

The Bird Empire

Chapter I Rat Infestation

Since time immemorial those who were blessed by reason and intellect were also possessed by an avid lust for knowledge, for shedding light over the impenetrable darkness and its veils of mystery, just like works of art enlightening the minds of people, queer contraptions and inventions finding solutions to questions once unanswerable, or space-crafts ready to conquer the darkness of space. However, darkness can never be conquered, no matter how much light there will be, for the bigger the light, the bigger the contrast between light and darkness as well, making the realm of mystery even more frightening... or enticing.

After all, a being who has no notion of the concept of space whatsoever will never be disturbed by the mystery it offers, however, once he finally discovers it, and prods its lights into this cold realm of the endless void, his mind will inevitably find itself violated by thousands of questions and intricate conundrums concerning mysteries never before imagined. The shock this certain being would experience once he stumbles upon this revelation would be certainly ravishing. The Vaghelauchs know this very well, for this revelation has scorched their planet and plunged their very nation into turmoil.

The very capital of the once Vagelauchen Monarchy, Mündler, built in an intimate valley between two colossal mountain chains, suffered the aftermath of this astounding revelation. Already did its countless towers and spires of stone, connected by bridges, scaffoldings and overlooked by jaw-dropping hanging gardens who looked like mountains of trees and lush flora, or farm plots, found themselves under the eyes of bizarre aliens from another realm, patrolling the streets and integrating the newly conquered territory under the sovereign of their Empire through the employment of military and administration alike.

Upon one of the hundreds of floors of one such gargantuan stone tower built for residential purposes there was a certain Vagelauchen of an elegant avian countenance, with his blackened, oily feathers exuding a raven-like allure while his clothing displayed their wearer's fine taste. He looked through one of the windows glancing over various ships of a radiant white colour, reflecting the saffron rays of the morning sun, as they come and go, bringing officials required to assist in the process of integration. He felt a certain bitter taste clogging his beak knowing how much his own home will change, expressing concern for his own comfort and integrity with these imperious aliens trampling the very stone his nation once thought to be unconquerable.

From the other side of the hallway whence he stood just outside his apartment, he suddenly heard the metallic sound of boots colliding against the cold stone. He glanced over to see the

very conquerors approaching, with their bizarre appearance that no sensible mind could have fathomed until now.

Hearing the noise intensify, he did what other inhabitants did and lurched towards his apartment, locking the door shut and allowing his mind to escape free into the virtual realm projected by his own terminal, reading about the latest happenings as the storm of metallic thumps outside intensified.

The reading grew increasingly harder as the noise outside grew in a cacophony of nervous conversations and panic as the monstrous aliens apparently questioned the inhabitants. Once or twice, wet screams of terror would be interrupted by the deep sound of their imperial plasma weapons, undoubtedly obliterating any who has dared confront them with defiance.

Stress grew as the Vagelauchen heard conversations growing more and more intense as the patrol undoubtedly moved from one apartment to another, coming closer and closer to his, until, suddenly, there came a tapping, followed by a confident knocking on his door, bringing his mind from the virtual universe it explored and back into a now frozen body.

His feathers ruffled as disconcerting thoughts filled the head in a chaotic cadence with the disgruntled knockings on the door. Slowly, he approached the source of this noise, and after taking a deep breath, he opened the door revealing the alien monstrosities behind it, glaring at him with demoniacal eyes.

There were five such creatures, four of them covered in blackened armour, combat suits that hid their bodies both from harm and eyes, while the fifth one, obviously their officer, stood directly in front of the Vagelauchen displaying his abominable allure.

A knot formed at the back of the Vagelauchen throat as he eyed this creature's strange traits: A body smaller than his own bearing a featherless soft skin as white as marble stone, displaying no fur, or hair whatsoever except for the top of his head which was covered in a short, sided hair as yellow as the sun during noon, carefully hid under a black cap. The most bewitching element of this never before seen creature's appearance remained his eyes, who somehow seemed unnatural even for an alien as him, as they shined brilliantly this golden colour like luring demon eyes who invited unsuspecting prey to drown its sanity in them.

Despite this abhorrent appearance, the alien exuded a mannerism comparable to the nobility of the Vagelauchen Monarchy. Meticulous in gestures, and unexpectedly courteous, the officer asked permission, in a fluent Vagelauchen tongue, to enter in and address some inquiries. Obviously, his soon-to-be host could not deny such an eloquent request and, with a shaking hand, he signaled this bewildering stranger from another world to enter, guiding him towards the living room table.

The host encountered an unusual calm over this officer, and a certain peculiar fascination as well, as this alien did not hesitate to voice his appreciation for the ornamented stone decorations carved into his own apartment's hallway and living room walls, resembling floral motifs and creatures he could have never imagined to have ever existed. He also voiced his delight for the impressive architecture their culture embroidered itself with, expressing a

delectable harmony between elegance and empowering pride. All this, he expressed in a fluent Vagelauchen tongue which he claims to have learned during the war, for the three years it lasted.

His host hesitated to correct him on the fact that the war actually lasted one year. Instead, he was captivated by the uniform he sported: A somber, almost hollowing uniform weaved out of a black fabric, with golden embroideries. The left side of his collar sported a strange insect-like creature in a gold colour with pincers and a pointy tail, while his right side bore golden letters in an alphabet he did not recognize. His chest intrigued him the most, for the left side of his chest, where he would assume the heart to be, displayed a golden symbol that shared odd similarity with a Vagelauch's appearance.

The officer took his cap from his head and placed it on the table. His host did not fail to observe a certain silver-coloured skull embellishing his cap in an almost dismaying fashion. Unconcerned by his host's discomfort, the alien officer continued to speak in the tongue native to this planet, gently asking the Vagelauchen host whether he has learned the Universal language knowing that his race discovered space travel two hundred years ago and would have undoubtedly discovered other alien life forms. His host nodded in approval, although stating that he never saw other alien life forms himself, but he reassured the officer that he knew the Universal language, a language created to accommodate communication between space faring civilizations, very well, and that he has no problems speaking it.

"Well, if that is the case..." The officer responded calmly, now speaking Universal. "Then I will ask you to transpose our conversation over this language as I am afraid that it won't be long before my knowledge of yours will fail me utterly."

His host nodded.

"Good!" The officer exclaimed. "Then, allow me to present myself: My name is Caius Valerius Severus, Centurio Pilus Prior of the Cohors Sexta Praetoriani. And do you have any idea why I am here?"

"Honestly, no, sir." His host replied.

"Well, that is surprising. Surely word must have reached your... auditory organs by now, no? After all, the individual has a very difficult time in keeping his pain to himself, which is an irony, wouldn't you think? I mean, the individual cries and shouts for liberty, for individualism, to be able to be alone and by himself, freed from the shackles of whatever state nurtured him, but once something goes against his will, he then scurries away crying of his pain in a collective of like-minded hypocrites, rather than fighting to preserve what he once wanted to have himself handed on a plate."

"Believe me, sir, if I would have known, I would have answered you, but it just so happens that I led a more isolated life since... well... since this all happened."

“Ah, you don’t need to tell me. I understand.” The officer grinned, mimicking empathy. “I was there the whole time.” He continued, barely holding a chuckle in front of his host’s nervous and apathetic look.

“But, to enlighten you: I have been tasked to assist in eliminating dissent in this city, and you will have to help me find some dissidents who hide in this very residential building you also live in. How does that sound, hmm?”

“Flattering, I am sure...” The host replied reluctantly.

“That is what I like to hear!” Caius said, as he took out a holo-pad from his uniform, a contraption used to navigate through various servers and databases, like a portable pocket computer that could also emit holographic images and videos in order to better illustrate information.

“So, let us begin with your name.”

“My name is... Edvard Rabenburgen.” The Vagelauchen said, noticing Caius write his name down onto the pad.

“Right, and what is your profession?”

“Informatics, and server-side security for the Kreuz bank, besides that... I fancy myself a writer.”

“Who do you live with?”

“I live alone.”

“And have you ever had any form of contact whatsoever with dissidents in the past?”

“No. Sensible people would stay away from them, sir.”

“Oh, you say so? Well, that makes a lot of you rather mentally challenged as their numbers increase by the day. What do you think of them?”

“A partisan group, sir, republicans. They refuse to recognize their monarchy and instead they promise a new future under an entirely new regime. Opportunists, if you ask me. Deluded ones, at that.”

“Good for them that their delusion has a cure. But tell me, sir Rabenburgen, do you know the punishment for dissidence against the Empire?”

“Crucifixion, sir.”

“And who finds himself eligible for such?”

“Traitors, dissidents, and anyone who helps their cause or prevents the authorities from capturing them.”

“Well, formulated, I couldn’t even put it better myself! Well, that would be all, kind sir, but before I leave, I must ask you once again, for protocol’s sake: Do you hide any dissidents from me, sir Rabenburgen?”

Edvard paused. He glared deeply into his interlocutor’s yellow, hexing eyes that widened before him. He felt a certain chilling sensation flow down his spine and wet coldness furrow beneath his bones as the officer eyed him curiously, awaiting an answer.

“Absolutely not... sir.” He spoke, after a brief hesitation.

“Well then...” The officer spoke in a cheerful manner as he rose up from the table. “That means that my job here is done. I will now go and alert my men. They will do a survey of your apartment, mere protocol and nothing to worry about, and we will be on our way.”

But as Caius left for the apartment’s door, a certain creaking sound stopped him dead in his tracks in the hall. The sound came from another room, on the far side of the hall, beyond a row of wardrobes and cabinets that hid precariously a locked door.

With unsatisfied eyes the officer glared over at Edvard, only to notice a certain air of uneasiness about him. “You did not tell me you had pets.” Caius said, trying to fake a smile.

“Excuse me, sir?” Edvard inquired, entirely astonished.

“I heard something just beyond that door.” Caius muttered, pointing towards the locked door.

“Impossible, sir! There is nothing behind it!”

“So you say...”

Speaking in an incomprehensible language, the officer contacted his men through a communicator lodged into his hear. In a moment’s notice, the four armoured men stormed into the room, and at the signal of their officer’s, pointed their rifles at the door, waiting for his command. Edvard could only watch in awe as this entire scene unveiled before him. A grueling terror shredded every filament of flesh and nerve in his body while shattering his mind in a thousand shards.

He watched, horrified and utterly bamboozled, as the officer demanded him the key to the door. Obviously, he had no other option but to cooperate, and in a matter of moments, the officer pried the door open, letting the dim hall light dispel whatever darkness manifested on the other side. A frightening symphony of hollers, and plasma fire announced itself, with a similar reply from Vagelauchen weapons and bullet sprays.

Edvard ducked underneath his table, though the entire scene lasted no more than a minute. Right afterwards, two armoured legionaries carried one dead Vagelauchen body each, while another apprehended an incapacitated, although live, dissident.

“Edvard Rabenburgen!” A coarse shout emerged from the hall, as the officer and the remaining soldier approached the still-confused host as he now stood up before them, his sight drowning into the pair of yellow gems that burned with a fire embodying wrath and fury.

Never did Edvard think that the intonation of his own name could inspire him such portentous dread as it does now.

“By the Emperor’s will, you are under arrest!”