

FOR MY FANS

FRIENDS

And

The Curious

A SPECIAL CHRISTMAS GIFT

A Generous Preview of Rose LaCroix's New Novel

The Linen Butterfly

COMING IN 2018

## CHAPTER 1

### JAMAIS VU

For one terrifying moment, he forgot everything.

Perhaps not *everything*. He was confident of a few basic facts. His name was Arthur Carrick. He was a gray wolf. A young adult male, twenty-four years old to be exact.

It wasn't a great deal to go on.

Arthur took stock of his surroundings. He was standing in a cold, dark bedchamber. The whitewashed stone walls were hung with tapestries. Opposite the bed was a hearth topped by a mantle painted with heraldic shields.

Only the dimmest rays of gray daylight filtered into the room from windows set in deep niches in the walls; the only other light in the room came from six tall tapers on a wrought iron candelabra.

Outside, the wind moaned. Arthur's nose tingled at the scent of burning tallow, mildew, and a century of dust.

Out of instinct, Arthur reached for his belt line, expecting pockets but finding none. On his left he carried a longsword in a black leather scabbard; on his right, a large pouch.

That was when Arthur noticed his clothing. He was wearing a black tunic, tight gray hose and pointed shoes made of soft black leather. He had a heavy cloak on his shoulders too, pinned with an elaborate gold brooch spangled with emeralds and sapphires.

Arthur loosed the strap that held the spacious belt pouch closed, fishing through it for some clue about himself. There was a flint and tinder, a seal matrix, a stick of red sealing wax, a quill pen, a length of gut sinew coiled around a wooden spool, a knife and spoon made of silver, and some gold and silver coins.

He held one of the crudely-struck gold coins up to a candle to get a better look, half expecting to see his own face. He was greeted by the stylized portrait of a crowned otter and the text "THEOD \* REX \* OCC \* MAG \* VER."

He closed the pouch, straightened the buttons on the front of his tunic, cleared his throat, and hitched his cloak. Nothing seemed the least bit out of place. Everything was fine. Solid. Real.

Alone with the moaning wind, Arthur climbed into the window niche, perching in a stone seat. In the shadow of a gunmetal sky, obscured by sheets of rain that spattered on the leaded windowpanes, he chased elusive memories of another time and place. It was as if his true identity had been locked away in an oubliette, begging to be set free.

Arthur heard footsteps. There was a strong scent of genet on the freezing draft.

"My Liege?" said a familiar voice.

A rusty-spotted genet in polished armor, an arming sword and buckler on his belt, stepped into the room. "Any time you're ready, My Liege. Our guests are waiting," the catlike creature said.

"Balthasar! You don't know how happy I am to see you!" the wolf blurted out, sitting up straighter.

Balthasar tilted his head. "Are you alright, sire?"

Arthur drew a heavy sigh. "No, Balthasar, I'm not alright," the wolf lamented. "I feel like my entire life began a few moments ago. This doesn't feel right. I'm not even sure who or where I am!"

Balthasar climbed up the short flight of stairs to the window seat and scooted in beside Arthur. He placed a hand on the wolf's arm. "You feel it too?"

Arthur tilted his head. "You mean you..."

"A few moments ago, I had this terrifying feeling, like I didn't know who or where I was. My entire life up to this point still feels like a weird dream."

"It's nerves. It has to be," Arthur said, gazing at the floor.

Balthasar's ears folded back. "Yes... I suppose so."

Arthur shook off his lingering unease. "We shouldn't keep our guests waiting," the wolf said. He pulled his face into a taut, stoic glower and stepped down from the window.

He hurried downstairs to the great hall. A bevy of guests in mourning finery stood at either side of the hall, their faces long with grief. At the center of the room, a wolf's body lay in state on a bier, in fine armor amid satin, silk, brocade and flowers.

This was Ignis, his father. He'd been killed in a riding accident some days ago, Arthur recalled. The late winter cold kept the stench of decay at bay, but a fresher, more general scent of death, subtle but unsettling, wafted from the body.

"Announcing His Lordship, Arthur, Duke of Upcaster," a voice called from up in the gallery above him. Trumpeters blew a short fanfare.

Arthur's stomach twisted. *The Duke!?! Good grief! I don't know how to be a duke! How is this real!?!?*

"Announcing Her Ladyship, Athene, mother of Duke Arthur," the voice in the gallery boomed.

A female wolf entered the hall, flanked by a vixen and a lioness who comforted her, dried her tears, and fed her candied rose petals from a dainty basket. What were their names? Ah yes! Marie and Ariane! They were her ladies in waiting.

Marie and Ariane gave Arthur a polite curtsy, and Arthur kissed his mother on the cheek. "How

are you?" he asked.

"Not well, son," Athene sobbed. "My humors are in an uproar."

"Well, have a seat," Arthur said, guiding her to a pair of gilded chairs at the end of the hall and sitting next to her.

Sir Balthasar took his place to Arthur's right, and an aging stag to his left. The stag was... Who again? Oh! Sir Richard of Kingswater, Warden of the Bailey of Upcaster, his father's most trusted knight. How could he forget?

Arthur gestured to the assembled crowd. "You may approach," he called.

A lynx knelt reverently before him. "Good evening, Milord."

"Welcome... Barry, is it? Barrow? Barstow?"

The lynx's brow furrowed. "Virgil, sire. Virgil of Vinewood, Sheriff of Upcaster," the lynx said, his voice slow and deliberate as if he were talking to a child or an idiot.

"Oh, erm... I'm sorry we had to meet under these circumstances," Arthur said, his hackles raised in embarrassment.

Virgil gave him a forced smile. "All of us mourn with you," the lynx crooned, kissing his hand reverently.

"Thank you, Virgil."

The lynx gave him a bow and retreated into the crowd.

Another lynx, this one about forty or fifty with a close resemblance to Virgil, was the next to kneel before him. "Welcome, Count Julius," Arthur said.

"Thank you, sire," Julius replied. "I've scarcely slept since I heard the news."

"Likewise," Arthur murmured, leaning a little closer to Julius. "It was a big shock to all of us. I'm thankful I don't have rival claims to deal with or I wouldn't get any sleep at all."

"We trust you, sire," Julius said. "I'm certain Ignis would be proud of you."

"I won't disappoint!"

Two red foxes in armor came after Julius.

"Welcome, Sir Apollo, Sir Simon," Arthur said. "Thank you for coming."

"My brother and I share your heartbreak," Apollo said. "Without your father's patronage we'd be nothing."

"Well, you've more than proved yourselves as far as I'm concerned," Arthur reassured them. "You don't need to worry. You'll keep your commissions, I promise!"

Three genets came next. "Welcome, Count Marcus, Countess Sophia. And you too, Master Basil. Are those silver spurs?"

"They are, milord," the teenage genet said, his face somber but his eyes betraying the warm spark of pride. "I'll be a knight soon."

"If you're anything like your brother, I'll be happy to give you a post," Arthur said.

Basil gave Balthasar an admiring glance. "I will be," he declared.

The very last creature to kneel before him was a fennec in a smart red and blue tunic.

"Sire, the King is at the gates," the fennec said.

Arthur gave him a firm nod. "See him in, Master Godstan," the wolf said.

"Yes sire."

Arthur and Athene rose to their feet and marched toward the late Duke's bier. Athene stood to Ignis' left and Arthur stood to his right.

The younger wolf gazed at his father's body. The late Duke Ignis looked better from a few feet away. Bits of fur were falling out here and there, and his lips were starting to draw back in a macabre snarl. Arthur shuddered. Death was cruel, random, and above all ugly no matter how much satin you dressed it in.

An otter wearing a stately crown and dressed in a long red and gold robe marched in. He was flanked by a stag and a grey fox who wore red and gold tunics with blue and green hose.

Arthur knelt reverently before the otter.

"Announcing His Lordship King Theodore The Second," the fox called out.

What was that herald's name again? Of course! Wenstan! He'd known him for years, Arthur reminded himself.

"Long live the King!" said the stag, whose name Arthur couldn't recall. Was he new?

"Long live the King!" every other creature within earshot thundered.

The King approached Arthur and gestured for him to rise. "Is everything ready?"

"Yes Milord. We'll be leaving for the Isle of Rest shortly," Arthur replied.

"Good. I can attend the funeral mass but I'm afraid I'll have to pay my last respects there. I have some important visitors in my court in a few days."

"I understand," said Arthur. "It would be my pleasure to host you here at my castle so that you can be well-rested when you return to court. Say the word and we'll be on our way, sire."

"Proceed," the King replied.

With that, six strong servants lifted the late Duke's bier and carried him out of the great hall into the rain-soaked afternoon, to St. Wulfram's Cathedral for one last mass before the long journey to the Isle of Rest.



Only Arthur and his household carried on to Northpool, the late Duke's last stop on the mainland. They arrived at sunset in a procession of carriages, wagons, and horses.

The late duke's ornate coffin, gilded and painted with images of saints, was unloaded like so much cargo and set on the dock next to Arthur's trunk.

Athene knelt by the coffin and dabbed her eyes. "Goodbye," she whispered, placing a hand on the coffin and planting a kiss about where her husband's head would be.

"Aren't you going to say something to her?" Balthasar whispered.

"What do I say?" Arthur replied.

"I don't know, sire. Think of something. She's heartbroken, can't you see?"

Arthur put a hand on Athene's shoulder.

"Mother," he said, "it's time for us to go."

"You're taking my Ignis from me," she sobbed, her voice cracking.

"Mother, I don't know what to tell you. If I could bring him back I would."

"There, there, milady!" said Ariane. She and Marie ran to the older woman's side and gently escorted her away from the coffin.

"Make way for Duke Ignis!" Sir Richard called. At that signal, six servants lifted the coffin. The stag led them up the gangway to a nearby ship that flew the late Duke's standard.

"Stow this!" Arthur commanded, pointing at his trunk. Two servants carried it aboard.

"Goodbye, Arthur," Athene sniffed.

"Goodbye, mother," Arthur said. "We'll return soon."

"Do be careful," Athene murmured. "I don't want to lose you too."

Arthur embraced her, giving her a warm kiss on the cheek. "Don't worry about me. We'll be home in a few days. Come, Sir Balthasar!"

The wolf stepped onto the ship, Balthasar in tow.

"How did I do?" Arthur asked the genet.

"I couldn't have done better myself, sire," he said.

"I want the truth," Arthur grumbled.

Balthasar went deathly silent. "You don't feel any grief at all for him, do you?"

Arthur gazed at his father's coffin. The genet was right. He'd felt confused, frustrated, disgusted, and melancholic but it was more about his situation than his father. His memories of his father were vivid, and he couldn't recall any bad blood between them, but there was something missing from his memory.

The wolf's ears sagged. "How could I mourn? I feel as if I hardly knew him."



In an elegant bedchamber at Upcaster later that night, King Theodore unpacked a set of alchemist's tools from a wooden chest.

He set the glass flasks, clamps, candles, and a set of bellows up on the table. With a small golden spoon, he took precise measures of the ground skin of a Lombrellian toad, powdered puffer fish bladder, and the resin from a white poppy. He mixed them in a solution of *aqua vitae* in a glass vial.

He heated the vial over a stout candle fanned by the bellows for five minutes, let the mixture cool a moment, and strained it through a cheesecloth into a wooden bowl. The otter wrinkled his nose as the horrendous stench hit, but he held his nose and drank it in one gulp.

The King felt weak as the elixir took effect. He dropped to the floor. His mind left his body, his vision distorted, his consciousness torn into ten billion pieces and plunged down a long, dark shaft.

Ted Ducasse woke gasping in a lab in Seattle, the various wires and tubes from the powerful subjective reality engine still connected to his body.

His tech lead, a genet named Isa Chetal, came to unplug him.

The otter gagged and coughed as the breathing and feeding tubes shoved down his throat were pulled free.

"All good on the AI takeover?" he asked.

"Your avatar hit his head when he collapsed, but he recovered just fine once the AI kicked in," Isa replied as she removed the tangle of wires from his scalp, held on by tiny electrodes. She took his hand and helped him out of the padded suspension chamber.

Ted's head throbbed and his stomach heaved as the hangover from hell gripped him for a moment.

"We need something easier than grogging out," Ted complained, rubbing his head. "I mean, this is basically poison I'm drinking, it's not fun going in and and it's not fun coming out of."

"You'll be fine, it's never hurt you in the past."

"How's everything running out here?"

"No issues. It seems Mr. Carrick and Mr. Viverra both had a pretty nasty spell of *jamaïs vu*, but they'll get over it."

"Jamaïs vu?"

"The opposite of *deja vu*. The feeling you've never done something before," Isa explained. "Starting the sim with Arthur's father already dead gave him too little time to form any kind of emotional bond with that avatar, so his memories don't jibe with how he actually feels."

"Well, he wanted to be a duke, didn't he?" Ted growled. "Have our next round of test subjects confirmed their briefing for tomorrow?"

"Yes, I heard back from the last of them today." Isa replied.

"Who, Laz?"

"Yeah, he was a bit slow getting back."

"Alright, good! I'm going to run by R&D and ask them to do a final test run on the 30s sim today so we'll be good to go tomorrow. You can have the rest of the day off, Isa."

Ted turned his attention to the glass chamber where the real Arthur Carrick lay, still as death. The wolf was very much alive, but in a sort of cold stasis, neither frozen nor thawed. Wires, tubes, and electrodes all over his body regulated his temperature and oxygen and kept the wolf's cells alive and active while his mind was another universe away.

On a monitor next to the chamber, Ted, like a god, could peer into that universe. In the sim, Arthur, Sir Balthasar, and Sir Richard stepped off a small ship at a dock below a Romanesque abbey on a tiny island. Six monks in white robes stepped aboard the ship and lifted an ornate coffin, carrying it up to the abbey, chanting in deep voices.

Ted smiled. *Well, Mr. Carrick, you got what you wanted. Have fun!*



In the chilly crypt beneath the Abbey of the Blessed Saints Oswald and Anshula on the Isle of Rest, Duke Ignis was laid in his tomb. Six monks lowered him in on silken cords, saying a final prayer for their patron.

Arthur rubbed his hands, shivering a bit.

"Are you alright, sire?" Balthasar said.

"The chill from the rocks is getting to me. Send for me in the morning," Arthur grumbled.

"Yes, my liege," said Balthasar, giving Arthur a bow of deference as the wolf stepped out.

"Chill from the rocks?" Sir Richard grumbled when Arthur was out of earshot.

"Let it be, Sir Richard," said Balthasar.

"He hasn't gone soft, has he?"

"Arthur does not need your concern."

"Don't take that tone with me!" the stag protested. "Have some respect for your elders!"

"I took an assassin's bolt for Arthur three years ago!" Balthasar screamed. "Or have you forgotten?"

The genet's hackles raised and his pulse nearly doubled. He'd forgotten everything about that incident, and the memory felt foreign, as if it had been inserted into his mind. But the stag's stunned silence and the lingering ache in his shoulder from the cold weather told him this memory was true.

"My apologies," Sir Richard said, gazing down, giving a slight bow.

Up to that moment, Balthasar hadn't grasped how important he was. Now he understood: he wasn't simply a title and a banner; he had experience. He had proved himself fearless in the face of danger. But it didn't feel real. It felt like he was living someone else's life when he recalled the things he'd achieved in his twenty-five years.

The genet pinned back his ears, eyes downcast as the monks lifted the heavy stone lid onto the sarcophagus and sealed it with mortar. *This is my life*, he reminded himself. *Why does everything I've done feel like so many fantastic lies?*

## CHAPTER 2

### SOME OTHER SPORT

In a fallow field somewhere east of Upcaster, stubbled and strewn with small patches of dirty snow, Arthur, Balthasar, and Virgil were enjoying a day's hunt. Arthur watched as his hawk keeper, a red fox, unlashd a stout wooden cage from his horse.

The hawk flapped and squawked. Arthur's horse let out a frightened whicker, shying a moment as the ferocious bird in the cage on its back struggled and shrieked.

"How's my hawk, Arnulf?" asked Arthur as he pulled on a long, stout leather glove.

"Feisty as usual, M'lord," the fox said with a grin, carefully retrieving the ferocious bird.

The hooded hawk sank its claws into the fox's glove and snapped dangerously at his unprotected upper arm with its sharp bill. "By the shield!" Arnulf exclaimed.

"Hold the tether," Arthur said, taking a piece of meat from a small bag on his belt and offering it to the shrieking bird, coaxing it onto his arm until it settled there, feathers fluffed with worry as it devoured its prize.

Virgil's hawk put up less of a fight as his hawk keeper, a coyote, retrieved it and placed it on the lynx's arm.

"Right lads, good hunting!" Arthur exclaimed. The wolf whipped the hood from his hawk's head and raised his arm. The sleek bird of prey launched itself into the air.

Virgil and Balthasar released their hawks a moment later. They circled high above, scanning the ground for prey. Virgil's hawk zeroed in on a large feral marmot shuffling across the fallow field. Its wings tucked and the tawny raptor went into a dramatic headfirst dive, claws extended. The hawk hit the marmot hard, and the two creatures went sprawling across the field.

Virgil's hawk keeper ran to retrieve the kill.

"Fine catch! Game stew tonight!" Arthur said, thumping the lynx on the back as the young coyote came back with the squawking bird and its kill.

Virgil opened a sack of coarse cloth, and the coyote dropped the dead marmot in. "Alright, let's see what you two can catch."

Balthasar's hawk was the next to catch something. It caught an enormous quail, fattened on lost grains gleaned from the fields. "Roast quail, my treat!" the genet announced proudly as his civet hawk keeper retrieved the kill.

"Make that two!" shouted Arthur as his hawk snagged a quail on the wing.

Virgil released his hawk again. It climbed to about a three hundred feet in the air and stayed there.

Once his quail was in the bag, Arthur lifted his arm and his hawk took to the air on powerful wings. It only flew a few feet into the air when Virgil's hawk dove sharply toward it. The two ferocious birds fell to the ground, locked in deadly combat.

"Get them apart!" Arthur called to Arnulf.

The fox ran to the spot about a hundred yards away where the hawks churned the mud, squawking, biting, and clawing each other. He tried his best to separate them but was given a nasty bite on his hand for his trouble.

Arthur and Virgil had no luck either; by the time they were able to get their birds apart, they'd mangled each other and lay dying in the weeds.

"Your hawk killed my hawk, Virgil," Arthur seethed.

"Your hawk provoked her!" Virgil snarled.

"Yours attacked mine! Everyone here saw that! Just for arguing, I'll see to it that you pay for another one out of your commission!"

Virgil drew his sword. "No you won't!"

Arthur drew his much larger sword and leveled the point at Virgil's chest. A low, vicious growl rumbled deep in the wolf's maw. "Challenge me at your own risk, sheriff. Put it away or I'll cut you in two."

Balthasar stepped between them. "Come on, lads! There's no reason for fighting. There are plenty of hawks in the woods. Let's find some other sport and let it be."

Arthur and Virgil uneasily sheathed their swords, neither taking his eye off the other.

"Very well then," Virgil growled. "Some other sport."



Isa Chetal lay fast asleep in her bedroom deep in the suburbs of Seattle. Her fiance, Harry D'Angelo, lay back to back with her, his tail draped over her affectionately.

The sound of her Omnax's jangly ringtone snapped Isa wide awake. Harry groaned, pulling a pillow over his large ears.

Isa picked up the flat, vibrating sheet of graphene on her nightstand. A message appeared on the screen:

INCOMING VOICE CALL FROM CONTACT: MOM  
OMNAX ID 2gf391a7-MENDOCINO, CA

Isa unlocked the screen and answered.

"Hey Mom, what's up?" she yawned.

"Did I wake you up sweetie? I can call back later," her mother said.

"No, It's fine."

Something tapped gently at Isa's lower back. It was Harry's tail, twitching in annoyance.

"So how was your visit with Anshula?" Isa's mother asked.

"Oh, the usual. Some pie-in-the-sky talk about the universe this and energy that..." Isa rolled her eyes.

"But you hadn't seen her in years! Didn't you do anything?"

"We went to a few places but... I don't know. She's so into this whole New Age thing. It was like we were in two different places wherever we went."

"Well... I don't agree with your sister's beliefs, But at least she has some sense of wonder and miracles, Isa. You can be so jaded sometimes! Have you tried going to church?"

"I haven't been to church in a while, Mom."

"Why not? You used to love going to church when you were a little girl."

It was true. Isa had enjoyed Sundays with her mother at the little non-denominational church on Old Lafayette Road, but something about the doctrine of absolute obedience always rubbed her the wrong way. She tried to chalk up her doubts to the failings of the mortal soul, and its supposed resistance toward doing good.

But deep down, something about assuming that good was not in her nature and that she needed to pray for grace to be worth anything in the eyes of God always seemed wrong. This meant a creature couldn't trust their own judgment, and if they couldn't, they had to defer to the Bible or their elders. Never to themselves. What if the elders were wrong? What if the Bible didn't say what they thought it did?

The final straw came when Isa was 16. Her friend Jamie, a grey fox she'd met in Sunday school as a child, came out trans. The congregation tried to cure her by pinning her to the ground and laying on hands, praying for six agonizing hours.

Jamie was lucky; she managed to fake being "cured" for a couple more years, kept her grades up, and got into a good college out of state where she successfully transitioned. As for Isa, she quit going to the Old Colony Church of the Holy Spirit after that episode and never looked back.

"Yeah, I did," Isa lamented. "Things change, though."

"I wish I understood what changed, sweetie. What about that Hindu temple your father went to

with Anshula? What happened there?"

"I couldn't get my head around the doctrine, and the worship style didn't really speak to me."

"But you must have something you believe in?"

"After I saw glorified game sprites following a religion named after the computer they lived inside, it didn't make sense to think religion offered anything special."

A moment of awkward silence followed. "But you have to admit, Anshula's happier, isn't she? It gives her hope to think there's something bigger out there."

"She doesn't sound hopeful," Isa sighed. "She was going on and on about bad energy and vampires when we were walking around this one part of town. Her world is full of ghosts and things that go bump in the night, Mom. That's not happy, that's scary. I don't know how she can stand to live in a place like New York."

"Every life has good and bad. Your sister always has such a big pretty smile whenever I see her though, and you're always sulking, but I dunno... maybe there's something I don't know about how happy you are. By the way, have you heard from your father?"

"Yeah, I called him night before last. He said he's retiring next March."

"Retiring?"

"Yeah, the contract at Newport News is finally up. He says he wants to see family more often and he's going to have to be retired to do that."

Isa's parents had met in Norfolk, VA, but her father was from the middle class suburbs of Mumbai, India and had moved to the US after a Muslim friend of his was killed in a religious riot in the 2000s. After his children had grown up and his wife divorced him, this left her father with family all across the US and India to keep track of; retirement for Bhavesh Chetal was hardly the end of a busy schedule.

"Well bless his heart! Tell him I said good luck on his retirement!" her mother said.

Harry gave another irritated groan, his tail still twitching.

"Will do," said Isa. "Hey, I need to go for now but I'll talk to you soon, OK? Love you!"

"Bye sweetie! Love you too!" said her mother.

Isa slid a finger across the screen and set the Omnix back on her nightstand.

"I wanna get back to sleep," Harry mumbled.

"Yeah, me too, though I've got work," said Isa, giving his spotty back a friendly scratch. "Big day today."



The garrison at Upcaster Castle – unique in the kingdom – was built of stone and abutted the southern wall. Atop the garrison was a spacious, stately half-timbered hall, built for the Marshal of Upcaster and his wardens to use while on duty. It jettied out over the edge of the garrison and gave a commanding view of the bailey.

Balthasar paced the large hall, his hands behind his back, striped tail twitching. "Forgive me if I've overstepped with this, but you shouldn't tempt fate with your vassals."

"He was out of line!" Arthur growled.

"It wouldn't be worth the peace of the kingdom to have a duel over a stupid hawk, Arthur! Creatures like Virgil won't forget a slight like this. You'd better make peace while you still can."

"I suppose so. You think I'm being too hard on him?"

Good. The old bond of trust was still there. Maybe he could talk some sense into the wolf after all.

"I think you need to be careful not to get too angry too quickly," Balthasar said. "But for the same reasons you can't be too passive. You have to walk a fine line now, and it won't be easy."

Arthur sat at the table, near the hearth. He rested his head in his hands. "I'm going to get murdered, aren't I?"

"Probably not. Not by Virgil, at least. He isn't that stupid."

Arthur shook his head. "You're the only creature in this kingdom I trust not to stab me in the back."

"It's difficult knowing who to trust sometimes. Would you like to stay a while and talk? Maybe a round of chess?"

Arthur smiled. "I think I'd like that."

Balthasar walked toward his larder. "I have some dried fruit and smoked herring if you're hungry. I'll be right back."

The genet returned a moment with a platter of food and an elegant glass flask of wine. "The chessboard is in that chest by the window," the genet said.

Arthur dug out the chessboard and set the pieces up on the table. "Red or white?"

"I'll take red," Balthasar said, setting the platter and flask on the table.

Arthur moved a pawn forward two squares, freeing his queen and bishop. A typical aggressive opening for the wolf.

Balthasar took a bigger gambit, leaving his king vulnerable first.

"You're going to do something really devious, aren't you?" Arthur said.

Balthasar grinned, drinking some wine straight from the flask. "We'll see."



Isa made good time to work and went straight to her office, logging her Omnax into the Occident labs network.

She pulled up a console with the vital stats of the sim participants. Arthur, Balthasar, Virgil, Apollo, and Sylvia were all stable.

Sylvia, remarkably, hadn't met any of the others. The sim had loaded her far away in a remote province. It had happened once or twice in their early tests that two creatures loaded into a sim at the same time led completely separate lives from each other, but more often than not, everyone's paths crossed sooner or later. The Great Truth AI made sure of that.

She pulled up Arthur and Balthasar's location. It looked like they were together at the moment.

How were they doing? They couldn't still be married in this medieval world. Had they found some way to make their love for each other work?

She opened the video feed. The wolf and genet were sitting at a table, playing chess. There was a flask with a few drops of wine left in it, and they both seemed just a bit tipsy as they finished up their game.



"Checkmate!"

Balthasar slid his last rook across the board, cornering Arthur's king. The wolf gave him a look of wide-eyed astonishment.

"That was easy for you, wasn't it?" the wolf said, his movements slower and his voice a little slurred from the strong wine.

The genet gave a roguish wink. "Only because you let your guard down."

Arthur slouched, his brow creasing with worry. "I really should get married soon. Everything I have will be scattered to the four winds if I get killed."

"I should get married too," Balthasar said, curling his tail in discomfort at the very thought.

"I can't imagine you with a female."

"I know," grumbled Balthasar. "Though I can hardly imagine you with a female either."

"I've had female lovers. I thought you knew?"

"I know you were always lost when I gave you that look. You know the one."

Maybe the beguiling, wide-eyed gaze Balthasar flashed him was enough, or maybe it was the wine, but Arthur couldn't contain himself. Arthur's tail began to wag, and the wolf let out an excited huff.

"Damn you, Spott," he murmured, leaning across the table to kiss the genet passionately. It was good. Scandalously good.

Balthasar broke the kiss and beckoned Arthur toward his bedchamber. "Come on, neither of us has anywhere to be for a while," he cooed.

The wolf followed willingly and shut the door behind them. "I can't believe I'm taking you up on this."

"But you are, and you know where the door is," Balthasar purred. "Leave now if you don't want me."

"Damn you, Spott..."

The deal was sealed. A fleeting instant, a flurry of linen and fur, and they were on the bed tangled in each other.

Bliss. Sheer bliss. It was as if they had made love many times already, not the two or three times on the sly Balthasar could remember. It came so naturally.

By and by the afterglow wore off, as they lay together sweaty and panting. Out of nowhere, something gripped Balthasar with a strength that blindsided him. Shame. The sort of visceral shame he had never felt before.

But he should have known this feeling. He should have felt it before. It was the way anyone who believed in the laws of mortals and gods ought to feel, he told himself. This forbidden love carried serious consequences.

If word got out, the knights and soldiers who answered to him would refuse orders and might even kill him. No abbey would give him sanctuary. No inn, except the seediest den of thieves, would give him shelter. Death – whether a fast death by burning or a slow death by neglect – was the only fate for males who were caught doing the things he'd done with Arthur. And when he died, he might be cast into the hottest part of the Desert of the Damned, the scorching dunes where the lustful wandered in heavy sandstorms for all eternity.

"What is it, Spott?" Arthur asked.

That old familiar pet name killed him. It carried the weight of so many warm memories Balthasar couldn't place; shame and fear filled the void and the genet trembled.

"We can never do this again, Arthur," Balthasar sobbed. "I'm so sorry for tempting you. My liege, I'm so sorry!"

Arthur leaned forward. "No, Spott. I mean, *Sir Balthasar*. I shouldn't have encouraged you."

The wolf's slouched posture, flattened ears, and eyes full of woe told the whole story.

"You felt it too?" asked Balthasar.

"Yes... and I've never felt this way before. But I'm afraid from now on, we're going to have to keep our friendship out of your chambers... or mine."

Balthasar gave Arthur's hand a squeeze.

"It's for the best," the genet plained.

"I'll always love you."

The crossbow bolt didn't hurt as much as those four simple words.

"I love you too," Balthasar said, tears staining the fur around his eyes. "Now, let's keep this to ourselves."

## CHAPTER 3

### MORAL CALCULUS



Virgil Dol sat hunched over a writing desk in a chamber in the Upcaster Guild Hall. The lynx used this secluded nook near the base of the clock tower as an office when carrying out his duties as sheriff and exchequer. The isolation suited him, and gave Virgil an environment free from distractions... and prying eyes.

On this particular afternoon, he was copying passages on siege warfare from a text by Publius Marcus Remus, the great general of the Aenean empire, scrawling the words of the manuscript in his usual cramped, hurried hand.

A knock at the door broke his concentration. The lynx flattened his tufted ears and put his pen away in its cubby hole atop the desk. "What is it?" he bellowed, expecting a servant.

"It's me, Arthur."

Virgil ran to the door and unlocked it. "Ah, My liege! What brings you here?"

The lynx's blood froze as Arthur swaggered into the room and leaned against the table, briefly resting his hand right next to a forged copy of the Bishop of Thornholt's seal Virgil carelessly left in plain sight.

"About the hawks yesterday, you don't owe me anything if I don't owe you anything," Arthur said, getting to the point with no niceties.

"Oh, thank you," Virgil droned.

"Do you have those ledgers finished, by the way?"

"Right here."

Virgil seized the moment to draw Arthur's attention away from the seal. He motioned to a table where a set of bronze jetons on a counting board showed a value of five thousand four hundred-fifty marks.

He picked up a stout book where page after page of inelegant scrawlings kept years of accounts for Arthur and his father. He pointed his claw to a fresh entry. "I just finished."

"Very good. And you have the receipts?"

"Right here."

Virgil handed Arthur a stack of loose leaves of vellum.

"I'll seal these tonight and send them out in the morning," Arthur said. "Thank you."

"Will that be all Milord?" asked Virgil.

"No, not quite. I heard you had borrowed a copy of *The Campaigns of Publius Marcus Remus*? I'd love to see it!"

"Ah, be very careful with it. I had to leave the deed to my manor in Chalkdale with the abbot at St. Eadfrid's to borrow it."

Virgil handed the richly-bound book to Arthur, who reverently turned the pages. The lynx picked up the seal, along with a bone stylus and a spare ink pot and put them deftly in a box of writing supplies while the wolf was distracted.

"It's very lovely," Arthur said, gazing admiringly at detailed illustrations. "Who painted these miniatures? I'd like to commission him."

"I believe the abbot said this was Master Karl's work. He died last year, sadly," Virgil replied.

"What a shame. Yes, I think I have some of his work. My father commissioned a book of hours from him. This is some of his finest work, though."

The lynx bit his lip, his bobtail twitching restlessly as Arthur turned each page. "That's why the Abbot of St. Eadfrid's will own Chalkdale if anything happens to it."

"I'll have to see if I can commission the workshops at St. Eadfrid's to create a copy for me. Maybe one of Master Karl's pupils learned something from him?"

Arthur set the book down with great care and reverence, and Virgil betrayed his relief with a great sigh.

"Will you be leaving tonight or do you need a room at the castle?" the wolf asked.

"I need to be in Chalkdale before it gets too dark," Virgil said. "Then tomorrow morning first thing I need to leave for Vinewood to take care of some matters at home."

"Alright then. Safe travels to you! If I need you before next month I'll send for you."

"Thank you, My Liege," Virgil said as Arthur made his exit.

The lynx breathed a sigh of relief. He put the book and his notes together in a wooden chest and secured it with a padlock.



Isa stepped from the sterile, starkly-lit back rooms of Occident Labs into the sun-drenched lobby. The genet's eyes became narrow slits in the bright sunlight pouring through the lobby's large glass facade, the only window in the entire building.

Two foxes, a coyote, a wolf, and a cougar were waiting for her. They were such nice folks... did

she really want to do this to them?

The idea was simple: study homosexual relations in a hostile but relatable environment. The setting was a pastiche of 1930s Europe and America, at a time when being openly gay could lead to unemployment or far worse. What's more, according to her notes, the wolf and the cougar – Vince Niven and Ayler Kane – were married in this reality.

Isa tried to convince herself this was the right thing to do. This was a bold experiment in psychology, quantum computing, suspended animation, sociology, and even game design. So many envelopes were being pushed. To back down now would mean hanging up so many creatures' hard work, not least among them her own.

Isa smiled and forced her reservations aside. "Alright, we're just about ready to start. Come on, right this way," she said.

The five creatures in the lobby followed her round the corner to a sleek modern conference room. Every detail, from the seamless deep pile carpet to the designer light fixtures, had been selected by Ted to impress.

This was the part where the test subjects had to be sold on the adventure; the part Isa hated the most.

"Alright, well, Mr. Ducasse wants me to be to the point. I'm Isa Chetal, the lead technician here, and the head of the SRE development team. Also, I'm sort of the unofficial greeter and spokescreature, et cetera. Heh, you might say I pretty much keep the place running when Mr. Ducasse isn't around. So, how about a round of introductions?"

"I'm Jared, I'm a systems analyst at Galactec in San Jose," one of the foxes said.

"I'm Laz, I'm... a freelance mechanic from Seattle," the other fox said, his ears back in embarrassment.

"I'm Eddie, I'm a bush pilot from Fairbanks," the coyote mumbled.

"I'm Ayler, I'm a graduate student at Portland State," the cougar said in a clear, polished voice with a hint of an upper class Massachusetts accent.

"I'm Vince, I'm a senior at Portland State and part-time barista," the wolf said.

"Okay, good! Now we know each other," said Isa, picking up a universal remote for the lighting, temperature, and media center in the room. "We're going to show you a quick informative video, then go on a tour of the facility. Now, you're all here for the same sex relations under stress study, correct?"

There was a general murmur of agreement, though Eddie held his tongue, flattened his ears, and slumped in his seat, his eyes going a bit shift.

"Good," Isa said. "This video will give you a brief overview of the virtual world this study will take place in and the sorts of things you can expect. If you have any questions I'll be glad to answer them after the video."

She pressed the down button on the light dimmer, then the "Play" button, and Ted's web of lies unfolded in a slick million dollar trailer for the experiment.

The presentation opened with Ted lounging on a deck chair on his yacht, somewhere in Puget Sound.

"Hi, welcome to Occident Labs!" the otter gushed. "I'm Ted Ducasse, founder and CEO of Occident Labs. We're a cutting edge company exploring new frontiers in reality synthesis, social experiments, and quantum computing technology. If you're watching this presentation, you're one of the lucky few chosen to take part in an adventure like no other! Let's see what's in store for you in the land of Occidentania!"

Isa's stomach tightened as five creatures fell under Ted's spell, transfixed by images of castles, knights, airships, gangsters, and countless other fantasies, presented with Ted's oozing narration and all the smarmy charm of a video brochure for a Caribbean resort. If these creatures truly understood the price of those fantasies, would they be enraptured, or enraged?

On the screen a handsome male cacomistle in green and white striped hose and a red tunic so short it made Isa blush was wooing a female cacomistle in a delicate brocade gown. She winked coquettishly at him from the balcony of an Italian villa.

"Of course, your feelings are still your own, and you may even find yourselves falling in love. This is perfectly normal, though we discourage real world relationships built on your experiences in Occidentania. Occident labs takes absolutely no responsibility for broken hearts!" Ted's voice cooed over the romantic vignette.

That was Ted's only warning. These creatures had no idea what they were barreling into. Romance happening spontaneously in the sim was the least of anyone's worries. Inside the sim, one's entire outlook on life was shaped by a complete set of false memories that would catch the participant off guard when they were activated. Isa had experienced it briefly in a test of an ancient sim that fed into the continuity of the medieval and 1930s sims. She had a parallel set of memories of a life she never lived, as the daughter of a Aenean prelate at the height of the empire who was burned alive for denying the supremacy of the Aenean gods.

That disorienting, partial loss of self hit Arthur and Balthasar too. Isa had watched their coupling on the monitors. She enjoyed it; not in a perverted way, but in an empathetic way. Isa was happy to see two creatures so much in love throwing caution to the wind and losing themselves in each other.

Their happiness didn't last. When the act was done, the manufactured memories hit. Memories of a lifetime being shamed and intimidated out of loving on their own terms. It broke her heart to see how sad and fearful they were once the afterglow wore off.

She didn't have to inflict that on anyone else. She could spill it now and walk away...

*No, stick with it,* Isa thought. These sorts of behavioral experiments were ethically sketchy by their very nature, but they told so much about the psyche. The subjective reality engine she had invented and perfected through painful trial and error was now being used to follow in the footsteps of

Milgram and Zimbardo, the pioneers who took an ethical risk and produced astonishing insights into the workings of sentient creatures of all species. The world thanked them, and they would thank Isa and the team of researchers, developers, and behavioral scientists who gave their very best for this experiment.

And yet, the moral calculus felt *off*.

The presentation finished, and Isa turned up the lights.

"So, any questions?" she said.



Virgil folded his hands pensively and rested them on the table, his eyes glowing in the dim candlelight of the great hall at his leveraged manor in Chalkdale. "Let's get right to the point, shall we? I offered you the opportunity of a lifetime earlier today and I meant it. Sir Simon, I would like to make you Marshal of Upcaster and Sheriff of Vinewood."

Simon swallowed. The fox had suspected from the start there would be some treachery involved in Virgil's offer; hearing the offer did nothing to allay his worries.

*The door is right there, he reminded himself. You can leave now.*

Then again, the revenue on Vinewood's wine trade alone was enough to make a sheriff almost as rich as an earl in a few years' time, and it was easy work. Simon's life hadn't been easy; he was one of that lowest order of knights, of distant noble ancestry whose families had long since lost most of their fortunes. He'd grown up in a manor smaller than this one in an old timber hall badly in need of repair, and he'd never known wealth or prestige. Even his current pay, as Sir Balthasar's proxy, was less than twenty-five marks per year when all the excises and expenses were taken out. It meant he could buy a mount, a sword, and a full plate harness of middling quality but not a lot else.

Here was his chance to have it all. He could have a stone castle, a gorgeous wife from a noble house, honors and achievements on his crest, and fine filigree armor he could display during the joust. He could live in luxury beyond his wildest imagination.

"I'm listening," Simon said, quelling the storm of protest within.

"I want you to gather a force of a hundred of the most vicious creatures-at-arms you can find. You are to kill my brother, his wife, their sons, and all their guards," the lynx said. "Storm his castle if you have to."

"Kill them all?"

"They're Beziard heretics!" Virgil hissed. "Every last one of them!"

"I can't do this without an order from the Bishop of Thornholt, you know that!"

"I have the letter of excommunication right here," Virgil said, sliding a formal letter with a large wax seal attached across the table.

Simon examined the seal. Genuine? No, the Bishop's name was Gabriel, but here it was clearly spelled "Cabriel." A clever forgery, but not too clever.

Simon's better judgment caught up with him. Here was his chance to keep from making an enormous mistake. He slid the letter back toward Virgil. "Forgery will get you hanged, Virgil," Simon stated bluntly, pointing a claw at the seal. "Or perhaps I should ask Bishop Gabriel if he's changed his name recently?"

"As far as I know, this order is genuine," said Virgil, studying the seal a moment. "Perhaps the bishop had a new seal matrix made and the engraver was a bit lazy."

"I think I should be on my way."

"Then I'll offer this to your brother, and you can explain to your father why his eldest son let his little brother best him. It's not my loss."

Simon fought the urge to cringe. He loved Apollo, but he would never be outdone by him if he had a choice. The letter was probably a forgery but if they got caught, the penalty for fraud was on Virgil, not on him. He could always claim the lynx had deceived him.

There were fortunes to be made. It was time to make a bold decision. Kingdoms were won and lost on decisions like these.

"Very well, Sheriff," the fox said in a low voice. "I'll see to it that the heretics get what they deserve."

"I thought you would come around! Feel free to stay here until morning by the way. Before you leave tomorrow I'll give you seven marks from my private treasury to pay for a hundred creatures-at-arms and any unexpected expenses. Use it wisely and don't take more than a month to finish the job or I will have my money back one way or another."

"As you wish, Sheriff," said the fox. "I am at your service."