutting it off, letting Mach call Quirwin a terrorist one last time before the room was plunged into a heavy silence.

No one spoke. Any words that could have been said after that strong, unexpected stab from Mach would have felt jarring and unfitting. The room was quiet—too quiet, a silence so loud Hivoc could hear everyone else’s heartbeats pounding inside their chests. Avion’s was racing the fastest. Hivoc could practically feel the rage from across the room.

“We need to plan,” Avion suddenly said, his voice cold and calculated. He sounded like he wanted to kill Mach. Hivoc didn’t deny that he felt the same way. Avion moved to the table, sitting down in a chair and leaning forward, his elbows on the map embedded into the wood.

Slowly, everyone else began to sit down at the table as well, taking careful steps around Avion as if he was a ticking time bomb ready to go off at a moment's notice. As they did, Xailu whispered under his breath, "Well, we aren't *completely* in the right, y'know..." Everyone looked over at him, their attention caught by his sudden words.

"What do you mean?" Quirwin asked, sounding offended at Xailu's almost accusatory words. He'd done something inarguably good—both in his eyes and the eyes of the other rebels—and now one of them was going against that same notion? It was frankly absurd, in his opinion. He leaned forward, a sharp look on his face, as though trying to intimidate Xailu.

Clearly, it worked. Xailu leaned back in his chair, looking away awkwardly and rubbing the back of his neck while muttering out quiet, half-formed excuses about how Mach's Machinae *were* good inventions, and that destroying every last one of them wouldn't be a good idea. After all, Mach could destroy the blueprints in protest to the destruction of his beloved creations, thus making it so no one could ever build a Machinae again.

Even Hivoc could agree that destroying every last Machinae was fundamentally a bad idea. Avion and Quirwin, on the other hand, seemed to disagree, judging on their expressions alone. Everyone else seemed conflicted or neutral about the idea. Everyone could feel the tension coming close to boiling over.

"The kid's got a point," Krae said, propping his feet up on the table, his old boots resting on the wood and paper. He took a puff of a cigarette, earning a

disgusted look from his son, Isticus. “But that doesn’t matter. Mach is a bigger problem that needs to be addressed. We can’t dispute *that*.”

That seemed to be enough to defuse the ticking time bomb that was Quirwin and Avion and relieve the tension in the room for the moment. Avion brainstormed in silence, his face scrunching up in irritation every time an idea came to mind that was worthless to their cause.

Everyone had a stark lack of ideas, voiced by the silence in the room. To silence the nothingness, Hivah reached out for the hologram device, turning it on despite being fearful of what she would see. She was right to be afraid, considering no matter the channel she switched to, it was bad news for the rebels.

On one channel, there was a reporter next to an older man. He snarled into the microphone provided to him by the reporter. His voice was rough and gravelly with age, the tone mirroring the anger his wrinkled face showed to the camera. “Those darn rebels are the reason my house is destroyed! They should be ashamed for what they’ve done, they should be—” Hivah switched the channel, cutting the man off.

It was a vain attempt, though, as news stations from all across the country displayed more of the same. Any support for the rebels was being drained because of a lie from Mach. His charming smile and slicked back hair and wise gray eyes had swayed the leverage of the rebel group over to himself. One station even predicted that a whopping 65% of neutral voters would be voting for Mach due to the rebel actions today alone.

It was a heavy hit to their cause.

“I am going on a walk. No one bother me unless they want a new scar,” Avion said, pushing his chair away from the table and leaving the room dramatically. He needed to clear his mind, the mess of emotions—anger, sadness, the need for vengeance and justice—were making his thoughts scattered and scrambled. Nothing fresh air couldn’t fix, though.

Hivoc stood up, his caring heart beckoning for him to go and talk to Avion; whether it be to plan with him outside or just to have a conversation to distract them both from the tragedy at hand. Either way, the motive was less important than the result. Hivoc followed Avion, seeing the other walk outside the rebel base entirely. His face was twisted in anger, a warning sign to everyone to stay away and let him be.

Hivoc, of course, ignored those signs, watching Avion rest his back against the brick wall of the alleyway and slide down until he was sitting, his head in his hands and his fingers in his hair. Hivoc felt his heart beckon for him to act again, and he moved to sit down next to him. Neither said anything for a moment, resting in the heavy silence between them.

“I’ll make things right,” Hivoc said to break the silence, looking over at Avion as he said it. The other man made eye contact with him, his striking orange eyes meeting the platinum of Hivoc’s. Avion found his lips taking on the beginnings of a smile, though he shunned it before it could become anything more.

“Thank you, Hivoc,” Avion said in response. He left it at that, nothing more and nothing less. He didn’t want to show vulnerability; that was a weakness he wouldn’t have targeted again. A mistake that wouldn’t be endured again.

Hivoc nodded absently, dissatisfied with the lack of engagement from Avion. “I’ll take you to my house for a cup of coffee. That’ll take your mind off things,” he offered. He stood up, offering his hand to Avion.

After a beat of hesitation, Avion took it, Hivoc helping him up. Hivoc led Avion out of the alleyway, the two walking side-by-side in the chilly afternoon. *Perfect weather for a nice coffee*, Avion thought. The two wandered the streets of Luttecord, keeping their heads down on the off chance they might be recognized as being part of the rebellion.

After a long walk, the pair arrived at the Blackstone home. Hivoc moved past the old mailbox with weathered blue paint and down the cobblestone path to the front door, unlocking it and swinging it open for Avion. They both moved to the kitchen, Hivoc working at the coffee maker while Avion sat down at the small circular dining table.

“Nice place,” Avion said, his eyes moving around the quaint home while he got comfortable in the wooden chair at the table. Hivoc put down a mug of coffee in front of Avion, who took it and sipped the brown, nigh black, liquid. Hivoc did the same—though he preferred tea to coffee, an opinion he vehemently stood by whenever Hivah said otherwise; it wasn’t bad, just not his favorite, something Hivah couldn’t seem to fathom.

“Thanks. Lived here my whole life. I was born and raised here, then stayed. I never left, now that I think about it.” Hivoc said, looking around his house. It was hard to imagine it as something other than home. Hivoc had always felt perfectly at home here. As many bad memories the bricks and floorboards held,

they were outnumbered ten to one—Hivoc couldn't just leave them to be forgotten, he wanted to savor them. "Would you care for a tour?"

Avion raised an eyebrow, but shrugged in agreement. Hivoc rose from his chair, taking Avion and his coffee around the house. He showed Avion around, giving brief descriptions of the few rooms. Eventually, they came to Hivoc's bedroom, his hand hesitating at the handle.

Hivoc couldn't remember the last time he'd had guests over to his house—Hivah was the social sibling, she was the one who brought her girl friends over and gossiped with them over tea; isolation and the blade suited Hivoc more. This was different, though, he convinced himself, opening the door to his bedroom and to his life.

Avion walked inside, looking around the room with stifled awe. The room was lived in—walls covered in pictures from Hivoc's childhood, photos of his mom and sister, memorabilia from various movies, even a sheath hanging upside down from the ceiling with engravings in a dead language. Avion thought of his own room, comparatively barren and empty, and felt a bit of shame for his lack of life in the place that was supposed to represent him wholly.

"I feel like I messed up," Hivoc admitted, bringing Avion back to the moment. Hivoc's eyes scanned the walls, fearing to look at him after so blatantly speaking his emotions. "I tried to do something good, but Mach just... made everything worse."

Avion looked over at Hivoc, his eyes studying the man. Slowly, hesitantly, he put his hand on the other's shoulder—a small gesture of comfort. "Some rest

will do us all good. Thank you for the coffee and the tour, but I will be leaving to go to my own home... rest well, Hivoc.” Avion’s hand left Hivoc’s shoulder, and he finished off his coffee before setting the mug down on the dresser and making his way out of the Blackstone household.

Hivoc collapsed onto his bed, not realizing how tired he was, even with the coffee in his system. He didn’t bother to change into pajamas, nor had he noticed that the sun had set, dusk claiming the sky as its domain. Soon, he was snoring as the minutes ticked on.

Chapter VIII - Insomniac

When Hivoc awoke, he didn't feel an inkling of drowsiness in his body in spite of the late hour. He stretched his arms up above his head, cursing the pain in his side, and his past self, wishing he had bothered to change into something more comfortable—or take off his belt, at the very least. The sky looked beautiful, with carefree stars twinkling on a canvas of black horizon and gray fluffy clouds.

He stood from his bed, pushing his messy hair out of his face and forcing his body over to his dresser. He changed into his pajamas, even though he knew he wouldn't be falling back asleep now that he was awake. He finally felt the energy of the caffeine from his cup of coffee, striking at the most inconvenient of times. Still, he shuffled back to bed, throwing the covers over him.

A beat of silence.

Then another.

A cricket chirped outside his window.

Hivoc threw his hands over his face and groaned. He had barely tried to sleep for a minute, but he already knew he'd be restless. He rose again, cursing his decision to have a cup of coffee at such a late hour. He put on a pair of shoes, throwing a coat from his closet over his pajamas.

He reached for his sheath out of instinct, only just then remembering it was still at the rebel base. He pulled his empty hand back to him, the feeling of his fingertips against his own palm uncanny in that brief moment where he expected the familiarity of his sword's grip.

He grabbed his housekey from his bedroom, locking the front door as he left the house. The stark lack of a sheath attached to his hip was unnerving to him—it made him feel vulnerable, like someone would pop around the corner and catch him off guard with every step he took. Still, he moved forward, traveling through the sleeping city of Luttecord; the rubble of every building gave him the spark to move.

He was nearly at the building he had committed to his near perfect memory when his feet suddenly stopped him, forcing him to notice the small cafe across the street. It was out of the way, tucked in a nook between two marginally bigger buildings. It had a simplistic logo of a coffee cup, the steam coming from the small mug spelling out the letters.

Hivoc couldn't quite say why, but the sight of it reminded him of Avion—maybe it was the man's obsession with coffee, or maybe it was some other subconscious connection he'd made in his mind that would be impossible to fish out from the depths of his brain. Either way, the thought of the other man spread warmth through his chest, condensing in the shoulder where Avion had placed his hand.

Hivoc's legs moved faster than his mind, bringing him into the coffee shop before he knew what he was even doing. His heart was going a mile a minute in

his chest, an involuntary reaction that his body was using to tell him... something. That something, of course, he couldn't put his finger on.

He stepped inside the cozy coffee shop. It was a quaint little place with lanterns hanging from the low ceiling and circular wooden tables taking the floorspace. Only a small number of people were inside, which was reasonable considering the lateness of the time it was outside. Tentatively, Hivoc walked forward, going up to the front counter, where a barista stood with a welcoming smile on their face.

Hivoc placed an order for a black coffee, still feeling like he didn't quite belong in the shop. After he did, he moved to sit down in a secluded corner, taking a seat at a table pushed up against the wall, a window pouring in some moonlight from outside. Even though he felt he didn't fit in—like a piece forced into the wrong spot of a puzzle—he felt himself warming up to the relaxing atmosphere.

Soon, the barista called his name, and Hivoc walked up to the counter and took the steaming hot cup of coffee from the barista, saying a quick thanks. He turned around and left the shop, his umber skin getting a bit warmer at the cheeks for a reason he didn't dwell on.

He moved quickly, not wanting the coffee to lose its warmth before he got to the rebel base. The world had faded away around him, his sole focus on the concrete in front of him. With his mind wandering, he found himself at the alleyway to the rebel base.

He walked down between the two walls of brick, bringing his fist up to the spraypainted symbol of Mach's political party—the gear with hammers for

teeth—and knocking on it. After a short moment, the brick separated, creating an entrance to the elevator. He walked inside of it, the elevator operator silently nodding in acknowledgement of his presence and taking the both of them down all the way.

He walked through the rebel base with ease, his memory leading his legs down the halls and vast open rooms of machinery and scattered people who were doing late night work. Eventually, he got to the gigantic vault-like door, entering the passcode Hivah had shown him into the pad next to it. The door creaked open loudly, the sound echoing off the high ceiling and far away walls. Hivoc winced as he felt nearly everyone in the large workshop look over at him, staring with curiosity.

He moved inside without looking behind him, hurrying and allowing the door to slam shut. He spared a moment to breathe a small sigh of relief when the many pairs of eyes were off him. He walked down the hallway, coffee still in hand with wisps of steam curling out from the small opening in the lid. He walked into the common room of the higher rebels, blinking in surprise when he saw him.

“Avion?” he asked aloud, seeing the man sitting at the table with a mass of empty coffee cups around him. His body, which had been hunched over the display of Ollown in the table, suddenly straightened out, his head snapping over to look at Hivoc. They both stared at each other like criminals caught red handed in the night. Hivoc, after a beat of hesitation, moved forward and set the warm cup down on the table, sitting down next to Avion.

“What is it you want?” Avion asked in his signature cold voice, grumbling out his words. He had deep bags under his eyes, the skin almost a sickly purple color. Among the empty cups was a hologram displaying a past interview between Mach and some C-list celebrity host that had lost traction years ago. How they managed to get one of the most famous people currently alive on their show was beyond both of them.

“I come with a peace offering, Avion,” Hivoc responded, knowing the key to Avion’s heart. He pushed the cup towards the other, offering it to the man. Avion took it, sipping the drink and visibly becoming more invigorated by it. Though, Hivoc wasn’t sure how helpful it would be, judging by the aforementioned mountain of coffee cups. Hivoc sat down, pushing some of the cardboard and paper cups out of the way to make room for himself.

“So, what are you doing?” Hivoc asked after Avion stayed silent for a long minute. Avion didn’t take his mouth away from the coffee cup, and he took so long to respond that Hivoc thought he hadn’t heard him.

“Stragetizing...” he finally muttered, letting his head fall down onto the table in a defeated manner. Hivoc winced, hesitantly reaching out and rubbing Avion’s back comfortingly. Mach’s recent and plentiful successes had clearly taken a large toll on Avion’s mental health, and even his physical health too—Hivoc could see stray white hairs among the luscious black, despite the fact Avion was no older than twenty five.

Hivoc prompted Avion to speak, “what kind of strategizing?”

Avion took a deep breath, then began to ramble on about Mach and Machinae and politics and whatnot. It was hard for Hivoc to keep up with how

quickly Avion was speaking—the caffeine had obviously kicked in, as Avion spouted out words too fast for any reasonable person to understand.

Hivoc rested his head on his palm, placing his elbow on a clear spot on the table, after his head started drooping and his eyelids grew heavy. He had to force himself to stay awake, tuning out of the conversation, even as Avion unpaused the hologram and let the interviewer talk about some gala that would be coming up. Hivoc didn't even realize Avion's voice had stopped, his eyes already half closed and his mind slipping into unconsciousness.

Then, Hivoc snapped up and out of his drowsy state as Avion slammed his fist down on the table and rose from his chair quickly. Avion looked down at Hivoc, their eyes meeting. Hivoc could see the gears turning in Avion's head, a sort of grim satisfaction with himself painting his expression.

“I have an idea.”

Chapter IX - Plans

Hivoc stood outside the staggering mansion in a suit and tie, his belt lacking the weight of his sheath. His hand itched at the spot it would've been, wishing it was there. He moved it away from his waist to his hair, slicking it back and tidying it atop his head. He adjusted the cuffs of the charcoal suit, tightening the tie to where it nearly choked him. He took a deep breath, his nerves at an all time high. Then, wondering how he got himself into the predicament, he walked inside the gala.



Avion had secluded himself in his private quarters for nearly a whole day after telling Hivoc he had an idea. In fact, he was still isolated in his room when the results of the election were being announced. Everyone else—the rebels, the citizens of Luttecord, the entire population of Ollown—was waiting with bated breath, staring at their holograms on skyscrapers and inside their homes and praying that the candidate they had cast their votes for took the place as leader of the nation.

Inside the rebel base, the higher rebels—with the exception of the aforementioned Avion, who was still formulating and planning inside his bedroom—crowded around the circular table inside the locked off room. The hologram hovered in the middle of the table, displaying a reporter with a map of Ollown behind him, every province in the nation colored either orange for Mach or blue for Blissoul. Mrs. Stilgraw Blissoul was the candidate the rebels, and almost all of Luttecord for that matter, wanted to win, but the suffocating amount of orange made that idea but a fever dream.

The result was obvious as the final few votes were cast and counted. Mach Steelspine was going to be the next president of Ollown, and there was nothing the ragtag group of rebels could do to stop it. It was a crushing feeling, and it made Hivoc feel especially useless. The cities were being made into ruin, the people into corpses, the communities into loners, the outspoken into silence. He was powerless to change it, all of them were.

The sound of Avion bursting out of his room and into the common area didn't even snap Hivoc out of his depressive trance. Not until Avion turned off the hologram and placed his hands on the table, leaning his head in—completely and entirely unfazed by the massive loss their group had just taken. He spoke with determination, a certain definitiveness that made his plan seem nothing less than flawless.

“I know we shall do to stop Mach,” Avion said, his eyes moving along the faces crowded around the table, his eyes catching on Hivoc, then Quirwin. “It’s customary for the former president—in this case, Rigack Torne—to host a gala

at his home in celebration of the election of a new leader, where all the candidates, winner or loser, will be there.”

“So what?” Quirwin asked, his normally cheerful expression painted with a stark seriousness that was unnerving to everyone at the table—Avion included.

“*So what?*” Avion echoed, his tone saying the answer was obvious. “We send someone into the gala undercover, they take information out of Mach, then get ahead. All we need is someone who can sweet talk words out of his mouth.”

No one spoke for a moment, not even a peep. They all looked at each other, wondering which person would be the one to volunteer to save their situation. Hivoc ruled himself out, his social skills notoriously bad. Breaking the silence, Hivah stood from the table.

“Hivoc should. Think about it, his conversational clumsiness would be perfect—a young political student looking to his idol for some advice on how to get into the game. He would barely even need to make a disguise, and he knows so little about politics he could get Mach talking about anything.” Hivoc looked at his sister, baffled at the idea. Everyone at the table seemed equally skeptical at the plan.

“And, the rest of us have more important things to be doing,” she added at the unsure looks of her companions.



It was late in the afternoon, with barely a cloud to hide the bright blue sky or the bright sun.

Hivoc looked at the tailor shop—at least, he assumed it was—with growing unease. The two of them were in a sketchy neighborhood on the edge of Luttecord, where trash covered the roads and people with harsh looks and scars on their faces held weapons out of sight, ready to use them when provoked. The shop itself seemed run down, with a flickering outdoor light and a sign in a language he didn't understand.

"I have a connection here, he'll give you something good." Avion walked into the shop, not waiting for Hivoc to follow him, but assuming he would.

He did.

Avion had said he'd give him enough information not to look like a total bumbling idiot in front of Mach, but not enough to deprive him of questions to ask, though he had yet to fulfill that promise. Hivoc didn't have any suits that still fit him; the most recent was a purchase during his high school years for a prom he ended up not attending.

Inside, the store was the complete opposite of the rundown exterior. It was extravagant, extra, fancy in all the ways that mattered and the ones that didn't. Everything Hivoc considered himself not to be. Suits, ties, and shoes of various colors, patterns, and sizes hung from racks lining all the walls and reaching the ceiling. Some even hung from the ceiling itself. Hivoc was awestruck by the sight.

Hivoc's hand reached for a suit out of instinct, only for Avion to slap his hand like a mother catching her child reaching for candy. "Don't even. *You* will

not be picking out your suit, I am, because *I* know fashion, unlike you.” Avion waved his hand and walked further into the shop. Hivoc trailed behind until he stopped suddenly.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked, having processed Avion’s words and looking down at his current attire.

“Come here, this will work on you.” Avion grabbed a charcoal gray suit off a rack and held it up to Hivoc. After looking him up and down, he nodded, tossing the suit over his shoulder and walking up to the clerk. Hivoc shook his head, dumbfounded, but followed Avion nonetheless.

Avion placed the suit down on the counter. The clerk was ancient. The few hairs on his head were ghostly white, his sickly pale skin was cracked with wrinkles, and his body reeked with the smell of cigarettes. Avion spoke to the man in his native tongue, the clerk responding in it. Hivoc took a step back, letting the two men have their conversation while he stood on the sidelines, patiently waiting for the purchase to follow through.

Avion said something that caused the old man to utter a short laugh, and Hivoc couldn’t help but wonder what the conversation between them was about. After a good few minutes, the clerk disappeared behind a back door with the suit, and Avion leaned over to him.

“I will come back in half an hour to pick you up. The suit will be done by tomorrow morning, you just need to stick around for fitting.”

Tomorrow morning? He thought. He was certainly no expert in tailoring, but that seemed an unreasonably short amount of time, one that made him question the quality of the suit he’d be getting. Before he could ask, though,

Avion had already disappeared out of the store. Too quick and quiet for Hivoc to reasonably keep up with.

Soon, the clerk returned from the back room with a tape measure but without the suit. With some assistance from Hivoc, the man got all of his measurements, constantly grumbling words that sounded like complaints, then disappeared out of sight. Some time afterwards, Avion reappeared, taking Hivoc out of the shop.

“Now, we talk politics. Brace yourself.”

And so they did. The two shared a dialogue that was closer to a *monologue* as Avion explained, elaborated, and just talked about simple things—over a cup of coffee at the cafe. Hivoc had gotten coffee for Avion just yesterday. Hivoc was pleased to think that Avion enjoyed this shop more than his usual one.

The conversation nearly bored Hivoc to death, but he toughed his way through it, managing to understand most of what was being said to him. The two eventually left the cafe, but not before the edge of the sun had begun to dip under the horizon, bathing the sky in a stunning weaving of pinks and oranges and yellows that made Hivoc’s jaw drop.

He stopped on the sidewalk, staring at the encapsulating beauty above him. It was as if he was looking at the face of another planet, or a painting of extraordinary beauty. It took his breath away, and he reached out to grab Avion’s wrist to make him stop too.

“Wha— Hivoc—” Hivoc stopped his protests by pointing up. Avion followed his finger, staring at the sky just as he did. “Oh...” he muttered under his breath, the two standing there with the setting sun spreading an embrace of

warm light around the both of them. Neither spoke. The mix of awe and fear of shattering the delicate moment kept the pair silent, the sound of whistling winds and chirping crickets filling the air with gentle song.

Many minutes passed, freeing the tension in the men's shoulders and relaxing them. "We should probably leave now..." Hivoc whispered under his breath, still half under the trance the sky had placed upon him.

"We should..." Avion responded. Neither of them moved.

The sun had hidden halfway behind the earth when they finally did, at which point they made their way back to the Rebel base. They walked in silence, and neither of them noticed that Hivoc's hand held Avion's wrist for the entire time.



Avion went down to his private bedroom, but Hivoc chose to stay in the common room. He was alone in it, rummaging around in the kitchenette for some food—he had eaten barely anything since he went out with Avion for the planning for the gala. He had just found a bag of chips and turned around, only to freeze like a burglar in the night when he spotted Hivah standing there with crossed arms and a knowing look on her face.

"So, how was your date with Avion?"

Hivoc's look turned to something closer to a scowl. He wallowed the chip in his mouth before responding. "It wasn't a date."

“Oh, please, Hivoc. Avion’s love language is swords and politics, and that’s all you talked about *all* day.” She sat down at the table, resting her feet up on it and leaning back in her chair until it was balancing on its hind legs.

“It wasn’t a date,” he emphasized, his voice firmer in tone but weaker in spirit. He felt his cheeks warm at his sister’s teasing, shoveling his mouth full of chips so he could avoid responding to the prying questions he knew his sister would ask him.

“You two were out late. What were you guys doing?”

“Mouhf fuhll,” Hivoc responded, pointing to his cheeks, which were bulging with the outlines of chips. He took the opportunity to escape to his private room, eating the rest of his chips and lying down in his bed once he had changed into pajamas. He repeated the plan in his head over and over again, reminding himself of each and every step to help him remember it.

He was tired, however. The length of the day had drained him of his energy, his body yearning for sleep. Soon, he fell asleep, despite the nerves about the upcoming gala... and his sister’s stupid remarks.

It wasn’t a date.

Chapter X - Gala

The plan was simple, yet that made it no less genius.

First, he would get inside the gala, posing as a college student looking for some advice from his favorite politician, Mach Steelspine, on how to become successful. Second, he would sweet talk Mach until he spilled something that the rebellion could use. Third, he would excuse himself, thank Mach, then make his way out of the building, disappearing never to be seen again.

It was a flawless plan. Only in theory of course. Half the plan is getting it done, even if something goes horribly wrong in the process.

Hivoc took a deep breath, trying his best to calm his nerves. It did nothing but remind him of every wasted second. He walked forward before he could psych himself out of it, stepping along the cobblestone pathway up to the guard at the front door, a clipboard in hand.

“Name.” The guard’s voice was deep and intimidating, and he had the build to snap Hivoc in half. Hivoc would stand a chance against him if he had his rapier, but he had left it—not only would it shatter his disguise, but it would be confiscated at the door. For a brief moment, he forgot the name he was going to use, almost speaking his own before correcting himself.

“Billy Rames,” Hivoc said, adding a quick nod of his head like it was the truest thing he could say. The guard looked down at his clipboard, checking the list of names with a dash of suspicion in his eyes as his gaze traveled along the page. After a tense moment, the guard stood aside, allowing Hivoc inside, crossing his alias off among those yet to enter.

“Welcome to the Gala, Billy.”

As he stepped past the man, Hivoc’s shoulders—which he hadn’t even realized had tensed—relaxed in relief. He tugged at the cuffs of his sleeves as his feet left cobblestone and stepped on marble flooring. It was the picture perfect representation of elegance and aristocrats. Rich metals and fine materials made up the walls and ceilings, each tile alone costing more than a room in the Blackstone home, by Hivoc’s estimate.

The entrance connected to the main room; a staircase at the far wall led to the left and right to halls unseen. Most of the main floor was taken up by people in suits with glasses of bubbling golden champagne, talking political nonsense to each other. Against the walls were half a dozen bars, Machinae in place of bartenders creating perfectly made cocktails for the guests. Hivoc was as disgusted as he was enamored. These people seemed so completely and utterly ignorant of the entire nation they were living in, and how the one man that was destroying it was going to be their leader.

His eyes left the guests, searching the faces of the mass of people for the one belonging to Mach Steelspine, or someone who might be able to locate the man for him. Though he scanned each and every face three times over to be sure he hadn’t missed anything with a mechanical precision, Mach was not

among them. He huffed in irritation when he found nothing, deciding to make his way over to one of the bars to get himself a drink. He needed to blend in, standing around looking lost with his hands in his pockets was sure to raise eyebrows. Unwanted attention would be the death of the mission, so he couldn't risk anything.

He sat down on one of the velvet stools, resting his elbows on the counter and leaning in, speaking over the music of the gala and the dull roar of the mindless chitter chattering guests. "I'll have a glass of champagne, please." The Machinae, which vaguely had the shape of a man, though was clearly still a robot with copper skin and glowing eyes, moved stiffly and methodically, grabbing a bottle with a forged hand and pouring it into a thin glass for Hivoc.

Hivoc took it, mimicking the hold of the other people on the floor. He brought the lip of the glass to his mouth, barely taking a sip of it when he heard the sound of a microphone being tested at the far end of the room. His platinum eyes were drawn to the source of the noise, widening with recognition when he saw Mach next to Stilgraw Blissoul—the failed candidate for whom Hivoc he had voted—and Rigack Torne—the former president.

"I want to thank all of you for coming tonight, it is an honor to have all of you in my company," Torne said in his signature aged voice. His hair had long since turned gray, his face had wrinkled, and a thick white mustache covered his upper lip. He stepped back from the podium set up on the stairwell, nodding to Stilgraw and letting her take his place in front of the microphone set up atop the lectern. It was customary for the loser of the political race to bid the other good wishes in their presidency and best wishes for Ollown itself.

Stilgraw cleared her throat, adjusting the microphone to her preferred height before leaning in, her voice powerful as it echoed across the room. “It is the people’s job to put someone in charge. It is the people’s job to decide who is right to take on the burden of leading our country further into greatness. Even though the leader has power, the true power is in the individual. I *strongly* encourage each and every one of you to use that power to its fullest. You are not weak, you are not limited, you are not nothing. Act wisely, and respond accordingly, do not let yourselves be destroyed because you believe you can’t fight back. Best wishes to Steelspine and Ollown. That is all.”

She stepped back from the lectern, a look in her eyes that was impossible for Hivoc to decipher. It was strange, like a silent warning she was giving all the guests. Her words sparked whispers among the crowd, people in hushed voices talking about what she meant with her short message to them. They were all silenced when Mach came up to the microphone, the smallest twinge of worry behind his gloomy gray eyes. He clutched the lectern a smidge too tightly.

Hivoc tuned out Mach before he even started speaking. He was spouting nonsense, nonsense that seemed to enamor all of the guests, holding them hostage with words. Hivoc moved through the crowd, weaving between people like water. He got closer and closer to the bottom of the staircase, where Mach would undoubtedly walk down and blend in with the crowd after his speech.

Hivoc looked around, noting the few people of the press snapping flash photos and recording and transcribing Mach’s speech, eager to be the first outlet to get the story out to the public. They were like fish swarming around

bait on a hook, trying to be the one to snatch the biggest piece. Hivoc looked back to the lectern, Mach looking infinitely confident in himself with a charming smile on his face and a cocky look in his eyes.

“I want to thank all of you for your votes, entrusting me with the leadership of this nation. My plan is to use laws as guidelines for future presidents, to make the nation a better place not today, not tomorrow, but for the generations beyond us. Now is a building block for the future, and we are the constructors. That is all, have a great rest of your gala, folks.” He did a small wave, then walked down from the podium, earning an applause from the crowd of guests. Hivoc had to bite back a grim laugh at Mach’s words. He claimed to be a visionary for the future, but he was completely screwing over the present in the process.

Now was the moment of truth. Hivoc walked up to Mach, having to push his way through person after person after person in the mass of people. He just barely managed to squeeze past, getting to Mach before any of the reporters could weasel their way between them. Thankfully, most of the guests seemed to leave the two alone, letting Hivoc have a partially private conversation with the other.

“That speech was really inspiring,” Hivoc said, the words making himself cringe with how he sounded. “Do you think you could give me some tips to get in the game? You’re always so persuasive, I just *need* to know how you do it.” He had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep his face from visibly contorting from the disgust of his own suck-upiness.

Mach ate it up, a grin plastering his face. “Well, since you’re so kind, I’ll gladly tell you how to do it. I’ll tell you, it’s not easy, mister...” his voice trailed off, prompting Hivoc to give a response.

“Billy Rames. It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir.” Hivoc extended a hand for Mach, which he took, the two engaging in a firm handshake. The conversation dragged on, Hivoc offering to buy Mach a drink, and even though he rejected it at first, Hivoc insisted just enough to not seem pushy, eventually getting some alcohol in Mach’s system. It seemed to loosen him up, though not nearly enough to get secrets spilling out of his lips.

After some more drinks, all of which were heavy hits to Hivoc’s wallet, Mach went on a monologue about politics and persuasiveness, and Hivoc was just about to call it quits and look for an excuse to leave, when Mach leaned in close—close enough for Hivoc to catch the wretched smell of one too many drinks in his breath—and spoke in a low whisper.

“How ‘bout I let you in on an insider secret, kid.” Mach had to steady himself on the bar counter, and Hivoc could feel his hopes rise like a helium balloon. Mach looked around, making sure no one was eavesdropping on the pair, then continued. “Now ‘at I’m president n’ all, I’m plannin’ on renovatin’ one of those smaller towns, y’get me? Probably Tillonthaw, that’s a good n’. That’s what you gotta do when yer in politics, you gotta make decisions, even if everyone doesn’t like all a’ ‘em.”

Hivoc smiled widely, his eyes gleaming at the drunkenly wrapped present of words Mach had so graciously given him. He nodded in agreement. “I know exactly what you mean, sir. Would you perhaps like another drink?”

He had the information, now he just had to get out.

Chapter XI - Escape

Getting out, of course, was the *other* hard part.

Then again, it would be much easier to get out of a conversation with a drunk Mach without suspicion than if he was sober. Hivoc stepped away from the man. “Thank you for the insight, sir, but I must be going now...” he turned around, already walking away with his heart pounding in his chest. He had been acting so well he hadn’t even noticed how hard his heart was racing in his chest during the entire exchange. Or how much his legs were shaking.

He was only a few paces away from the front door when he felt Mach’s hand on his shoulder, making him stop. Hivoc turned, thinking himself caught in the act. Mach leaned in, a smile on his face like he knew Hivoc’s secret, flashing pearly white teeth that weren’t natural in the slightest. Either they were modified or they were entirely fake, giving the impression he took care of his dental health.

“Here’s ‘nother tip,” Mach said, gripping Hivoc’s shoulder harder. Suddenly, his smile became more kind. “Go by yer full name, *William*. Billy makes you seem childish, n’ no one wants a childish candidate.”

Hivoc relaxed, faking a laugh and gently pushing Mach’s hand off his shoulder. It was a close call—way too close—that much was certain. He

thought for sure he had been exposed, but Mach was entirely under the delusion that he really was some suck-up young politician. He got another pace away from Mach, only to be stopped again.

His grip was tighter. Too intentional to be that of a drunken man. His fingers dug into Hivoc's flesh, making the hairs on the back of his neck rise on end and goosebumps bubble up under his skin, despite the moderate temperature. Hivoc spared a glance behind him, and the intoxicated expression on Mach's face had dropped, a stone cold serious look in its place. He wasn't slouching anymore either, and his eyes had a deadly glare to them.

"That was quite the performance, Hivoc Blackstone. I almost believed you for a minute there. *Almost*. You should really take up a more productive hobby than fruitlessly trying to stop me, I think acting would suit you nicely. Something where you won't be in my way. Oh, and just so you know, I didn't say anything I didn't want you knowing. You can try and stop me, but you'll send me one step back so I can go forward ten more. Being against me is living in a burning house—idiotic. I strongly advise you to stop. For your own good."

Mach patted Hivoc's shoulder, letting him go and returning to the party. Hivoc could barely even move. He couldn't have been that obvious, right? His mind was racing with thoughts of confusion, powered by fear. His body moved on its own, functioning on autopilot and bringing him out of the mansion. He ignored the comments of the other people, including the guards themselves when they tried to get his attention.

While he walked, he couldn't stop his eyes from looking over his shoulder and scanning his surroundings, paranoid over the thought of one of Mach's

Machinae stalking him. None were, though. At least, not any that Hivoc could see. He flinched when a cat meowed at him, his hands snapping straight to his waist to grab a sword that wasn't there. The feline stared up at him curiously before moving on, bored with the man.

He was only a block away from the rebel base when he heard a rustle in the alleyway behind him. Fear flooded through him as much as grim curiosity did. He stopped his pace, turning around and looking at the alley. It was shrouded in darkness, making it impossible to see anything in there in the dim light of the evening moon. He stepped closer, kicking dirt with his foot.

He squinted his eyes, heart pounding against his ribs like a warning for him to leave immediately. He didn't listen to it, just moving closer until he got to the source of the noise coming from behind a dented metal trash can. He reached out for it, tilting it to peek at what was there. He shut his eyes, half expecting some creature of the night to jump out and make him his dinner. He felt his pulse quicken, anticipating his own demise.

It was merely a rat, however, scurrying away with an apple core in its mouth. Hivoc breathed a sigh of relief, his nerves soothing ever so slightly. Despite the fact that the noise was just a false alarm, his body was still on high alert, flinching and jolting at the slightest movements and unexpected sounds.

He finally began moving again after pulling himself together, convincing himself that there was nothing to fear—Mach was all the way across the city after all, and he couldn't just leave the gala to stalk Hivoc, who was completely and positively insane.

He was just being paranoid, right?

Right?

Hivoc walked down to the rebel base, the route already ingrained in his mind despite only being a part of it for a short amount of time. Memory had always been one of his strong suits, usually for the better; though he could never get embarrassing scenes out of his mind, like they had been stored in the data banks of his mind.

He made his way to the faux brick wall hiding the elevator, opening it and going inside with the operator. The operator brought the pair all the way down to the bottom floor, while the entire time Hivoc was replaying every moment from the gala, and thinking how clueless he had been, not to see that Mach had been acting the entire time. He felt stupid for not seeing it. Mach was a manipulative genius, yet Hivoc had just assumed that he wouldn't use his skills to trick him.

The elevator came to a stop as they reached the bottom, the door opening for him to step into the open room. Surprisingly, tonight there weren't many rebels at work, just a few especially dedicated ones crafting and tinkering at their respective work stations. He walked past them without a second glance, opening the staggeringly tall door. It creaked open for him, letting him continue his stride down into the private common room.

When he entered, he was pleasantly surprised to see that mostly everyone was awake and waiting, with the exception of Xailu. He could already imagine their reactions to his failure in the mission—disappointment, anger, desperation, all the things he hated seeing on people's faces. His mouth started moving before he could properly think about what he was going to say.

“Mach spilled a secret.”

The others, who had already started looking at him when he approached, perked up at that, flickers of hope in their eyes and body language eager for him to tell more good news. He wasn't a good liar, but lying by omission was a lot easier than blatantly lying. Besides, they didn't have to know that Mach had somehow known his name and his rebel status; that was a needless worry that he didn't want to add to their shoulders.

“Mach told me he's going to attack Tillonthaw. I didn't get a timeframe, but my guess would be that it's happening sooner rather than later.” Avion's expression glowed like he had struck gold, the gears turning in his head on how he could make a plan out of the information. He stood up, walking to the back of the room, where a chalkboard had been set up.

He grabbed a stick of chalk from the tray attached to the board and started to scribble out ideas for what to do and how to stop Mach. Hivoc silently started to slip away, exhaustion creeping up on him now that the adrenaline of being caught in the act had started to fade into security.

“Hivoc,” his sister's voice called out to him softly. He turned around to look at her, and she peeked over her shoulder to make sure the other rebels were too focused on Avion's plan to pay attention to them. She leaned in, her voice dropping to a whisper. “Is something wrong? You don't look all there...”

Hivoc blinked, then scrambled for an excuse in his mind. He muttered words about how he was just tired, and all that acting had taken a ton of energy out of him. Hivah raised an eyebrow, unconvinced. She crossed her arms, silently prompting him to say the whole truth. He knew she wouldn't

relent—Hivah was ruthless when she wanted something done, he had seen it first-hand more times than he could count.

“Mach,” he started, gesturing with his hands absently, like he was grasping at the air for the words he needed to keep speaking, “he *knew* who I was, somehow. He knew my name, he knew I was a rebel, he knew I was acting. And he told me not to get in his way, but I’m going to, anyway. I don’t care what it takes or what happens to me, I’m stopping Mach.”

He walked away before his sister could respond. He would have told her not to tell anyone, but he knew she wouldn’t even though he didn’t explicitly tell her. She knew him almost as well as he knew himself, and she always knew which secrets were okay to talk about and which ones he wanted no one else to know. Hivah walked back to the other rebels, watching Avion’s plan as Hivoc went down to go and sleep off his unease.



Avion spared a fleeting glance at Hivoc even as he continued scribbling on the chalkboard. Even though Avion hadn’t known Hivoc for long, there was an inexplicable magnetism between them. Magnetism that made Avion’s eyes stick to him like flavors on his tongue, magnetism that made his mind keep thinking of Hivoc even when he left the room, magnetism that made even his closed eyes see Hivoc. It was a feeling he knew and hated so intimately.

His eyes flickered to Quirwin, his best friend of many years, so many that he couldn’t remember a time before they had been friends. Every time he

thought of Hivoc, there was a nagging feeling in the back of his mind that told him to think about Quirwin, trying to take him back to the past and draw him into that abyss once more.

He brought his eyes back to the board, writing as if nothing was wrong. As if no emotions were running rampant in his head. As if he didn't feel divided every day seeing Hivoc and Quirwin in the same room.

Chapter XII - Armaments

Hivoc slashed at the dummy, his enhanced rapier gleaming under the lamplight illuminating the room. Preparations were underway, and that meant Hivoc couldn't waste time not practicing his swordsmanship. He took a step back from the dummy, wiping the sweat on his brow with the back of his hand. He sheathed his blade, exhaustion plaguing his muscles with an aching pain.

He walked away from the dummy set up and went towards the kitchenette to relax. As he walked by, his gaze traveled along what all of the other higher rebels were doing. Krae and Isticus were working together, trying to forge as many more weapons as possible for the upcoming battle at Tillonthaw—mostly swords, though they included some spears and other weapons.

Quirwin had his nose deep in a new invention of his. He said it would singlehandedly be able to stop the Machinae, but didn't allow anyone to touch it. From what Hivoc could tell, it was going to be big, since Quirwin had allocated much more space than usual for just this one invention. He looked extraordinarily stressed, his eyes darting around and seeing every single part with equal disgruntlement.

Hivah and Liz on the other hand, were tinkering with some smaller robots, as well as what looked like robotic prosthetics—similar in shape to Mach's

prosthetics, but much less refined. Mach's had always been clean, sleek, like something from the far future, while the one on Hivah's table was more rustic, hand-made, more down to earth in a strange, almost comforting way.

He looked away, only to do a double take when he noticed one extra small detail. Hivah's eyes weren't on her own creations, nor Liz's creations, but Liz herself. He saw Hivah's gray eyes speckled with flicks of amber from their mother linger on Limizella's face, examining her features while fazing out and not listening to the words she was saying. Hivoc smiled at the sight—partially because it meant Hivah had finally adored someone, and partially because it was the perfect ammunition to tease her with.

He walked past Xailu and Avion as he got to the kitchenette, the two scrutinizing a plan of defense over the map-embedded table—the thing had become a staple to the rebels, almost like an extra member that was there every time they needed it; it was an iconic part of the room Hivoc couldn't imagine not having. He rested his hand down on the wood, leaning over the table to see what Avion in particular was doing.

"A victory will not come easy," Avion whispered, half to himself and half to the others around him, "Mach chose this city carefully. Tillonthaw is one of the smallest cities inside Ollown, and the most against him among said smaller cities. It's Strategic, calculated. He chose it for a reason, that much is certain..." He bit on the wood of a pencil, chewing on it methodically.

Hivoc moved away, leaving the pair to themselves. He grabbed a glass from one of the cabinets and filled it with water, quenching his thirst before returning to the training area. He stepped back to slash at it, only to bump into a

form behind him, both stumbling at the unexpected contact. Hivoc turned, seeing Avion close to him.

“A mental break is required for me, and I feel that a rematch is required for me to regain lost glory. Would you care for a duel, Hivoc?”

“I would never say no to beating you in battle,” Hivoc said with a smile, stepping to the dummy and moving it out of the way. Avion drew his longsword, both men taking their respective stances with their weapons of choice. Hivoc held his rapier tightly chin high, looking Avion right in his eyes.

“Good luck,” Avion said, “you will need it to best me this time.”

Hivoc lunged forward, his sword piercing through the air with an unbelievable speed. Avion took a quick step back, parrying the attack with equal agility and skill. He slashed at Hivoc, who deflected the blade with his own. It was a back and forth, the clashing creating a tornado of metal between the duelists. Sweat trickled down their brows, their footwork impeccable despite the growing exhaustion from the lengthy battle.

The fight seemed to last forever, to the onlookers and the participants. No matter how many times one lunged or slashed or attacked or dodged, the other always had the perfect response to it. It was mesmerizing to watch, like a perfectly rehearsed dance of swords being performed with the precision of an expert in the craft.

Hivoc and Avion both were experts, in their own way. Hivoc had taught himself how to use a sword in unorthodox ways when he needed money fast, which gave him the unpredictability and surprise factor that he wasn't ashamed to admit had won him more than one fight. And Avion had learned his skills

with a blade through generations of family, the exactness and familiarity ground into the callouses of his hands over years of traditional practice.

And then—

A falter. A misstep. A miscalculation. An imperfect block. Hivoc brought his rapier a few millimeters too low. Not enough for most people to take advantage of, but Avion was not most people. He was a man of the blade, a connoisseur of the longsword.

The simple mistake was all he needed to win. He sliced his sword, stopping it just before it touched Hivoc's throat. The metal pressed against the rich umber-colored flesh of Hivoc's body, the glimmering silver against his neck like a second place medal. Both men panted in exhaustion, faces sheened with sweat. Neither spoke, simply staring at each other. It was a long moment before any of them had the energy to make comprehensible words.

"One to one... You may have won our first battle, but I will come out on top. That," Avion smiled lightly, "I can guarantee."

"Is that a promise we'll fight again?"

"Only if you train enough to beat me, Hivoc Blackstone."

Chapter XIII - Tillonthaw

The battle was to happen at sunrise. The final preparations had been made, the townsfolk warned to go inside their homes and pray for the best, the swords' edges sharpened to perfection, the rebels armed with blades and shields, and the bodies of the battlers filled with energy.

The air of the frigid morning had chilled Hivoc, who had taken to stuffing his hands in the pockets of his overcoat to keep them from shivering. Hivah was in the same position, the pair had never had the best resistance to the cold weather, raised around a hearth with soup for dinner and blankets to shelter them every night. Avion, on the other hand, seemed completely unfazed, of which Hivoc was envious.

Hivoc stepped over to Avion, drawing the other man's eyes. "I don't understand how you can survive out here without a scarf and coat," he said, planting his feet in the ground. He had forgone his usual boots for ones more suited for the cold morning. He rolled his aching shoulders, body still not fully recovered from the overexertion of their duel yesterday, something that went unmentioned, but not unnoticed by Avion.

"Once you begin moving and fighting you will become warmer. Besides, it is not so cold out here, I would call it moderate. Perfect weather for a nice

morning coffee, now that you mention it.” Avion looked out into the distance, his eyes tracing the sprawling lush hills of the Ollown countryside. The sun had yet to claim the horizon as its domain, leaving the sky a muddy blue color that dimmed the usual vibrant green of the grass they stood upon.

Not too far away, though, there was a small river on the edge of the town. Mach had supposedly poisoned the river—whether intentionally or not was unknown—through the use of the Machinae, forcing the residents to take their water from elsewhere. Of course, the big cities—Zloenheim, Valeria City—had naught a problem. The disparity grinded his gears.

“You never can shut up about coffee, can you?” Hivoc asked, his voice disbelieving but playful in nature. They both chuckled, but a silence quickly enveloped them, neither quite sure how to continue the conversation. They stood, not speaking, waiting in anticipation for the Machinae to come. It was like awaiting death, counting down the minutes until the axe came down on their necks.

Hivoc was about to say something to Avion, about offering to get him a coffee from the caravan they had brought from Luttecord, but he didn’t get a chance. There they were. A metal army on a battlefield of earth. An artificial march atop a natural ground. They appeared on the horizon, creating silhouettes and drowning the area beneath their feet in dark shadows.

Everyone drew their weapons, Hivah tightening a bolt to hold a contraption around her arm. Liz and Quirwin did something similar; they may not have had proficiency in swords or shields, but they used their minds to make weapons they could use better than anyone else. Hivoc admired the courage it took to

use one's skills in that way. He also noticed the look of confidence on everyone's faces—it didn't take a genius to tell why, there were only some fifteen Machinae per person, which was more than enough to handle.

The humans charged, their weapons wielded tightly in front of them. Hivoc and Avion reached the front line of Machinae first, Hivoc taking no time to stab and pierce the robots with his rapier. He executed quick footwork around them, his movements clunkier due to the heavier wear he had on. Normally, he avoided wearing armor—it felt like he was putting on an extra pair of skin with how uncomfortable it felt. Not to mention it made him that much slower in combat.

Today, however, he had picked some thicker clothes to accommodate for the chilly morning, even though it wasn't enough to prevent him from shivering under the woolen coat. He felt the weight slow him, having to expend more energy to keep himself moving at a pace too fast for the Machinae. There was the plus of not sweating because of the cold, on the other hand.

The Machinae's eyes, upon the rebel horde attacking, turned a reddish-purple in color, all of them beginning to counter attack as a single unit of strength. The rebels faltered at the sudden resistance. Despite the significantly fewer Machinae than they had met when they first marched to Tillonthaw, the rebels still had trouble managing them.

The Machinae had been trained by experts, a fact obvious by their elite movements and weapons—which they had created from transforming the metal of their hands and arms into swords and shields—parrying and slicing with the precision of disciplined masters of the craft. Avion, who had been trained

similarly, struggled against them. The Machinae were not human, they did not make mistakes in the same way humans did, and that made it nearly impossible for Avion to capitalize off of them.

Slowly but surely, the rebels lost ground. The Machinae injured more than they killed. The rebels had to step back towards the homes of the Tillonthaw citizens. Hivoc didn't, though, for something strange happened with the Machinae. They did not attack him, they didn't even look at him, just marched past with weapons for arms, ignoring Hivoc as though he wasn't there. It was strange—supernatural, even. They should have been attacking him, tearing him to shreds with their metal bodies, but they didn't.

It was weird enough to make Hivoc lower his sword and stop attacking, puzzled by their lack of recognition of him. He thought he would be especially targeted by the Machinae, given Mach himself told Hivoc to stay out of his way. It appeared there was a malfunction, however. He made a mental note to talk to Quirwin and the other specialists with electronics after the battle ended. He snapped his focus back to the battle itself.

Hivoc went to the backline of the Machinae, all of them continuing to ignore him even as he destroyed them with his sword, piercing their metal skin with his steel blade. He slashed through their uncannily human bodies, dicing them up like vegetables on a cutting board. He dwindled their numbers singlehandedly, bringing them down from over a hundred to mere tens.

With the skill and determination of Avion and the other rebels, the Machinae were defeated, left as scrap on the landscape—the remains of a coward sending metal instead of meat to fight for him. Hivoc looked down into

the corpse of one of the Machinae, seeing a purple crystal inside the heart of the machine. He reached down for it.

BAM!

The crystal shattered, all the light that was emanating from it dissipating in moments. The same thing happened across all the Machinae, purple shards of the crystal exploding within the machines. He figured that the crystals were what powered the Machinae, and that Mach had designed them to explode as a failsafe. It didn't seem to work with every Machinae though, failure prevalent among the ranks.

While Hivoc and the others gathered, celebrating the victory over Mach, Quirwin and Isticus took it a step further, shouting celebratory curses at Mach and holding their middle fingers up to the air. Avion just shook his head, whispering something under his breath Hivoc could safely guess translated, more or less, to 'immature.'

Limizella patched up the few wounds inflicted on the rebels, treating them with antiseptic and antibiotics and wrapping them up in gauze bandages. Overall, the mission had been near completely successful, the only hiccup being the minor injuries suffered.

After gathering themselves, the rebels told the people of Tillonthaw they were safe. They refused any payment, despite the insistence of a majority of the residents, made their way back to their caravan, and returned to Luttecord and their rebel base.

Hivoc's body was aching after lugging his rapier around for the entire battle, and the small duration of rest he got inside the caravan wasn't enough to

rejuvenate him. Back at the base, Hivoc made his way down the hallway to the bedrooms, only for the hand of Avion to press down on his shoulder, stopping him in his tracks.

“How did you do that?” Avion asked, his voice serious and firm. Hivoc didn’t speak. He knew exactly what Avion meant, nothing had to be said. He didn’t look over his shoulder to see Avion, now wasn’t the time to do that. Instead, he just cleared his throat and shifted on his feet, muttering under his breath.

“I don’t know, they just... didn’t see me or something.”

“Weird,” Avion said, his voice silently telling Hivoc he didn’t believe him. He removed his hand anyway, letting Hivoc go on.

“Yeah, it was,” he responded. Avion left.

Hivoc felt like he hadn’t said the right answer, even though it was the truth. He almost called out for Avion, but what good would it do? Nothing. He walked to his bedroom, collapsing on his bed, ready to fall asleep. It wasn’t night yet, but he still made a wish.

“I wish he knew he could trust me.”

Chapter XIV - Celebration

Quirwin popped the cork off a bottle of champagne, initiating a flood of cheers from the rebels. It was the same night that they had defended Tillonthaw from the attack by Mach, but the energy was completely different. It reminded Hivoc of the parties he was invited to but never attended in his youth, full of people drinking and doing drugs and kissing while he tried to find a conversation he could manage for a few minutes before eventually sneaking out without anyone noticing.

He held a glass of champagne, blinking and—just for a moment—seeing himself at the gala again. He was jolted back to reality when he blinked again, though his heart beat harder in his chest nonetheless. He drank his champagne, standing off to the side, not engaging with the other rebels. He wasn't focused on the party at all, his mind lingering on only one person.

Avion.

Earlier, he had told the truth to him, but it had felt like a lie. Avion hadn't believed Hivoc when he said he didn't know the reason for the Machinae, and that pained Hivoc. His eyes scanned the people in the room, looking for Avion in hopes of making things up to him. When he did find Avion, his eyes stuck

there—like a hand in honey—staring at him, knowing he had an obligation to talk to him, to plead for Avion to believe him.

He swallowed his pride, washing it down with the alcohol in his glass, then strode over to him, wobbling from the nerves prickling his body like binding thorns. Avion looked as attractive as ever, despite the more casual wear he had chosen for the unofficial party. His pale skin was bathed in warm light, his coffee black hair was slicked back, one strand hanging rebelliously between his orange eyes, which were looking at Quirwin.

“Hey,” Hivoc said, the collar of his shirt feeling too tight around his neck, making his back sweat.

“Hello,” Avion said in response, his eyes diverging from Quirwin to look at Hivoc, though his body remained angled to the former.

“I, um, just wanted to say sorry, is all.”

“What for?”

“For not being clearer about not knowing about the Machinae and, um... yeah. I didn’t lie, though, I told you as much as I knew.”

“I never said you did.”

“Your body language was saying it.”

“Was it? I was skeptical, but I never thought you outright lied. You did seem confused on the battlefield when it happened.”

“I was. It was weird.” Hivoc shifted his stance, trying to be more comfortable, and setting his empty champagne glass on the counter off to the side. Even though he felt awkward, and he was stuttering through words with needless pauses, the conversation seemed to flow naturally off Hivoc’s tongue,

something that couldn't be said of him a lot of the time. He couldn't say why it was happening, he just felt different with Avion, that everything was a lot easier, though there were also more expectations.

“Do you have a clue as to *why* it happened? I know Quirwin would be fascinated with another development on the Machinae. He's been obsessing over them ever since they made their first appearance. One would think they're his own invention, with the magnitude of notes he keeps on them. They're thicker than his skull.”

Hivoc snorted at the insult, which was clearly from a place of friendship. Hivah had told him that Avion and Quirwin had been longtime friends after the two moved to the same city around the same time. He could see the companionship with the way they acted around each other, like they both knew everything about each other. Hivoc was jealous that he didn't have a friendship like that, though not surprised he didn't. Friendships like those were once in a lifetime, not something you came across every day.

Hivoc didn't know how to continue the conversation, how to keep Avion engaged with his words. He didn't try, either, just went to the bottle of champagne and poured himself another glass.

Interlude - II

Despite being so extraordinarily drunk that it visibly amused the normally stoic Avion, Hivoc was a *very* stiff dancer.

“You must relax your muscles, Hivoc,” Avion suggested, trying to guide his arms with his own.

“M relasd,” Hivoc responded, unable to be steady on his own feet. It was true, his muscles were as relaxed as they could be. He didn’t think he could even tense them, while his body was in this state. He tried to let loose, like Avion had told him to, but he was seemingly incapable, his movements rigid and tight.

“Remind me to *properly* teach you dancing.”

“Mmm... kay...”

Chapter XV - Regret

Hivoc's head was killing him. Every beat of his heart was like an ax coming down on his skull, pain pulsating in waves. He stood up from his bed, bringing a hand to his hair and pushing the black locks back so they weren't blocking his eyes. He stumbled his way out of his room, tripping over his own feet as he walked into the main room. He did a double take when he saw Avion holding a broom, sweeping up litter on the floor.

Hivoc called out his name. "Avion?"

Avion looked up from the floor, broom and dustpan still in his hands. "You're up early, considering how much you drank last night," he said, returning to sweeping. The entire room was completely covered in trash, making shame and guilt fill Hivoc to the brim.

"Sorry for leaving such a mess for you," he said, wandering further into the room, stepping over dustpiles and trash as he did. He got himself a glass of water to soothe his headache—it didn't do much, but it didn't do nothing either. He chugged the entire glass until it was empty, setting it down on the countertop as he tried not to look awkward letting Avion clean up everyone else's mess.

“It’s quite alright. However, I do think it’s necessary to make you aware of some of the curious actions you partook in while drunk,” Avion said, not looking Hivoc in the eyes as he spoke. Even Hivoc could tell there was something awkward to say, and he knew he didn’t want to hear it. However, grim curiosity took over, forcing him to ask.

“What’d I do?”

“For one, you asked me to dance with you—you were very stiff, I must say, even though you had plenty to drink, you weren’t fluid in the slightest.” Hivoc felt his cheeks get warm in embarrassment, attempting to stutter out an excuse for his drunken actions. “I did dance with you, mostly out of pity, though it was quite amusing. Then you were clinging onto me for the rest of the night, though that was partially through my own choice, as you couldn’t stand at all on your own. Oh, and you were very resistant to me leaving you alone in your room, thank god I’m strong enough to wrestle myself out of your grip.”

Hivoc was mortified the longer Avion talked about him, wishing he could bury himself alive so he didn’t have to deal with the embarrassment of his past. He had been made aware of his less than appealing dancing multiple times, especially by his sister, but never of his clinginess while drunk. He covered his face with his hands, drawing the lightest of chuckles out of Avion.

Avion shrugged, continuing to sweep. Hivoc found himself grabbing a second broom. Sweeping would help distract his mind from the embarrassment he was feeling. Avion looked Hivoc in the eye, the smallest bit of surprise crossing his face. “I don’t need your assistance, Hivoc. Please, rest—you need it.”

“I need to make up for my behavior yesterday,” Hivoc forced out. That seemed to silence Avion, since neither of them spoke for a good few minutes, silently cleaning while Hivoc’s headache and awkwardness cleared, only barely. The two briefly spoke to ask for help getting in a corner or handing the dustpan or a rag to each other. This silence was different from the one they shared yesterday, Hivoc noted. It felt different, more comfortable instead of suffocating. It felt nice.

“I didn’t tell you everything about the gala.”

“What?”

“I didn’t tell you everything that happened at the gala,” he repeated. Avion raised an eyebrow, silently asking for Hivoc to continue. “Mach knew who I was somehow, and he said that being against him was like being on fire or something. He said I shouldn’t try to stop him, but—” he looked over at Avion, who now looked deadly serious.

“Hivoc, what did he say *exactly*?”

Hivoc blinked, then recounted the scene as best he could. “I think he said ‘being against me is living in a burning house?’ Something like that.”

“Hivoc,” Avion said, dropping his broom, which clattered against the floor loudly, the sharp sound sending a jolt of pain through his head and renewing his headache. “Did you think, for even a moment, Mach meant that *literally*? What if...”

Avion didn’t have to finish the thought. They both ran out of the rebel base, running down the streets of Luttecord in their pajamas. Hivoc rounded the corner of his block before Avion did, seeing smoke pouring into the sky. The

smell of ash hit his tongue, and fire burned bright in an engulfing inferno down the street.

It came from the direction of his house.

He rushed to it, denying what he knew to be true. He begged and pleaded under his breath, praying for the truth to be a lie. His legs burned with pain, but he continued pumping them until he knew the truth with a hundred percent certainty. He collapsed onto his knees.

His house was on fire, burning to ash right in front of his eyes. And with it, all of the memories he had ever made there.

Chapter XVI - Ignite

Tears washed ash off of Hivoc's face as his home burned to the ground. He felt his entire life come crashing down with the house. The fire department had come, though they were too late to salvage anything worthwhile from the fire. Everything he had ever owned was inside that home. Now all of it was gone—every picture of his mother, every toy from when he was a kid, every last shred of evidence he had existed on this planet for twenty three years. Gone. Lost all because of one person.

Mach.

Hivoc cried. He cried and sobbed until his voice had gone hoarse and his eyes were puffy. Yes, he had shed tears in the past—over Luttecian children who had lost their homes to Mach, over the misfortune of his loved ones, over heartwrenching stories in the news—but he couldn't remember the last time he had cried like *this*.

No, that was a lie. He *did* remember.

Eight years ago. October fifteenth. His mother had been robbed and murdered in an alleyway, left to bleed out for what felt like hours in pain before her inevitable death. Hivoc had to watch as the two men restrained him, stabbing knives into his mother's flesh as he begged and pleaded with them for

her life, crying just as he did now, if not worse. If he had been stronger, if he knew how to hold a sword, then he could have saved her. He could have done something—*should have* done something.

But he couldn't have. He had been powerless at the time. He wasn't powerless anymore, and after that day he vowed never to let anyone be hurt ever again, but in protecting every *person*, he had neglected to shield his own home, leaving it vulnerable for Mach to come and destroy with a flick of his wrist. It enraged him as much as it depressed him.

Hivoc felt Avion's comforting hand rub his back, though it did nothing to calm him down nor make him feel any better. Nothing could make him feel any better in a moment like this. He coughed up soot and ash as he continued to sit in front of the remains of his home, but he was numb to the burning feeling it created in his lungs.

Only when minutes had passed did Hivoc have the strength to stand up, using Avion's arm as support. In the near distance, he saw two pillars of smoke rising up in the sky, exactly where Krae and Isticus's and Limizella's homes had been. Mach hadn't just destroyed his home, he had destroyed the homes of his friends.

"Sorry, kid, stuff like this just happens sometimes," one of the firefighters said to Hivoc, patting him on the shoulder. "We did find some letters, addressed to a... Hivoc and Hivah Blackstone?" The man held two ivory envelopes in his hand, squinting to read the cursive handwriting that wrote out Hivoc and Hivah's full names.

With shaky hands, Hivoc took the letters. He ripped his own open as the firefighter left him and Avion alone. His eyes scanned over the message, his fists gripping so tightly they crumpled the sides of the paper in on itself. Avion looked over Hivoc's shoulder with a grim curiosity.

“What does it say?” he asked.

Hivoc took in a deep, shaky breath, and spoke the words on the page.

Dear Hivoc Blackstone,

Evidently, you have ignored my warning at the gala a few days prior. You were quite effective in dismantling the Machinae army I dispensed to Tillonthaw. I'm sure you can agree it was beautiful, no? The Machinae can fight for us. We can suffer no casualties in any war we fight, using machines as soldiers instead of men. They will be the medics, they will be the generals, they will be the fodder, they will be the heroes of Ollown. No man will ever have to see the horrors of battle again, don't you see? All this to say that rebellion is counterproductive. Your protests are bumps along the road of innovation.

You may think you're stunting the growth of the machine with your fights, but you are doing nothing but showing how truly powerless you are. I will squash every last one of you like the miniscule bugs you are if you continue your behavior. I have already shown you my power through the destruction of your home, I know you cannot afford to lose much else in this world—especially your dear sister, Hivah. You may hate the change that is coming to the world, but change is for the better.

Return to the shadows, Hivoc. That is all the advice I'll give you.

*Best wishes,
M. Steelspine*

Hivoc stood up, ripping the letter into pieces and tossing it onto the ground. He did the same to Hivah's letter, rubbing his foot onto the paper and getting dirt and mud all over it. He had a feeling Mach was watching him, and the destruction of the letter was a sign of defiance he indulged in. He turned to look at Avion.

“We’re going to kill Mach. I don’t care what you say to me, Mach is dying by my hands.”

PART II:

DREAD

Chapter XVII - Empathize

Hivoc walked like a broken man, because he was. Even though now he was more determined than ever to stop Mach by any means necessary, that determination didn't relieve the intense grief he felt from losing his home and everything in it. Every step sent pains through his body, reminding him of everything he had taken for granted that was now ash and smoke.

He didn't look back as he walked farther and farther away from his home, not even as Avion began to tail behind him, calling his name and trying to get his attention. After realizing he wouldn't respond, Avion stayed silent, walking alongside Hivoc instead. There weren't any opportunities to speak, but Hivoc didn't want to say anything even if there were.

The walk felt longer than it took. It felt like every second took minutes to tick by, it felt like the day would never end, it felt like the world was lengthening the distance to the base with every step taken, it felt like the sun and the clouds were as still as statues in the sky. Nothing made time pass, not even the flashes of anger Hivoc felt for Mach.

His body was functioning on autopilot—if it wasn't, he would have never moved from the street in front of his house, waiting for something to change, even though he knew nothing would. The sadness he felt was so drowning it

numbed him. He felt prickles in his hands, as if his body was trying to give him feeling, though it had no success in its attempt.

His body remained unfeeling while his mind ran rampant.

Avion and Hivoc arrived at the rebel base—the only place Hivoc could call home, now that his actual one was nothing more than rubble. As he knocked on the brick wall, entered the elevator and descended to the base with Avion, Hivoc was still walking as if barely alive.

Murmurs echoed from the lower rebels as the two men walked deeper into the hidden base. No one had seen Avion appear this melancholy, nor had they seen Hivoc reflecting Avion's mood so intensely. So, of course, rumors began to sprout about what was happening. No one knew for sure, their claims being little more than speculation and flimsily backed theories.

Avion escorted Hivoc, not trusting him to walk without assistance. He guided him until they reached the door to the upper rebel room, where members were chatting, oblivious to the bad news the pair had to reveal.

Hivoc opened his mouth to speak but words failed him—barely a sound left him, except for a pained gasp. Avion gently pushed Hivoc back a step, signaling he would break the news. Hivoc barely nodded in acknowledgement. Avion cleared his throat, hooking the attention of the rebels.

He took a deep breath. “Our homes are gone. They were all destroyed—burnt by Mach.”

Silence. Silence enveloped all of them as if a flood was drowning the ghosts of their words before they could even form on their tongues. No one had

to speak, the nothingness did it for them. It whispered their devastation and depression in everyone's ears.

Quirwin had been busy working on something—his *magnum opus*, so he claimed—which he was typically much more careful with than his other inventions. Today, though, hearing the news, his hold on his tools slipped, letting them fall to the ground loudly.

“How could he have known where we lived?” Limizella asked, her voice piercing the silence like a sword through flesh. Her question earned no response, yet everyone had a theory in their mind, one they didn't dare voice despite the validity of it. There was only one possible way someone like Mach could have intimately known the location of their homes.

There had to be a spy. Among all of them, there was a betrayer. Someone working for Mach in the shadows, pretending to be against him for the sake of gathering information to feed to him. The idea alone made Hivoc's stomach twist into knots. It was one of the most dishonorable things a person could do—gain someone's trust knowing that it will end in catastrophe.

Hivoc's eyes moved around the room, lingering on every person to see if he could decipher the looks on their faces and possibly learn who was the secret spy. All he saw, however, was the same suspicion he held in himself mirrored on everyone else's expressions. That wasn't the only emotion he noticed. Krae and Limizella specifically—though there were hints of it within everyone—looked defeated, ready to give up.

He wasn't the only one who noticed.

Avion spoke up. “It is bad. But, none of us became a rebel because there would be no obstacles that would hold us back. When we decided that we would be the ones to stop Mach, we accepted that there would be many challenges, we accepted that it wouldn’t be easy. We have been set back, but we cannot give up because of that. Think of all the people that we can save by not giving up. Think of the future, not the now.

“There very well could be a liar among us, but let us give our companions the trust and support we have for the months before this day. We must work together if we are to defeat Mach—a man cannot defeat a giant, but a crowd can take it down with teamwork.”

Hivoc was amazed by the way Avion handcrafted a miniature speech right then and there. He was moved by it as much as the other rebels were. The energy in the room was uplifted by the words alone, brightened as if Avion was a sun upon them. It didn’t snuff their worries, but it did help reinvigorate their spirits and bring forth the same drive they felt before.

Hivoc, despite the speech, still didn’t feel fully restored, but he put on a smile with the others. His suspicion lingered as well, as he subtly eyed the other rebels and tried to remember everything and anything that could give them away as the spy. Nothing came to mind right away, but he knew there were signs, signs that someone like him could see.

“Who’s with me?” Avion asked, his voice catching their gazes and booming through the room. He raised his fist in the air, and they followed suit—it was almost as though they were punching the sky and punching the spirit of their oppressor and enemy. “*Jdazarb zhagan soc muflaiy!*”

Hivoc cheered with the rebels.

Chapter XVIII - Distraction

Hivoc rose from the table, stepping outside of the room to catch a breath of fresh air. He was motivated by the speech, yes, but there was still a part of him that felt lost—still caught on the barb that was the memory of his former home. He left the base, letting his body soak up the sun. He closed his eyes, taking in a deep breath to relax and cope.

He stood outside to have a moment to himself so he could think without the voices of others rattling around his head. He pushed his hair out of his face with his hand, looking out into the distance. There it was in the sky, the final traces of smoke dwindling in little trails disappearing behind the clouds. The world was unaffected by a tragedy so deep to him.

He heard a rustle behind him, and he turned to see Avion walking up to him. He felt his shoulders, which he didn't even realize were tensed up, relax. Avion stood next to Hivoc, resting a comforting hand on the other's shoulder. It helped Hivoc more than he would've thought possible. The touch was firm, and yet gentle at the same time.

"Hivoc," Avion said, getting his attention. Hivoc kept his gaze trained on the horizon beyond the pair of them. His mind was as lost as his eyes were, but his ears lingered with his form, taking in Avion's every word. "I know this isn't

easy for you. I was thinking, maybe I could help take your mind off things for a little while?”

Hivoc's eyes came back to him, meeting Avion's. He stared at him, his gaze transfixed, studying his face and memorizing it. He searched the files in his brain for the words to respond—so he could speak without sounding like an idiot. He came up short, so he just said what he was thinking without all the fluff his mouth tried to add on.

“Yes.” He cleared his throat, now finding the words to continue. “Please, yeah. That would be nice.” Hivoc found the thoughtful suggestion almost unexpected. He knew Avion to be a caring person through the time they had spent together as co-workers and friends, but Avion was never one to show it. He kept to himself. Hivoc saw himself a little in Avion. They both kept to themselves, preferring the touch of sword hilt to that of another person, and their words meant more than what left their tongues.

Avion led him down some streets, eventually arriving at a steam carriage service. He paid the man a handful of coins and hopped into the carriage. “Two passengers to Porthelwedge, please,” he said, gesturing to himself and Hivoc. The man nodded, getting into the driver's seat of the machine. Avion offered a hand to Hivoc. Hivoc took it, grasping the other man's palm, wrapping his fingers around his wrist, and using Avion's strength to pull him in.

The driver started the carriage, steam whistling outside of pipes as the wheels of the vehicle turned, moving them all forward. Hivoc glanced out the window of the carriage, watching Luttecord fade into silhouettes against the sky.

“So, Porthelwedge?” Hivoc asked, raising an eyebrow, once Luttecord had disappeared into the distance. Porthelwedge wasn’t known to be one of the attractive cities of Ollown for tourists. In fact, tourists seldom visited. Valeria City, the nation’s capital, outshone Porthelwedge in every aspect that mattered.

“I lived there before Luttecord. I’ll show you around. There’s a nice spot for food where we can eat,” Avion explained, looking out the window as the carriage traveled down a path, trees seeming to stroll by while birds scraped clouds and squirrels looted branches for acorns. Hivoc didn’t take his eyes off him, listening to the explanation and feeling a flicker of something in his chest.

He told himself to look away, and yet he couldn’t. He could only bear to remove his gaze when Avion met his eyes, making eye contact. His cheeks felt warmer, for a reason he didn’t know and didn’t want to. Avion’s eyes lingered on his face for a moment longer, then away again.

Soon, they arrived at Porthelwedge. Hivoc stepped out of the carriage, his eyes searching his surroundings for a familiarity that was entirely absent. It did not have the towering structures of Luttecord, nor the quaint homes of Tillonthaw. Its buildings jutted out at every angle, stabbing the air with sharp points and irregular extensions. It looked like a brain teaser—even one of those optical illusions he had seen during class when he was a child.

“Woah,” was all he could say. Avion stepped down beside him and thanked the driver, looking at Hivoc fondly before guiding him down the road. They walked side-by-side, two-by-two, down streets that were so foreign to one yet so familiar to the other. Rounding a corner, they saw what presumably had been

a home, now ash and rubble. Hivoc could tell it was Avion's house by the way his shoulders tensed at the sight.

"I'm—" his voice trailed off for a moment, unsure of what to say. He found his voice after seeing the concern behind the stoic eyes of Avion's emotionless face, like a face of silent agony on a statue of marble. "I'm sorry that happened to you, Avion."

Avion shook his head. "Nonesense, Hivoc. I knew it would happen, it was inevitable."

"That doesn't mean it hurts any less, though."

"I suppose it doesn't."

"So we're going somewhere else?"

"Yes, we are." Avion still looked forward to his house, counting the flakes of ash that were caught up in the wind. He breathed in the air, as though cherishing the final breaths of his home's extinguished life. He stuffed his hands in his pockets, itching to take something—anything—from the wreck to hold and treasure, yet there was nothing worth saving. "There's this restaurant I enjoy. I feel you'll like it as well." Avion had to force his legs to move, force himself to go on.

Hivoc lagged behind a step, though quickly caught up to Avion, the two moving side by side. Avion walked the winding roads of Porthelwedge confidently, knowing exactly where he was going, stepping down narrow passageways between buildings and stepping up stairwells while going down others. Hivoc had no clue where anything was, nor how to find his way in a town as disorienting as Porthelwedge.

They seemed to walk forever, never stopping and never pausing, just continuing to go on and go on and go on. No two places they passed looked exactly the same. Some had too many sharp angles, others were barely high enough to hold their height,

At last, Avion's announcement that they had arrived was like music to Hivoc's ears. They sat down in seats outside the building itself. It didn't look open, let alone functioning. Its windows were tinted black with soot from cigarettes, the window in the door was blocked by planks, the paint was peeling on the walls, and cobwebs bridged the distance between support beams. The feeling of abandonment was furthered by the lack of customers. It seemed that other people were avoiding this building as if it was a bad omen. And yet Avion sat down anyway.

Hivoc, though reluctant, sat down across from him, his eyes judgemental as they scanned the wooden structure overhanging their rickety chairs and small circular table. Much to his surprise, though, a large older woman—came out of the front door, cigarette in mouth and notepad in hand. Her gray hair was tied back in a bun, and her apron was gray from food stains and ashes.

“What you want?” she asked in a rude, raspy voice that cut through Hivoc's ears like the sound of screeching metal when it scraped something at the wrong angle. She held a pencil up to the notepad, not even bothering to look up at either Avion or Hivoc. Hivoc glanced at her, then the table, then back at his hands. He tried to ask for a menu, but Avion spoke for him, quietly shushing Hivoc with a raised hand and a waving gesture.

“Two pots of *Kmgrada*, please, and some sides of *Bloezh* and *Fraa*,” Avion said to the woman, making her eyebrow raise with the most emotion Hivoc guessed she’d ever show: mild surprise, which faded into gruff nothingness again. She walked away, scribbling the order down on her notes. “You’ll like it, it’s very spicy.”

“Spicy?” Hivoc asked, skeptical. He was always the person with the highest spice tolerance among Hivah and all her friends. Spice found *him* hot, if anything. Hivoc leaned back in the chair, making it groan with protest under his weight, the metal literally bending at the pressure. “I’ll be fine.”

“If you say so,” Avion said, shaking his head.

Hivoc leaned back forward, his tone betraying his offense. “What’s that supposed to mean? I’ll have you know, I take spice like a champ.”

“Then I’ll tell the waiter to give you the normal bowl instead of the mild. The one they give to natives like me.” Avion called out to the door, and the woman popped out, her brows furrowed in annoyance. “My friend wants the standard spice, could you do that for him?”

The woman let out a single, sharp laugh, then went back inside. Minutes passed, then the woman brought out two steaming hot bowls of a food unfamiliar to Hivoc. She gave the two men their silverware, then returned inside to get what appeared to be two eggs, and a small glass of a thick yellow liquid. Hivoc looked at the food with contempt, though not complete disdain, and not quite disgust.

Avion gestured for him to eat, picking up his spoon and scooping some of the food out of the bowl in front of him. Hivoc grabbed his spoon as well,

though he paused before taking a bite of the food in front of him. It was a stew of sorts, with some ingredients he recognized and some did not in a deep red broth that made it impossible to see the bottom of the bowl. He scooped out a plentiful amount of broth and other ingredients, his mouth engulfing the spoon.

He chewed. And chewed. And chewed. Then he swallowed.

And then the spice hit him like a freight train.

He coughed and gagged at the unbelievable heat, trying to cover his mouth so he didn't embarrass himself too much as Avion stifled a laugh in his palm. His amusement didn't go unnoticed by Hivoc, who had begun clutching his stomach from the spice that made it feel like a hole was being burned in his gut. In spite of the pain, Hivoc continued to eat. Avion did too, though he was much more composed. Avion tried to make conversation, but it was a frivolous attempt.



The pair began walking back to a taxi station, once they had finished eating. Hivoc, thankfully, had survived the battle against the *Kmgrada*, though just barely. He could still feel the burn against the inner tissue of his mouth and throat, as if both were coated with a layer of pure heat and spice. It was manageable, but he still couldn't hide the discomfort.

Avion tried to make conversation with Hivoc, who seemed more focused on managing the dulling pain—and keeping himself awake, his head nodding and his steps irregular. Avion found himself smiling almost fondly at Hivoc. He

gently guided Hivoc, taking his hand and leading him towards the taxi parked at the edge of town. He paid the driver quickly, handing him an extra tip as compensation for the inconvenient hour—midday, rush hour, even for a small town such as this.

“You can sleep when we arrive home, Hivoc.”

Hivoc didn’t listen, though, he was already out cold, his head resting on his companion's shoulder as his snores filled the back of the carriage. Avion had more or less assumed this would happen—to those inexperienced, certain spices in the *Kmgrada* had a drowsing effect. It was even used anciently as a rudimentary concoction that inspired modern sleeping pills.

Avion sighed, his arm going around Hivoc’s waist to keep him close as the carriage rode on. They wouldn’t get home until night was just beginning.

That gave him plenty of time to admire the other.

Chapter XIX - Notion

The carriage taxi slowly rolled to a stop at Luttecord station. The machine huffed and puffed steam out of its pipes, whistling and groaning after driving Avion and Hivoc to and from Porthelwedge. Avion climbed out of the carriage, having to maneuver Hivoc out as well, his companion still sleeping peacefully. Night had properly fallen since they left Avion's hometown, the sky dotted with pearly white stars and clouds so thin they were nearly invisible.

Avion lifted Hivoc into his arms. Hivoc wasn't light as a feather, that much was clear, but Avion was able to carry his dead weight without too much struggle. Avion's rigorous training served him well.

As for Hivoc, he seemed quite unbothered in his sleep—content, even, in his dreams. Avion looked down at Hivoc, who was murmuring soft snores as his head lay limp against his arm.

“What do you dream of, Hivoc Blackstone?” Avion whispered, careful not to wake him. It was a perfect night for dreaming. Avion looked to the sky, and he saw the sky blanketed by an ink-black night, dotted with pearls of stars and the hitchhiking clouds blurring handfuls at a time. Then there was the moon itself, lighting Avion's way in the late hour.

It was a short walk to the rebel base. But by the time Avion had brought Hivoc inside and all the way to his bedroom, his arms were burning and practically yelling at him to put the man down. Avion carefully settled Hivoc on his bed, taking off his shoes and jacket without fully undressing him. With a breath of relief, he stood straight and looked down at Hivoc.

A familiar feeling made its way into his stomach, making his entire being conflict with itself. His eyes didn't allow him to look away from Hivoc, even as emotional scars writhed in pain inside of him. *Not again*, he refused the familiar feeling, waving it away. He turned his back to Hivoc, starting to make his way out of the room. His hand grasped the doorknob, the flickering light of the lamps finally dying out.

"Mmmhm... Avion..."

...

What?

Avion turned, looking straight at the sleeping Hivoc. Had he muttered Avion's name in his sleep, or was his sleep-deprived mind playing a trick on him? A similar sounding murmur told him it was the former. Avion moved to Hivoc's bedside, gazing down at him.

"Yes, Hivoc?"

"Mmmf... Don' go... warm..."

Avion couldn't stop himself from snorting just a little at the amusing babbles from Hivoc. He brushed a lock of hair out of Hivoc's face, tucking it behind his ear. He smiled, his hand still in Hivoc's hair— his fingertips

reluctant to deprive themselves of the soft black strands that cluttered Hivoc's head.

"Good night, Hivoc," Avion said, finally removing his hand after what was probably too long to be justifiable. He gently closed the door to Hivoc's room behind him as he left, collapsing on his own bed. His thoughts of Hivoc and the day that had unfolded were swimming through his mind wildly, making it impossible to think straight. He spared himself the trouble of thinking and fell asleep. Even in his dreams though, one thing remained consistent.

Him.



Hivoc woke up with a crick in his neck and embarrassment on his mind as he remembered his sleepy self. He knew that the version of himself he was when sleepy and when drunk were very similar, but he hadn't realized that they were both able to completely mortify him. Once was enough, but a second time? It was almost like he was *trying* to make it happen—which he wasn't, he wanted the complete opposite, if anything.

He sat up, still in his clothes from yesterday evening. At least his shoes had been courteously placed over by the door, his jacket presumably hung up in the closed closet. He stood, stripping himself of the dirty clothes and tossing them into a hamper. He glanced at the door, making sure no one—especially not his sister—was passing by, then looked in the mirror of the closet, checking out his

muscles. They were still well-defined, but noticeably more so thanks to his more proper training at the rebel base.

He didn't resist the urge to flex his bicep, posing like he was a model, even though those men had more aesthetic muscles than functional ones. He put on a shirt, neatening its hem as he stepped out into the hallway. The smell of bacon dragged him up the short stairwell. That food from yesterday's outing left him craving something more homey, more familiar to his tastebuds.

He pulled a chair out and sat down at the table, resting his arm on the top of the chair. Everyone else was already up, making him wonder how long he'd slept in. Krae and Isticus were kind enough to make the breakfast, the two working as well in the kitchen as they did in a smithing room. It was like watching dance partners, the way they multitasked and navigated around each other, cooking at a remarkable speed.

"Where'd y'all learn to cook like that?" Quirwin asked, shaking his head in amazement.

"It's not all that different from smithing. You gotta do everything perfectly, follow some instructions, and protect yourself from the fire. And both end in a product you give away in the end, makes it all worthwhile," Isticus said, sprinkling a pinch of salt on an omelet as it sizzled in a pan. The boy was always more mature when he was working, it was like he was a completely different person when he had a tool in his hand.

"Maybe let Liz stick to the cooking next time," Quirwin said jokingly, earning a glare out of both men from the Fharn family. *Like father, like son.*

The glare made Isticus look more like his father than anything else, with the matching brown eyes and singed hair tips.

“You’re lucky we don’t poison this food and kill ya, Quirwin,” Krae quipped in return. It was nothing more than a quip, but it flicked on a lightswitch in Hivoc’s mind. *You’re lucky we don’t poison this food and kill ya. Poison this food and kill ya. Poison and kill ya. Poison. Kill.*

“Something on your mind, Hivoc?” Hivah asked, her expression as curious as it was concerned.

Poison. Kill.

“Yeah, actually, something is. I just had an idea, is all. What if, we, uh...” He shifted in his seat, resting his elbows on the table like he was about to tell a secret to everyone in the room. Everyone leaned in a little as well, even Isticus and Krae, who were still busy over in the kitchen. “What if we... what if we assassinated Mach?”

Suddenly the room seemed a lot less lively than it had before. Shock populated the faces of his comrades, and Isticus couldn’t stop himself from staring at Hivoc, ignoring the food in front of him. Someone even dropped a fork, the metal hitting tile making a jarringly loud clatter in the room.

“That’s *really* extreme, Hivoc. Are you sure we should go to that measure?” Xailu asked, obviously surprised and even disconcerted by the idea. “I mean, think about it, what kind of example would we set if the people who want to *stop* violence did it in the most violent way possible? There are other ways to stop Mach.”

“It’s an extreme measure, yes, but with every passing day it becomes clearer that Mach is not going to be stopped passively,” Avion said, his voice firm. “Reactivity can stop the harm that’s already happening, but it won’t prevent the harm from happening, only action can do that.”

“You can’t seriously be considering taking a life, Avion!” Hivah protested, standing up abruptly, her chair being pushed back and falling to the floor. She pointed her finger at him accusingly, jabbing it at him venomously. “I will not kill someone, Avion, and I swear to god if you seriously think that I will, I’ll just—”

“Why don’t we just calm down!” Quirwin shouted, cutting Hivah off, putting his hands between her and Avion.

“Calm down? It’s someone’s life! Yes, he’s a bad person, but *murder*?” Hivah said, turning her outrage to Quirwin rather than Avion. “Saying that someone shouldn’t be assassinated isn’t a horrible thing to say. I know it’s Mach of all people, but are we seriously considering this?” She threw her hands up into the air. She looked around the room, as though everyone there had suddenly shown some ugly version of themselves.

“I agree with Hivah,” Xailu added, restating his point, earning a quiet thanks from Hivah. “I don’t think we should kill Mach. There’s better ways to stop him than assassination.”

“Like what? Nothing else we’ve done has even put a dent in Mach’s plans. We need to permanently stop him, not let him get away with all these horrible things over and over again,” Hivoc said.

“We can hold a vote,” Avion offered. Everyone agreed, though some more hesitantly than others. “All in favor of assassinating Mach, raise their hand.” Avion raised his own hand, alongside Hivoc, Krae, Quirwin, and—to Hivoc’s surprise—Limizella. “Those not in favor?” Hivah, Isticus, and Xailu all raised their hands.

“Three votes to five. It’s decided,” Hivoc said, feeling suddenly nervous about the idea. “I don’t expect you—” he addressed Hivah, Isticus, and Xailu “—to participate in this. You can stay here, while the rest of us try to kill Mach. As for everyone else, we should start planning now.”

Interlude - III

“I don’t expect you to do this one bit, son, don’t think I’m disappointed in you for not wanting to. Taking a life isn’t a job for boys like you, it’s not something you should ever do. You only do it when there’s no other choice, and anyone who does it under any other circumstance is a coward, okay? The world wasn’t built for kind souls like you, but that doesn’t mean we can’t make the world better.”

Krae held Isticus’s face in his hands as tears welled up in his brown eyes, the same ones that mirrored his fathers. Isticus sobbed and hugged his dad, hiding his teary face in his shoulder. It was a private moment, not shared by anyone, just as it should’ve been.

Chapter XX - Assassination

“Off to the rally, eh?” the taxi driver asked when the rebels—minus Hivah and Isticus, who had opted to stay back at the base instead of partake in Mach’s assassination—all entered the carriage. Avion silently nodded, handing over the necessary money for the toll and leaning back against the plush seats of the car. Everyone had been almost entirely silent, only speaking when they were brainstorming the plan to kill Mach. Surprisingly, Xailu, despite his reluctance before, now seemed relatively onboard with the plan, a welcome change of heart, for sure.

Eventually, after some contesting, it had been decided that they would use a gun to shoot Mach while he delivered his speech in Porthelwedge. The event meant to generate momentum for Mach, instead, would bring an end to this Mach problem once and for all. Of course, the ride to Porthelwedge was excruciatingly slow, thanks to the traffic to the rally. People from all corners of the nation were coming just to hear his speech.

They had one gun. One chance. Hivoc thought it was a fool’s way to kill someone. A gun was a cowardly weapon, where you didn’t have to do anything but pull a trigger and watch a body fall—unlike a sword, where you had to feel a body go cold.

It took significantly longer for them to reach Porthelwedge than it had taken Hivoc and Avion on their outing. Hivoc wished it was just the two of them again, enjoying a day to themselves without worries or problems, having fun and making memories. Today would make different memories, memories one didn't cherish and laugh over or look back on fondly from the future. Today would make memories one would treat with disgust.

Yet, even so, it had to be done.

The metal of the small pistol felt foreign in Hivoc's hands. Something too powerful for him to wield, too unfair to the man on the opposite end of the barrel. Then again, when had Mach ever been fair to the citizens of Ollown? Not when he destroyed their homes or ripped apart their families, that was for sure. He gripped the handle tightly, his finger rubbing the metal in his palm with equal parts determination and fear.

The carriage scraped to a stop to pick up more passengers. Hivoc took special care to hide the gun under the cloak he had draped over his usual wear. The cloak wasn't something he intended to wear when swordfighting. It got in the way, as stylish as he considered it to be.

The rebels moved as a group, pushing through fans and haters alike in the sea of people surrounding Mach. They were able to find a vantage point fairly easily, on the roof of a randomly chosen building with a convenient railing allowing them to be largely concealed while the event took place. Hivoc risked a peak over the edge.

The streets were filled with people, and the spaces between towering and winding buildings were packed like canned sardine with even more onlookers.

This Porthelwedge looked nothing like the one Hivoc had experienced on his and Avion's date—no, not a date, definitely not a date, they didn't go on dates, they had friendly outings, and that was all that was, an interaction between friends, nothing more and nothing less. Restaurants and shops that were previously closed were now bustling with people alien to the city, roads that had been devoid of any life were now barely walkable, and the overall noise of the area had increased tenfold.

Hivoc could see himself and Avion walking the streets, though, as Avion pointed out the places he had been to as a kid or the few significant points of interest within the community. This place felt *real* with the way Avion described it, but now? Now it seemed overblown, overdone, faked. Hivoc didn't like the feeling, but he couldn't stop himself from feeling that way.

"Who's taking the shot again?" Hivoc asked, taking the gun out from under the cloak.

"Xailu said he would," Avion replied. Hivoc nodded, passing the gun to the other. Xailu looked even less comfortable with the weapon, something told through his eyes, a look of reluctance, maybe even fear, buried within his purple irises. Xailu was young, possibly the youngest person in the whole rebellion. He looked it too, with short black hair and a slight build. Despite the boy's intellect in planning, Hivoc had a strange feeling about him that no one else appeared to share.

"That's *if* Mach actually shows up today," said Limizella. "Hologram technology has been advancing a lot lately, we don't even know if he'll actually

be here today. For all we know, he's relaxing at the Copper Birthplace while a version of him is here speaking in his place."

The Copper Birthplace. It was reported to be a gigantic looming tower made of copper where all of the Machinae came from. It was Mach's workshop and home, the location completely and entirely hidden from the public. Not a soul knew where it was, none except Mach himself. Some people theorized that it wasn't even within Ollown's staggering borders, that it stood tall in a neighboring nation.

"I know what kind of man Mach is, he would die before skipping out on the opportunity to be here in person," Krae responded. His look hardened under his beard and bushy eyebrows. Hivoc wanted to doubt his words, to poke every hole he could to ensure they had the most perfect plan possible. Krae had this look in his eyes, though, something that said he *knew* he was right, beyond any shadow of a doubt.

They all nodded, accepting the idea.

Just then, cheering erupted from the streets below them. At once, the rebels peeked over the edge of the building. The man himself, Mach, was standing upon a makeshift stage in front of a crowd of cheering spectators. He smiled and waved at the crowd, basking in the attention they gave him.

After a long moment of cheering, longer than anyone else would give the crowd, Mach silently motioned for them all to settle down. Suddenly, his face took on a much more serious expression as he approached the microphone and clasped his hands on the edges of the provided wooden lectern. He leaned in, articulating clearly into the mic.

“I know you all are eagerly awaiting my response to the recent malefactions of these so-called ‘rebels’ to my cause.”

Xailu aimed the pistol at Mach’s head, but he did not pull the trigger.

Malefactions? They weren’t criminals, they were *stopping* Mach from destroying homes and families, not anything malicious like he was suggesting. Despite the truth, the people in the crowd seemed to believe his words unwaveringly. It was an infuriatingly depressing sight to see, to watch an entire population fall under the influence of one man’s fearmongering and puppeteering with little effort at all.

“Today, I present a message to the ‘rebels,’ because they are no doubt seeing this message—in fact, it wouldn’t surprise me if they’re here right now: You can try your hardest to defeat me, and you may succeed, but innovation is more than just a man, it’s an *idea*, and an idea cannot be killed. My corpse will be kindling to the fire that is the future, my death will make my message stronger. I beg of you, stand down before you hurt more people, you are doing nothing except hurting this nation the more you act.”

Xailu’s hand shook, his finger positioned over the trigger, and yet he did not pull it.

The people cheered at Mach’s message, pumping their fists in the air and clapping at the verbal attack on the rebels. Xailu did not pull the trigger even then, the tremors in his hands making the barrel of the gun waver even more than it was a moment before.

“Xailu, pull the trigger,” Avion commanded, his voice raised but still unheard by the masses over the immense noise of their cheering. He didn’t pull the trigger.

“Xailu, pull the trigger, or I swear to whatever god is above us I’ll rip it straight from your hand and do it myself.”

More moments passed. More moments wasted. Xailu hesitated second after second. The window of opportunity was passing, Machinae were starting to show their metallic faces, scanning buildings and, undoubtedly, looking to catch them in the act.

“Damn it all, Xailu, give it here!”

Just as he said he would, Avion grabbed the gun and snatched it out of Xailu’s hand, aiming it at Mach’s head.

The trigger was pulled, and a bullet soared out of the weapon.

It soared to the sky, the careful aim thrown off by the Machinae that had grabbed his arms. A woman, standing below, pointed right at them and screamed in terror.

Pandemonium ensued.

Chapter XXI - Disorder

The whole city was in chaos.

Hivoc was standing, frozen. The piercing sound of the bullet was still ringing in his ears, bouncing around his skull painfully. He couldn't hear anything, let alone think. It took him more than a heartbeat to calibrate himself after the pain in his ear began to numb.

He looked over at Avion, seeing the Machinae—which was still gripping his wrist tightly—begin to wind up a devastating blow that would undoubtedly kill him. Hivoc acted purely on instinct in the moment, lunging and crashing into the Machinae, sending himself, the robot, and Avion to the ground. Thankfully, the Machinae released its grip on Avion, letting him recover.

Hivoc was positioned on top of the robot. He grabbed its skull, bringing it up as far as the neck would allow and then slamming it down against the brick roof. Sparks shot out of the back of its head, a satisfying sound of metal being crushed reaching his sensitive eardrums.

Hivoc slammed its head again, not stopping until the glowing purple lights of the Machinae's eyes flickered out and turned off entirely, signifying its death. He stood up, barely able to hear his own voice calling out for the other

rebels to escape. The sound of the citizens below screaming and running away in fear filled the entire area.

Avion stayed as the other rebels scrambled to leave, grabbing the gun again and aiming where Mach was before the Machinae had intervened. To no one's surprise, he had fled once the bullet had been fired to the sky. Avion cursed loudly, tossing the gun off the building.

"You piece of scrap metal!" he shouted at the disabled Machinae, stomping on its face and mutilating it further. He rushed down after the rebels, taking the same fire escape they had used to climb up to the roof. Adrenaline pumped through his veins as he ran and caught up with the others. His breathing was shaky, the fear of being caught stalking him like a knife at his back.

For just a moment, just a short fleeting moment, he thought that everyone was safe. The quiet second they had to breathe and think of what to do next was quickly interrupted by the scraping of gears grinding against themselves to create a horrid screeching noise. All of them looked to the sky, where the noise had come from.

Machinae, tens of them, all decorated with metallic wings, appeared in the sky. Avion and the others drew their weapons, preparing for a difficult fight. It made sense, Mach wouldn't want the rebels getting away without a fight, or getting away at all, for that matter. If he could kill them all now, then that would be more momentum for him—and one less obstacle standing in the way of advancement for the masses.

Hivoc had his eyes so focused on the sky, he didn't even notice he was surrounded on the ground too, the robots covering every angle they could use

for escape. The only way they could get out was by fighting their way through them. Before even drawing his sword, he ripped off his cloak, tossing it out of the way and freeing up his movement.

Then, he felt the familiar hilt of a rapier in his hand, taking the place of the pistol's grip.

Without another moment wasted, he charged in, slicing through the Machinae's inner workings with the specially designed weapon, making them spill out like guts. The others joined him, tearing through the sea of metal flesh forming the Machinae. In spite of the many they destroyed, every one that fell seemed to be replaced with two more, their ranks a never ending army.

"We can't do this forever!" Hivoc shouted, panting heavily. Sweat covered his skin, and he tasted it in his mouth. He wiped it off his face with his free hand, the drops threatening to drip into his eyes and blind him.

"And what do you suppose we do instead?" asked Avion, parrying the clawing attack of a Machinae, piercing its chest with his sword and twisting it till it died, then dodging the lunge of another, stabbing the blade down through its head mercilessly.

"Hijack a taxi."

Avion's lips turned up the littlest bit at that, glancing over at Hivoc as he did. Seeing the dead serious—and exhausted—expression on his face, he lost his amusement. "You're serious."

"Yes?"

"Well, lead the way."

Hivoc nodded, charging through a particularly sparse spot in the crowd of Machinae, slashing through a few along the way. His sword created an opening in their formation, allowing the rebels to follow him and charge past fairly undisputed. The Machinae's algorithms clearly hadn't anticipated that, temporarily stunned as they recalibrated to adapt to the new situation. Once they had, though, they charged faster than any human could ever hope to run.

Thankfully, the rebels had a moment's headstart. That small head start was barely enough to get them to the closest carriage, the driver still in the front seat. Avion grabbed the man by the shoulders, practically throwing him out of the carriage and vaulting into the front seat. The other rebels got into the backseat.

"Drive!" Hivoc shouted, sticking his head out the window to see the Machinae getting closer and closer by the second. Their eyes were a deep, glowing purple. Under any other circumstance, Hivoc would have loved the shade. It was beautiful, yet it was also far from Hivoc's idea of beauty. Another thing Mach ruined for him.

Avion activated the carriage, steam bellowing out of the engine as they rode off away from Porthelwedge, the Machinae all stopping in their tracks as they saw the rebels escape. The rebels relaxed into their seats, relieved they had escaped unscathed, even if their attempt at ending Mach had failed.

But while the rebels relaxed, a tiny creature the size of a scarab clung onto the underside of the carriage. A creature that seemed insignificant at first glance—tiny, weak, mindless insect and nothing more. But a careful observer might see that this was no mere insect.

Its exoskeleton was not of chitin, like a true insect, it was of thoughtfully polished copper. There was no mind behind its eyes, only a faint purple glow and a whirring engine one would mistake for the buzzing of a fly. The typical organs were absent as well, ditched to make room for an audio and video recording device and transmitter. It had one purpose, and that purpose was not to eat and reproduce: it was to eavesdrop.

And eavesdrop it did. All the way back to Luttecord and the rebel base.

The mechanical beetle watched and recorded every last second. Once it had captured everything it needed, it flew away, all the way to the Copper Birthplace, to the home and workshop of its creator. Mach smiled when the footage began to roll.

The rebels would falter now.

No, not just falter.

They would die.

Chapter XXII - Waiting

Waiting, waiting, waiting.

He walked a step behind as Mach guided him down the hallway of the Copper Palace. He himself was old, yet Mach was older. He remembered when the both of them were in high school together, the boy bullied relentlessly throughout those years. *Still young enough to be kicking and standing*, he thought to himself.

Mach was just about to show him the new and improved design to the Machinae, something that would bring those damned rebels to their knees. It would be so very satisfying to see them down, pathetic on the ground, begging for forgiveness and mercy when he and Mach would inevitably win.

“If you are to be my general, then you must meet the others I have selected. I am warning you, they are... not the *flesh* you’re accustomed to working alongside. That won’t be a problem, will it?” Mach asked, turning his head back to look at the other. The man raised an eyebrow curiously, holding back his response for the moment. Metal was good for fodder, but making tactics and commands? He would have to be proven wrong on his current distaste with the idea.

The two men entered the “Throne Room,” as it was called. Mach didn’t appreciate being considered a tyrant, but he kept his mouth shut about minor things such as that. There was no need to create infighting between your allies when the nation was already as split as it was over his politics.

“These are my other two generals,” Mach said, gesturing to the two figures standing in front of them.

In Ollown, it was standard that the leader appoint three close advisors—titled generals—of his or her choosing. It was a difficult decision that, for most people, required rigorous research and planning. Mach was not like most people. Before Mach had even begun campaigning, he knew exactly whom he wanted to stand at his side, it wasn’t even a question in his mind.

The first, of course, had walked in with him. He was a man that needed no introduction. The other two, however, were special cases.

The first of the two special cases was a woman in her thirties, though calling her a woman was a hyperbole. Yes, she had long raven hair, and an eye color matching the copper of the Birthplace, and a hand of delicate fierceness, but a woman she was not. She was closer to metal than flesh. Her arms had been replaced by metallic prosthetics, her legs enhanced from her hips to her ankles with glowing purple machinery.

She brushed the hair out of her face, tucking it behind her ear, revealing that the entire left side of her face was machine in place of skin. She extended a robotic arm, introducing herself.

“Veronica Ettrot; a pleasure,” she introduced herself, her voice distorted by the enhancements encircling her neck. The man shook her hand, the metal

firmness under the skin against his palm unfamiliar and disturbing. He nodded, diverting his eyes to Mach's final general. *It* was even stranger in appearance than Veronica. It was a Machinae, that much was certain, but it was different from the mass-produced models that had been scouring the nation.

Unlike the typical soft metals the other Machinae were made of, this one was made of specially-processed hardened steel. Its eyes were the most vibrant purple color he'd seen from any of Mach's creations. The *thing* was a beauty not born of nature, but of man, as beauties should be. Nature made man so man could play god and make their own men, men with flesh stolen from nature's mountains and geodes.

"I call it *M*. It requires 70% more power and 300% more resources than a standard model Machinae, but I think it's worth it. Wouldn't you agree?" Mach asked, reaching out and tracing a wrinkled finger down the polished metal arm of the robot. The other man nodded approvingly, scratching his chin as he looked it over with interest. On looks alone it seemed worth the cost.

"So, what was it you wanted me to do again?" he asked Mach, still looking at the Machinae positioned in front of him.

"Well, you'll be glad to hear that we located the rebel base. It's a secret hideout in Luttecord, very well disguised. I'll have to see it for myself after you go there. And by go there—" he walked closer, leaning in and giving the man a dark look. "—I mean destroying everything they own and tearing them limb from limb until there's nothing left except blood and scrap. Do I make myself very clear, sir Sebastian Confra?"

Confra nodded, his smile turning into a wicked grin. “Loud and clear. I assume I’m leaving today, yes?”

“No, not yet. The rebels would be expecting that, they’re on guard right now, after that close call in Porthelwedge. Instead, we wait. We wait for the rebels to think that they’ve escaped us, to think their slimy little bodies wriggled out of our fingers when, really, they’re just putting themselves further in our palms.

“Oh, and one more thing. When you go to the base, Hivoc Blackstone is to remain completely and entirely unharmed, lest I be the one to kill you myself. Now, leave my sight, I have many important things to attend to.”

Confra turned and left, the footsteps from his boots echoing on the high ceilings and metallic floors. He’d never been one to question commands, but this seemed like a very strange request. Even so, he would do it just the same.

The rebels wouldn’t know what hit them.

Chapter XXIII - Storm

Sebastian Confra.

A man of great regard and respect in the nation of Ollown. He was a war veteran, some of his medals of the highest regard for the honor he brought as a general to the Ollown army. People credit him as the sole reason they won the wars they fought in, with so few soldiers, little war-worthy resources, and allies that were pitifully weak.

Despite his advancing age, he still made frequent public appearances, actively supporting and even campaigning alongside Mach. Their ideals didn't entirely overlap, but there was one thing they undoubtedly agreed on. It wasn't robotic prosthetics, or Machinae animals to help rehabilitate forests. No.

It was the use of machine in place of men. Machines did not lose hope, they did not doubt authority. They charged into battle and followed tactics to the letter exactly as he said them. They were engineered to be the perfect weapon. Confra knew that was the one weakness of Ollown's army: the pitiful soldiers. With Machinae as the soldiers, they'd become a dominant global superpower.

He intended to prove that, with the rebels as the example. Their fall on this very day would be undeniable proof they were inferior at the very thing they

did best. Fight. The Machinae's numbers would overwhelm them, destroy their ranks, take away any advantage they might have in an already disadvantaged position.

He straightened his collar, pulling his shirt down in an effort to remove the fine wrinkles in the fabric. Once he was satisfied, he put a cigar between his lips and lit it, inhaling the addicting smoke and blowing it out, taking a breath before putting it in his mouth again.

He stepped out of the carriage, the bright Ollown sun gazing down on him with a bright ray of light. Machinae surrounded him, all awaiting his command. Each and every one of them were perfectly designed soldiers and weapons, ones that would unfalteringly follow a command to the exact letter of his words. No human error, no mistakes, no problems.

He took a deep breath of the Luttecian air. It was peaceful today, lightly windy and some clouds sparsely covering the blue sky. He absently thought that this afternoon would be nice for a picnic.

“Alright, blow the whole thing up.”

KABOOM!

The entrance to the rebel base was blown to debris in a second. Sending a shockwave of dust and smoke back out at him. He waved it away from his face, coughing into his fist. “Now, invade! I want every rebel either dead, incapacitated, or begging for mercy on their knees! Move, move! Now!” He pointed right at the hole blown in the door of the rebel base, commanding the Machinae to attack.



Hivoc slashed his sword through the metallic body of yet another Machinae. They had burst through the secret entrance to the rebel base and instantly started causing havoc. Most of the rebel ranks were already injured or unconscious, or had given up hope entirely. The few who remained, himself included, were struggling to fend off the Machinae.

There was no possibility of escape. There was only one entrance and one exit to the rebel base, and that was completely blocked off by the horde of Machinae that seemed to grow every time one tried to make a dent in it. The overexertion was making Hivoc sweat bullets, having to step back every few minutes to take a breather and a long gulp of water, less he felt like he was overheating.

“How much longer until you can get that thing up and running?!” Hivoc shouted behind him, quickly returning his attention to the frontline, cutting through another handful of Machinae. Quirwin, upon seeing that they were being overrun with Machinae, began diligently working on the prototype that he had been formulating for the past few weeks.

“Half an hour, at least!” Quirwin shouted back, a screwdriver between his teeth as he crossreferenced the blueprints to the machine he had in front of him, cursing loudly as he realized he messed up yet again. “Make it forty-five minutes, I can’t work in this damn noise!”

“Can’t exactly do that when you’ve got robots being shoved up your—”

“We’ll do what we can!” Avion interrupted Hivoc, his own sword slicing through the assembled guts of the Machinae in front of him. Their metal seemed even softer than usual, he noted as his sword made quick work of the machines. He looked beyond the ones in front of him, seeing nothing but a sea of metal and cogwork figures shaped to look like people.

Then, he saw *him*.

Sebastian Confra, the man commanding the battalion of Machinae like an army, an army of gears impersonating soldiers of flesh.

“Defeat him!” Avion shouted, pointing the tip of his sword at the general. “If he’s gone, the Machinae cannot be controlled!” Immediately, the attention shifted from the Machinae in front of them to the goal, the deciding factor of the battle: none other than the former war general and newly appointed advisory general to Mach. The Machinae, while largely independent, still needed some sort of management, either remotely from Mach, or, in this case, nearby from Confra. Of course, getting to him was no easy task, because the rebels had a much more present problem right in front of them.

With every passing second, the idea of defending themselves from the horde of metal and overcoming it to reach Confra became more clearly impossible. Unless, of course, Quirwin got the device working in time.

“Quirwin, update!” Hivoc shouted, grabbing some water and splashing it on his face, making his body buzz with adrenaline, and drinking some more to cool down. Before Quirwin could even look over, Hivoc was back on the frontlines, slashing through machines and tearing them apart limb from limb.

“Almost finished! Gimme a few more minutes!”

“A few more minutes?” Krae asked in disbelief, swinging a great hammer, which Hivoc had never seen him wield, and creating awe-inducing dents in the Machinae’s protective skin. “Son, I don’t think I have a few more seconds ‘fore we’re overrun with ‘em,” he said, his attention focused on the battle which raged on without any sign of relenting.

Then, disaster.

The rebels faltered, they staggered back. They allowed the Machinae to take larger steps forward without retaliating against them. The exhaustion—which the robots did not experience—was like an hour glass slowly trickling down sand, each grain bringing them inch closer and closer to defeat. Or worse, death.

“Almost done!” Quirwin shouted, grabbing some spare, unneeded parts, and throwing them as rudimentary weapons at the Machinae, hoping to help the others more directly as he tinkered. It didn’t do much compared to the weapons being slashed and sliced and slammed, but the effort was present.

Of course, it did nothing to stop the Machinae. Hivoc, overcome with exhaustion, went down to a singular attack—a bullet to his chest. It wasn’t from one of the robots, no, it came from none other than Sebastian Confra himself. He fell to the ground, in pain and weakened, fading out of consciousness.

He thought the rebels were goners, lost entirely. But, right in the nick of time, a giant bright light exploded from behind the rebels. It was Quirwin’s machine, one designed to disable machines and anything that needed power:

most prevalently, the Machinae. And that it did, sending all of them to the ground, effectively scrap metal now.

“You absolute IMBECILE!” Hivoc, in his state of half-consciousness, heard from the radio on Confra’s chest, the voice belonging to none other than Mach himself. *“I made it absolutely clear he was not to be harmed, and what did you do, you worthless jumble of soggy flesh? Don’t answer that. We’re going to have a very serious discussion about your performance when you get back here. Confra, this will not go unpunished.”*

And then, he was out, the darkness around his eyes claiming him and knocking him out fully as Confra escaped, the siege finally ending.

Chapter XXIV - Battered

Hivoc woke up slowly, his eyes opening for a few short moments before his vision would disappear again and his consciousness would slip away. He managed to wake himself up fully, his head pounding with every beat of his heart in his chest. He was lying down, his face to the sky. Only, he didn't see the sky, he saw a ceiling. The ceiling of his bedroom in the rebel base.

He looked down, seeing a woman he didn't recognize stitching closed the bullet hole in his shirt. Right, he had been shot. How long ago was that? He brought his hand up to his head, trying to feel how long it had been since he'd been knocked out. He couldn't tell, any concept of time was lost on him since he lost consciousness.

"How bad is it?" he asked, his head falling back against the pillow. The woman looked up in surprise, not expecting him to be awake. He felt weak, drained, as though his body had been sapped of all the energy it had. "How long was I out?" he added. He was thirsty, too. His mouth was dry, and the roof of it under his tongue's touch felt almost unfamiliar, feeling like a whole new part.

"Only two hours or so," she responded, checking her watch, "you would've been out longer if the wound had been worse. Thankfully, it missed all of your

vital organs, only some muscle damage in your abdomen—that means taking it easy the next few weeks, so no swordfighting.” She poked around the wound, ensuring its cleanliness and full fix. She nodded in satisfaction, rising up and starting to leave the room. Before she did, though, her eyes met Hivoc’s, and for just a moment, he saw something within them—something eerily close to fear. Or was that distrust? She was gone before he could decipher it.

He lifted up his shirt, looking at the spot on his stomach where the bullet had pierced his skin. The scar was a jagged circular shape with discolored skin, but it wasn’t nearly as prominent as he thought it would be. He brushed his finger over the wound. There was no pain, just a memento shaped like a circle imprinted on his body forever.

“You’re alive.” Hivoc looked up, Avion standing in the doorway with his arms crossed and a stern but concerned look on his face.

“What gave you that impression?” Hivoc asked, grunting as he shifted on the bed to sit up. He would’ve stood up too, if Avion hadn’t put a hand on his shoulder to forcibly keep him sitting down. Avion sat on the edge of the bed, taking his hand off his shoulder. The two sat in silence for a moment, the moment weighing down on their consciousnesses. “I’m sorry,” Hivoc finally said, “I should’ve been more careful.”

“There was nothing to do, do not apologize,” Avion replied, giving Hivoc a look that said ‘that’s final.’ “If anything, it was I who failed. We are a team, yet I did not protect you—”

“*Could* not protect me. In no way could you have stopped a bullet from hitting me, don’t make it seem like you should’ve done better. What happened

happened, but at least we survived and made it out all in one piece.” Hivoc smiled at him, trying to uplift his mood. Avion smiled in return, but the tired look in his eyes suggested otherwise.

“Was anyone else hurt?” Hivoc asked, distracting Avion from his own injury.

“Many died, a few injured. None were given the privacy you were, though. Those who lived had wounds less severe than yours. After you became unconscious, Confra fled and allowed us to destroy the Machinae. Some of the medics within our ranks helped, but a few others came from somewhere else... those ones helped you. The rebel medics offered help, but they insisted on working alone.”

Weird, Hivoc thought to himself, they must not have trusted us to deal with a bullet wound.

“We did lose a lot of resources, however. A lot was destroyed or lost, especially technology and weapons. We are lucky they left us with anything at all,” Avion added, defeat creeping into his voice even through the standard emotionlessness. He slouched on the bed, hands in his lap, and eyes unable to match Hivoc’s for longer than a moment.

Hivoc reached out and put a hand on Avion’s shoulder, comforting him. “We’ll come back. I know we will. You don’t just stand there and let something happen, that’s not you, Avion, and it’s not me either. It’s none of us. We’re one step backwards, but we can always take another forward.”

Avion paused, his gaze still diverted. His back did straighten more, though, some of the confidence seeping back into his posture. The sight brought a smile

to Hivoc's face, so he kept his hand on Avion's shoulder. He didn't take it off until he was sure Avion felt better, his face neutral in expression with the sole exception of a glimmer in his eyes showing appreciation.

"I..." Avion hesitated, taking a deep breath before trying to speak again, "thank you, Hivoc. You must rest now, I cannot have you recovering for long, we need you in good shape." Avion rose from the bed, making Hivoc's hand fall back down to the mattress. He stood there for a minute, both of them feeling their goodbye was incomplete, yet also unsure how to make it full.

Hivoc cleared his throat. "Um, yeah, time to rest... You should go train, you'll need to work a lot to make up for all this muscle you're losing." He flexed his arm, making Avion shake his head, though the smallest smile crossed his face.

"You are much too prideful... lose that when we duel next, Hivoc Blackstone."

"You're the boss."

Avion shot him a glare at that, but it was far from stern in nature. He left the room, closing the door behind him and leaving Hivoc alone. It wasn't nighttime, but Hivoc made a wish anyway. He closed his eyes and used his eyelids as the pitch black night, imagining pearly white stars on them glittering the world above him, wishing upon the biggest one.

I wish to kill Sebastian Confra.

Chapter XXV - Vengeful

The doctor's orders had been loud and clear: No swordfighting until he had recovered.

However, it wasn't fighting if the opponent was a training dummy, was it? That was Hivoc's mentality. He knew his sister and other rebels would be reasonably worried for his health, but he had no desire to rest. He needed to feel his sword in his hand again, he needed to wield his weapon and use it. Doctor's orders be damned. But, he did have to be quiet: Quirwin was quietly snoozing not too far away, and any noise too loud would surely wake him.

He held his sword tightly, lunging forward and piercing it through the dummy's chest with deadly accuracy. If a man had been in place of the dummy, his heart would have been pierced, killing him instantly. Hivoc had never killed a man, but he could think of two he would kill, without needing to think twice about it.

Mach R. Steelspine and Sebastian F. Confra. The President of Ollown and his leading General.

He imagined Mach's head in place of the dummy, his own rage making his stabs and pierces and slashes accurate and powerful. He pretended to counter an attack from the still mannequin. Using the play to make a powerful attack

forward. The blade of his sword went straight through the neck of the mannequin, but not without consequence.

His wound ached, making him wince and break out into a cold sweat. He muttered a curse to himself, the exertion from his practice only making the pain worse on him. The pain from his wound was now adding to other pain he had been experiencing as of late. For one, he had a constant devastating headache, which made it pretty much impossible to even think most days. Today was clearer, which allowed him to train, though that plan was being cut short by the pain in his stomach.

If that wasn't enough, his eyes had been hurting on and off since he'd been shot by Sebastian Confra as well, which had been just as tortuous as it sounded. He pushed through it, though, putting on a strong face for the others and wincing behind closed doors.

He was just about to return to training once again when a familiar voice echoed through the room.

"You are not in bed."

Avion.

"No... I'm not," Hivoc replied, guilt creeping into his voice.

"Hivoc."

"Avion..."

"Hivoc."

"I know." He sounded like a kicked puppy with sadness caught in his voice. He couldn't help it, he knew very well he wasn't supposed to be putting strain on his muscles in this state, but he didn't have the most common sense,

between the headaches and blinding rage for what Sebastian had done to the rebels. Avion looked at him with pity, stepping closer and gently taking his chin, titling it up so he could see Hivoc's face.

There were tears in the corners of his eyes from the pain. Avion sighed and let go of him. "You must rest, Hivoc. That is an order, you will rest. I will make sure of it, this time." Avion gestured for Hivoc to follow him, which he did. He could have simply stayed at the training area and continued in spite of Avion's demand, but he knew Avion was right. He really needed to rest, as much as he wanted to just keep going.

Avion guided him down the hall, back into Hivoc's room. Hivoc sat down on his bed, suddenly feeling like he wouldn't be able to stand again if he tried to. Avion reached down and brushed some hair out of his face, scanning every feature with a concerned look behind his eyes. Avion saw something behind his eyes, something he didn't like.

"I know you're angry," he whispered softly, "I am too. But, that doesn't mean you can kill yourself because of it. We lost people, yes, but I will not lose you too, Hivoc Blackstone." His hand lingered on Hivoc's face as he spoke, his voice quivering, tears making his eyes glossy, and his stoicity threatening to break down. Taking his hand away from Hivoc, Avion wiped the tears from his eyes, and shoved his hand into his pocket.

"I'm sorry," was all Hivoc could say. He would have kept going, if it weren't for Avion's interference. He would have trained and trained and worked and worked and swung his stupid damn sword until he collapsed and curled up

and died. He began to cry himself. “I’m really sorry... I won’t do it again. I’ll rest as long as I need.”

“Good.” Avion nodded, the glossiness having left his eyes now. After a brief pause, he added: “try meditating, it helps me when I’m angry.” With that, he left the room, leaving Hivoc alone to rest and recalibrate. Hivoc laid back in bed, closing his eyes. Boredom crept up on him, but he knew better than to go and use his sword again.

He would just have to wait this out...

Interlude - IV

Hivoc tried to meditate, he really did. He knew it'd be good for him, and he knew that he needed to be patient and calm himself down if he actually wanted to make a change in his mental state. The desire to do it didn't mean it was easy, however. His mind was on anything but calming down. They had all been careless to think that Mach had let them escape unscathed; he wasn't someone who let things go unpunished, especially not to that degree.

Hivoc slouched over, muttering curses to himself. This wasn't working. Disappointed and disheartened, he stood up and made his way out of the room. He winced in pain with every step, but pushed forward anyway. The best way to trick himself into not being in pain was distracting himself, that's what his mom always told him.

His mom.

...

He missed his mother. Some days, even now, he woke up hoping that he would see her face again, or smell her cooking, or hear her humming. None of that ever happened. On some days, he had nightmares of her death, the screams haunted him worse than anything, even more than his paralysis.

He made his way to the rebel base's kitchen, taking out a mug and quietly making some coffee. When it was ready, he walked carefully, making sure not to spill a single drop from the steaming hot mug. He arrived right in front of Avion's room. He raised his fist to knock on the door, only to be stopped by Avion opening the door himself first.

“Oh, hello,” Hivoc said, surprised.

“Hivoc,” Avion responded. “You’re out of bed. Again.” He sighed, disappointed, but still knowing Hivoc would get up. “I think it’s time we talk about something. Something that is very important.”

Chapter XXVI - Nightlight

Hivoc and Avion sat on the bed side by side, Hivoc still holding the cup of hot coffee in his hand. Neither said anything, awkwardness sitting between them and creating an uncomfortable atmosphere. Now that he wasn't moving, most of the pain had faded from his body, only spiking again if he shifted his body in a particular way.

"I, uh, got you something to drink," Hivoc finally said, offering the mug to Avion. He nodded and took it from him, drinking a tentative sip. Hivoc couldn't tell if it was the warmth of the drink or something else that seemed to make his cheeks turn a little bit redder.

"Black. I like it black," Avion responded, looking down into the cup.

"I know," Hivoc responded, making Avion look up and make eye contact with him. Hivoc was the one to look away this time, staring down at his hands, his fingers awkwardly fiddling with each other. "It's the only kind you drink, right? I mean, I've never seen you drink anything else..." He trailed off, unsure if his words were coming off as they were in his head.

Avion paused, then smiled.

"It is, anything other than black coffee is a disgrace to the drink," Avion said, jabbing his elbow into Hivoc's arm playfully, making him sit up in turn.

They sat close to each other. Close, but not quite touching. Sitting next to each other felt almost relaxing to Hivoc, as if Avion's mere presence was calming, comforting, making him feel safe.

"I feel like I'm letting you down," Hivoc said, the words spilling out of his mouth before he could stop them. "I shouldn't have been injured, and now I can't help at all if Confra or Mach tries to attack us again. It's not just that, too, this pain from the bullet, it— it's bad pain... I-I'm sorry." His head tilted down, hiding in shame from Avion.

Silence. For a moment, silence. Candlelight flickered. Avion's face was painted with concern for Hivoc, wondering just how bad the pain had to be for him to hide it so vehemently. "I will get some painkillers, stay—"

"No, wait," Hivoc said, his hand snapping forward to grab Avion's wrist before he could leave. "Could you just... stay with me, maybe? If that's not too much to ask, of course." He held onto Avion's wrist, his hold only lessening a little bit as Avion stood there and contemplated Hivoc's ask. He pulled himself back to Hivoc's bed, sitting down, complying.

Both sat on the bed, Hivoc letting go of Avion's hand. Avion didn't let him pull away, his hand grabbing Hivoc's, his fingers interlacing with the other's. The gesture was surprising, to say the least. Though, it was far from unwanted. Avion's hand in Hivoc's—warm, calloused, rough in texture yet gentle in nature—distracted Hivoc from the pain, distracted him from everything outside of the room they lived in.

They sat next to each other, neither speaking, for no words needed to be said. And thus, none were said. In spite of words going unsaid, they were not

unheard. There was a connection between the two, more than what could be seen with an eye or felt in the contours of one's palms. It lived in their minds, like a chain of feelings locking them together.

Willing prisoners, they were.

Hivoc lay down, shifting the blankets to position himself under the covers of the bed. Avion joined him, their backs against the mattress and eyes on the ceiling with their fingers interlaced like strings of yarn woven in a pattern of beauty and entwined thoughts and feelings.

Hivoc felt content like this, as if time could not overtake them here, as if Sebastian and Machinae and Mach and fire and life were nothing more than simple problems with solutions just as simple. He knew, though, that he was ignorant. There was a bliss to his ignorance, but there was a lingering ache in his mind that told him he needed to understand what he did not know.

Avion breached the silent contentment, his words quiet and almost taboo.

"There is something I must tell you, Hivoc," he whispered, his eyes exploring the knots and grain of the planks covering the ceiling above them, the one that separated them from the rest of the rebel base, hiding them from any eavesdroppers.

"What is it?" Hivoc asked. Something inside him told him he wouldn't like the answer, yet he ached for it nonetheless.

"It is... complicated. I feel there is something I have neglected to tell you. Before you or Hivah joined us, there was a time someone caught my eye," Avion explained, his lips suddenly feeling dry. Why was this so hard for him to speak aloud? He had thought this over so many times; what was so different

about simply speaking the words that danced in his mind? “Quirwin,” he finally uttered, “I loved him—love him. He... made me feel things, Hivoc. Things that I had not felt before him. I felt the need to act on those feelings, express them, justify them, do something with them.”

Hivoc felt hot. Like his body was telling him something was wrong. It felt like steam was burning his skin from the inside out, making tears prickle the corner of his eyes. Why was he crying? There wasn’t anything to cry over, nothing to make a lump form in his throat, and yet he felt sadness. He tried to force the thoughts from his mind. He was not the subject right now, Avion was, and he didn’t want to take away from his moment.

Yet, at the same time, he suddenly felt claustrophobic. There wasn’t enough room. Metal encased his lungs. He was drowning. Or suffocating. Or being crushed. It was because of Avion being in the room. He tried to take a deep breath. He couldn’t.

“I think it’s time for us to go to sleep,” Hivoc said, his words wavering as they left his mouth. He had interrupted Avion, though he didn’t notice. “It’s been nice talking, but I think it’s time for you to go.”

Before Avion could protest, he was already being guided out of Hivoc’s room insistently, practically being shoved out of the doorway. Hivoc closed the door behind him, forcefully, yes, but not enough to wake anyone or cause alarm. He took a deep breath now that Avion wasn’t in the room anymore. He snuffed the candles illuminating his room and climbed into bed, moving on automatically. His body acted for him, putting him under the covers of his bed and burying his face in his pillow.

He cried that night, though the tears didn't wash away the emotions within him. They did bring upon him an idea, a plan he knew he must set into motion. Once his eyes were red and the tears had finished staining his pillow, he went into action. He gathered some supplies from his room, only what he would need and only what would fit on his person. In that moment, there was someone, a man, making him feel things he knew he could not contain.

Sebastian Confra.

Those feelings, however, were not of the same nature as Avion's for Quirwin. The opposite. He felt rage, hate, scorn. There was only one way he could express them, justify them, do anything with them.

He needed to *kill* Sebastian Confra. He *needed* to enact justice upon him for the murders of the rebels he caused. Tonight would be the night he would do it. If not tonight, then tomorrow, and if not tomorrow, then the day after. He could not rest, though, knowing that Confra's heart beat and his lungs breathed and his brain thought.

With a mere small bag, his sword, and a cloak to conceal his clothes and weapon, he wandered into the night, directionless but not aimless.

Chapter XXVII - Trek

Night shrouded his escape, cloaking him better than any disguise could do. Anger flooded his veins, his mind focused on one thing and one thing only: Sebastian Confra. He needed Confra dead, nothing else would satisfy this anger he felt. The cold air made his body shiver, yet he pressed on without complaint. The cold was manageable, nothing to turn back over.

Before leaving the rebel base, he had done some studying up on where he could find Sebastian. There wasn't much he learnt, but he had a feeling that someone like Sebastian Confra would take to the big city and capital of Ollown: Zloenheim. Thus, that was where he was headed.

Zloenheim was a little ways away, some 20 miles or so. He was less focused on the journey, more on the result of it. Twenty miles would be well worth it once Confra was out of the picture. Before he knew it, he was on the edge of Luttecord, standing in darkness barely illuminated by the moon above him.

What would Avion think? What would Hivah think? They didn't want this, he knew they didn't. They would want him to rest, to gather his energy and work with them as a team, not sneak off to train—not this either. He was thinking of Avion again, his mind on that moment that had happened only

hours ago. Avion had been lying there with him, he didn't want Avion to leave, he didn't want either of them to do anything. He just wanted to lie there with Avion, maybe the whole night.

It all made perfect sense now, those forlorn glances he spared Quirwin, the feeling of a secret in the air whenever the two of them were in the same room. The way Avion never sat too close, keeping just enough distance. How had he not noticed? In hindsight, it was obvious. That's what they said though, wasn't it? Everything seems obvious in hindsight.

Why couldn't things ever be clear in the present?

It felt like the pain in his gut was completely gone now—either he was fully numb to it, or it was overshadowed. No matter the reason, he knew he couldn't waste time. In an ideal scenario, he would be able to get to Zloenheim, find Sebastian, kill him, and make it back to Luttecord before anything bad happened. Of course, ideal did not mean realistic.

He started to formulate a better plan in his head, one that had some wiggle room for the eventual hiccup in the plan. Once he got to Zloenheim, he would lie low to try and find Confra without getting caught, then he would kill him. Right there, it didn't matter if someone saw. He was already considered a criminal by the President. He was confident he could escape, anyway.

Before he even knew it, he had reached Zloenheim. The bustling cityscape wasn't really his style. Too many people to get to know anyone; you couldn't really appreciate the community that way. In Luttecord, people really knew people. That was the kind of life he liked.

The lights of Zloenheim blinded him. It was everything the magazines said it was. Restaurants had enticing signs with intriguing names trying to lure in hungry customers like a siren's song. Buildings towered up beyond the clouds. Lights in every nook and cranny made the entire city glow. Unlike the horizontal nature of Porthelwedge, Zloenheim was almost entirely vertical. It felt alien, almost backwards compared to everywhere he knew.

He made his way through the perfectly straight and square streets of the metropolis. The precise nature of the roads themselves were not too unlike Luttecord's downtown area. It did, however, seem much more expensive than Porthelwedge's ragtag backstreets that Avion had shown him.

Eventually, he found a bar situated off the side of the street, a parking lot sparsely filled in front of it. He tugged his hood further over his face, concealing it on the off-chance someone might spare a second glance at him. He fumbled through his pockets, finding a few coins of spare change. Enough for a glass of cheap beer for himself. Not great by any means, but enough to numb the pain he felt.

He wandered inside the bar, a small bell ringing over the door. The moment he entered, he felt like he wasn't meant to be there. He didn't let himself get distracted, sitting down on one of the barstools, inhaling the scent of alcohol, tobacco, and staleness that lingered in the peeling wallpaper. It was a typical bar, nothing out of the ordinary.

Booths lined the walls, windows overseeing the tables on which were four cork coasters, decorated with simple graphics of other cities and countries and landscapes. There was even one with one of the more popular spots in all of

downtown Luttecord. He'd visited once or twice, it wasn't anything special, really. Not good enough to be coaster worthy, in his opinion. There were bar games too—8 ball pool, some decks of cards, and one more that caught his eye the most: Darts.

It wasn't a particularly interesting game in his eyes, but the dartboard made him do a doubletake. Pinned to it by a dart was a wanted poster of none other than himself, labeled as a terrorist, wanted dead or alive as a dangerous criminal.

Terrorist.

That's really what they were calling him now.

He was saving the country, and what was he called? Not a hero, not brave, not a savior. A terrorist. Someone threw a dart straight at Wanted-Hivoc's eye, hitting the bullseye of his iris. He shivered, turning his attention to the bartender in front of him. He set the coins down on the countertop as the bartender paused in front of him.

"Whatever this can get me, please," he muttered, hoping his voice wasn't recognizable enough to make it a liability. Apparently, it wasn't, because the tender counted the coins and poured Hivoc a beer, tilting the glass at an angle to minimize the foam. He took most of the coins, leaving three for Hivoc, who pushed one to the tender. "A tip."

The bartender nodded and took it, leaving Hivoc to his lonesome.

"Can't believe someone would do something like that, eh?" A man said as he sat next to Hivoc, ordering a drink for himself. "That Hivoc, guy—" he continued, butchering Hivoc's name by lengthening the final vowel; Hivoc

nearly winced, but kept it to himself, “he’s a real menace. I mean, terrorism? Terrorizing where he lives too, ain’t that a shame. Let’s be honest, though, if the boy was... right-minded, then he wouldn’t be doing allat, would ‘e?”

“Right-minded?” Hivoc asked, unable to keep his mouth shut.

“Oh, yeah. Anyone can see that what Mach is doing is good! That boy’s tryna kill him, cuz... well, he just can’t see the good in ‘im. That’s what’s wrong with dem country boys an’ girls, they just don’t see the good things. They’re so obsessed with trying to keep things as is because it’s all they ever knew.” He made a *tsk tsk* sound and shook his head, like he was disappointed in the ‘country boys and girls’ he talked about. Luttecord wasn’t even in the countryside.

“Sure, something like that.”

The man looked over at Hivoc, peering past the hoodie and right at his face. Before Hivoc could turn his head away or pull the hood up further, the man caught a glimpse of his features in the gaslight of the bar. Paired with the wanted posters plastered all over the wall, he put two and two together that Hivoc was Hivoc, the terrorist wanted by the government.

Hivoc didn’t wait for the man to make his reaction obvious to the other patrons, practically jumping out of his chair and making a mad dash to the front door. He barely got out before he heard the same man yell: “Stop! In the name of the law! You are under arrest!” Of course he was a police officer too, that made things so much better for him...

In no time police sirens rang out in the distance, crawling closer as he ran for his dear life. The officer gave chase, Hivoc's heart pounding wildly in his chest.

He needed to escape. Fast. Or he was as good as dead.

Chapter XXVIII - Found

Hivoc made a mad dash down the street, managing to outrun the officers that were hot on his tail. He didn't need to escape, he knew his limits—true escape wasn't possible. He could, however, hide. He knew he could hide in time, that much was certain. A corner was coming up soon, and, somehow, he knew there would be an alleyway he could dive into.

He slid around the corner, moving as fast as his body would let him. As soon as he reached the alleyway—only about five paces, with the strides he was making—he dove in, hiding in the darkness. No going back, nowhere else to go. This was either the end of the line or his crazed escape, nothing in between. He held onto the handle of his sword, silencing his breath.

The police officers rushed past, shouting into their radios for reinforcements, naming him and his location. It wouldn't be long before they realized that he tricked them, they weren't idiots. He waited until all of them had gone by, still holding onto the grip of his sword with a tense ferocity. Once the sirens had faded enough to be near silent, he let go, taking a breath.

He willed his heart to calm down, the beats impossibly fast. He began to brainstorm ideas. There would be no way he could encounter Sebastian now that his presence had become obvious. He covered his face with his hands,

wishing the answer would just come to him. He wasn't in a thinking mood at the moment, with all the adrenaline rushing in his veins.

It came to him. Like a little voice in his head whispering the answer, he thought of it. Sebastian Confra wouldn't want to miss out on this chance. He failed to kill Hivoc last time, and there wasn't any doubt in his mind that he would want to try again—to finish the job this time. All Hivoc had to do was wait for Sebastian, isolate him, then kill him.

Screw honor, screw respect, screw anything that would prevent him from playing dirty. *Guns* weren't honorable. Killing a man with gunpowder and a bullet while he wielded a sword was nothing short of pathetic. If Sebastian didn't hesitate to do that, then he shouldn't expect any better of Hivoc. Of all the tactics that the disregard of respect brought him, he still refused to think about using a gun. No rifle would ever touch his hand again, he made the vow right that second.

He escaped the alleyway, not before looking left and right to ensure no eyes were on him, especially not those of a police officer. As far as he could tell, there was safety. He crossed the street when there weren't any carriages driving by, going into a second alley across from his first hiding spot. He suspected that the officers would assume Hivoc would do one of two things: either run as far away as possible or stay in that same alley.

Thus, he could watch from afar. He could watch and lie in wait as he hoped for Sebastian to come to him. His entire plan at the moment was hinging on the fact that Sebastian would come, would try to kill him. If he didn't—something Hivoc seriously doubted—then he would have to go and find Confra himself, a

significantly harder quest to undertake. He held his sword, ready for the man to show his face. Any minute now, he would arrive.

Carriages passed by, steam and smoke pouring into the night sky. Gaslit lamps illuminated the streets in front of him, yet made his shadowy hiding spot all the more effective. The Grand Clock in the city center ticked by, not waiting with anticipation as Hivoc was. Every moment that passed, every moment with Confra not showing, felt like an eternity to Hivoc.

He was starting to lose hope. Was his prediction incorrect? Did Sebastian really not think to come and stop Hivoc? Maybe Hivoc had misjudged his character, perhaps he wasn't the type of man who rushed in to settle a score. Perhaps he was the patient type, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

Hivoc was almost ready to turn back to Luttecord and apologize, because he knew Avion and Hivah and Liz and everyone would make him do so. After all, he had probably scared them to death doing this. He didn't get the chance to run away, though, not as a carriage sped down the street and came to a halt by the sidewalk across from him. An older man—not nearly old enough to be Confra—stepped out of the driver's seat and opened the door of the backseat for a second man to step out.

Sebastian Confra.

Sebastian stepped out of the vehicle, cigar between his lips. Smoke poured from the burning tip, ashes falling beneath his feet. "So, Hivoc is here? I don't see him," he said, his eyes scanning the surrounding area. Hivoc slunk further into the darkness when his gaze came near the alleyway. Sebastian was none

the wiser, furrowing his brows in stark annoyance when he was brought back to the police officer in front of him.

“W-well, he did manage to...” the man waved his hand uselessly, trying to find the words that would get him in the least trouble. He could not find them.

“Ah, well, he did... *escape* us.”

“You let him go?”

“N-not on purpose!” the officer exclaimed quickly, tugging at his collar while beads of sweat formed on the back of his neck and sideburns. He dabbed at them with a handkerchief, trying in vain to hide his nervousness. “He’s a slimy boy, that one.” The officer grinned, trying to downplay the situation to the best of his abilities. Confra was having none of it.

“Where did Hivoc go?” Sebastian asked firmly.

“Um... about that... we aren’t sure...”

Sebastian sighed and pinched his brow, muttering to himself. He waved his hand in the air. “Split up all available officers into search groups of three to five, no more no less. Hivoc Blackstone got away from us once, and I am confident he will not get away from us again, not while *I* am here to do something about it. Get on it, men, now!”

“*Sir; yes, sir!*” the officers shouted back, largely in unison, scrambling to get into groups like Confra had dictated. Despite not being a war general anymore, he still had the presence of one. Intimidation had been a strong suit of his since the beginning. The officers still addressed him like a war general too, which only added to the fear-factor he brought with him. It was like a bad omen

lingering over his head; anyone with a right enough mind could see that messing with him would not end well. So, no one did.

“You two, you’re coming with me.” Sebastian pointed at two officers, gesturing for them to come with him. Then, he addressed the entire group of police officers in the area. “Whoever finds Blackstone gets a raise, a bonus, and a medal for stopping a terrorist! Move!” The money alone was enough to get the groups moving, the promise of a medal only increasing the allure tenfold.

Confra led the two other soldiers away from the rest of the officers, going in the opposite direction. Now that Hivoc’s view of him wasn’t obscured by the carriage he had arrived in, he could very clearly see that Sebastian had a broadsword in sheath at his side, the leather protecting the powerful sword. Hivoc waited, making sure not a soul had their eyes on him, then began following Confra and the two others.

Soon they were walking down offroads, one officer using a match to light the way, though not very effectively. Eventually, they entered a small plaza. It was an open area, normally very bright and festive during daylight but not at this ungodly late hour. They paused for a moment, the three of them stopping in their tracks. Now was Hivoc’s chance.

Slowly, carefully, he snuck up behind Confra. One step at a time. Step by step. The dirt muffled his footsteps. He willed his breathing to be silent the closer he approached. There, on the opposite side of his broadsword, was Sebastian’s gun, the metal gleaming in the light from the match. Slowly, steadily. Hivoc’s fingers brushed the metal.

He grabbed the gun, stepped back in the clear, and pointed the barrel right at Sebastian's head. He aimed the sight right between the Confra's eyes as he turned to see what the noise was.

"Confra," Hivoc said, spitting the name out of his mouth with nothing but disrespect and hatred. "You thought you could kill me. You thought a bullet to my stomach was the best—the *honorable*—way to kill me. You thought wrong. I could kill you right here with the very same gun you tried to end my life with. I could, but I won't, because I have honor. You and I will fight as men: Sword against sword, no rifles, no backup, no nothing. I will kill you fairly even though you have disrespected me."

Sebastian stared at Hivoc, then after a moment he laughed a horrible laugh. One that reeked of overconfidence. He drew his broadsword, resting the blade on his shoulders. "Hivoc, nice to see you. Fine, then. You two, stand down, run away, go tell the other officers that Hivoc Blackstone will be dead and dismembered in... be generous, say ten minutes."

"We'll fight like true men, and I will kill you like a true man would," Hivoc stated. He removed the cylinder from the gun, tossing it far away from the both of them, and dropped the gun on the ground. He grabbed his modified rapier, taking it out of his scabbard and holding it in front of him.

"You're confident. Makes you easier to kill."

"*En garde, Confra, en garde.*"

Chapter XXIX - Rematch

Blades clashed against each other. The sound of metal on metal filled the small plaza where they fought, as the police officers retreated. Hivoc and Confra were alone to fight until only one of them stood. They both knew that neither of them would give up, not until the other had fallen either by blade or by exhaustion.

Hivoc knew his rapier stood no chance in defense against the broadsword, even with the modification to its weight and thickness. He needed to continue his offense, anything less would get him hurt, and probably killed. He stabbed forward with his rapier, the attack just barely parried by Confra's broadsword. The sword's great bulkiness was as much an upside as a downside. Yes, it had more power, but it would also make it harder to move quickly.

Hivoc took advantage of the fewer opportunities for speed, sending his blade all across Confra's body. He stabbed and sliced anywhere the broadsword wasn't, going in at awkward angles and places that required quick movement and agility. He gave neither himself nor Confra a break, capitalizing on every moment.

He could already see sweat forming on his opponent's brow.

“Tired already?” Hivoc asked, taunting him. If Confra was angry, he would be more likely to make a mistake. The more mistakes he made, the easier it would be for Hivoc to win. He needed to play his cards right, he needed to play without giving Confra any breathing room. Not one inch could be relented, not to an opponent like Confra.

“You wish,” Sebastian responded, his hands clenched tightly around the handle of his sword. He continued to deflect Hivoc’s attacks, though every redirected strike only gave Hivoc another chance to go in again. “You have a relentless offense, I’ll give you that, boy,” Confra said, spitting out the words with disdain infecting them.

Hivoc stepped back, practically dancing with the complicated footwork he was executing. The step back lured Sebastian in—exactly what Hivoc wanted. Hivoc sliced at Sebastian’s legs. It wasn’t a strike meant to hit, or hurt, it was meant as a diversion. His blade didn’t even make contact with Confra, and it wasn’t meant to. If his broadsword was at the ground, it would take a momentous effort to bring it back up.

But Hivoc had neglected to think of one thing.

Confra didn’t fall for the deception. He didn’t slip his leg or move his sword to block the attack. No, he saw through the tactics and was already moving to chop into Hivoc’s flesh. There was barely a moment for Hivoc to duck before the broadsword cleaved right where his neck would have been if he hadn’t reacted. Sebastian wasn’t going for a victory, he was going for a kill.

Hivoc reached up for his head out of instinct. Sebastian had cut off a chunk of his hair with the sword, and the dark locks spread out in Hivoc’s palm. Fear

spread through his body like a poison, making his heart beat fast and his mind yell at him to run for his life.

All of a sudden, the tide had shifted out of Hivoc's favor. Sebastian kicked Hivoc's legs as he crouched, sending him onto the ground. He brought his broadsword up like an executioner's axe, bringing it down with a dangerous strength. Hivoc rolled out of the way, just barely. The force of the blow wedged Confra's sword between the stones of the plaza ground.

Hivoc scrambled to his feet, grabbing his rapier once again.

"You're scared," Sebastian said, freeing his broadsword. It wasn't a threat, not an accusation, it was just a statement. A true one too, Hivoc was scared. He didn't want Sebastian to be right—he couldn't let him be right. Hivoc swallowed his fear, holding his sword out in front of him.

"Fear's an illusion of the mind. I'm not scared, not of you, not of Mach, not of the Machinae, not of anything."

"Now you're just lying right to my face. I don't appreciate liars, Hivoc Blackstone. Odd you took your mother's last name, isn't it? Must be one of the things you slobs do out in the poor towns, the ones that beg for things to stay just the same. You can't imagine a better world—you're *afraid* of a better world, one where you get left behind."

"I'm afraid of the world collapsing into chaos because Mach is killing everyone who doesn't agree with him or fall for his manipulation. I keep my mother's last name because she was a good woman, and my dad wasn't around, the coward he was."

"Oh, he was around. Just not for you."

Hivoc furrowed his brows in confusion. What did Sebastian mean by that? He almost wanted to ask, but Sebastian continued speaking before Hivoc could speak another word.

“Mach told me, the day I exterminated your little vermin nest, that *you*, specifically, were not to be hurt. I did everything in my power not to hurt you, to keep you unscathed and unharmed, but now? Now you’ve proven to me that you’re a devilish little rat. Today, I’m not listening to Mach. Today is the day you die, Hivoc Blackstone.”

Sebastian began swinging relentlessly at Hivoc, every attack intended to kill Hivoc. The blade came down towards his skull, or it sliced at his torso or his legs. Each time Hivoc narrowly dodged the onslaught, sidestepping or jumping back. With a mere second of hesitation, he would have been a dead man.

He began to tire, his dodges taking more and more energy for a sloppier movement each time. In his peripheral vision he could see Death beckoning for him, waiting for him to make a deadly mistake so it could claim his soul. The sight didn’t give him hope he would survive. He swore he could see it smile when he tripped backwards, landing on his back, panting and sweating.

“Finally,” Confra spat, making Hivoc flinch. “Your death will be quick. Painless, I can’t guarantee. But, Hivoc Blackstone, I will not make you suffer because I—contrary to what you want to believe—am not a monster.” He raised his broadsword above his head, hands tight around the grip.

Hivoc closed his eyes, accepting death’s kiss on his forehead.

He heard blade meet flesh, only he felt nothing. He still breathed. His heart still beat. The wind still touched his skin. He carefully opened his eyes, seeing a sword pierced straight through Sebastian Confra's chest, the sharp point coated with his blood. Confra didn't breathe—couldn't. For a moment, he held onto life, looking down at the sword protruding from him.

And then he collapsed, taking the sword down with him. Hivoc watched him fall, his eyes going to the person standing behind Sebastian, the one who had killed him.

Avion.

"You came for me..."

"I did. I did because I knew you could not do this by yourself. You and I will have a strict talk when we get back to the base, understand that. Now, we leave. Get up." Avion reached a hand down to Hivoc, the latter nodding and accepting the hand. Hivoc pulled himself up, hugging Avion as he did.

It was a sudden gesture neither saw coming, but neither stopped it, not for a few seconds of peace and silence. Then, they broke apart, ready to leave. Already, Hivoc had learned two things during the battle: One, he couldn't fight alone; two, if they were going to win, they had to use some dirty tactics.

Against his best wishes, he had to disregard honor to win. To survive.

Chapter XXX - Return

Hivoc and Avion ran for their lives. As much as Hivoc wanted to maintain an intimate moment with Avion, he had higher priorities. Those priorities, of course, were escaping the police, who would no doubt execute both of them for the attempted murder of Mach Steelspine and the actual murder of Sebastian Confra.

The boys rounded the corner as sirens followed them mercilessly. The silence of the night was pierced by the horrifying sound of the alarm, the citizens of Zloenheim remaining asleep through the racket in a way Hivoc couldn't begin to understand. He couldn't think about anything else right now, he had to keep running. A simple misstep, a single stagger, a single moment of hesitation would lead to his death.

Hivoc looked behind him, only to realize that he was outspeeding Avion. He felt himself panic that Avion wasn't nearly fast enough to keep up with his pace. There was no way they'd both be able to escape the police without doing something different. Hivoc scanned the surroundings for something—anything. Then, he saw it. The Taxi Service.

“Avion!” he shouted, pointing at the rest spot for the taxis between trips. If they were lucky, the lead they had would be enough for them to get over there,

get into one of the taxis, and make an escape out of the city. After that, Hivoc didn't have a plan. One step at a time, that's as much as he could do right now.

He sped over to the taxis, finding an empty one. He tried the door. Locked. He looked back at the police, getting closer by the second and catching up with Avion. He yelled a curse, taking off his cloak and wrapping it around his hand. He punched through the window of the carriage, shattering the glass and sending shards all over the inside of the vehicle. He vaulted into the carriage, getting in the front seat.

It didn't start.

He broke open the panel underneath the steering wheel, looking at the complicated inner workings of the vehicle. He'd seen characters in movies hotwire a carriage before, but it usually happened with all the complicated things offscreen. He knew he had to find wires, but which ones did he have to use? He prayed that he could somehow find them, moving random things around until he found a set of wires, right in front of the engine, glowing a quiet, eerie purple. He pulled the coverings off two random ones, wrapping the metal around each other.

The vehicle made the powering on sound, booting up. He shot up, hitting his head on the steering wheel. Somehow, it worked. He made sure the engine was on, looking back and seeing Avion run straight onto the roof of the car. Hivoc didn't wait a second longer, pressing down on the pedal and accelerating the car. They shot forward, driving just as fast, if not faster, than the police cars behind them.

There wasn't much leeway for escape, definitely less than Avion would've liked, which only gave him more motivation to keep pushing. Avion crawled on top of the carriage, wind whipping past his face making it impossible to hear anything but the insane beatings of his heart within his chest. He made his way to the broken window, nearly cutting himself on the broken glass.

He got inside, collapsing against the back of the chair and looking over at Hivoc. He was laser focused, a single curl of his ink black hair down between his eyes. Avion couldn't recall a moment he looked exactly like this—this determined. He looked away, sticking his head out the window—with caution—to see how far away the police were.

Hivoc had made some good distance with the carriage, but there was only so much he could do. They needed another idea, and fast. Avion scanned the pockets of his clothes, looking for something—anything. His fingers brushed against a small metal object, powerfully charged and ready to go. His eyes widened ever so slightly, taking it out and holding it in his palm.

To the uninformed eye, it seemed just like a small trinket of sorts, with no clear purpose. Avion knew, however, that it was anything but. After the miracle Quirwin had pulled off when Sebastian had stormed the rebel base, he had stayed up for hours on end to an unhealthy extent, trying to recreate what he had done on a portable scale.

He had made a single prototype, one Avion had grabbed without hesitation once he had realized Hivoc wasn't in his bedroom. They had no other options right now, the police would gain on them eventually, they wouldn't be able to run forever. Especially not if they tried to go to Luttecord. He turned to Hivoc,

“keep the car as steady as you possibly can, or we’re both dead, Hivoc,” he said, sticking as much of his torso out of the window as possible.

Hivoc glanced at him, thinking him crazy. Still, he kept the carriage steady as he drove down the roads leaving Zloenheim. He had no choice but to depend on Avion to do whatever he had in mind. Avion had far more pressure on him compared to Hivoc. He held the miniature device in his hand, held so tight it almost broke.

He held his aim steady, trying to run calculations in his head for the most optimal throw. Too many variables, too little time, for too complicated math. He primed the device with a button on the top. Four seconds. Four seconds until it activated, deactivating all machines within its range that used the same power source as the Machinae. He hoped the police cars used that power. Knowing Mach’s innovative tendencies, he placed his bets on it.

Avion threw the device, causing a giant purple explosion midair. The cars all came to an abrupt stop, the explosion just barely missing their own hijacked vehicle. He cheered as the police were left behind, immobilized and useless thanks to Quirwin’s ingeniousness and determination. He ducked back into the car, unable to contain his joy.

Hivoc couldn’t help but join in, seeing the explosion ring out behind them. He didn’t fully understand what just happened, but he knew that he and Avion had just got away. One more day to live. One day closer to killing Mach and saving Ollown. One more day with Avion in it.

“How in God’s name did you do that?” Hivoc asked, his words erupting with unbridled happiness.

“Quirwin’s invention. Thank him. Thank the Gods.”

Hivoc’s breath hitched, the sweet taste in his mouth going bitter. *Quirwin*. Quirwin was one of his friends, a companion he was eternally grateful to have on his side, so why did the thought of him leave an uncomfortable itch in his heart that he needed to scratch? His gut bubbled with emotion, practically begging to let out everything on his mind. He took in a deep breath, and fearfully whispered.

“You’re... dating Quirwin, right?” he asked, almost not wanting to hear the answer.

“What? No, Quirwin and I are not romantic. If you had let me finish my story before ending our conversation early, then you would know that I confessed to Quirwin. He did not feel the same about me, and thought it best we remain friends. I apologize for the confusion.”

“Oh... Oh,” Hivoc said, realizing how wrong he’d read the relationship between Avion and Quirwin. “No, no, don’t apologize, it was my fault. I just...” He wanted to speak, to grab the words floating around his head and weave them into something comprehensible for Avion. He tried his best, “I just thought that you two were together, and that... well... made me feel less important. Like Quirwin meant more to you than I did—stupid in retrospect, don’t even say it. I guess...”

“You wanted to earn my respect?” Avion filled in for him.

“Yeah. I felt like I needed to earn something from you in some way, stupid as that sounds.” Hivoc shrugged self-deprecatingly.

“It is not idiotic thinking, Hivoc, it did, however, lead you to making an idiotic decision—this. Next time, consider more than just yourself before acting... and meditate, it is seriously a good thing!”

“Okay, okay! I’ll meditate! For real this time... and sorry again.”

“You’re forgiven.” Avion looked at the passing sign, as they drove past. “You’re not forgiven for missing our exit, though.”

Hivoc paused, looking in the rear view mirror as the sign grew farther and farther away from them.

“Shit.”

Interlude - V

The Machinae are strange machines. They are unlike anything I have ever seen before. They function with a mysterious power source—this glowing purple crystal that I have chosen to name Subject_001 for convenience. Subject_001 is a near infinite power source, allowing for the Machinae to be extremely compact and even negate the necessity for steam power. The gears, the wires, the engine, all of it was made to fit inside the smallest structures.

As much as I hate Mach, it truly is a marvel.

The crystal itself is more confusing, still. There are two major parts, the outer shell, which retains the distinct bright purple coloring, and the core, which is dark purple. The core acts as a negative source, taking away all the power from other Subjects in a nearby area, and even having harmful effects on nearby organisms.

From my limited testing, it seems to weaken the immune systems of humans, as well as other animals. However, it decays smaller plants at an extremely accelerated rate, concerningly so. Further testing will be required to understand its effects.

However, the Subject gets its power from the outer shell. The shell acts as a secondary negative source, inverting the effects of the core and allowing the

Subject to not only sustain life, but also generate extraordinary power. This is a miracle gem. If Mach released his in-depth research to the public, then the whole world would advance tenfold. But he knows that keeping the power source to himself keeps him strong.

Knowing what we know, however, allowed me to create the Deactivation Device—proper naming in progress (can you tell I'm not the best namer? Note to self, learn how to name things better).

We must play our cards right, we must play around his trump card.

- Excerpt from Quirwin's journal

Chapter XXXI - Colossal

A few days had passed since Hivoc had snuck out and tried to kill Sebastian Confra. Since then, his wound had healed for the most part, and his eye had significantly less pain than the near constant ache he had before. He had also tried to meditate more, despite how boring it had been at first.

Before, he could barely calm his mind or heart down for any longer than ten minutes. Now, though? With Avion's patient help throughout the process, he could calm himself down properly—with some difficulty, to be fair, but it was easier with every passing attempt.

His eyes were closed, enveloping him in darkness. The soft bedding of his mattress lay under him while he breathed in and out, slowly. The only thing he could smell was a hint of gas from the oil lamp on his wall. He'd grown accustomed to the smell through the sheer amount of exposure, thanks to the growing popularity of oil lamps, but he still wasn't a fan of it.

He heard the door open.

Opening his eyes, he saw Avion enter his room. He let himself break his meditative position, Avion sitting down on the bed next to him. "What's up?" Hivoc asked, laying back on his bed to properly relax. As calming as the

meditation was, if an opportunity to stop presented itself, he wouldn't be one to reject it.

"Mach has created another threat," Avion said, watching Hivoc move to lie down on his bed. He gently nudged the prone boy, silently telling him of the seriousness of the situation. "Am I right to assume you have yet to see the news?" Avion asked.

"Uh, yeah, I've been busy lately, sorry. What did he do this time?" Hivoc asked, sitting back up again. He braced himself for the worst, knowing about Mach's... *ambitious* tendencies.

"I think it would be better to show you his announcement." Avion gestured for Hivoc to follow, standing up and guiding him out of the bedroom. The two made their way down the hallway and up to the large room above. Avion placed his hologram device on the map-table, clicking a few buttons until it finally projected Mach's announcement.

A projection of Mach stood over the device, speaking confidently and even a little smugly. "Citizens of Ollown, as your president, I have an important innovation to announce. Due to the overwhelming success of the Machinae, we have designed a brand new type of Machinae: A Colossal. The Machinae could do good with a design as small as a man like you and me. A Colossal, on the other hand, can do so much more. It's giant in stature, standing as tall as the tallest towers of Zloenheim."

"Holy... seriously?" Hivoc said, looking back at Avion. He nodded grimly. There was no lie, no trick. Mach was serious about this, about the creation of Machinae that were greater than the Giants of myth. Machinae were already a

pain to deal with on their own, but one that could touch the clouds? It seemed as if it would be nearly impossible to defeat, even with the entire force of the rebellion in the effort.

“Avion... what’re we going to do?”

“I... I don’t know. I suppose the only thing we can do is try. There is nothing else we truly can do.”

“Okay...” Hivoc paused, thinking for a moment. He reached down and fiddled with his hand. He picked at a scar on his skin—one that circled entirely around his thumb, never fading no matter how much time passed nor any treatment he gave it. “Do we know where a Colossal is?”

“*The* Colossal. There is only one at the moment—that we know of. According to one of our recent informants, it was at Maeimar Forest, near Valeria City.” Avion sat down at the table, pointing to an out of the way Forest near the border of Ollown. Hivoc followed Avion’s direction, looking at the forest on the map and comparing the location to Luttecord.

“He’s trying to stretch us thin. He knows we can’t be everywhere all at once. We have to choose the best course of action.” He stared at the map, knowing he wouldn’t be able to do everything. He wasn’t sure he could save everyone. There was only one way to stop Mach, and that was going to be to find him and stop him directly. Their first chance had failed, and since then, his security had heightened further. No one knew where the Copper Birthplace was either, so that was impossible.

Somehow, they’d have to be the first.

“We have to destroy that thing. We don’t have any other good options. If we let it roam free, then it’ll start doing more harm than all the other Machinae combined,” Hivoc said, scratching at his scar as he spoke. “I know I can’t do it alone, though, we need at *least* one other person—assuming you’re coming to help me?”

“I am, and I agree. But who is going to come with us?” Avion asked, raising an eyebrow. He looked over Hivoc’s shoulder, at the rest of the rebels. A lot of them looked demotivated, despite the small step forward that came with the death of Sebastian Confra. His murder had doubled the bounty on their heads, making it even more dangerous for any of them to take action.

Avion stood up, going over to them and explaining the situation. He knew the state of them: Xailu wasn’t the best fighter, Hivah and Liz were more for inventing than destroying, Isticus was in a questionable state of mind after the attempted assassination, and Krae was getting too old to fight.

“I’ll go,” Quirwin said, standing up.

“That settles it; me, Avion, and Quirwin, will try to go and kill that thing.”



It obstructed the sun. It was a silhouette against the horizon, gigantic and unnatural. No man was supposed to create this monstrosity. No creature was ever meant to stand on the ground and scrape the sky at once. It had to fall.

Quirwin held his guandao, Avion and Hivoc their respective swords.

“How the hell are we going to get to its core? The part that gives it power is all the way up in its chest—” he pointed the tip of his weapon to the chest of the machine in the imitative shape of a man, “I don’t see how we’ll get up there.”

“We don’t have to get up there,” Avion responded.

“What?”

“We don’t have to go up, we must bring it down.” He pointed at the creature’s ankles. If it fell, then they would be able to destroy it without problem.

“Okay, that’s a plan,” Hivoc said, nodding. He rushed forward, knowing that if the Colossal were to see them, then it would surely crush them—either with its hands or its feet, or maybe both. The Colossal had giant eyes, glowing like the expansive gaze of a lighthouse on the coast. It swept over the ground, spotting Hivoc. The metal of its body groaned as it moved, raising a foot off the ground to try and crush him.

Hivoc weaved out of the way, dodging the attack from the Colossal. When its foot made contact with the ground, it pushed further into the grass, creating a shallow crater from the weight of its body. Hivoc stabbed his blade into the ankle of the Colossal, pushing it in as far as he could. He ripped it out, trying to damage as many of the parts as he could on the way out.

“Help!” Hivoc shouted to Quirwin and Avion, who quickly took action. Avion moved to help Hivoc, Quirwin going to the other leg of the Colossal. Quirwin slashed and stabbed at the leg, destroying it relentlessly. Meanwhile,

Avion and Hivoc whittled down the other leg, poking and stabbing and ripping at mechanics and inner workings.

The Colossal tried to reach down for the rebels, only to fall forward as it tried. The shift in weight from moving its enormous arms forward combined with the unsteadiness in its feet caused it to collapse against the ground. Its back was left exposed, giving the three the opportunity to climb on top of the Colossal. Quirwin broke into the Colossal's back, easily spotting its engine thanks to the giant glowing purple crystal within it. He broke the wires protruding from the engine, cutting off its power.

The Colossal flickered with its last bit of artificial life, then died, fully collapsing against the ground.

"I thought that would be harder," Hivoc said, wiping a sheen of sweat off of his forehead, resting the point of his rapier on the metal back of the dead Colossal. 'PROTOTYPE: I' was written in tiny, blocky letters in one of the crevices of the Colossal, its hidden place preventing him or the others from seeing it beforehand.

"Mach did say that he only had a prototype. He will not make it simple for us again," Avion said, sitting down on top of the disabled Colossal. Hivoc and Quirwin did the same. "I doubt that this version was the completed one. Perhaps he released a prototype to fulfill the promise he made, then develop it later. Either that, or he was blinded by his own ego."

"Quirwin, you're the best with the Machinae between the three of us. Is there anything useful we can get out of this thing?" Hivoc asked. He didn't

want to come out here to just kill a prototype. Surely there was more they could do than simply kill it.

Quirwin sighed, looking down at the Colossal. He pried open its chest and made his way down into the mechanics of it. All inside were tons of gears, pipes, wires, all these parts that were grotesque compared to the natural beauty of the forest. “We can harvest the crystal from the engine, but aside from that, I’m not sure what else there is to do.”

“Well... how do they work? Like, I know they can work, but surely there’s some sort of code within them that makes them work, right?” Hivoc asked, peering inside the Colossal, trying to see Quirwin among the inner workings of the copper beast.

“There *is*, yeah, but it’s in a cipher. I know it’s in a cipher because when I run it in a test machine, it doesn’t work, only in the Machinae. The Machinae have a special separate part in them that decodes the cipher, which lets them work while the copied code won’t ever work on its own. I could try and find the key, but that’ll take ages. Every part in one Machinae—let alone a Colossal—is designed to make it act as biologically as possible, everything has such a generalized yet perfected purpose that it’s near impossible to find the *one* thing that makes the whole thing work.”

“But it’s possible, yeah?” Hivoc asked, joining Quirwin.

“Possible doesn’t mean realistic, Hivoc, and I strongly advise against you coming with me in here. You have no idea what you’re doing; even I have no idea what I’m doing. This thing doesn’t have *any* similarities to the normal Machinae, as far as I can tell. It’s almost completely unique, which means

we're starting from square one. We might as well cut our losses and head back to base, we can't stay out here forever."

"At least tell us what to look for. We might as well make it worth our while, Quirwin," Avion said with a sigh, entering the exposed innards of the Colossal as well. Quirwin tossed his hands up in annoyance, but didn't refute either of them from participating.

"Look for... I don't even know. *Anything*, honestly. If it looks like it would be the key for a cipher, say that." Quirwin started ripping parts out of the Colossal, disconnecting wires and damaging metallic machinery left and right. On the side, he rewired some of the power from the core to one of the fans, giving him some cooling as he searched.

"Maybe I could check the actual code? Who knows, I did a lot of logic puzzles in school, maybe I could figure it out," Hivoc said, hoisting himself out of the thing and going to the head of the Colossal—the intuitive spot, in his opinion, for the code to be. He took apart the cranium piece, finding a small console within the Colossal. It was probably only there due to the Colossal's status as a prototype. All the more convenient for the rebels.

"Ha! Good luck," Quirwin called out to him from the chest cavity, "if this thing is in any way similar to the Machinae, you'll have a damn hard time figuring out the first thing about that code. Good luck to you, Avion and I will be doing something *actually* productive."

Hivoc shot a glare in Quirwin's direction, then looked down at the console. As soon as he looked at the code, he realized he had no idea what he was doing. He didn't want to admit Quirwin was right, though, so he scanned the code for

any possible clues. There didn't seem to be any, and the code itself was so expansive that it would take meticulous hours to find the spot where the key was—if it was even within the code, which Hivoc doubted.

He looked all throughout the code, trying to find something—anything.

Then, one of the phrases looked familiar.

'*Galton ae luge.*' Hivoc scrunched his eyebrows together. He recognized the phrase. It was a phrase from a dead language, rarely quoted in old texts and some legal situations, more or less meaning '*when in danger, return to...*' usually followed by some riddle or ciphered place name that only those who knew would understand.

Only, there weren't any other words after it, just two long strings of numbers, both of them with most of their length dedicated after a decimal point. Hivoc puzzled over it for a moment, staring at the numbers in utter confusion.

"Numbers? Why numbers..?"

It hit him. Coordinates. Mach had hid coordinates inside the code of the Colossal, which it was supposed to return to in the event of danger. He could only think of one place Mach would want the Colossal to return to: the Birthplace.

"Guys!" he shouted, getting Avion and Quirwin's attention. "I think I know where the Copper Birthplace is!"

Chapter XXXII - Yearning

Quirwin offered to drive them all home, and neither Avion nor Hivoc spoke up against it. They had first come to the forest in a carriage belonging to Quirwin, the same one they were driving in now. The carriage rattled against the uneven ground beneath them, the sun shining down on all of them through the windows.

The smell of pine seeped in through the steam-powered carriage, lulling Hivoc into a state of semi-relaxation. He glanced over at Avion, scrunching up his eyebrows in confusion at the state of the other. Avion was taking in slow, deep breaths while his shoulders were tense at his sides, his hands in his lap and eyes closed. Hivoc leaned over to him.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, surprising Avion and bringing him into the conversation.

“Car sick,” he responded simply, as if any more words would physically hurt him. He turned his head and closed his eyes again, trying to find any sort of peace to meditate in. Hivoc felt bad for him, his hand clenched as he tried to think of a way to help Avion. *Maybe I could open a window?* he thought to himself. He looked at the sides of the carriage, just under the windows. He

cranked the handle until the window cracked open a bit, letting some fresh air in through the carriage.

“Is that better?” he asked Avion.

Avion seemed to calm down a little bit, but not enough to satisfy Hivoc. “What helps you relax? Aside from meditating, since that isn’t working for you,” Hivoc asked.

Avion took a moment to respond, trying to find the strength to force words out of his mouth, “Distractions help...” His voice strained with the words, clearly struggling to keep himself composed in the car.

Distractions. *What could distract Avion of all people?* Hivoc thought, having a slight panic over what to do. Avion was one of, if not *the*, most composed person he’d ever met, nothing ever seemed to faze him beyond a fraction of a movement in his eyes or at the corner of his lips.

Hivoc calculated his options, running through ideas in his mind. None of them went well in the scenarios he came up with. He had to do *something*, though, it would just be cruel to let Avion suffer through this without some sort of support. Hivoc reached over to Avion’s lap and did the first thing he thought of—actually, he was acting before he really had a chance to think, his body acting faster than his brain, something useful in a sword fight but inconvenient when one was trying to be rational.

Without even realizing what he’d done, he had grasped Avion’s hand, his fingers intertwined like a masterfully crafted blanket, the colors of their skin differing like differently-dyed wool. He squeezed Avion’s hand in his, the others fingers wrapping around the back of his hand as though he never wanted

to let go. This seemed to be an effective way to distract Avion, since his breathing slowly became normal and he relaxed just a bit.

Thankfully, a secondary distraction came in to help Avion even more. Quirwin spoke to them, leaning back against the seat so his voice carried over to the back of the carriage better. “So, now that we know where the Copper Birthplace is—courtesy of the Colossal—what’re we going to do? I mean, what’s the plan now?”

Avion, invigorated from Hivoc’s reassuring hand in his, managed to speak without feeling sick: “We could infiltrate in secret. A sneak attack would allow us to get in without many problems and get to Mach with fewer complications than a direct attack.” Even though Hivoc’s hand was calming, he, weirdly, felt his heartrate pick up and skip a beat or so when Hivoc began to slowly trace circles with his thumb onto the back of his hand.

“Mach would never let us do something like that. He would expect it—especially with the death of the Colossal. The Copper Birthplace is probably bursting with Machinae. Sneaking in isn’t an option,” Quirwin refuted from the front seat.

“Then what are we to do?” Avion asked, emotion seeping into his voice—fear, anger, desperation, determination.

Hivoc squeezed his hand; a soft, quiet gesture. “We could do a combination? Maybe we weaken Mach’s forces with a blatant attack, force him to guard certain areas of the Birthplace, then we sneak in through a different entrance and work our way up from there.”

“Good idea, but we need a foolproof plan. A normal attack *could* weaken Mach’s forces temporarily, but it would also encourage him to create more forces. We would give him a reason to get stronger. Not to mention that he would definitely use an attack like that to get political movement. He has us cornered without even doing a thing.” Quirwin shook his head, the role of devil’s advocate almost too easy to play in a desperate time like this.

“What do you suggest, Quirwin?” Avion asked, almost accusingly.

He didn’t say anything for a moment. What could he suggest? They had no advantage, aside from knowing the location of the Birthplace and a device that was still in the midst of being refined. No expendable troops, no master tactician, no *deus ex machina*, and no clear course of action. “I don’t know... but we need to know which ways Mach has the advantage. If we do, we can try and target them. We need to take away the strengths, or level ourselves up to them.”

“But how could we get anywhere near the sort of numbers he has?” Hivoc asked. Hundreds of Machinae were always standing at Mach’s disposal. Hundreds of soldiers were perpetually ready to strike, to kill, to conquer.

“We could create some rallies. Mach may have a lot of the bigger cities, but he knows that we can sway the small towns to work with us. Not everyone will join us, but I’m sure enough will. It’ll be enough.”

“Perfect. It is a plan, then,” Avion said, relaxing into his seat a little. He didn’t let himself fully relax, of course. There were still a lot of things to stress out over, but a little break from thinking of it helped him a little. He looked out

the window, at the passing scenery, the trees going by and standing tall without a worry in the world.

He almost yearned for that kind of peace.

Hivoc absently rested his head on Avion's shoulder, the latter squeezing his hand in response. Even if the peace in nature was unmatched, they could have their own kind of peace.

Chapter XXXIII - Rally

Hivoc was up late that night. He wouldn't have been able to sleep anyway, if he tried. He studied the map on the table in the common room. He could already feel where it was, without even needing to match up the coordinates in the Colossal to those on the map. There it was, right in the forest—territory that was declared protected land years ago, barring anyone from stepping foot in it. It was the perfect place to create a secret hideout.

He planned out the route they would take in a few days time. They would start here, in Luttecord, then travel throughout the country to rally as many people as they could, plead their case and beg for their support. Then, the day following, they would travel to Valeria City, the city closest to the Copper Birthplace.

Then they would march into the forest, find the Birthplace, and kill Mach. In theory, of course. Nothing had ever gone perfectly for them, there was always—*always*—something that got in the way. They could hope, though. No matter what happened, they had to have hope.

He relaxed in his chair, resting his hand on his face and rubbing his eyes. He needed some sleep. He was just about to stand up when he heard footsteps

echo on the silent floor behind him. A chair creaked beside him as the person sat down. The person—Avion—put a hand on Hivoc’s shoulder.

“You should not be awake,” he said simply.

“I know. I had to get something done.”

“Could it not have waited until tomorrow?” he asked, shifting to pull the chair closer, until they were almost touching. Hivoc opened his eyes and looked over at Avion, the soft light of the oil lamp bathing both of them in warmth. He sighed, knowing it probably could have waited. He didn’t *have* to stay up this late working. His silence was more telling than any word he could have spoken to Avion. He sunk into his chair under Avion’s strict look.

“Let us go to sleep, Hivoc. We will need it if we are to have a chance at recruiting more rebels for the cause. I trust you will actually sleep, and not stay up even later?” Avion asked, standing up to return to his room. His face was bathed in cold darkness as he turned away from the lamp.

“Yeah... I promise. G’night, Avion.”

“Good night, Hivoc.” He paused. He knew Hivoc. He knew he promised to sleep, wait for Avion to leave, and then stay up to his own self-inflicted detriment. “Would you like me to escort you to bed?” he asked, turning and offering his hand. Hivoc looked up from the desk, his eyes flickering between Avion’s hand and face.

He accepted the hand, standing up. When he went to let go, however, he found it hard to. The callouses of Avion’s palm seemed to align with his own like a perfectly crafted jigsaw puzzle. Their fingers threaded, a better warmth coming from their own body heats.

Avion walked Hivoc to his bedroom, the two standing in front of the door silently. Hivoc stared up at Avion. Avion stared back. Hivoc pursed his lips, trying to search for the words to say something. Nothing came.

“Well, I bid you good night, Hivoc,” Avion finally said, practically declaring that their time together for the night was over. “We will see if your nighttime decisions are comparable to your daylight ones once we both have some more sleep and some food in our stomachs.”

“Yeah... Good night.”

Avion left, and Hivoc retired into his bedroom, collapsing onto his bed and falling asleep soon after. He hadn't realized how tired he was.



The morning came earlier than anyone would've liked. The cats turned their backs to the waking world, the early birds slept in, and even the sun yawned and grumbled about it being too bright. However, Krae and Isticus were not among the slow starters. They had no intention of taking their time. Time was short, and they had to use it wisely.

The sun had barely risen when Isticus stood in the hallway of all the rooms, ready to wake everyone up—earlier than any of them had asked to be awakened. Krae, wisely, had his hands over his ears, his grin spanning both sides of his face. “Now,” he whispered, Isticus nodding in response. Isticus banged the pot and pan in his hand against each other in front of all the doors, waking everyone up with a great clamor.

Immediate outrage and sounds of pained ears came from everyone, Isticus and Krae scrambling away while giggling like schoolchildren. Hivoc was the first to burst open his door, the next—Hivah—her door almost hitting him in the face as he started down the hallway. “Isticus!” Hivoc shouted after the blacksmith, knowing it was his doing. No one else was immature enough to do something like that.

“If you punch me, I won’t make you any new swords!” Isticus said back playfully, running over to the table, going on the side of it opposite to Hivoc. Hivoc came close to the edge of the table, but didn’t actively go after Isticus, biting the inside of his cheek to stop himself from being rash. As annoying as Isticus was, it *was* nice to see such a wide grin on his face.

“Fine, you win. But once we start rallying, you’ll have to help a lot to make up for it,” Hivoc said, putting his hands on his hips. Isticus groaned, but relented quickly, accepting the terms. “You might have to get your hands dirty too, someone might try and fight us while we’re up giving the speech.”

Hivah had been so kind as to work up some speeches, alongside Limizella, for the rebellion to deliver to anyone that would listen. Hivoc had looked them over beforehand, memorizing some of the more difficult parts so that he could make it look like they’d been rehearsed longer than he actually had.

“I think it is time we made a change. Hivoc, are you ready to go?” Avion asked, coming into the room and sparing a stern glare over at Isticus. Hivoc nodded in return, cueing Avion to get everyone’s attention. “We leave now. If we go now, we will make it to Valeria tomorrow. Remember, no one can waste time. A wasted second is another second Mach is gaining power.”



The bright sun shone down on Valeria City as it set beyond the horizon. It painted the buildings with light the colors of gold, amethyst, rose quartz. There wasn't a single cloud in the sky to obstruct its warm gaze as it closed its eyes and let the moon embrace them. The group had purchased a hotel room for the night, using a false name and having Isticus pay, since he had the least attention among them from all the news reporters. Tomorrow, they would march straight to the Copper Birthplace with the people behind them, and they would defeat Mach.

That was tomorrow, though. There was still a bit left of today.

Hivoc collapsed onto the bed in the hotel room. They wanted to save some money, so they had cut down on the number of rooms and beds they rented, meaning some people had to share. Among those people were Hivoc and Avion. Avion came into the room after his shower, towel wrapped around his waist as he began dressing himself.

"You did good today," Avion said, making Hivoc look up. "Your voice was powerful... good job."

Hivoc felt his cheeks get warmer. His eyes locked onto Avion's back, studying every stray drop of water that slowly slid down his pale skin. "Thanks..." he said, looking away suddenly. "It was pretty tiring. I'm just ready to go to sleep at this point." He was looking down at his hands in his lap, feeling the weight of the bed shift as Avion sat down next to him.

“Then we should sleep. A lot of work will happen tomorrow, we cannot waste a second that we could use to gather our strength. Good night, Hivoc,” Avion said, lying down and pulling the blankets over both of them, putting his head on the only pillow provided in the room. It was a big pillow, but it felt a lot smaller with Avion already putting his head on it.

Hivoc matched his movement, lying down on his side, facing Avion. They were both staring at each other like this, eyes locked on each other. Neither broke eye contact. It was simply prolonged. Avion reached forward, putting his arm around Hivoc. Hivoc didn’t resist, he just let Avion touch him. Hivoc brought his own hand to Avion’s face, his body running hot with emotion. He put his palm on Avion’s cheek.

They kissed.

Just once. A quick, silent kiss. It left Hivoc wanting more, but Avion closed his eyes, the tiredness of the day washing over him and taking him for the night. Hivoc didn’t think he’d be able to sleep with Avion’s body against him, though, eventually, he did.

Chapter XXXIV - March

“People of Ollown!” Hivoc shouted to the crowd in front of him, made up of people who aligned with his ideals—the idea that Mach was too evil to be in power. “We have been wronged! Mach has used his power to destroy us. He has used his power to destroy our homes, separate our families, and silence those who try to speak out. My friends have lost their workplaces and had their homes destroyed. People in my home town have been forced to sleep on the streets while those in the big cities get the greatness! They get the prosthetics, they get the Machinae servants and workers, they get the help that we pay the price for! Today, Mach will die!”

The people cheered back, pumping their fists into the air. Hivoc could feel the energy in them, the power in their emotions. There was a fire in the people, a fire that had been manifesting and growing and strengthening for months—years, even—alongside the growth of Mach’s power. Now that their fire was strong, they were ready to extinguish Mach’s.

“Everyone, you will each get a weapon—a sword, a rifle, a shield, anything. The only enemies you have to kill are those made of copper. No man’s life will be lost.” He gestured outward to the crowd, where rebels were passing weapons.

“For months, we have been on the back foot; we have let Mach have complete and total control. Now, we take initiative. We will push back for every time Mach has wronged us! He has killed our families, he has destroyed our homes, he has manipulated the devout to follow unwaveringly to his cause! We cannot let it stand. Today, we will march to the Copper Birthplace, and we will break down the unnatural structure and let humans reclaim the power. Robots have no space in this world, and we have the power to show why.”

He turned his back to the audience, now properly armed. He led the march into Valeria Forest. The forest was unlike any other in all of Ollown. In most of Ollown, the trees stood taller than the people but were dwarfed by modern buildings. Most weren't evergreen, either, their leaves changing in the autumn for a beautiful brown and gold season.

The trees in Valeria Forest were different. They stood like giants, even taller than the Colossal. They never lost their needle-like leaves either, remaining green all-year round. As beautiful and incomprehensible as they were, they provided the perfect hiding spot for the Copper Birthplace.

It was easy to get lost in the forest, and even easier to get hurt or die. The dangers were a natural harbinger of to ward off anyone thinking of going off the designated paths. He himself had never gone in because of the warnings from his mother, telling him of unknown beasts that lurked beyond the treeline. That fear was Mach's barrier, a way for no one to get to him while he carried out his plans without contention. Today the barrier would fall apart. Hivoc would ensure it, even if it killed him.

The march began slowly, as he expected. The people needed guidance—*he* needed guidance. He glanced down at the crudely drawn map on his arm, which he used to help him lead the others through the Valerian Forest. He took a deep breath as he started the march. His legs already felt weak, as if some unseen force was weighing him down, trying to stop him before he even started. He pushed on, though, willing his body forward, denying the weight that pressed down on him.

The trees stared down on everyone that walked past, bystanders to a day that would surely be remembered in history. Hivoc did not want to think about the future, though. He merely needed to focus on the now. And he did, he pushed his legs forward.

Time passed. He wasn't sure how much, because the sun was largely blocked out by the towering trees of the forest. He felt defeat creeping up his spine as though trying to kill him. Did he take a wrong turn? Were the coordinates a diversion by Mach? His body felt weaker as well, like a tell that he should turn back. That he should give up.

He saw it.

Nature's disgrace. The home of the Machinae. The workshop of Mach. The plague to Ollown. In all of its horrid glory, it stood. It was almost entirely made of copper, antenna protruding from its main form. At the very top was a dome, giant glass panels allowing Mach to look out from the top.

They had arrived. Not just the rebels. Also the townsfolk who had had enough of Mach.

A mechanical beast that was as much a scourge as it was an achievement.

The Copper Birthplace.

Chapter XXXV - Strike

Mach stared out the window, hands behind his back. Age was creeping up on him faster than he could escape it. The modifications he gave to his body would give him a few more years... years he could use to change Ollown for the better. Hivoc just didn't see it. He didn't see that to get to the best world possible, some people had to be sacrificed.

He had run all the calculations. The death of few would bring paradise for the many. Hivoc didn't need to be in that few, he didn't *need* to die for paradise to be reached. But, if he stood in Mach's way, that's what it would come down to. He reached over to a nearby desk, pressing down on a button to speak to the Generals he had positioned below.

Only two remained. These ones were better, though; they were not weak like Sebastian. They had *more* than simple flesh, they had mechanics working inside them. Mechanics making them much more powerful. Machines were the future, and Sebastian's rejection of them would only leave him in the dust.

"M... you may attack. You have one instruction: Kill everyone... including Hivoc Blackstone." He released the button, letting his command go to the Machinae. "You were never meant to make it this far..." he said to Hivoc, looking out the window, knowing he couldn't hear him. "I would congratulate

you, but you've been a pain in my ass. Now, I won't give you any outs. Let's see you win, now that it's a fair game..."



It stood outside the Copper Birthplace, commanded by its creator. With skin of metal and an engine for a heart, it mimicked a human in stature, though was very clearly inhuman—*uncannily* inhuman. Its arm was melded into a sword, at the ready in front of it. Its eyes were glowing the same bright purple color as the Machinae, though with an intensity Hivoc hadn't seen before.

"I will give you one final chance to relent. If you do, all but the terrorists you stand beside will be spared. If you choose to fight, then M will rip every last one of you limb from limb. It has been programmed with the knowledge of what causes the most pain in a person; the pain you experience will be immeasurable," Mach's voice projected over an unseen speaker.

The hairs on Hivoc's arms stood on end. Goosebumps rippled across his skin. No matter what the people who backed him and the other rebels would do, he, Avion, Limizella—everyone he knew and cared for dearly—would be slaughtered without a hint of mercy.

The fear made some of the protestors freeze up in terror. They didn't know they would be getting into *this*: a death wish with a shiny metal coating. No one moved, for better or for worse. Anyone that wanted to run was too afraid to move a muscle, and those that wanted to fight stood their ground, armed and on guard. Some were shaking, which was understandable in Hivoc's eyes.

“Your moment to flee has passed. On your tombstones, I will leave a reminder that I gave you a chance to escape this death.” The speaker clicked out, leaving a moment of static before pure silence. *M* did not hesitate, rushing forward in an instant, dragging its sword behind it before slicing. Hivoc reacted in a split second, blocking the attack with his sword.

The Machinae pushed against Hivoc’s sword, forcing Hivoc to stagger backward under the force. With the sudden positional weakness on Hivoc’s end, *M* morphed its other arm into a second blade, stabbing at the man. Hivoc barely managed to put his own hand in the way of the sword before it could reach the rest of his flesh.

The point slid right through his palm, scraping at his chest. Hivoc yelled in pain, using all his strength to push the Machinae away from him. He clutched his palm, dropping his rapier onto the ground. Blood poured out from the cut, a deep crimson color, dripping onto the green grass below. He stepped backward, taking some safety behind his comrades, letting them protect him while he looked among the crowd, hoping anyone had some sort of medicine or gauze to help his wounds.

Many looked at him, seeing the strength and power of the Machinae named *M*. A few took their chances and ran, sprinting and dropping their weapons, going back the way they came. Who knew if they would find their way back home, or get lost in the forest and die. Hivoc couldn’t focus on them, though, he had more pressing matters: the extremely combat adept Machinae, who moved almost as fast as one could react.

While some fled, others reacted in a different way. They drew their weapons and prepared to fight. Only, they didn't aim at *M* or even the Birthplace itself. No, they aimed their weapons at Hivoc and the other rebels. Hivoc looked around at the people, confusion on his face. He wasn't the only one, either. The other rebels—especially Hivah and Liz, wore expressions of pure betrayal and confusion.

“When I warned you to leave, I wasn't warning you all. The difference between you and I is that I do not put faith in every single person I meet. I am a skeptic, and that has brought me to the top of the social and political ladder. You, on the other hand, will believe anyone who says they support your cause. So, when I learned that you were going to be campaigning across the country from my dearest spy within your ranks, I knew I had to deploy loyal supporters of mine to help keep the power.

“Unfortunately for you, you will die here. You will never know the one among you who gave away all the precious information you tried so hard to protect. They were a quite loyal subject, too, telling me everything I needed to know and more. They will be rewarded with life. The rest of you, however? I wish, for your own good, that there is no afterlife, so you do not have to relive the pain I am going to put you through here in this life.”

The false supporters of the rebels' cause moved forward, blades and shields at the ready, death inching closer and closer.

PART III:

WAR

Chapter XXXVI - Betrayal

They were surrounded by betrayers. All of them with weapons. To worsen the situation even more, *M* stood ready and waited for the betrayers to step away so it could come and disembowel the rebels. The opportunity wouldn't come, though. Quirwin, quick thinking as ever, reached into his pockets and produced two Deactivation Devices.

He threw the first on the ground, right in the middle of all of the rebels. He threw the second one straight towards *M*. Both created blinding flashes of light as they exploded. The first blinded the group of people surrounding the rebels. The second sailed to *M*'s feet, clearly causing spasms and staggering and glitching out, though it did not entirely deactivate, like the other *Machinae*.

"Run!" Quirwin shouted, starting in a sprint and running away from the Copper Birthplace, going deep into the forest. The other rebels followed, dashing behind him while the enemy was temporarily immobilized. Hivoc started after them as well, though he limped and staggered weakly. Everyone else was too far ahead, with only Limizella to glance behind.

She dashed backward, grabbing him and helping him along as they ran away from the betrayers. He limped along behind the rest of the rebels as he

regained his footing. Barely able to see where he was going, he blinked rapidly, trying to stop the dizzying bright dots and multiplying pictures from his eyes.

“How much do I owe you?” Hivoc asked Limizella, chuckling weakly as they found some cover with the rest of the rebels in a grove of large trees. He caught his breath as he pressed his back against a thick tree trunk. The other rebels gathered close, peeking around the trees and dense foliage to check if they had successfully hidden themselves.

Limizella rolled her eyes. “It’s on the house, Hivoc. It always is.” She pushed his hair back, putting her palm on his forehead. She quickly pulled her hand back, wincing and waving it through the air. His skin was scalding hot, enough to make her skin turn red just from the contact. “Holy... Hivoc, are you okay?”

“Yeah... I’m fine,” he responded dismissively, sitting up and then trying to fully stand up, before stumbling and falling back against the tree. Limizella looked up, and over to Hivah.

“Hivah!” she whisper-shouted, getting Hivah’s attention, “you know your brother better than me, come here!” Hivah, who was watching for the enemy, turned and saw her brother’s condition. She rushed over to him, leaving the watching to Xailu, Quirwin, and the Fharn father and son.

She checked on her brother’s condition, suffering the same light burn as Limizella did. She pulled at Hivoc’s collar, loosening it to check Hivoc’s pulse. When she put two of her fingers on his neck, though, she couldn’t find the artery, scrunching her eyebrows in confusion. Normally, she was decent with medical practices—more knowledgeable than other rebels, though nowhere

near an actual doctor. Before she could say anything about it, Isticus—who had better eyesight than his father—called out to them:

“Hide! They’re coming!” With that, everyone scrambled to take better cover, using nearby flora and geology to conceal themselves and blend in with the environment. The betrayers, alongside half a dozen Machinae, came down the small path that led from the Birthplace.

Mach’s voice came out of *M*: “*Keep moving! If they get away, you will take their place in death! Spare the spy and spare Hivoc, those two are the only ones I want to live long enough to see my face again.*” Mach’s minions continued to search the area, spreading out through the forest in search of the rebels.

Meanwhile, the rebels held their breath. Hivah, feeling as if her lungs were going to burst, clamped her hands over her mouth. *M* still stood on the other side of the tree that the rebels were using for cover, not moving with the rest of the betrayers. Instead, it lingered behind, taking a more detailed account of the surroundings.

Then *M* started to move on, taking mechanically perfect steps—its body not shifting in balance, staying perfectly level with every movement, uncannily perfect in nature.

Isticus broke, taking in a large gasp of air before Krae slapped his mouth shut with his own hand. *M*’s head snapped back like a predator catching its prey, stalking over to the tree. It had heard them. There was no way they’d be able to escape now, not with *M* prowling a few feet away from them.

Hivah gripped a small dagger, ready to fight until the end of her life. Mere seconds before she planned on jumping out, someone in the distance shouted:

“Mach! I think we found something!” *M* craned its head back, deciding whether or not to finish checking here or move to the signal. After brief deliberation, it bounded out toward the voice, leaving Hivoc, Hivah, and Limizella to themselves.

The rebels all collectively breathed again, coughing as they took in long gasps and tried to calm their heart rates. Hivoc, oddly enough, seemed mostly fine, catching his breath rather quickly compared to the rest of the rebels. All of them sat in silence together, unsure of what to say. There was a lingering thought they shared, as they all looked at each other.

There was a spy among them. Hivoc couldn’t imagine any of his fellows being the spy.

Hivah was his sister. She had been with him from the very beginning, and both of them had deep rooted anger and hate for Mach.

Avion was... complicated, but not possible. He was the leader of the rebellion. A spy could never get into that position. Right?

Liz, Krae, and Isticus were all great friends of his. Surely they couldn’t be. Luttecord was constantly destroyed by Mach, their homes and friends and communities were wrecked. No way any one of them could be.

Quirwin. Hivoc could admit he felt a personal dislike of Quirwin that was completely undeserved, but that didn’t advocate for him being any sort of spy.

Xailu. Young, quiet. Hivoc didn’t want to insult the boy, but he didn’t think Xailu had the guts to be a spy. He had wanted to shoot Mach, but the day of the assassination had stepped down and forced Hivoc to take the gun.

Somehow, any one of them could be working for Mach, any of them could be a spy that had infiltrated their ranks and plagued their objective with confidential information given to Mach. No fingers were pointed, but eyes glanced around at each other, all of them having some level of suspicion for each other.

Chapter XXXVII - *M*

The rebels snuck back through the forest and entered the Copper Birthplace, carefully.

The entire tower was a complex mess of hallways, staircases, and Machinae. The machines were too busy with random work tasks to notice the rebels, their whirring making a dull hum that was properly creepy. Hivoc grabbed his sword handle, waiting for them to notice him so that he could attack. When they didn't, he thought he was safe, that nothing would hurt him.

He began to sneak further into the Birthplace, mesmerized by the ingenious design and complicated machinery around every corner. Nothing inside the copper-made tower was 'simple.' Everything was overengineered, with gigantic gears, pulley systems, wires, and that same purple crystal powering it all throughout.

Hivoc led the rebels around long, winding hallways. They were pristine, with steam running through pipes and making the entire building feel hot. The halls had infinitely many corners, making Hivoc feel as if he was going insane, with the repeating patterns. At first, he looked around every wall to make sure there weren't any Machinae, but he eventually began growing antsy and reckless.

He barely spared a look around the corner of the next hallway before stepping out into it. His recklessness allowed a Machinae—an insect, by shape—to spot the rebels, its eyes glowing purple as it recorded them infiltrating.

Mach watched through the insectoid robot, clenching his jaw and rubbing the stubble on his chin with irritation. He just had let the rebels trick him, let them escape right through the gaps in his fingers and sneak into his workshop. It was an embarrassment, a humiliation, a shame on his title. He needed to defeat the rebels. That would be the only way he earned his honor back.

“*M*,” he communicated to the Machinae, “return to the Birthplace. The rebels are here. Kill them.” He stepped away from the control panel off to the side of the upper room. He looked out the main window, seeing the trees as tall as his magnum opus—the very tower in which he stood. Only one thing stood second to it, and that invention was a failure.

Well, the current version was.

He didn’t become president of Ollown and the greatest inventor of the modern day by giving up on projects. No, he would just scrap this version, then rework it until it was perfect. Until it was unable to be criticized, until it was unable to be seen as anything less than the ideal product of the future.

He would die before he could reach his utopia—everyone’s utopia. But, he was willing to make that decision. The present didn’t need to be great, as long as the future was perfect. No amount of modifications to his own body would allow him to survive the generations it would take for the Machinae to be

integrated into normalcy. Then again, this stunt in and of itself might be enough to accelerate the public's acceptance of the project.

Project Machiman.

Meanwhile, *M* was bounding through the forest, moving beyond the abilities of any human being, and even that of the fastest carriages around. With that speed, it ripped into the Copper Birthplace, running to the rebels at lightning speed. It practically used the walls of the Birthplace as ladders, tearing into them with its stronger metallic feet. It left gashes in the structure, its only objective to kill.

Hivoc and the other rebels were oblivious, continuing on down the hallway. Hivah, in the back, was the first to hear *M* coming, hearing it like a beast charging after its prey. "Duck!" she shouted, knowing there was no time to run. Listening to her guidance, the rebels ducked to the sides of the hallway, just as *M* pushed right off the wall at the opposite end of the hall and lunged down its length.

Its sword arm, extended out to pierce flesh, became stuck in the wall. It tried to pry it out, giving the rebels ample opportunity to run. Hivoc took that chance, making a mad dash down the hallway while unsheathing his weapon. Sword in hand, he took a stance and waited for *M* to come and fight him, knowing Mach would send the robot after him, rather than his allies.

His intuition was right, as *M* made its way toward him, relentlessly travelling with its sword-arm at the ready. It lunged forward, only to be parried by Hivoc, who directed the robot's sword to the side, leaving *M* open for Hivoc's own thrust. He stabbed its metallic flesh, only for the point of his

sword to slide off the Machinae's metal armor, leaving but a scratch on its plated skin.

The futility of his attack was demoralizing, but he still had an advantage over *M*. He shoved against it, making it stagger enough for Hivoc to grab its arm. The robot fought and writhed against him, while Hivoc pulled his body back and set his foot on *M*'s chest. He pulled the Machinae's arm while pushing on its chest, and, after sparks and flashes and loud rumbling noises came from the robot, the arm came off.

Water and some oil—the former no doubt being used for steam—poured out of the robot, while sparks shot out of the exposed machinery. The loss of its energy made it spazz out, just as it had under the effects of the deactivation device. It stood nonetheless, balling its fist like a man and taking swings at Hivoc. Hivoc knew now that this was simply a game of outlasting *M* until it lost its lifeblood.

The Machinae fought valiantly, seemingly recognizing that its time of living was limited, and doing whatever it could to injure Hivoc. It gave everything it had and more, its strength too much for Hivoc to handle on his own. It jumped into the air, straight for Hivoc, only to be slammed into the wall by Krae, using his body to shove it right against the copper tower, splattering water and oil like blood.

With the combined efforts of all the rebels holding it down—some limbs requiring the help of two rebels—the Machinae slowly bled out, while fighting with every bit of energy still in its system. As time went on, though, its

resistance slowed to a stop, until finally, it died while pinned against the wall by its adversaries.

The rebels allowed the disabled robot to fall to the ground, the machine twitching and shooting sparks and stray steam into the air. Hivoc threw the arm onto the ground next to the metal corpse, kicking *M*'s head hard enough to leave a dent while wiping his hands on his pants and cleaning himself the best he could. Not enough to fully clean himself, but enough to make some difference.

The oil and water *M*'s body left refused to mix, a barrier between the natural and the artificial.

“Holy... I didn't know you had that in you,” Hivah said, a mix of pride and shock in her voice as she gave a soft punch to Hivoc's arm. “Keep that up and Mach won't stand a chance.”

Hivoc wasn't paying as much attention to her words as he could, staring down at *M* as the last bit of life left it.

First, Sebastian Confra. Now, *M*.

Two Generals down, one to go. He had a feeling this one wouldn't go down easily.

Chapter XXXVIII - Ascension

Climbing, climbing, climbing, climbing. Every step sent pain up Hivoc's legs, each staircase and hallway harder than the last. Exhaustion was creeping up around the corner for him. He wasn't the only one feeling the weight of the journey either. His companions were all as weak as he was, though they had not engaged as intensely in the fight with *M*. The more he and the others ascended, the more impossible the climb seemed to be.

His body begged for rest, his muscles aching and burning under the strain. He walked nonetheless, until he could walk no longer, collapsing in the hallway and going up against the nearest wall to rest. The others followed suit, finding a small glimpse of refuge in the halls of the Copper Birthplace.

With *M* dead, the rebels felt safe to rest, as the remaining Machinae were less advanced and deadly. Hivoc closed his eyes and breathed. He knew he needed the rest, as the feeling of exhaustion crept up on him through the pain in his legs. The hallway felt too tight, and with every blink it came in closer on him, trapping him and suffocating him.

Everyone rested, some against the wall, some against each other. Hivoc found his own body pressed up to Avion's, the two of them using the other for support. Hivoc couldn't imagine existing in this moment without him. He

needed Avion. He wished he was alone with Avion, or just alone. He couldn't process everything he felt with so many people around him.

He just had to fight it out. Once Mach was dead and buried in the earth, then he could start focusing on his emotions again. For a hired sword, blades came before emotions. He needed to remember that. Emotions were the reason he lost fights, that he failed in battles he could've won, that he got hurt. *I wish I could turn off these emotions*, he thought to himself, looking up at the ceiling. He wished he could see the sky, in a time like this, but he had no such luck.

He made the wish, despite knowing that it wasn't nighttime.

He didn't have much time to spare, though. He, along with the other rebels, heard the Machinae quickly and loudly making an approach to them. He scrambled to his feet, helping the others rise as well.

"In here!" Hivah exclaimed, opening a nearby door and ushering them all inside. Just as they got in and shut the door, the Machinae came barreling down the hallway, looking for them. Thankfully, they were safe in here, allowing them to recuperate and catch their breath.

Hivoc would've done the same, if the room didn't seem so peculiar.

He walked further inside, seeing papers strewn about on various desks with blueprints and displays of intricate mechanics—complex wiring, masses of crystals, and gears inside each. On the far wall, there was a corkboard, covered with paper drawings. One word was pinned above it all.

He reached out and touched the papers, scanning the blueprints and furrowing his brow in confusion. He traced his finger over the ominous word, whispering it to himself as he did.

“Machiman...”

Chapter XXXIX - Machiman

Hivoc's whispered word drew Avion over to him, making the latter peek over Hivoc's shoulder to see the corkboard. He, too, saw the diagrams and blueprints, trying to make sense of them. He gently pushed Hivoc to the side so he could get a better look.

Though there were designs and pictures across the entire board, one in the very middle stood out the most. It was the clearest and most advanced depiction of the Machiman, with a front, back, and side view, showing off the entire internal mechanism of it.

The see-through metallics on the blueprint allowed Hivoc to understand what was different about it in comparison to the other Machinae. Its inner workings, unlike the rest of the robots in Mach's army, were arranged in a way that looked almost exactly like a human's internal organs.

The compartment where the glowing crystal was stored was shaped like a heart, with wires spreading out from it that mimicked the nervous system. The muscles had hydraulics that, hypothetically, would allow the Machiman to move its body exactly as a human would. The computing system was compressed entirely into the shape of a brain, powered by the nerve-wires coming from the false heart.

It made Hivoc feel sick. Mach wanted to make robots exactly like men, in every way, shape, and form. He looked down at the mark on the blueprint, telling him that this was Mach's 4th version of the Machiman—labeled with a bold *IV* right in the bottom corner of the page.

A note had been pinned right next to it, black ink messily scribed onto it: "*Mark IV, failure, became conscious and rejected programming.*" Hivoc couldn't do anything but stare at that line, reading it over and over again. Mach had lost control of Mark IV, wherever it was. Somehow, somehow, the Machiman had gained consciousness and rejected the programming Mach had put into it. The idea made the hairs on his body stand up in fear.

A conscious Machinae.

It lived. It wasn't just metal and wires, it had a mind. It had thoughts. It had a being. The boiling hate Hivoc already felt for Mach increased tenfold with the idea. Mach wanted to play god with the Machinae, wanted to play god with *life*. No man should have that kind of power. Hivoc knew he had to stop Mach before the power-hungry genius could get any closer to satisfying his tyrannical god complex.

"A living Machinae," Avion said aloud, just as repulsed by the thought as Hivoc was. While Hivoc had been lost in thought, the other rebels had come over to see the corkboard as well, putting together the pieces that there was a robot out somewhere pretending to be human.

The longer Hivoc stared at the corkboard, the more he felt a foreboding ominous feeling. It was as though he was one step away from solving the mystery in some thriller novel Hivah would have begged him to read. He shook

it away. He was feeling better now, with more energy. Maybe now would be the time to start ascending the staircase again, seeing as the other fellow rebels looked energized from waiting as well.

He pushed his way to the other side of the room, and pressed his ear to the door. He closed his eyes and listened. Nothing. The Machinae had passed by them, without realizing they were in there. He opened the door just enough to peek outside.

The hallway was devoid of anything outside of the ordinary—ordinary relative to the Birthplace, at least. The entire building in and of itself was out of the ordinary in every meaning of the term. He closed the door again, bathing the room in dimness once more.

“Are we ready to go back out there?” he asked to the room. A small chorus of groans reminiscing on pain came in response, though everyone agreed to continue onwards nonetheless. Hivoc led the rebels outside of the room, taking one more cautious look before stepping out and allowing the rest of the rebels to follow him.

The ascension continued, the rebels taking their time to climb up staircases and walk down hallways. They needed to conserve their energy—any moment now, a Machinae could jump out from around a corner or come sprinting down from the opposite end of a hallway. They needed to be prepared and alert for a moment like that.

Despite their cautious attitude toward the building and its interior structure, Mach had come prepared: a trap, silent in nature, had been set along many of the walkways on the higher end of the Birthplace. The trap wouldn't hurt them,

nor kill them. Instead, it would simply alert the Machinae of their position. Mach, as much as he loathed the rebels, didn't want them killed just yet. Not after the humiliating death of *M*. He wanted to watch them die—watch them squirm like maggots as they tried to escape before ending their lives and allowing his regime to live on.

Hivoc only realized the trap when it was far too late to do anything about it. He had managed to bring the rebels into a small circular room, one with many exits in every direction. Before any of them could go down one of the seven unexplored passages, they were surrounded by scores of Machinae.

They inched closer and closer with every passing second.

Interlude - VI

Vitranus is a powerful material—a gift from the heavens, even. It gives power beyond any steam machine. An age of innovation is upon us yet again. However, in the first ages of innovation, the smartest people around wanted what they thought was best for people by giving innovation to absolutely everyone. I know better, because I am not just smart, I am a genius. I know not to give everyone Vitranus right away.

For later reference, these are the expansively detailed properties of Vitranus:

Vitranus is an exceedingly rare material, more than any other known on this planet. I know that because no matter where or what I search, there is no mention of the traits of this crystal in combination. Vitranus has a bright purple shell, with a rich deeper purple core. When both the core and outer shell are together, the entire crystal glows brightly.

When the parts are separated, however, neither glow. Most Interestingly, when both parts are together, they create a near infinite source of energy, beyond the powers of steam, coal, or human efficiency. My testing is limited,

with the growing requirements for my campaigning in office and dealing with the rebels, though I have had an ongoing test since my youth.

In this test, there is a Vitranus core and a full Vitranus crystal, with the latter wired to power the former. The Vitranus core seems to act as a forever siphoning source, draining energy from whatever's nearby and doing... something with it. The full Vitranus crystal acts as a forever source of energy. Where either of these things store and siphon energy is beyond my understanding. I have been, notably, running this test for multiple decades at this moment in my life.

The Vitranus crystal has not run out of energy. It is, as far as I am aware, infinite. Or, so close to infinite that the gap is meaningless. I have one singular Vitranus crystal powering the entire Copper Birthplace, and nothing seems even close to running out of power.

The power, however, seems to be too limitless. It requires a limiter to prevent its power from inevitably overrunning the device it powers—a property I discovered after the entire Copper Birthplace lost power and the power box in which I kept the crystal had exploded. The best limiter appears to be water, with more tests to be done. For now, small amounts of water are enough to have Machinae survive years, while larger supplies are required for larger machines.

The Vitranus, though, does poison the water eventually. Very quickly, actually, and water requires near constant switching—around once a week for larger machines and once a month for Machinae.

It is truly a gift of God. Man is stronger than God, however, because we can twist and mold God's gifts into what we desire.

Giving Vitranus to everyone would mean that people would use it for malice. I cannot have that. The only way to prevent the spread of malice is to restrict the production of Vitranus to only the Machinae, the Machimen, and the Colossai. Anything of my own creation can wield the Vitranus. Anything else is untrustworthy.

The same people who want the Vitranus are the people who never believed in me—who wished for my downfall, kicked me while I was down, did everything in their power to wring me of my hope and joy until I had nothing left. They are the bane of paradise, and they will be gone in this new age.

In the beginning, we had the age of nature. Then, the age of enlightenment. Now, we are on the cusp of ending the age of humanity. With the age of humanity soon to be behind us, there is one more age ahead of us.

The age of machines.

In the end, we will finally have perfection—paradise. Ollown will no longer be a nation of the sideline. Ollown will be an oasis for all who enter it. Ollown will be the nation to save the world. I will ensure it.

- Excerpt from Mach's journal

Chapter XLI - Kidnapping

“How are the DDs coming along?” Hivoc shouted back to Hivah and Limizella as he pierced through a Machinae’s skull, dragging it backward and carving a hole into its chest for the girls to get access to the crystal inside. Hivah and Limizella were quickly crafting more Deactivation Devices—which Hivoc had shortened to DDs based on Quirwin’s subpar naming abilities.

“They’re coming, just keep the Machinae at bay and we’ll do the rest,” Hivah said, taking the crystal out of a partially destroyed Machinae and shoving it into the empty shell of one of the Deactivation Devices, tossing it in an arc over the heads of the rebels into a crowd of Machinae, letting it explode and disarm the robots.

The rebels were in the middle of two neverending groups of Machinae on either side. On the westernmost front was Quirwin, using his Guandao to hold the range advantage, keeping the Machinae back singlehandedly. On the other side, Hivoc and Avion were holding the front. Krae and Isticus were using some of the metal from the Machinae’s exoskeletons to build the shells, which Limizella and Hivah were filling with crystal and arming.

Xailu wasn’t doing anything outwardly productive, though he was scanning the walls and ceiling, using his young yet crafty eye to spot things Avion or the

others might have missed. This included a loose part of the ceiling. He grabbed a detached arm from one of the Machinae, bringing it up to poke the ceiling, knocking a part of it loose.

It came down, nearly crushing him and the others. After some startled swearing from Krae—followed by stern words to Isticus to not repeat them—Xailu looked up into the hole, realizing that it seemed to be some sort of passageway for Machinae. It was big enough for him and the others to pass through, he reasoned.

“Liz! Hivah!” He gathered the girls’ attention and pointed up to the hole, relaying his plan to them. Even if the passage was big enough to fit through, they needed some way to get up into it without being mauled by the surrounding Machinae. The only possibility was using each other. That did, however, mean, someone would have to be left behind to push everyone else up. They’d have to stay down long enough to let everyone else boost off them before coming up themselves.

Xailu knew who it had to be. He grabbed a DD, throwing it into the crowd of Machinae in front of Hivoc and Avion, clearing out some of the robots and shouting to Hivoc. “Hivoc, there’s an escape in the ceiling. Would you help us get up into it? We need someone to be last to come up. We’ll grab you and pull you in, don’t worry.”

Xailu didn’t have the best reassurance, but it didn’t take a genius to recognize that his plan was their only option. Hivoc nodded, though kept his eyes focused on the Machinae first and foremost. Xailu quickly made his way over to Quirwin, telling him the same thing he told Hivoc. The rebels made

their circle of safety smaller, surrounding the opening in the ceiling. With everyone's combined efforts, they continued to hold off the Machinae, slashing through them, chest or head or limbs.

The pile of destroyed Machinae grew larger, forming a barrier, making it nearly impossible for the incoming Machinae to advance on the rebels further. The makeshift metal blockade let the rebels safely begin climbing upwards into the passage above. One by one, the rebels were lifted up by Hivoc, who boosted them with his shoulders.

The hardest two to get up would be Avion and Quirwin.

Thankfully, enough Machinae had been wrecked to create a meaningful barricade surrounding the remaining three rebels, protecting them from the banging and clawing from the Machinae on the other side. Oddly, though, it all seemed to stop suddenly.

"They're not doing anything," Hivoc said dumbly, stepping closer to the barricade and listening for any clues that the Machinae were still trying to attack them. When he didn't hear anything, he walked back to the center, suspicious. "What do we think Mach has planned now?"

"I don't know," Quirwin responded. "Not that it matters, since we'll have to go through the ceiling anyway. I'll go up first." Hivoc nodded, getting down on one knee and letting Quirwin step onto his shoulders before standing up. Hivoc held onto Quirwin's ankles, giving him a firm stance so he could go up into the passage above.

Quirwin pulled himself into the passage above, getting inside with little resistance. He reached down, grabbing Xailu's arm and taking the two of them

up into the passageway. Without all the humdrum of the Machinae rushing and fighting to capture the rebels, Hivoc could hear screams of terror clearly as the rebels were abducted, including Quirwin and Xailu.



Hivoc and Avion stared up in terror at the ceiling, no one responding to their repeated calls—neither of them brave, or stupid, enough to go up to see for themselves what had happened to them.

“He took them,” Hivoc whispered under his breath, processing what had happened. That’s why he called off the Machinae. He thought he could kidnap every last one of them. “That son of a... Mach took them!” Hivoc shouted, though he was unsure to whom he was shouting. Tears began to fill his eyes, bottled up emotion threatening to spill out of him.

Interlude - VII

“I refuse to be your spy any longer. Your tyranny has done enough harm, and I will not stand by and help you ruin my home any longer. Do what you want, you cannot stop the rebellion.”

Mach read the message and sighed. He was more disappointed than anything. Disappointed in the person he had put his trust in to spy on the rebels. Sure, he had provided more than enough information to be useful, but being able to squeeze just a bit more intel out of him would have been a nice commodity. He would just have to make do, though.

He stood up from his desk, tracing the laminated hardwood and sending a message to his Machinae. “Our spy has betrayed us. Do not kill the spy, I will be the one to do so. I want to look him in the eyes and watch him beg for life before I kill him. Now, get me the damned rebels before I turn every last one of you into scrap!” He practically shouted the last words into the messaging system connected to all his Machinae, even though he knew they lacked the ability to understand his tone.

He had enough with the rebels. Even with all the growth of strength he had achieved—induction into office, the creation of *M*, the advancements used on

Ettrot, even the creation and collapse of the Colossal. All of it culminated in an overwhelming power over the rebels.

So how did those stupid pests manage to make me stagger this much? He thought to himself. He took a deep breath. He needed to calm down. A calm mind was a powerful mind. A powerful mind was more powerful than any of the rebels.

“The spy has been captured, alongside nearly all the other rebels.”

“Nearly?” Mach repeated to himself, before repeating it to the Machinae.

“The exceptions are Hivoc Blackstone and Avion Inkwell.”

Mach let a few beats pass. He could feel his heart rate picking up in his chest. But of course. The two rebels he considered to be most disruptive and most powerful—especially in combination—left out. He had all but the best, and that was the worst.

At least he still had the spy in his grasp.

That didn’t make the situation any sweeter.

He forwarded the message to all the Machinae in and outside the Birthplace: “Bring Hivoc Blackstone and Avion Inkwell to me. *Dead or Alive.*”

Chapter XLII - Distress

Hivoc was sitting on the ground, his legs too weak to hold him up. Avion's arms were around his body in an attempt to comfort him and get him through this ordeal. Through the Copper Birthplace. Trauma welled up in Hivoc's chest, reminders of what he lost in the past resurfacing with newly applied pain. As his mind flashed them all through his head, Hivoc was unable to escape them, no matter how tight he closed his eyes.



Hivoc stood beside his twin sister, Hivah. He didn't have the easiest life in the world, but he wouldn't trade it for anything else. He had his mom, he had his sister, and that was all he needed. He was just starting to earn true trust and independence, while his sister rejected it in exchange for alone time in her room, disassembling their alarm clock and rebuilding it.

Hivoc had long been training himself with a sword. He had gotten his hands on as many books about sword fighting techniques and strategies as possible, going outside day after day to train himself, going to the local smithy and giving the man there every coin he had to get himself a rapier.

He wasn't the best with it. Not even all that good, really. But, he could use it well enough to intimidate his friends at school and impress his sister. His mother wasn't the biggest fan of his self-induced training. Thus, one day she told him:

"Hivoc, I want you to listen to this. You can fight, I will not stop you from doing it or learning how to, but I do not want you to. I want you to live your life without feeling a blade cut your skin, and I want you to live your life without having to end a man's life with metal or flesh. You can be a lover, Hivoc, without being a fighter. You don't need to carry the burden of a sword every day, Hivoc."

His perspective had been changed that day. He had always thought, in the back of his mind, no matter how much he tried otherwise, that his mother and sister were weak. In a more traditional sense, that is. His sister was incredibly brilliant, a trait she inherited from their mother. When it came to swords and fistfights, however? He didn't trust—didn't want—either of them to do such a thing. Thus, he had accepted the ways of a rapier. To protect.

He knew now, though, that forever holding a sword meant you had to use the sword for more than protection. Even though that had yet to happen, it didn't mean it never would happen. It would happen, and he had to accept that the strength to protect meant the burden of fighting.

He left his rapier at home that day, the day his mother, sister, and he, all went down the streets of Luttecord to buy groceries. They never made it to the store, though, as men in masks pulled his mother into a secluded alleyway.

He begged for them to let her go, as did his sister. The men did not listen, shoving their knives into her body, everywhere the horrible blades could reach. Her screams of agony echoed through the city. By the time anyone found them, it was too late to help her.

He and his sister had few last moments with her, as the men fled the scene, hiding their blood-stained daggers.

“Hivoc,” his mother whispered weakly. He could tell every breath was harder than the last as blood stained her clothes. “I don’t blame you for anything... Love, Hivoc, you don’t have to fight. Dying with murder on your conscience is worse than any pain. Live a good life, son, I’m sorry...”

He never learned what she was sorry for, though, for she passed away seconds later. He and Hivah cried over her body, tears mixing with the blood still leaking from her open wounds as police and medics came. He promised himself, as tears drenched his mother’s clothes, that he would never let something like this happen again. Not to himself, not to his sister, not to his friends.

He looked to the sky and wished for hope, that night.



“It’s going to be fine,” Avion told Hivoc, the two hugging with the destroyed Machinae surrounding them. “We’ll find Mach and get everyone back, I promise. He will not get away with this.” The words provided some

comfort, but there was only so much Avion could do to help Hivoc in this state. He knew that, seeing Hivoc essentially shut down in front of him.

They both sat there for a moment, the sickening smell of metal infesting their noses, and feeling as if they were the only human things inside the entire Copper Birthplace. There wasn't any other life except for them, every inch of every room covered with copper or iron or steel. The constant neverending steam power on some of the more rudimentary areas of the Birthplace had given Avion minor burns.

The Copper Birthplace was not a home to humans, or even nature at all. It was an insult to nature, birthed from the metals of the earth and molded into a scourge of the very thing it came from. Nothing lived inside the Birthplace, which was kept running by an amalgamated mass of *Machinae* and machines in an everlasting cyclical bane to living.

Mach had taken too much from him—from his friends, from his community, from his city and his country. Collapsing now would be relenting to Mach's malicious takeover of Ollown. People would die, homes would be destroyed, entire communities would be ravaged, water supplies would be evaporated in the name of steampower or poisoned by the gem that powered all the *Machinae*.

He forced himself to stand, Avion's arms no longer wrapped around him. He wiped the remains of tears from his eyes with the heel of his hand, then reached down to help bring Avion up to his feet. He had already wasted enough time in the Copper Birthplace and had allowed Mach to get away with far too

much. Hivoc had been pushed beyond his breaking point. All he had left to draw on for strength was hate—for Mach.

Once Avion had stood up, Hivoc pushed forward, leading himself and Avion into the Copper Birthplace. He didn't know exactly where he was going, simply travelling with instinct as his guide.

Somehow, though, he knew that Mach was close.

Chapter XLIII - Veronica

The apex was in sight.

Hivoc could see it, the final floor of the Copper Birthplace where Mach, the creator of all this destruction, stood. One floor away. Just above the ceiling he would be there, the man who created all this. Hivoc was close now, closer than he had ever been before—close to stopping Mach, close to destroying the Machinae, close to exacting vengeance. All he had to do was climb the final level and kill him. One final obstacle stood in his way.

Veronica Ettrot. The most mysterious, and possibly dangerous, of all the Generals.

When Mach had announced his Generals to the public, next to nothing was known about the so-called *M*, or about Veronica Ettrot. According to most of the sources Hivoc could find, she had had no political career and no affiliation with Mach.

After hours of research culminating in next to no information about her, Xailu had stepped in. It was like magic, watching him type ungrammatical jumbles of words into the computer and finding more specific results than Hivoc's meticulous searching. He was dumb-founded, watching Xailu produce more information than hundreds of news sources did.

Most of it was irrelevant, yes, but there were a few diamonds among the rubbish. One of those few diamonds was Veronica's relation to Mach. Xailu had found pictures online of the two together that implied they shared some sort of familial bond. The most incriminating was a family photo, containing almost thirty people—including both Veronica Ettrot and Mach.

According to Xailu, Veronica had married into the Ettrot name, and there were clear signs of Mach—or someone associated with him—having removed anything else that could be helpful to them. Oddly, when Hivoc came back to Xailu a few weeks later asking him to work his magic again, Xailu had brushed him off and said that it didn't matter, and everything to be found was already found. Or, more likely, that Mach had gotten rid of everything else.

Hivoc pushed him, but Xailu rejected him, for reasons unknown. They became too busy after that, spending too much time on more important things to think about Veronica. He had accepted the rejection at the time, but now, standing so close to her and Mach, he wished he knew more. There was no way he could change that, though—he simply had to embrace the present.

Hivoc and Avion turned a corner, coming upon a gigantic hallway. Its ribbed ceiling and shining sides made it feel almost ethereal, pipes bursting at the seams and almost glowing with purple energy. At the very end of the passage was the final staircase, spiraling around a pillar up to the top floor.

The stairs were just out of reach.

Holding more importance, however, was the enigma of a woman standing between Hivoc and Avion, and the staircase. Molded from flesh and metal, there was no part of her that remained entirely human. She was an

amalgamation of humanity and machine, her beauty made revolting by the seams of her metal skin.

“Veronica,” Avion stated. It wasn’t a question. Both of them knew exactly who she was, with no less than a hundred percent certainty. Hivoc grasped the hilt of his rapier, drawing it from its scabbard. Avion followed suit with his own blade. Veronica did nothing, drawing no weapon of her own. She didn’t need to. She was the weapon.

“I’ve heard a lot about you two,” Veronica said, her voice rooted in humanity but distorted by the numerous enhancements interfering with her throat and face. A dull roar of whirs and mechanical noises emanated from her person as she spoke, the complex biology and machinery somehow working in tandem. “You have caused quite a bit of trouble. Confra tried to fix that—and failed. He deserved it, truly, resisting the Machinae. I was sad to see *M* go. Oh, well, that will make your inevitable defeat that much sweeter.”

Her voice, despite the human undertones of it, was cold and cruel. There wasn’t a drop of warmth in it, every word meant to bring Hivoc and Avion down. She was a true ally to Mach, even more so than Confra had been during his lifetime. Hivoc guessed some of the loyalty originated from their familial ties, though he assumed that she also shared Mach’s ideologies.

“The only inevitable defeat will be Mach’s, not our own,” Avion responded, his sword pointed toward Veronica. She kept her human eye trained on Hivoc, while her mechanical one locked onto and analyzed Avion. The total control over her own body was terrifying, but nothing would be able to deter Hivoc and Avion from advancing.

Bravery overcame their fear.

“I take it you won’t allow us to go through peacefully?” Hivoc asked rhetorically. Veronica rolled her human eye. Hivoc took that as a yes. He waited for her to attack, not knowing the defense mechanisms Mach had no doubt installed on her. Any wrong move could mean certain death for him. She was an expertly designed killing machine, for all he knew.

He wasn’t the first person to move, Veronica launching herself at the rebels with enhancements in her legs. She didn’t use a sword to attack, instead using her own fist to try and punch Hivoc. The control over her own weapon—her arm—made it nearly impossible for Hivoc to get his rapier in position to parry it. He barely managed to shove his blade between himself and Veronica’s oncoming fist.

The parry didn’t do much, however. Veronica used her other arm, while her fist was still contesting his blade. She reached over to Hivoc’s hand, trying to twist the blade away for an easy opening. Hivoc’s eyes widened in fear as his sword was pushed to the side with the strength of both her arms, mechanical and biological. Even using both hands to support his rapier, he couldn’t resist the sheer force of her mechanical strength.

A new appendage sprouted from Veronica’s back, threatening to kill Hivoc with its sharp point when he was most vulnerable to attack. Avion, though, was the one to save the day, shoving Veronica off-balance, running into her using his body. She almost fell to the ground, recalibrating herself just before it could happen.

Avion moved in on Veronica's side, Hivoc taking the other side of her. She couldn't effectively cover both of her sides, not with the skills of both Hivoc and Avion attacking her at once. Avion was striking her machine side, leaving him at a slight disadvantage, whilst Hivoc had an easier time fighting Veronica's human side.

The two pressed in on her, closing the distance and creating pressure. At this rate, Veronica would fall with little problem. She, however, was determined not to go down easily. Using the enhancements in her legs, she pushed herself away from the two of them, giving herself space. Sweat was already dripping down her flesh-side forehead.

"Scared?" Hivoc asked, wishing he had more preparation before going right into fighting her. The glaring sun from the side windows wasn't easy on his eyes. Confidence was still the primary emotion inside of him, though.

"Not at all. Just making it easy on myself." She activated some sort of unseen mechanism in her robotic arm. It glowed a vibrant purple color, the light flowing from her arm to the rest of the modifications in her body. She stretched, not taking any chances—the mechanical side of her body would do more than enough for her, but she liked to

She held her palm up, pointing it right at Hivoc, then fired some sort of beam from it. Hivoc felt frozen in place, watching the laser come straight toward him as time slowed to a crawl. It felt as if his brain was processing a million things at once whilst the laser came barreling to his head.

He thought he was going to get hit with the beam. Until Avion moved him, practically tackling him to the ground. The laser pierced his foot, moving

straight through his flesh without resistance. He cursed loudly in his mother tongue. He couldn't nurture it now, though, because Veronica was shooting even more beams at both of them. A single good shot on them would mean certain death.

Veronica shot another beam at Hivoc, which he narrowly avoided. Veronica held the distance she had created making it nearly impossible for Hivoc and Avion to close it. Even an inch closer gave her a simple point-blank shot.

They needed some sort of plan. And fast. She was barely using up any energy, just standing there while Hivoc and Avion had to dodge and maneuver, covering leagues more distance than she was. Even worse, they couldn't communicate with each other, since she was standing right there.

The only upside, if one could call it that, was Veronica had started focusing her attention on Avion, allowing Hivoc to catch a short break and think. Veronica almost seemed to forget about him, shooting beam after beam at Avion, every miss scorching the metallic tile of the Copper Birthplace.

He could easily sneak past her and go up the staircase... that would let him kill Mach. But it would mean almost certain death for Avion. After all they had been through, he couldn't leave him behind like that. Hivoc felt a deep bond with Avion, making it emotionally impossible to desert him, even if he could possibly stop Mach sooner. He refused to ascend without Avion.

Praying Veronica didn't notice him, Hivoc crept up behind her, sword drawn. Her back was well-covered, with extra appendages coming out of it to shoot more rapidly at Avion. He could simply stab them and disable them, but that would give him away. He had a better idea.

Positioned at her back, Hivoc put himself in the one place he figured she couldn't reach—right behind her. It seemed as if the information was innate inside of him. He knew it without knowing how. He put his rapier around her neck and started pressing it against her. At first, he wasn't sure if it would choke her, but the distorted sounds she made told him it was working.

Realizing her mistake, Veronica shot wildly, trying to hit Hivoc. The lasers, no matter how much she tried, couldn't hit him. Every second he kept choking her, though, Hivoc could see some sort of plate coming out from her shoulders and face, which would create a barrier around her neck, stopping him. He didn't have time to do anything else.

As Veronica wildly shot laser beams, one bounced off the glass windows along the side of the room before hitting the floor. Avion knew what to do with that; he grabbed Veronica's wrist and aimed it right at the window. Just as he planned, it hit the window and reflected, bouncing right back at her face. It hit her, boiling her skin and shutting down the mechanisms in her body, frying the system. As she went limp in Hivoc's arms, collapsing without protest, he dropped her dead body on the floor.

"You did it..." Hivoc told Avion.

"We did it," Avion corrected. He moved closer to him, stepping over Veronica's body. "Thank you, Hivoc," he said, a warm smile on his face.

"I couldn't have done it without you," Hivoc whispered, feeling like he had to say something in response. His cheeks were warm. It was almost like a fairytale, the setting sun painting a golden color over everything. He needed to

focus, though, one last time. Kill Mach, then everything will be smooth sailing, he told himself.

“Likewise,” Avion responded, allowing Hivoc to lead the way up the spiral staircase.

Interlude - VIII

“The Colossal?” Veronica asked, after hearing Mach’s in-depth explanation of his newest idea. “Sounds expensive. And ineffective. We can make almost a hundred Machinae for the cost of one Colossal, by the sounds of it. Is one Colossal worth a hundred Machinae?” She picked at something in her teeth with an attachment on her body, a simple quality-of-life addition, unlike most of the other ones on and in her body.

“Just listen!” Mach insisted, waving his hand to dismiss her concerns. “The Colossal is perfectly effective! The bigger the better! I *know* the rebels will struggle with it. The Machinae are already close to matching someone like Avion in combat abilities, just imagine what a *gigantic* Machinae could do. Besides, it’s not just for fighting. My campaign manager has been hard at work with me, and we’ve come up with some great ideas.”

“Really? Do tell. If the slogan is *the bigger the better* then I’m going to punch you,” Veronica responded, still unimpressed. She propped her feet up on the table separating the two. Mach pushed them off, making Veronica roll her human eye. He had never liked her attitude, which she had used against him since they were young, but no amount of robotic changes could fix that.

“Don’t worry, my campaign manager beat me to that. Look, surveys have proven that the residents of Ollown—the ones we care about, not the countryside civilians who are holding us back—*love* the Machinae. One of the biggest concerns the people have mentioned are the destruction of buildings and living spaces, and also feeling weak when compared to the Machinae. The Colossal fixes both problems.

“Not only does the Colossal make rebuilding infrastructure a million times easier—it can *literally* put things back together like building blocks. But my manager, the genius that she is, came up with this idea. We let the people of Ollown see themselves *in* the Colossal. Rather than make the Colossal an assistant to the people, we make it a *symbol* of the people.”

Veronica shook her head softly as Mach gave her the explanation. “Good job, prez, you’ve made a giant killing machine and hope to market it as the next savior of humanity.” She stood up from her chair, feeling her lips itch. Mach, in exchange for giving her this robotic power, had made her stop smoking cigarettes, to ‘keep both parts of her in good condition.’ She hated the withdrawals, but agreed nonetheless.

“Wha— hold on! It’s a good idea! Do not walk out on me, Veronica!” Mach said, irritation building up more and more. He really hated her attitude, but she was a damn good asset for his image. A bridge. Sealing the gap between man and machine.

“Sure it is. On paper. Once you stop being a self-centered egoist you’ll figure out its Achilles heel. I’m going out for a cigarette,” Veronica said on the way out. She shut the door behind her, the force at which she did it making

some of the trinkets on Mach's desk shiver. He stopped them with his hands, glaring daggers at her.

"You'll never be my successor with that attitude!" Mach shouted angrily at her, their sibling divide more obvious these days than ever.

"Achilles heel..." he muttered to himself, looking down at his blueprints. "She doesn't know a thing. You're perfect, my Colossal." He spoke down to the papers tracing out the design of the Colossal. It wasn't all that different from a Machinae, aside from its immense size and the shifting of all the internal parts.

It was a purposeful design change. His dearest spy had told him of the progress being made by the rebels on mapping out and understanding the Machinae's inner workings. With this new design, he *would* make the rebels stumble.

"You will be *great*," he told the on-paper Colossal, dragging his finger down his creation's form.

Chapter XLIV - Rig

The final floor of the Copper Birthplace held only one giant room, divided into two parts. The forefront of the room was less decoratively impressive, though much more clearly functional. On almost every side—except for the one Hivoc and Avion had just come through—there were computer terminals and drives, lining the walls and stretching all the way to the ceiling.

There was only one other exit, which was directly across from them. However, in the way of the exit, was Mach. He was not standing on the floor, instead he sat in a chair suspended in the air through some sort of mechanical system entwined in the ceiling.

Hearing the door open, he knew only two people could be behind him. “Hivoc. Avion. You both have come far. I will admit, you have bested me more than once. While you were winning battles, I am still winning the war. The public despises you, my strength is greater than you have ever thought of, and your numbers are ever-dwindling. Come, let us go somewhere more decent.” He spoke, all the while never turning to face either of them.

The chair descended from the ceiling. As Mach stepped off the chair pulled itself upward, moving along two different axes to go to the middle of the room. He moved through the door, indicating that Hivoc and Avion do the same.

Understandably, the two were suspicious of the rather cordial sounding invite from Mach. There wasn't much else they could do but follow him, though. It was either that or turn back, and the choice was obvious between the two.

They advanced, swords at the ready in case Mach tried to do anything. They stepped into the next room hesitantly. The throne room. It looked like the entire room was coated in gold, the setting sun making it look more like a painting than real life. Hivoc had to force himself to focus on Mach, rather than his surroundings.

He pointed the tip of his rapier at Mach, making the threat clear. "Mach. What did you do with them?" It was as much a demand as a question. He needed to know. He needed to free them. He held his rapier tight, fist wrapped around the handle of the sword.

Mach ignored him, walking to the very edge, right in front of the expansive window looking over the forest. He looked up beyond the trees, right to the horizon and the setting sun. He let his hands go to his sides, then behind his back.

"Paradise lies on the horizon, Hivoc," he said, knowing neither of the two would interrupt him. He had the bargaining chip—Hivah, Liz, Quirwin, all of them, in his possession. If they killed him, they wouldn't be able to find their friends. A very bitter victory. "It always seems visible, but always out of reach. Every day we try to inch closer and closer to paradise—we walk to the horizon—and every day it inches further and further away, teasing us, standing forever far away."

“Where are they!?” Hivoc shouted, his demand echoing through the giant throne room. Mach ignored him still. If anything, Hivoc’s growing anger and desperation was more amusing to him than terrifying. He didn’t bother to face Hivoc. He felt no need to look, so he didn’t.

“Humanity can never reach paradise on its own. I know that, you know that, everyone knows that. That’s why we controlled fire, we controlled steam, we controlled nature. One day, far beyond my death, we will take hold of the *world*, and we will claim the horizon as our own. Now, that can take hundreds of thousands of years, if we try and give every last human being a taste of paradise. Or, more logically, we can sacrifice the ‘perfect’ lives of a couple... thousand people, maybe more, to accelerate the progress drastically.

“Those thousand or so people will die, and people will mourn them. Then, they will move on. We will forget their names and their faces and their dreams. We may forget them, but we will not forget the sacrifice they made so the majority can feel the embrace of paradise. Can’t you see my cause is noble, Hivoc?”

Finally, Mach turned to look at Hivoc. It was clear that age was creeping up on the man, his wrinkles etching themselves deeper with every year that passed. Every strand of hair on his head was silver or white. Liver spots covered his hands, dotting every contour. Even so, his iron gray eyes still had the same intensity they had held in his youth.

He stared down Hivoc.

“My cause is noble, Hivoc. My execution is simply doing what is necessary. You want every single person to be spoon-fed peace and faux

paradise from birth to death. I don't have to hear you speak to know what you think: *No one should have to suffer*. You're right. No one should have to, but this world forces it. Once you accept the fact that people will suffer no matter what, then you'll see my cause is much more virtuous than you put it up to be. So, Hivoc, will you join me? We're much more powerful as allies than adversaries."

Hivoc didn't speak. Not to think, he already knew his answer before Mach had even said a single word. He would never work with him. He was appalled that Mach would think that Hivoc would agree. *I would rather die than stand on the same side with him*, Hivoc thought to himself.

"I'll never join you, Mach. I would rather wait a thousand years for paradise than torture and kill people to get a few inches closer to it."

Mach sighed. "I thought you might say that. Always have been blindingly-ambitious. Avion?"

"I stand with Hivoc, and I stand against you."

Mach nodded, looking almost disappointed that both Hivoc and Avion had rejected his offer. "I thought it might come to this. It's unfortunate neither of you can see reality for what it is, but that just means I'll have to kill both of you. First, for causing me all that trouble, I think it's fair I do some more damage than just physical." He waved, and a Machinae came and walked into the Rig.

Moments later, a hidden compartment opened, one Hivoc and Avion never would have found without Mach's interference. The captured rebels appeared from the hidden compartment, each of them tied by the wrists and ankles with

bags over their heads. “Now, don’t be rash here, Hivoc. I know what you’re thinking. *I can kill him now! I can set all my friends free!* That would be the case, yes, but I have instructed my Machinae to kill every last person in this room if I die. A dead man’s switch, if you will. Be calm, Hivoc.”

Mach had read him perfectly. Hivoc would’ve lunged and killed Mach, just then, if he had not explained the dead-man’s-switch mechanism. He forced himself to hold back, to wait for Mach’s offer. Hivoc knew he would have one, he wouldn’t have kept the rebels alive this long if he didn’t. He kept his sword out, not trusting Mach to be totally peaceful.

“What is it that you want?” Avion asked, more composed than Hivoc was. If he was as outraged and on-edge as Hivoc was, then it didn’t show on his stone cold face.

“I want,” he started, drawing a gun from his side, “to play a little game. You know there is a spy among these rebels. You tell me who you think it is, and I shoot them. Simple as that. If you are wrong, I will tell you who the *real* spy is, and then shoot the person you guessed, regardless if they are the spy or not.” He walked behind the rebels, aiming his gun at each rebel.

“So, Hivoc,” Mach started again, looking up at the two of them, “who will you kill?”

Chapter XLV - Death

“I... I need to talk with Avion,” Hivoc said. He couldn’t think. One of the rebels in front of him was a spy, someone that had sabotaged the entire mission of the rebellion. Mach nodded, allowing Hivoc to talk with him. Almost immediately, Hivoc turned his back to Mach, pulling Avion in to talk with him.

“Who is it?” Avion asked, his stone cold appearance cracking under the pressure. Deciding a life. It was an ask too great.

“I don’t know... what are we going to do?”

“I have an idea,” came Avion’s response after a moment. He turned away from Hivoc, turning to look at Mach. “Can we ask them anything we want?” Hivoc looked on, his eyes moving between Avion and Mach, the latter still holding the gun tightly.

“One question, to each person. Make it count.”

Hivoc felt just a little relief creep in through his body. One question. He could ask each of them just one. Somehow, he would have to figure out who did it just from that. Even if he did discover the spy, how would he have the ability to tell Mach to kill them? Only one question was running through his mind.

Who’s the spy?

Slowly, Hivoc walked up to the first person—Limizella. He could only ask her one question, but he was sure he only needed one. “Liz, are you the spy?” His voice was weak as the words left his mouth. He knew what he *wanted* to hear, yet he could only hope for the truth.

“No, Hivoc.” Words caught in her throat, making it impossible for her to speak clearly. She took a deep breath before continuing. It wasn’t clear whether her obvious distress was caused by the partial accusation or the act of being kidnapped and threatened with a gun. Or more likely, both. “I’m not. I could never betray you, Hivah, anyone. I know you’ll make the right choice.”

“That’s enough,” Mach silenced her, pressing the barrel of the gun right against the back of her head. Hivoc stiffened, forcing himself to be still. *One wrong move, and she’s dead. I need to say composed*, he told himself. Carefully, he moved on to the next rebel, Krae.

“Krae,” he spoke softly. His entire body shook as he spoke. “Tell me, and be honest. Are you the spy?”

Even with the bag over his face, he shook his head. “I wouldn’t dare. I’ve done horrible things in this life of mine, Hivoc, but that is not on the list of my regrets.” He paused, swallowing, then spoke up, his voice not meant for Hivoc, but for Mach. “I’ve wronged you, Mach, and I am sorry. That day, I knew I went too far, and I knew I needed to make up for what I did. I shouldn’t have bullied you, Ma—”

“Shut up!” Mach snapped, walking over and pressing the gun of the barrel to the back of Krae’s head. “One more word out of your mouth and your face

will have another orifice going right through your brain—” he stepped back and redirected the gun at Hivoc, “—continue, Hivoc.”

Hivoc’s chest was tight, his mouth dry. He looked down the line of his friends, still completely unsure of who was the rebel. “Isticus...” he paused. Krae and Isticus had both been torn apart by the Machinae, their lives put in jeopardy from all of Mach’s malicious deeds. He couldn’t imagine either of them *supporting* him. He asked nonetheless: “Are you Mach’s spy?”

Before Isticus could say anything, someone else down the line shouted outward with a broken voice. Xailu. “It was me! God, I’m so sorry, it was me! I was the spy! Please, forgive me, I-I didn’t know what I was getting into, please just—” his pleading was silenced by a gunshot. Blood covered the floor, Xailu’s face hidden by the bag over his head.

Hivoc had flinched as the gun fired, his ears ringing from the shot filling the enclosed room. He looked down at Xailu’s body, the blood staining the copper floor, the crimson liquid running over to his shoes.

Dead.

Just like that.

Xailu had died.

No ceremonious moment, no build up, just a stark reveal and a bullet through his skull. He was still a young man, with many decades of life ahead of him—younger than all of the other rebels. Hivoc could still barely comprehend his death, as sudden as it was.

“You killed him...” Hivoc whispered, his voice unheard to his own ears.

“Astute observation. I don’t think it’s necessary to tell you Xailu was the spy, considering he gave the confession himself.” Mach gave his gun, one bullet lighter, to one of the Machinae, sending it off with the weapon. “I presume you and I will fight?”

Hivoc lunged at Mach, sword ready to kill him.

Chapter XLVI - Hivoc

Hivoc stopped right in his tracks. It wasn't his choice to, his body had stopped all on its own. His muscles were tensed, and trying to relax or flex them felt like trying to bend solid iron. "What did you do to me!" he shouted at Mach, using the only muscles in his body that would obey him—his face. His eyebrows pressed downwards, curving to show his anger.

"Me?" Mach responded coyly, knowing what he had done to Hivoc. "I'm doing what I should have done a long, long time ago." Mach grabbed a device out of his pocket, pressing a few buttons on it. Pain shot through Hivoc, a horrible burning pain that sent him to his knees in agony.

Avion tried to move, only for Mach to speak first.

"One step and Hivoc will experience something less favorable than death," Mach threatened, his thumb hovering over a button on the controller in his hand. Avion stopped. "Let me explain, Avion, both for myself and for Hivoc. See, Hivoc has not been entirely honest with you. It's not his fault he hasn't been truthful, because he didn't know the truth."

Mach stopped the pain in Hivoc, releasing the control, though he kept him frozen. Mach knew the threat that Hivoc was, so he had to chain him down, lest he face Hivoc's wrath. "Can you blame me? It's a hard thing to tell a kid," he

paused, looking down at Hivoc, crumpled on the ground. The pain was but a memory in his body, but he looked terrible nonetheless. “She was the one who wanted to withhold the information, and I agreed. She didn’t want him to know, so I didn’t force him to know. Eventually, I realized she was a poison unto him, a plague that would drain him of all the perfections I created.”

“*You* created?” Avion asked, practically breathless. He couldn’t understand what Mach was saying fully, but from what he was implying...

“Oh, yes, the ones I created. See, I’m sure you’re aware that Hivoc had an absent father in his life. That absent father was I. If you saw me in my youth, you would see the similarities, though now we look much more different,” Mach narrated, staring straight at Avion while he spoke.

Avion stared in shock at Mach and Hivoc. At first, he didn’t see anything even remotely similar between them. Then, he noticed the little things—their stature, their shared metallic gray eyes, even something as trivial as their noses looked eerily the same. “You... you’re his father.”

“Somewhat. I had the *role* of the absent father, you see. Even though you would tell me otherwise, I consider myself Hivoc’s father. Before you sputter and stutter in confusion, allow me to tell the story.”



“It’s a miracle,” Mach said as he held his newborn daughter in his arms. He leaned over and kissed his wife on the cheek. He didn’t love her; he didn’t

even love his daughter. He loved his inventions leagues more than he did them. They were stepping stones, and he wasn't reluctant to admit that to himself.

Months ago, when they discovered she was pregnant, Mach had proposed something to her. She knew of his Machinae, and his obsession with innovation, development, and pushing the limits of what he could do. Thus, he had asked her if he could, after the birth of their child, create an artificial twin.

"A Machiman. It would think, behave, and exist just as a normal person would. It would believe it's a human. I've even developed mechanics to create growth within the Machiman. It will literally undergo growth just as a person would, it would be a person in every way except birth."

She was hesitant at first, obviously, but eventually she submitted, Mach's twisting words and careful encouragement convincing her too dearly. So, one day, after three failed marks of the Machiman, he created Mark IV. His daughter, named Hivah, would believe she had a twin brother all her life.

Mach stared at the blueprint, the type spelling out 'MARK IV.' He needed a name for the Machiman. He thought for a moment, grabbing a pencil from his worktable. If the Machiman and Hivah were to be twins, he thought, then their names should at least appear similar.

He drew an H in front of IV, making the words look almost like gibberish: "MARKHIV." He erased 'Mark' from the new name. "HIV." Almost a name. After a little more thinking, he thought of the perfect name.

Hivoc.

The Machiman, his true child, would be named Hivoc. For years, decades, Hivoc would believe that he was just as human as his mother and his sister. It was perfect.

He quickly became swallowed up in his work after that, always making innovations and new creations and newer, more efficient models. He had to leave his wife, not that he cared very much. She wrote to him, begged him to come back. He never responded. Eventually, she stopped.

Curious, one day he tuned in to the Machiman, looking through its eyes, seeing the exact same thing it saw. He was outraged, seeing his wife tell Hivoc things he didn't approve of—messages of caring for the masses, always prioritizing others over oneself, peacefulness.

That day, he called some of the few fully human people in his life, ordering them to kill his former wife. It would leave Hivoc and Hivah as orphans, but he was sure they would manage. If they didn't, he would just make another child. He could always make another. Robots were replaceable.



*“I’ve allowed Hivoc far too much freewill. I should have had him kill you all when I had the chance,” Mach said, finishing his story. Hivoc felt like he was going to throw up. His entire life was all a lie. Every single thing he thought he knew collapsed right in front of him. He questioned it all—*Did I ever even have an original thought, or was it all Mach? Who have I talked to**

that knew I wasn't real this whole time? How many times, thinking I was alone, did Mach watch? He felt betrayed, betrayed by himself.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Hivah, her face still covered by the bag placed over her face, stiffening and tensing up. Her body language showed enough of her surprise to make her facial expression unnecessary for understanding.

Avion wanted to move. He wanted to step in and help Hivoc—or even just stop Mach. He knew he could do neither, for fear of what Mach would do to himself and the others. Something inside him said, however, that there was no way he'd be able to get out of this peacefully. He had to do something—nothing wasn't an alternative.

Mach forced Avion to do something, making his decision for him. He pressed a button on the controller in his hand. “Let's end this now. It's been fun, but I think it's time we end this feud.”

He pressed a combination of buttons on the controller.

Hivoc stopped moving on the floor. A beat passed. Slowly, he began to rise. Not as a human. He moved mechanically, turning to face Avion. His normally gray eyes had turned to a deep blood red, losing all sense of humanity. He was under Mach's control.

“Let's see you fight my dearest son. Best of luck, Avion.”

Chapter XLVII - Mach

“Hivoc, kill Avion,” Mach commanded, letting the Machiman do the work for him. Hivoc did as Mach commanded, not having any other choice but to listen to him. He grabbed his rapier as he stood. He moved forward mechanically, the gears in his body acting as joints to push him towards Avion. Somewhere inside of him, Avion believed that Hivoc—the Hivoc he knew—was there.

“This isn’t you,” Avion said. He shook his head, staring right into Hivoc’s blood red eyes. “I know this isn’t you. Wake up, Hivoc... Please...” he begged softly, as Hivoc continued to approach him. Hivoc showed no reaction to Avion’s pleas for understanding. Avion felt desperation rise inside of him, fearing that he would lose Hivoc.

Still holding his rapier, Hivoc stabbed it at Avion, who narrowly avoided the attack. Despite still caring for Hivoc, he knew words were not enough in a situation like this. He needed something else, he needed something stronger. He needed to take a risk.

He moved forward, going closer to Hivoc. Moving right into him made it impossible for Hivoc to use his rapier correctly. To further immobilize Hivoc’s weapon, he grabbed his dominant arm—the one holding the rapier—tightly, too

tight to move. Avion was close enough to Hivoc now to *feel* him. Their bodies could touch in less than a moment.

That was it. Words didn't work. He needed something physical. There was only one thing he could imagine would work. Before Hivoc could try and hurt him, he shot his hand upward to Hivoc's face, holding it steady. With Hivoc's face in his hand, he pressed their lips together. The kiss was sudden, and, Avion hoped, powerful. He closed his eyes, unable to do anything else at this point but hope it would work.

Mach almost felt like laughing as he saw Avion's desperate attempt to free Hivoc from Mach's control. "Kill him now, Hivoc," he commanded. Hivoc stood there, doing nothing. "Hivoc," Mach said again, feeling irritation and a bit of fear bubble up into his voice. "Kill him. That's a command, Hivoc." He pressed a button or two on his controller.

It did nothing.

Hivoc reached up to Avion, dropping his rapier. He placed one of his hands on Avion's back, his other on the back of Avion's head. Hivoc kissed him back. By some miracle, Avion's kiss had broken Mach's control over him.

For a minute, they stayed there, lips joined. When they finally stopped, Avion had tears in his eyes. "I thought I lost you." Avion hugged Hivoc, his arms tightly wrapped around Hivoc. Both of them realized for the first time that Hivoc was a *Machinae*, a direct creation from Mach himself. The sincere moment ended early. They had one final enemy to defeat.

Hivoc turned to face Mach, who was desperately pressing buttons on his controller, trying to do anything to save himself from Hivoc. Not a single

button managed to help him, as he stumbled further and further backward, fear growing greater in his gray eyes. Hopelessness entered his expression, spreading across his entire body.

His hands shook, his body was frozen in fear, his eyes were wide with fear. He gulped, trying to swallow his fear. It stayed in his throat as he sputtered out the words: “Hivoc, Hivoc, please... surely, we can work something out here. You and I... we’re not so different, are we? We both want what’s best for the world. You can help me, and I can help you. We can help each other! Yes! We’ll bring greatness to the entire world! It will be marvelous! Please, just... just spare me.”

He held his hand, trembling, up to Hivoc, trying to reason with him. Hivoc stared down at Mach—his creator, the man who had brought him to life and taken everything from him also. He tightened his hand around his sword, bringing it upwards, until the point was pressing against the fabric of Mach’s shirt.

“Oh, no, no, no... Come on, Hivoc... you wouldn’t want to do that, right? I mean, think of what your mother would’ve said. She wouldn’t want you to kill someone, right?” He smiled nervously, hoping this plea would be enough to convince Hivoc to spare him. Hivoc stared right into Mach’s eyes, and grabbed his shoulder.

He stabbed Mach.

“Don’t you dare talk about my mother!” he shouted in Mach’s face, taking the blade out of his abdomen and stabbing in again. And again. And again. And again. And again. And again. And again until blood seeped into Mach’s

clothing and stained Hivoc's sword. Hivoc shoved Mach to the ground, making him yell out in pain, blood coming out of his mouth.

Hivoc straddled him, stabbing Mach again. Over and over. He didn't stop, not until Mach was long dead. He made sure he was dead, stabbing him in every vital organ, even as Mach's body lay still. Hivoc rose, standing up over the dead man.

He managed to walk a few steps, then collapsed onto the ground. He yelled into the air like he had never yelled before. His voice broke. He didn't care. He continued to yell into the air, his pain echoing back at him, as tears streamed down from his face and sobs blended with his painful screaming.

In the dawn that followed, the sun shone on him, and his fellow companions, as the world began to wake. Little did they know, while they slept, the lives of many had been changed. Forever.

THE END

About the Author

Wyatt Wilke, the author of his debut novel, *Spirits and Shamans*, is a high schooler aspiring to become a big name on bookshelves one day. He lives in California with his parents, younger sister, and two cats, and whenever he isn't writing his novel, he's reading. Wyatt has always loved using his imagination to create—whether it be designing characters, making rudimentary card games, or weaving words into intricate tales of heroes. He loves to bend the rules of writing and reality in his novels, crafting fantastical stories that are bursting with monsters and magic.

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