

# Spartacus

"Man of the Earth"

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## Prologue : The Legacy of Ashes

Long ago, before the stars had names, a man rose against his fate.  
His name crossed the centuries like a cry in the storm: Spartacus.  
Under the sky of Rome, he led enslaved men toward the dawn of their dignity.  
He lost, yes, but in his defeat he carved the first victory of humanity: the victory of a spirit that refused to bend.  
His body perished on the cross, but his breath remained in the dust, in the winds, in the blood of those who would come after.

Centuries passed.  
Empires fell, gods fell silent, and Earth nearly forgot the name of the Thracian.  
But the cosmos forgets nothing.  
For in the ether where souls wander, a memory still keeps watch.  
A tiny, trembling flame survived, and one day, that flame found a host.

A child was born, bearing an ancient imprint.  
His eyes held the melancholy of battlefields and the promise of a world waiting to be remade.  
His name was Andy Storm.

No one could have guessed then that the son of storms would become, in his turn, the torchbearer of humankind.  
That he would take up the fight where his ancestor had left it: no longer against Rome, but against oblivion, fear, and death itself.

And when thunder fell upon the arenas of another world,  
when the two suns of Yaras set the sky ablaze with fire and blood,  
the name of Spartacus would be reborn, carried by an exiled son of Earth,  
an echo from the ages reminding the universe of a single truth:  
Man may be chained, but his soul never.

# Chapter 1 : The Blood of the First Fight

At the edge of the Sagittarius Arm, where the Milky Way dissolves into a blot of ink, a swarm of stars slips by in silence, tracing trails of molten gold that pierce the darkness. Their glow crowns a solitary system, an amber ornament suspended in the void and, within this crown, two white suns burn, setting aflame the blue-tinged planet: Yaras.

Seen from space, the sphere seems to breathe: every ocean, every continent pulses like an ancient organism. The atmosphere shimmers with metallic reflections; the winds, loaded with luminescent dust, unfurl silver ribbons above opaline seas. The first rays of a double dawn brush a continent tinted with shifting hues: colossal forests with ancient trunks, endless plains, and white-sand shores where the waves break in wild veils.

Between three mountain ranges whose peaks bloom into milky white, an immense dome rises, blue and polished, anchored in the rock like a jewel protected under glass. Near it, a city unfolds on a pharaonic scale of metal, glass, and sharp angles thrust toward the sky, proclaiming the audacity of the architects who shaped it. But it is inside the dome that the landscape turns, reversing itself into wonder: suspended above an abyss of drifting clouds, the Xiorcian Arena reigns.

The city is vertical. Walkways as wide as arteries, painted a deep red and whipped by winds that seem to know the history of the stones, link enormous houses of polished basalt crowned with triangular roofs plated in satin metals. Massive arches made from the bone membranes of a forgotten titan open the way toward the districts. Veined and carved with geometric motifs glowing like sacred writings at dawn, they guard the suspended structures. Beneath them, the mist coils and swallows the light; within that milky shroud, enormous creatures glide: reptilian birds with a timeless grace, their vast wings describing spirals between the bare peaks. They patrol as silent sentinels ready to descend upon anyone who falls from the sacred bridges.

It is there, on one of those wide, polished bridges, that the struggle takes shape. The wood vibrates under the wind, and despite the altitude, every step resounds like a blow struck upon the world.

Diego Fuentes fights for his life.

A Terran from a distant world, he wears the finery of a vanished people: embroidered eagle motifs, fractured cuirass, scraps that snap at the slightest gust. His face, reddened by effort, is furrowed with fear and blood. Sweat glues his hair to his temple; the metallic smell of iron burns his throat. His left hand grips a cracking stone shield; in his right, a blade catching the light of the two suns and the three moons like a set of satellite eyes fixed on the outcome.

A sharp cry cleaves the mist. Instinct more than will makes Diego lift his gaze, and he sees two yellow-gold rings appear like murderous moons. They spin, whistle, resembling mechanical vultures. He parries one, deflects the other; but life has other debts to settle: a triple blade emerges, erases the air, and sinks into his stomach.

The pain slices him like a thread; the cry that escapes him is not just a call but a passage. In the instant his blood bursts in red sheets across the vermillion wood, his thoughts return, fragmented and stubborn, to the reasons that brought him here: hope, revolt, the promise made to a distant Earth. Memories rush in broken flashes: a mother bending under a dusty horizon, a ruined city, the whispered vow that humanity would not be swallowed without answering and with them, the bittersweet absurdity of finding himself reduced to a name on an arena slab.

Tusulac emerges from the clouds.

Chief of the Xiorcians, he seems sculpted for trial: massive, crowned with dark metal constellated with symbols, his rider-shaped body reflecting the glints of the duel. Two parallel suns inscribed in golden triangles mark his cuirass; his spherical helmet pierced with a multitude of openings reveals nothing of his face only a deep, mechanical voice vibrating like a drum under the stone.

“This sacred place,” he says, “carries the glory and faith of Xiorc.”

Each word falls with the solemnity of an oracle. Around him, the rings return like obedient accomplices; he reattaches them to his belt. With a sharp gesture, he raises an arm fitted with a diamond-shaped shield toward the horizon bathed in light. His movements are not simply those of a warrior: they are ritual, precise, weighted with the slowness of an ancient rite.

Diego, on his knees, bears the world on his shoulders; his mouth full of the taste of copper, he murmurs, slipping back into the vulgar tongue of his people:

“You can kill me, Tusulac... but the intergalactic confrontation... is only beginning...”

The words escape in spasms but carry a truth that outstrips the pain: he speaks not only for himself, but for a future larger than these suspended planks.

Tusulac inclines his head. A low rumble, like the breath of a mechanical beast, escapes his helmet. Slowly, he draws one of the rings weapon and symbol both and slides it beneath the fallen man’s throat. His voice, when sound returns, is iron and clarion:

“I, Tusulac, chief of the Xiorcians, honor your death. May your end resonate in the memory of your species. The time of the Terrans is numbered.”

He speaks each syllable as one lays a tombstone. There is no messy hatred or vulgar triumph; only the cold conviction of a people who read in conquest the justification for their existence.

A metallic glint, a breath cut short.

Diego’s head falls, rolls, and comes to rest upon the vermillion planks before being swallowed by the mist. One of the flying creatures, hunger in its eyes, dives upon the prize and tears it from the world of the living; the flesh disappears in a beat of wings. The body remains, arms falling, then slipping, inert. Blood seeps between the slats, tinting the air with a red shroud that rises and dances in the wind.

Tusulac straightens. He inhales as if to swallow the dead man’s soul; with a solemn gesture, he lifts his triple blade toward the sky, and his voice thunders, carried by the arches and hurled back by the mist:

“No one will stop my dominion during these games! I will annihilate your peoples, your inferior worlds, and your illusions of humanity!”

It is both proclamation and warning. The sound rolls across the suspended city; the bridges groan, the dark domes vibrate. To those who know how to listen between the words, there is more than a plan of conquest: there is the mechanism of an empire built through fear, a system of spectacle where killing becomes sermon.

The suns sink slowly behind the clouds. The mist draws down the curtain of light. Silence falls again, dense, almost religious; it wraps the city like a shroud. But beneath that apparent stillness, something stirs: a tremor, a worry that bends conversations in the alleys. The Sages if one can trust the rare silhouettes visible, long robes clutching amulets, calm eyes exchange measured words, jaws clenched. Their silences say more than their voices: the decision of a chief is not merely that of a man; it is the echo of a people.

And while the mist swallows the last of the scene, while the sentinels’ wings trace circles in the distance, the first drop of what will become a downpour of blood has already marked the sacred wood. The first head, the first name, the first cry things that, later, will take meaning in the stories and the anger of other worlds.

## CHAPTER 2    The Man from Cleveland

On Earth, light-years away from the turmoil of Yaras, rain hammered against the windows of Cleveland University. It struck the panes with the constancy of a celestial metronome, turning the Ohio city into a vast aquarium of opaque light. Inside, the gymnasium echoed with shouts, gasps and muffled impacts: a storm of men, muscles and will.

On the central mat, two silhouettes faced each other. The floor vibrated under their steps, the neon lights tracing shards of modern warfare across their skin. The air was saturated with sweat, effort and salt.

Andy Storm, twenty years old, his torso knotted with muscle, his eyes ringed with insomnia, stood against Nathan, smaller, nervier, with the agility of a prowling wildcat. They brushed, grappled, collided. Every hold was an inner battle, every movement an attempt to forget. Andy growled, resisted, lunged, but fatigue gnawed at him like a cold fire. Nathan pivoted, hooked his leg, and slammed him down with the brutality of a thunderclap.

A sharp crack. A strangled cry.

Andy struck the ground, open palm, the universal sign of defeat.

“Stop!” shouted the coach, massive, round-bodied but with a solid voice, standing at the edge of the mat.

Nathan released the hold, sprang to his feet, his pupils wide with victory.

“I beat the great intercollegiate champion!” he snickered. “You’re nothing but a shadow of yourself now, Storm. No one stays undefeated!”

The coach, a tall Black man with a calm but firm face, raised a hand heavy with meaning.

“Good fight, Nathan. Now go hit the showers with the others. And keep your moral lessons for later.”

Nathan, triumphant, bounced away, leaving behind the echo of his mocking laugh.

Andy remained lying there, arms spread, breath torn. Outside, the rain still slapped against the windows, blurring the gym’s lights.

He finally sat up, removed his headgear. Damp strands of hair fell across his forehead.

His face was that of a drained, haunted man.

“Sorry, coach... Nathan’s right. I’m nothing now. Take me off the team. I don’t deserve to be here anymore.”

The coach approached, resting a hand on his shoulder. His expression was that of a man who knew the pain of a young spirit shattered.

“You’re just going through a rough patch, Andy. Nothing’s lost. Give time a chance to do its work.”

Andy lowered his head, exhausted.

“Nothing interests me anymore,” he murmured. “Nothing at all...”

He left the gym without turning back, his silhouette hunched, swallowed by the steady clatter of rain.

Behind him, the shouts of the other wrestlers continued, but seemed to come from another world.

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The rain intensified, fine and relentless. It erased the contours of Cleveland, blurred the red lights, diluted the passersby.

On the evening bus, Andy stared without seeing. The window streamed with water, streaked with light and silence. His reflection blended with the streetlamps outside, a face of shadow and fatigue.

He slipped a hand into the inner pocket of his jacket and pulled out a folded photograph. It showed four frozen smiles from a vanished summer: his parents, his sister Lindsay, and himself, younger, carefree.

For a moment, he clung to it. Then the tension returned. Eyes reddened, he sighed, leaned his head against the window, and let the engine’s vibration cradle his grief.

When the bus dropped him off, the city seemed to have forgotten him.

The streets stretched on, long, uniform, lined with identical houses. Waterlogged lawns reflected American flags pressed against their poles by the rain.

Andy walked without haste, a gray silhouette in a gray world.

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The family house appeared at last modest, sagging, battered by humidity. The porch creaked like a stubborn memory.

Inside, the smell of old wood and cold coffee lingered. The floor groaned under his steps. The sideboard sagged beneath a pile of mail: bills, reminders, administrative letters opened with the weariness of a life falling apart.

He reached toward an envelope.

“Don’t touch anything, little brother!” called Lindsay.

His older sister, twenty-five, her features drawn from night shifts, dark circles under her eyes, her wrinkled nurse’s uniform clinging to her. She stepped forward, snatched the letter with a brisk gesture, sighed.

“Leave it. I’ll take care of it tomorrow. The hospital is overflowing... there was a pileup on the highway.”

Andy, eyes empty, remained silent. He passed by her without a word, without reaction.

Lindsay watched him, her heart tightening. She sensed what he hid, that exhaustion beyond words. So she placed a gentle hand on his arm.

“Say at least hello, Andy... please.”

He turned, awkward. She hugged him briefly. On her, he smelled medical alcohol and rain.

“Your favorite meal is in the microwave,” she murmured before stepping away.

She turned her eyes aside, wiped them, and left the house. On the doorstep, she glanced at the soaked flag, hanging like a breathless symbol.

“Get your confidence back, Andy... you have to,” she whispered before disappearing into the rain.

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In a silence even the rain could no longer drown, Andy stood alone in the living room, facing the muffled hum of the refrigerator. The television flickered: talk shows, commercials, weather reports and soulless faces. He sat in the old brown leather armchair where his father once read the newspaper. He ate without hunger, drank without pleasure.

His gaze finally fixed on a framed photo hanging on the wall: his parents, smiling, embraced under a summer sky. Below, a brass plate:

“To our dear parents, gone too soon.”

The ticking of the clock became a heartbeat.

The seconds stretched, endless.

Tears rose, slow, stubborn, silent, and he didn’t push them away.

Then, in a sudden gesture, he slammed the empty bottle onto the table. Glass chimed, shattered, scattering everywhere like fragments of memory.

He stared at them for a moment, dazed, then stood, heavy, unsteady.

He rose again, painfully. Climbed the stairs, each step heavier than the last.



The wood creaked under the weight of everything he couldn't say.

Upstairs, the hallway light flickered, and Andy's face faded into the shadows.

Thunder rumbled in the distance.

Cleveland slept, but for him, the night was only beginning.

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His room was narrow, saturated with stagnant air. The walls, plastered with fight posters and faces of forgotten champions, seemed to close in on him. The trophies, dulled by dust, barely glinted under the pale bedside lamp. A smell of metal, dried sweat and solitude clung to the sheets and walls.

Andy turned on the old stereo on his desk.

The first notes of Nirvana's Something in the Way filled the room, slow, suspended, as if hesitating to exist.

Cobain's voice rose, raw, almost too human, coming from an inner chasm where everything breaks.

Andy passed his hands over his face, pulled his hair back, breath ragged. His body trembled from too much exhaustion and absence.

He collapsed on the bed, eyes fixed on the ceiling, breathing shallow.

His hand slowly slid under the pillow, crawling and searching like a reptile ready to strike. Suddenly, his fingers touched the cold metal of a gun.

He grabbed it, pulled it against him. The lamp's light reflected off it in a pale glint, like a dead star.

"I want it to end," he murmured, his voice wounded, hoarse, cracked, almost foreign.

The music became a distant echo, a wandering lament in the void. Andy closed his eyes. The barrel brushed his temple. His hand trembled. A tear escaped, rolled down his cheek, and fell onto the metal.

Then, in a fragile motion, the tension broke. His fingers loosened.

The gun slipped, fell on the blanket with a dull thud.

Silence settled. It devoured everything. Even the song vanished, swallowed in a muffled breath.

Time passed. Perhaps a few minutes. Perhaps an eternity.

Then something changed.

A tremor rippled through the air. The posters shivered, the curtains swelled without wind.

On the opposite wall, the large poster of a fighter began to vibrate, as if animated with new life.

A luminous tear opened at its center, letting a beam of blue light burst forth, pure, vibrant, like a note from another world.

The light bloomed in the room. The air crackled. Objects trembled, dust lifted.

The bluish energy wrapped around Andy, still lying on his bed.

His body grew lighter, rising gently, suspended in the trembling glow.

His face softened, his tortured features easing, his closed eyelids calm, his heavy breathing becoming peaceful.

The weapon remained on the blanket, abandoned, useless.

The beam intensified, widened, and swallowed everything it chose to take.

Andy slowly passed through the luminous breach, his body dissolving into the brightness, then vanishing, taken by the void.

The room fell silent once more.

The walls became still again. The poster was nothing but a torn sheet, hanging, inert.

Only the clock's steady ticking persisted.

A stubborn heartbeat.

The last echo of a world that had just lost a man or seen another born.

## CHAPTER 3 : The Guide of Yaras

When he opens his eyes again, Andy is no longer at home. The air around him has the cold, motionless perfection sometimes found in museum observation rooms: too clean to be real, too silent to be comforting. He is sitting in a gray chair with a strange, almost living texture, one that molds to every line of his body as if the leather already knew his fatigue. Above him, a white ceiling diffuses a soft, steady light, as though daylight itself had been trapped inside the walls.

The smell is neither metal nor earth; it stings with electricity and intertwines with a feminine scent, sweet, floral, foreign and reassuring at once. The room has human proportions but a clarity from elsewhere, each object appearing polished by a distant attention.

Facing him, a woman watches him. Tall, slender, almost unreal in the fluidity of her movements. Her chestnut hair falls in waves over her shoulders, her diaphanous dress catches the light and sends it back in pure lines. Her gaze, a piercing blue, does not blink; it scans him as if reading the thoughts drifting behind his eyes.

Andy straightens suddenly, voice strangled.  
“Who are you? Where am I? Where is my sister?”

She does not respond immediately. She rises with methodical grace and walks toward the white wall. Her heels resonate on the polished floor, a controlled, measured echo. A faint smile touches her lips.

“Hello, Andy,” she says in a clear, composed, almost hypnotic voice.  
“Welcome to the planet Yaras. You are now in the Terran observation hall.”

Andy remains frozen, as if his body needs more time than his eyes to accept reality. He passes a hand over his face, incredulous, still carrying the smell of last night’s rain and beer.

“This isn’t possible... I’m dreaming, right?”

“You are fully awake,” she replies without impatience, with the calm certainty of someone who has spoken centuries-old truths.

She tilts her head, and her features, until then gentle, take on a restrained gravity.

“I know this will shock you,” she continues, “but I am going to explain why you are here.”

Her hand brushes the wall. The surface lights up, splits softly, then opens like an eyelid: the inside becomes a window. Beyond it, the landscape is strangely familiar, like a memory one has never lived. Plains of phosphorescent grass unfold in rippling sheets; shimmering rivers coil like silver ribbons; in the distance, crystal mountains pierce a fine mist, their summits bursting into prisms. Large plants with spined leaves stir metallic-green blades under a silently rising sun.

Andy steps back, mouth half-open.  
“My God...”

The woman turns toward him, her expression transformed: no longer a hostess, but the bearer of a heavy responsibility.

“I am Teya,” she says simply. “Your guide and your representative to the Yarasian community. The Sages who govern this world have entrusted me with your introduction here, into the Terran enclave. Whether you want it or not, your destiny is now tied to ours.”

A beat, and Andy manages to speak, his voice seeking familiar shores.  
“My destiny?”

“Yes,” she answers. “You, and twelve other Terrans.”

Teya pauses; the room itself seems to hold its breath with her.

“You were chosen according to criteria I cannot explain simply strength, aptitude, but also the resilience and stubbornness carried in your hearts. You will take part in a galactic Tournament, a unique and sacred trial in which the peoples of different worlds will face one another. Only one will survive, and only one world will be preserved.”

Silence falls again, heavy and cold. Andy laughs, a nervous laugh trying to dissolve the absurdity.

“This is crazy. An experiment? A simulation? Where is Lindsay?”

Teya steps closer, her fingers brushing the open window. Daylight sweeps across her profile; her eyes take on a harder glint.

“If the Terrans fail, your planet will be abandoned,” she says plainly. “Without Yarasian protection and without the arbitration of the Sages, your civilization will slowly sink into time sometimes into disease... or the madness of your own species. The trial is not only a spectacle; it is a selection, a chance granted to those who can wield survival as an art.”

She gestures toward the plain, extending her arm toward the window. The scenery shifts: on the grasslands appear moving silhouettes men and a woman in armor, bearing insignias from different civilizations.

“These are six valiant warriors from your world,” she says. “The others will join you soon.”

“And those, on the plain?” Andy asks, eyebrows furrowed, eyes fixed on shapes advancing at the horizon.

“The Esreprians,” Teya replies. “Your opponents for today, for now. Their planet, in the Perseus Arm of the galaxy, is a harsh world: one sun, no satellites to soften the tides, stretches of stagnant water and rugged lands. The Esreprians are shaped by their own authority reflected back at them: narcissistic, ritualistic in the glorification of themselves, incapable of loving except through the staging of their own grandeur. They are asexual, strangely disciplined. Their leader is called Pilôsitt, descendant of a legendary tyrant, Yosift, who bent his world under his grip for generations.”

Teya observes Andy, measuring his anger and surprise. A thin smile almost a line of compassion crosses her lips.

“You will learn quickly, Andy Storm. Here, survival is a constant lesson. Faith, too, can be turned into a weapon.”

Attentive to the shadow passing over his face, Teya speaks softly:

“You will feel bonds,” she breathes. “Resonances that cross space. They are not one-way magic; they are the consequence of a world that blends destinies to better understand itself. Do not ignore them.”

Outside, beyond the window, the sun travels slowly across the sky, as if time itself were aligning with the battles to come.

“Each battleground will have its own hourglass: the sun’s course will measure the time of the duel, and when it falls, when it disappears behind the horizon, the fate of the fighters will be sealed. One hour here may be worth a lifetime elsewhere. Whoever still breathes at dusk will be lifted, healed, and sent back at once if their will endures. This is the mercy of the Sages or their calculation.”

Andy clenches his jaw. His gaze shifts between the woman and the plain, between fear and a stubborn curiosity. Human logic struggles against the evidence of a ceremonial order older than his fears.

Teya comes closer, less distant now. Her voice softens.

“I am not your enemy, Andy. I am your guide. My duty is to prepare you and, if I can, to preserve you. But to do so, you must understand one thing: bravery here is not just strength in your fists. The Sages speak little, but their silences shape decisions. Learn to listen to those voids.”

A slight silence follows her words, a time so brief a human ear could miss it. Yet in that gap, Andy senses something like a wave, an implication: other voices will speak later, more measured, and every pause will matter.

There is, in Teya’s way of locking her sentences and measuring her breaths, the promise of a demanding teaching. And in Andy’s gaze, despite fatigue and shock, a crease of determination is born, tiny but tenacious.

## CHAPTER 4 : The Arenas of Esrep

Under the blazing sun of the Esrep arena, the plain breathes war.

A light mist rises from the ground, shot through with gold and azure. The wind lifts the dust of ancient battles, mixing in the air a scent of metal and dried blood. The wild beasts, crouched in their lairs, fell silent at dawn, as if nature itself were holding its breath.

Six Terran riders advance slowly, forming a line on the southern slope of the natural arena. Their mounts strike the ground with a grave, steady drumming.

American. Russian. Turk. Greek. Arab. African.

Five men and one woman.

Six souls from different eras, brought together by the same fatality.

The horses shine under the sun; armor glitters; national flags snap faintly in the breeze.

At a silent signal, each warrior breaks away, taking his or her sector: forest, plain, rocks, hills. Each disappears into the shifting geography of the arena, as if swallowed by an individual destiny.

Facing them, the Esrepians advance in turn.

Seated on mounts of perfect form, they carry their banners to the wind: three golden spikes, symbol of triad and domination.

On their saddles, strange weapons: triangular shields, long and short sabers, multiple daggers, and a net bristling with metal spikes.

Their appearance, at first human, quickly betrays their strangeness: smooth, pale skin, almost translucent; faces rendered disturbing by their perfect symmetry; a single, immense eye, glowing with an inner light.

Beneath their polished helmets, no expression.

Their bodies seem sculpted from flesh too dense, too balanced, as if life itself had been redrawn for the purpose of killing.

Their armor breathes at every movement, thin black plates pulled tight at the waist, golden boots fixed to onyx stirrups.

They spread out without a sound and vanish, too, into the folds of the landscape.

From the high tribune, Teya watches.

Her gaze crosses the battlefield with the precision of a scalpel.

Her voice, amplified by the winds of Esrep, rises, calm and cutting:

“Note this, Andy. The weapons of every combatant, yours as well as theirs, answer the call of their bearer.”

She takes Andy's wrist and lifts it slightly.  
A translucent bracelet, carved like a shard of solid light, pulses against his skin.

"Thanks to this," she goes on. "A high-density magnetic link. Mandatory, personal, unbreakable.

What you throw will return.

What you call will find you."

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At the edge of a dense, thorny forest with metallic leaves, Clayton Abeytu, twenty years old, advances cautiously.

A Native American of the nineteenth-century plains, descendant of the legendary Crazy Horse, he rides with his back straight, gaze fixed, breathing calm.

His skin is streaked with red and black paint, symbols of the hunt and of death.

On his saddle: a longbow, arrows, two war axes, a slender spear, a small hide shield.

The wind whistles through twisted branches that carry an invisible threat.

Then, suddenly, a flash.

Clayton reacts. He lifts, by reflex, the axe hanging at his hip:

the shock of metal tears the air. A long dagger, thrown at inhuman speed, ricochets sharply and buries itself deep in a trunk farther on.

The Esrepian bursts from the forest in a rapid charge. In one fluid motion he slides from his mount.

His arm stretches; the bracelet at his wrist lights up.

With a hiss of breath and steel, his triangular shield unfolds with a low shuddering sound, his double-edged saber flies from its sheath and snaps into his hand.

His single eye shines with a liquid gleam, reflecting the silhouette of the Native American like a living mirror.

Clayton leaps from his horse, hits the ground, and attacks without hesitation.

The clash of metal fills the clearing: axe against shield, breath against breath.

Each impact tears out a spark, each shout rings like a warrior's prayer.

Then, in a swift movement, Clayton releases his axe and extends his hand:

the bow leaves the saddle, drawn to him, and lands in his palm.

An arrow notches, is drawn and loosed in one single motion.

A guttural cry tears the air.

The point pierces the helmet, goes through the single eye.

The Esrepian's body collapses, fingers twitching one last time before they go still in the dust.

From the tribune, Teya's voice cuts through the wind:

"The bracelet, Andy. Remember: the weapon is the extension of the soul. What you cast away will return... if your mind calls for it."

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Farther off, in the Esrep forest, Mehdi Boukhara advances slowly, his gaze anchored to the ground.

His white horse breathes calmly, its nostrils steaming in the dry air.

Wrapped in an ochre tunic, he carries a curved sword, a javelin, a bow and two daggers strapped to the saddle.

Descendant of Khalid ibn al-Walid, the ‘Sword of God’, he embodies the faith and discipline of the desert.

The wind dies.

The leaves freeze.

A heavy silence falls all at once.

Then, a hiss: a net bristling with spikes drops from the sky.

Mehdi tries to avoid it, but already the trap closes and tears into his shoulder.

He falls, rolls in the dust, the breath ripped from him.

The Esrepian springs from his mount, saber raised, ready to strike.

But Mehdi twists aside, pivots, slices through one of the mesh strands, rolls to the side, grabs his opponent’s leg and drags him to the ground.

The two bodies close in, locked in a mute, brutal, animal struggle.

Their breathing merges, mixing iron and blood.

Mehdi traps the enemy’s wrist, bends it until it breaks.

A dry crack. The weapon falls.

He calls for his own:

the curved sword leaves the ground and flies into his hand.

He drives it into the gap in the armor.

A breath.

The Esrepian’s single eye dilates, then goes dark.

The Arab warrior, panting, rises to his knees, his palms turned toward the sky.

“Wallah...” he murmurs.

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In the observation hall, Teya inclines her head slowly.

Her gaze slides toward Andy, silent, fascinated.

“There,” she whispers. “That is what a Terran is: faith, instinct, rage, prayer... and death as witness.”

She smiles.

Her fists clench in a cold glint, reflection of a satisfaction she does not even try to hide.

Andy remains frozen, features taut, eyes fixed on the translucent wall.

“How... is this possible?” he breathes, voice strangled.



Without a word, Teya steps forward and touches the center of the room.  
A projection rises slowly: a three-dimensional map suspended in the air.  
The Milky Way turns on itself, a majestic spiral of gold and dust.

Teya points to a zone drowned in a violet haze.  
“Here, in the nebula of the Sagittarius Arm... Yaras, our mother planet. Cradle of the Yarasian community.”

She moves closer, her voice taking on a nearly religious fervor.  
“The Sages have watched you since your first uprisings. They listen to you. They study you. They know what drives you to survive... and what condemns you to destroy.”

The star field shifts.  
Before their eyes, the evolution of a people unfolds:  
first quadrupeds, then tall bipeds with thick, smooth skin.  
Their faces lengthen, their eyes grow larger, irises multicolored, pupils wide as skies. Their mouths shrink, their noses vanish, their ears curl back.

Andy recoils, pale, until he bumps against the wall behind him.  
“These... these are monsters!”

Teya looks away, but a fleeting smile crosses her face.  
“No, Andy Storm,” she answers softly.

She steps forward, her tone gentle, almost caressing.  
Her hips trace a slow, controlled movement.  
She extends her hand and brushes the image of the last Yarasian with a kind of sacred respect.

“They are dying,” she murmurs.  
“After millennia, their bodies have reached the limits of their own perfection.  
Their civilization is fading, slowly... inexorably.”

A silence spreads through the room, dense as mourning.  
Then Teya snaps her fingers with a sudden gesture.

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Outside, in the arena, Esrep’s sun burns at the zenith.  
The crossing beams of light draw a divine clock over the plain.

Through the high grasses, Bongani Zuma, elaborate hair and war paint on his face, walks forward, mace in his left hand, shield of animal hides in the other. His mount follows at a distance, nostrils flared and still; on its saddle, a slender lance, a long-handled throwing weapon.  
Descendant of the feared Shaka Zulu, the African advances without fear, muscles tight, eyes of a predator.

“Here is Bongani Zuma,” announces Teya.  
“Son of fire and iron.”

An Esrepian appears at a gallop, triangular shield raised, saber ready.  
The impact rings out, brutal. Bongani stops breathing for the space of a heartbeat, takes the blow, pulls back, pivots.  
His mace smashes against the enemy shield in a thunderous crash.  
One step, one surge: the Esrepian staggers and collapses into the tall grass.  
The saber flashes, grazing the Zulu's neck in a cry of despair. Too late.

Bongani, enraged, brings his mace down violently on his opponent's face. A dry crack follows, then the silence of the plain reclaims its rights.

Higher up, on a rocky ledge battered by the wind, Artemis Solomos, the Greek, advances. Red tunic, bronze shield on her arm, Spartan helmet on her brow.  
Her step is slow, measured.

"Descendant of Cleomenes I, brother of the illustrious king Leonidas," Teya whispers with pride.  
"And the only woman fighting for the Terrans today."

A flash cuts the air: a long dagger.  
Artemis lifts her shield high and draws her weapon on instinct; the clash rings out, sharp. Already the Esrepian leaps from the rocks, double-edged saber in hand.  
The blades collide, fast, brutal.  
Artemis's short sword flies into the dust.

But her arm does not tremble.  
She extends her hand: her triangular-tipped spear leaves the saddle and springs into her palm. In one single movement, she drives it through her opponent's chest.

The body collapses halfway over a rock. Artemis, panting, lets her joy burst out beneath the helmet.

•

Teya, standing in the hall, smiles faintly.  
"The magnetic bracelet," she murmurs.  
"The weapon obeys the soul that bears it."

Andy steps back, breath short, eyes locked on the battlefield.  
"Why? Why this galactic tournament?" he whispers, livid.

Teya approaches, lays her hands on his shoulders, her face so close her breath brushes his.  
"Four planets with humanoid imprint: Esrepians, Lacterians, Xiorcians and Terrans.  
They vie for victory.  
As I already said, fight after fight, only one people will remain... and a single chosen one."

She looks straight into his eyes.  
"All have been chosen for their abilities... and their ancestral heritage.  
Here, no firearms. No artifices.  
Only flesh, mind, and the memory of blood matter."

She tilts her head, a troubling smile on her lips:  
“...and sometimes a little more than that.”

“This is madness,” Andy murmurs.

Teya laughs, a clear, almost human laugh that breaks off at once.  
She turns back toward the arena.

•

In the arena, the river shimmers over the gravel; the shallow water lets the light of the sun, already past its zenith, play across its surface, marking time.  
Downstream, on the north side, Vlad Baranovski, a sixteenth-century Cossack, rides at full speed.  
Descendant of the conqueror Yermak Timofeyevich, he grips his saber in one hand, his whip in the other.  
His saddle is loaded with weapons: mace, bow, pike, hammer.

An Esrepian bursts in on the south side, shield in hand. The two warriors cross the river. The head-on collision is violent. Vlad is thrown, falls into the water, then rises again, drenched. Already the whip snaps, wrapping around his enemy’s legs.  
The body falls. The shield shatters.  
Vlad’s saber follows, driving straight through the adversary’s chest.

Slowly, the body releases its blood into the current, to the rough, satisfied chuckle of Vlad.

•

Teya, in the hall, remains standing, motionless.  
Her fists clench, her features stay impassive.  
Then, slowly, she turns back to Andy.

“I was born from Terran genetic extraction,” she says calmly.  
“Like the three other envoys of this tournament.  
We are hybrids created to serve the Sages.”

Her arms open, presenting her perfect body.  
“We are not the chosen ones, Andy.  
Only bridges.”

Outside, the sun begins its descent toward shadow.  
The plain grows darker.

Teya steps closer to him, her face lit by a strange fervor.  
“The Sages seek to extract, from among the victors, the purest genotype.  
A flawless heritage. An inalterable legacy.  
They want to create a new combination: the perfect Yarasian race.”

Her breathing slows.

She moves closer still, presses her lips to Andy's, a brief touch suspended in silence. Then her mouth glides along his cheek, her tongue brushing his ear.

"You are an irreproachable descendant," she murmurs.

"The Sages waited for your mourning to end before choosing you.

You are the last. The one who closes the circle."

Her lips quiver.

"If you triumph, your race will be spared extinction."

Suddenly, Teya stiffens.

Her arms fall, her features harden.

"But if our delegation falls... I will die as well."

A nervous laugh seizes her. She steps back, theatrical:

"That would be a waste, don't you think?"

Andy looks away, pulls the crumpled family photo from his pocket.

His face hardens.

"I want it to end."

## CHAPTER 5 : Blood and Metal

In the arena, the sun is descending.  
The plain is draped in copper-gold.  
The final cycle approaches.

On the heights of the hill, bordered by giant cacti and stones heated white, Kaan Arslan, a fifteenth-century Turk, advances.  
Direct descendant of an officer under Sultan Mehmet II, he wears the attire of conquerors: dark leather, iron belt, long sword in hand.  
His face is grave, marked with the fierce nobility of the old soldiers of the Empire.

“Here is Kaan Arslan, son of fire and the crescent,” announces Teya in a solemn voice.

Facing him, Pilôsitt appears.  
Chief of the Esrepians, he stands on his ivory mount, golden cuirass, helmet crowned with three golden spikes the all-powerful emblem of his people.  
His single eye gleams like a cold flame.

The two warriors watch each other.  
A silence. Then they charge.

Clash of steel. Bursts of dust.  
The sabers collide, whistle, bite into the burning air.  
Pilôsitt, faster, deploys a glittering net and throws it: the mesh of energy coils around Kaan.  
The air burns, the metal screams.  
Kaan tries to call his spear.

“Come!” he growls, voice strangled.

Too late.  
Pilôsitt’s saber comes down again and again.  
The blows fall like a rain of lightning.  
Kaan’s body collapses.  
Blood feeds the earth.

The Esrepian chief rises, triumphant.  
He lifts his saber toward the sky, roars his victory, then slowly turns the blade toward the observation hall.  
A silent challenge, aimed directly at Teya.

•

Teya remains straight, jaw clenched.  
Silence freezes inside the hall.

She fixes her gaze on the arena, still trembling with dust and blood.  
Her fists tighten, her face tenses. Then suddenly, a cry bursts from her:

“Pilôsitt! Be accursed!”

She closes her eyes slowly. A long breath crosses her chest.  
When she opens them again, a glacial smile, almost amused, touches her lips.

“We have won nevertheless,” she says in a low voice, strangely serene. “Our first battle.”

Andy looks at her, stunned, jaw tight.  
“I don’t believe this... What are you, exactly?!”

Teya’s laugh dies at once.  
She pivots toward him, her gaze suddenly as sharp as glass.

“Believe it,” she answers simply.

She slowly raises her eyes toward the ceiling, as if invoking an invisible presence.  
Her voice takes on a solemn, almost ritual tone:

“The Sages had all the participants’ weapons forged from an ancient ore, extracted from the very core of Yaras.  
A metal charged with memory and wisdom.  
For you Terrans, that ore was fused with the metals of Earth.  
Every blade, every fiber holds a fragment of their memory... and yours.”

She steps closer, her gaze plunging into Andy’s, hypnotic.

“These weapons now listen to the heart of their bearer.  
They answer virtue, inner strength.  
To master them fully, you must find perfect symbiosis between the soul and the sacred metal.”

A glimmer crosses her features.  
Her tone becomes almost a whisper.

“But this metal... also has a power.”

Andy jerks away, nerves raw.  
He walks across the room, hands clenched.

“I don’t give a damn about your story! Or your Sages! Or you! And especially not about your so-called magical metal!”

Teya narrows her eyes. A predatory smile forms on her lips.

“You have no choice, Andy.  
You live... or you die.”

He freezes. His voice falls, dark, cutting.

“Then I want to die.”

She steps forward. Their faces nearly touch. The silence turns electric.

“You say that... but the Sages did not choose you to die.  
Not like this, at least.”

She pivots, her step gliding across the floor like a wave.  
Without turning back, she adds:

“Your brothers-in-arms are waiting for you in the great hall.  
And if you try to escape... the magnetic barriers will nullify your actions and worse, they  
would strike you down on the spot.”

The door opens in a breath of translucent light, then closes behind her at once.

Andy is left alone.  
Silence weighs. His breath quickens.

“What... what the hell is this?!”

Suddenly, behind him, the wall wavers.  
Part of it becomes transparent, rippling, bathed in blue light.  
The brightness spreads slowly, forming the silhouette of a passage.

Andy freezes, fascinated.  
The room seems to breathe around him.  
Then, without a word, the light intensifies and envelops him.

## CHAPTER 6 : Heritage of Blood

The translucent wall opens before Andy.

Above it, a suspended clock displays: Day +2 – 18:00, Greenwich Meridian.

Beyond the threshold lies a vast white room, smooth, without shadows, where every sound seems absorbed by the walls.

Eleven warriors await him, aligned like a silent frontier.

Five of them still bear the dust, wounds, and dried blood of battle.

All of them stare at him, motionless.

Andy crosses the passage, trembling, throat tight.

Then his anger erupts:

“Get away from me! I don’t want to be part of your masquerade!”

A breath passes through the group, faint, like a whisper of wind.

A man steps forward, a slight smile on his lips, voice deep and warm, marked by a French accent.

“Rome took him from his home, beat him, broke him... and forced him to fight for it,” he says.

“But the auxiliary would become a leader.”

Andy steps back, hands open.

“What the hell are you talking about?!”

Another steps forward.

Broad, noble, with calm and deep eyes: Bongani Zuma.

“The leader will desert, be captured. As a slave, he will be reborn as a gladiator in the service of a perverse master.”

Andy frowns, breath short.

“This is madness...”

The Scandinavian, Solveig Berglund, inclines her head.

Her voice, clear and cold as a blade, cuts the air:

“And this gladiator will rebel.

He will raise an army of insurgents and fight for freedom for all.”

Andy staggers, tears blurring his vision.

The Russian, Vlad Baranovski, steps forward in turn, his tone low and measured:

“This Thracian will give his life to defy Rome and give the oppressed room to breathe.”



A cry escapes him:

“But... who are you talking about?!”

The last one, Mehdi Boukhara, approaches.  
His gaze is kind, his tone grave but luminous:

“About your blood, Andy Storm.  
You are the descendant of Spartacus.”

A heavy silence falls.  
Something cracks inside Andy, like an invisible dam breaking.  
His anger rises, pure, raw, incandescent.

“My parents died while the authorities didn’t give a damn!  
You think I’m going to fall into your delusion?!  
Believe that Spartacus is inside me? You’re all insane!  
I won’t give my life for that humanity!  
I’d rather die than fight for it!”

The words explode in the room like a detonation.  
The warriors remain silent, statues of shadow and light.  
Andy sways, gasps... collapses onto the trembling floor, eyes closed.

•

When he opens his eyes, the light burns him.  
He floats, naked, suspended in a translucent cocoon.  
Below him, a white slab streaked with golden veins pulses softly.  
Warmth flows into his skin, slips through his veins, down to his marrow.  
His breathing grows deep, slow, almost hypnotic.

Then the light fades.  
His body lowers, settles on the ground.  
He rises, panting, drenched in sweat.

Teya is there.  
Arms crossed, diaphanous dress, heels tapping on the polished floor.  
Her gaze is fixed, impenetrable.

“Wake up, Andy. You are finally ready.”

He lifts his head, still groggy.  
“Why am I... naked? What did you do to me?”

Teya circles him, slow, precise, almost feline.

“They all reacted like you,” she says.  
“Alain vomited everything. Solveig cried for hours. Bongani tried to run.”

“What are you talking about?!”

She stops. Just a few centimeters from him.  
Her eyes shine with an oddly human gleam.

“Andy will remain Andy.  
But your ancestral genome has been activated.  
Your cells now carry the imprint of the famous Thracian who came before you.”

She inhales near his chest, a gesture both scientific and animal.

“Spartacus lives in you.  
He fought for his cause.  
Find your own... or death will wait for you.”

Andy lowers his eyes.  
His laugh is short, broken.

“Death would be welcome.”

Teya stares at him, stunned.  
A breath escapes her lips, almost a sigh.

“Humans are truly... surprising.”

She turns away, walks toward the exit.  
Before crossing the threshold, she turns just slightly.

“Your brothers-in-arms await you in the mourning hall.  
We honor Kaan Arslan, fallen today.”

The door opens, light expands, then closes again.  
Andy remains alone.

He watches his hands tremble, the golden veins pulsing under his skin.  
His reflection, on the gleaming floor, shows a face he no longer recognizes.  
Between earth and star, between man and myth.

## CHAPTER 7 : Mourning and Lineage

The room is dark, lit by bluish torches that vibrate like halos of water.  
The air smells of wax, iron, and the dust of battles.  
The eleven warriors, draped in Turkish funeral tunics, stand bowed and motionless.

At the center rests Kaan Arslan. His face, peaceful, still bears the dignity of a warrior fallen standing.

Alain Larroque steps forward, followed by Artemis Solomos.  
Andy, head lowered, timidly crosses the circle of silence and bows.

“I... I wanted to apologize for earlier. And introduce myself.”

Artemis lifts an eyebrow, a dry smile on her lips.  
“He finally came,” she says. “Anyway, we won’t have time to live together. He’ll be dead soon.”

Alain extends a hand, his tone calm.  
“Welcome among us, even if the place... is far from ideal. I am Alain Larroque, the Frenchman, and this is”

Andy interrupts him, without looking away from Artemis.  
“We met during the previous campaign.”

She looks aside, grimaces, then turns back toward the body.

Alain shakes Andy’s hand, a brief smile at the corner of his lips.  
“This is Kaan, the valiant,” he murmurs. “Killed under the blade of Pilôsitt, the Esrepian chief.”

Silence returns, thick, trembling with the crackling of the torches.  
Andy lowers his head.  
Something awakens inside him an ancient, visceral feeling, like an ember in the ashes.

“Teya told me... about all this madness,” he whispers.

Alain gives a nervous smile.  
“Artemis is right: time is against us.  
I didn’t believe it either... until the truth forced itself on me.”

He gazes at his hands, as if discovering them.  
“Never would I have imagined I was descended from Vercingetorix.  
And to think I work for justice...”

“You’re a policeman?” Andy asks.

“A lawyer, in Paris.  
And I live with my partner. Her little girl is two.  
I’m already loaded with responsibility,” he adds with a tired laugh.

A dry silhouette moves forward, sharp as a blade: Izumi Ito.

“Teya also told you Kaan had a brilliant future as a hairdresser in Istanbul? That he lived with his partner?”

Alain freezes, embarrassed.

“Let me introduce Izumi Ito,” he sighs. “Descendant of the fearsome Tomoe Gozen, samurai general, feared in her time. She lives alone and works in Tokyo... as a waitress. Imagine.”

“Hello, Izumi,” Andy says, offering his hand.

Alain then designates the rest of the group.

“These are the ones you haven’t greeted yet: Warrent Warwick, the Englishman, descendant of Edward the Black Prince; Youcheng Qiang, the Chinese, descendant of the great Xiang Yu; and Solveig Berglund, Viking through Inghean Ruaidh, the ‘Red Girl.’”

Lobsang Kuchar, massive and calm, gently lays his hands on Izumi’s shoulders.  
“Calm yourself, Izumi.”

She pulls away, furious, her gaze fixed on Andy.

“And Diego Fuentes? Did they tell you about him?”

Lobsang holds her with a firm gesture, then turns to Andy, his voice steady.

“I greet you, Andy Storm. Lobsang Kuchar, descendant of Emperor Genghis Khan.  
And, while we’re at it, I study botany. I live with my family in Tibet.”

“He must know,” Izumi cuts in coldly. “We are laboratory rats. Whether he wants it or not, he is one of us.”

Artemis straightens, rigid and impassive.

“Diego was a banker in Switzerland. He was supposed to get married in Mexico.  
Tusulac, the Xiorcian war chief, killed him with his triple blade during the previous campaign.”

Vlad Baranovski steps in, calm voice steady.

“Artemis, give him time. Let us first honor our brother.”

Andy nods, then asks, hesitant:

“How is it possible that we all understand each other, despite our languages, our countries?”

In the shadows, Warrent Warwick chuckles softly.

“She stuck something in us... who knows where.”

“Nice to meet you, Warrent,” Andy murmurs.

The English knight checks himself, mock-worried.  
“Well, magic or not, we are international, my dear fellow.”

Mehdi Boukhara speaks up, composed:  
“The Sages have opened, through our minds, the ability to understand and speak with one voice.  
To communicate without tearing each other apart.”

He gestures to gather the group.  
Clayton, Bongani, Solveig, and Youcheng still kneeling in prayer rise slowly.

“Come. Let us accompany Kaan on his final journey.”

A long silence.  
They all gather around the body and bow.

•

Later, the great hall fills with a muffled bustle.  
Armor has been replaced by simple clothing.  
Tension softens, almost human.

Andy approaches Bongani and Warrent, a drink in hand.

Bongani laughs, his eyes bright in the torchlight.  
“I lived in Belgium, with my partner. I was an insurance agent.  
And here I learn my ancestor was a conqueror of southern Africa.”

“Bongani, where exactly are we? Yaras, yes... but here?”

“Under a colossal dome,” he replies. “The warrior city.  
Us... and our enemies.  
We live in the Terran enclave. No exit possible.”

Izumi appears, face locked, anger vibrating.  
“Rats in a magical world. Destined to die in color, arena after arena.”

“The winning race gets to choose its preferred battlefield,” Andy counters.  
“That’s a major advantage.”

“Grotesque,” she snaps, before disappearing into the crowd.

Andy turns to Warrent.  
“What’s your story, Warrent?”

Warrent smiles, nervous, weary with too much clarity.  
“I’m a firefighter in London,” he says with an insolent grin.  
“I live alone, and I like... female conquests. It’s like a sacred fire in me I always need to put them out.  
And now... here I am, intergalactic gladiator.”

He raises his glass, bitter.  
“To the glory of the living, and the memory of the dead.”

Andy nods, gaze lost in the blue flames.  
Under the cold light of the dome, a low premonition rises in him.  
Something great, unavoidable, is beginning to move.

He smiles, despite himself, then asks more seriously:  
“And our enemies? What do they really look like?”

Warrent shrugs, half-mocking.  
“I expected movie monsters. But no.”  
He leans in, confidential:  
“Behind the mask, we get... a distant cousin.”

“A distant cousin?” Andy repeats.

“I was hoping for Chewbacca, you know,” Warrent sighs, theatrically disappointed.

Clayton Abeytu steps in, jaw tense.  
“Enough jokes. If you don’t take this seriously, Englishman, you’ll be next.”

Warrent straightens, provocative.  
“You want to feed the roots from above, botanist?”

“I work on living beings, not plants,” Clayton growls, forehead pressed against his.

“I won’t see the difference,” Warrent answers, a predatory grin at his lips.

Mehdi intervenes, voice deep, imposing and calm.  
“Enough. Our fates are bound.”

“You’re right, Mehdi.”

A sharp voice cracks from above.  
Teya descends the ramp, dressed in black, tall silhouette, extravagant hat, queenly bearing.  
The hall falls silent.

Warrent shivers, whispering:  
“Every time she enters, I”

“You seriously have a problem,” Youcheng sighs.

“I am only expressing my noblest intentions,” Warrent replies, unfazed.

“Shut up,” Clayton growls.

Teya stops before the group.  
She closes her eyes briefly, her face austere.

“First,” she says calmly, “my condolences.”

Artemis mutters, arms crossed:

“Stop your theatrics, you”

Teya opens her eyes again, smiling wide, almost kind.

“Tomorrow morning, third Earth day: three of our warriors will face three Lacterians.”

Her gaze catches Andy.

“It will be your first duel, Andy Storm. May it be memorable... or you will die.”

Her eyes slide to Izumi, then to Solveig.

“You will be surrounded by experts. You will progress quickly.”

She inclines her head, almost teasing.

“See you at dawn... on the battlefield.”

She turns away, leaving behind her a trail of perfume and tension.

“What did I say,” Artemis grumbles, arms crossed.

Andy’s face stiffens. Fear crosses him, but he remains standing.

Solveig, tall and red-haired, athletic silhouette, watches him sideways, her eyes narrowed between concern and challenge.

## CHAPTER 8 : The Drakkar of Three

Dawn splits the horizon.

In the arena, the setting has transformed: a sea of steel stretches as far as the eye can see.

A drakkar slices through the waves, its prow carved into a streaming dragon. The wind lashes their faces, foam splashes the shields.

The cries of gulls pierce the salty air.

Andy stands on deck, clinging to the central mast, wearing the gear of a Roman auxiliary: dark cuirass, bronze bracers, short gladius. The sea air clings to his skin.

At the prow, Solveig Berglund keeps watch, her gaze fixed on the gray line of the sea.

“We won against the Esrepians,” she reminds him without turning.

“I requested a calmer environment... so you could adjust.”

Andy turns pale, a hand over his mouth.

“We’re going to fight... at sea?”

He looks up at the sky.

“I didn’t think battle arenas were so faithful to reality... even their gulls look happy!”

Solveig laughs, a clear burst in the wind.

“Yes. We are approaching the Irish coast. A wide beach awaits us there.”

She tucks a strand of long red hair behind her ear.

“I’m Swedish, descendant of Inghean Ruaidh, Viking leader and feared strategist.”

“And on Earth, what did you do?” Andy asks.

“Architecture studies,” she says simply.

“I’m twenty-one, I have a girlfriend, and I still live with my parents.”

Andy nods.

“I’m twenty. Studying construction management in Cleveland.

I lived with my older sister, Lindsay, in our parents’ house... they died recently.”

A fragile silence links them.

Then the snapping sails tear it apart.

Solveig smiles, a little forced.

“The Sages gathered candidates from all backgrounds, but almost all around twenty. Why so young?”

“We are the instruments of the Sages,” Izumi Ito answers from the stern, her voice cold.

“Testosterone multiplied by ten. At that age, you fear nothing. You dare everything.”



Solveig adds, more gravely:

“The Sages of Yaras... a cold, rational power. They manipulate life itself.”

The drakkar cuts through the foam.

In the distance, a strip of sand glows beneath the rising sun.

Three figures wait, helmeted, their opalescent armor reflecting the light like mirrors.

At the stern, Izumi adjusts the straps of the horses equipped with weapons.

Two bear flags, Japan and Sweden; the third, bare, sways with the swell.

Andy points to the bannerless stallion.

“And mine?”

Izumi, without blinking:

“There is no flag for... bastards.”

The word strikes Andy like a blade.

His face hardens.

Solveig lays a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“It’s not an insult,” she says softly.

“Your ancestor came from Thrace: a vague, shifting land. No nation, no banner.”

Izumi draws her blade, examines it in the morning light.

“Spartacus: perhaps a slave, perhaps a soldier, perhaps a king.

No one knows. But he came from Southeastern Europe.”

Solveig withdraws her hand, embarrassed.

“You see... no banner possible.”

“I was born in America!” Andy chokes.

“The Yarasians don’t care about your homeland,” Izumi cuts sharply.

“They believe only in heredity.”

The wind fills the sails, the drakkar speeds on.

The battle approaches.

The sand nears.

And Andy, between the two women, feels the weight of a heritage he never asked for rise in his chest.

Solveig resumes, softer:

“We are no longer only ourselves, Andy. Our ancestral genes live in our veins. Even without training, they guide us.”

“The activation in the awakening chamber...” Andy murmurs, thoughtful.

Izumi inclines her head.

“Exactly. And our horses are mechanized. They will follow you, return your weapon to you if

you fall. And if the battle is not finished within the allotted time, whatever the severity of your injuries, an energy barrier will separate you.”

She fixes him with a cold stare.

“Don’t even try to cross it, or your body will receive an electric discharge so strong you’ll be numb for hours.”

Solveig frowns, lifting her chin.

“We’re arriving.”

The Irish coast stretches on the horizon, cold, golden under the morning wind.

Andy fixes the trembling light in the distance.

“I had the most restless night of my life.”

Solveig gives him a light smile.

“We all do.”

She turns toward him.

“Let Spartacus take control. Everything will be fine.”

## CHAPTER 9 : Blood and Sea

The drakkar crashes ashore in a dull thud on a vast stretch of sand.  
The three Terrans dismount, heavy hooves, armor gleaming under the rising sun.

Across the bay, three silhouettes advance: the Lacterians.  
Short, stocky, covered in pearly armor.  
A mane of black fur covers their nape.  
Their large, milky-blue eyes pulse like a heart.

“The Lacterians,” Solveig announces, shifting her shield onto her shoulder.  
“We told you, Andy they are hermaphrodites, which increases their endurance.”

She gives a brief smile.  
“A bit like the Esrepians, who are asexual. Only the Xiorcians are like us sexed.”

Izumi, unflinching, summarizes in a calm tone:  
“Left: two short sickles.  
Center: a toothed club.  
Right: a balanced double-spear.”

Solveig frowns.  
“Their leader, Manamra, isn’t here.”

“Manamra?” Andy repeats.

“Descendant of King Braca,” Solveig explains.  
“Jester mask, twin sickles, speed and precision.”

She observes the wind.  
“They come from the Rule Arm. Their planet: Lactaria.”

Solveig tightens the haft of her long axe.  
“I’m taking the left. Kill before you are killed. And let your ancestor act. Don’t fight him.”

Izumi nods.  
“The Lacterians are legends. Stay on your guard.”

The drakkar, emptied of its crew, drifts away slowly with the tide.  
The three Terrans advance into the wind, sand whipping their faces, their mounts following behind.

They separate, each meeting their opponent.  
The Lacterians run barefoot toward them, fast, eager to clash.

•

In the suspended observation chamber, Teya watches the scene.  
Her features are frozen. The warriors around her hold their breath.

“Begin,” she whispers.

•

On the beach, Izumi confronts her opponent.  
She draws her long sword, grips it with both hands, leaps.  
Her blade whistles through the air.

The Lactérien with the double-spear blocks, pivots, strikes.  
But she is already behind him.

A clean, precise gesture: the throat opens.  
The enemy collapses, the sand soaking in milky blood.

Izumi bows, respectful, then wipes her blade with a slow motion.

To the left, Solveig fights the opponent with the short sickles.  
The duel is sharp, balanced; each breath is a decision.

A cry erupts from the center: Andy staggers.

“No!” Solveig shouts, stunned.

The distraction costs her dearly  
a kick throws her backward.  
A sickle slices, cuts her right cheek, a jet of blood staining her tunic.

Enraged, she throws her shield, calls her axe.  
The weapon leaps from the saddle into her palm.  
With a double scissor motion axe and sword she cleaves head and torso.  
The Lactérien falls, inert, his blood spreading across the sand.

At the center, Andy wavers, his face ravaged by fear.  
His gladius trembles in his hand.

The Lactérien with the toothed club roars, strikes again and again.  
Andy calls his shield with the bracelet: the buckler leaves the saddle and slams into his arm.  
The impact is brutal; he falls, rises, absorbs the blows.

The strikes rain down. He tries to counter, without conviction.  
A hit, a misstep his arm breaks.

A scream rips the beach.  
The shield rolls away. Andy retreats, on his knees, bloodied, gasping.

The Lactérien approaches, club lifted to finish him.

“Let me die in peace!” Andy screams.

The Lactérien gives a guttural cry and prepares to strike but Solveig has already moved.

She lifts her head: the sun is at its zenith.

She runs, arm extended, calling her spear.

The weapon tears free from the saddle, slices through the air, slaps into her palm, then flies straight ahead.

The club comes down too late.

The spear pierces the Lactérien’s skull.

His body falls backward, struck down.

Solveig reaches Andy, breathless.

“Hold on! The fight ended before the time limit. You’ll get medical care!”

Izumi joins them, icy gaze.

“You don’t intervene for another! It’s the rule.”

“Care is allowed!” Solveig snaps, her anger barely contained.

“Where is that damn survival unit?!”

Izumi points south.

A yellow-red metallic pod rises from the sea, glides above the sand, and splits open.

Surgical tendrils unfold, wrap around Andy, lift him, swallow him.

The lid snaps shut in a sharp hiss.

•

Inside, Andy floats in an oxygenated green liquid.

The tendrils move across his body, resetting his ribcage, straightening the broken forearm, closing the wounds.

A muffled scream rises then stillness.

Pain dissolves.

•

Later.

Andy rests in a cradle of white granite, submerged to the neck in a transparent gel.

The room hums softly.

Solveig watches over him, standing, hands clasped.

Teya enters, dark silhouette, expression impassive.

She approaches, stands to his right.

“He will recover,” Solveig says.

Teya studies the slow rhythm of his breathing.

“Yes. And he will learn.”

She inclines her head, her tone deepening.

“Today, he failed.”

A pause.

“Tomorrow, he will lead.”

The gel shivers.

Andy’s breathing grows stronger.

“He is in pain,” Teya notes, without visible emotion.

Solveig averts her gaze, lowering her voice:

“He is being reborn.”

Teya closes her eyes slowly.

In the green light, Andy’s face softens.

Between death and resurrection, the shadow of the gladiator begins to take shape.

## CHAPTER 10 : The Awakening of Blood

Teya straightens proudly, then turns her head slowly toward Solveig with authority.

“Your intervention earlier was not legal.  
Fortunately, I barely managed to obtain an exemption. He will remain in the group.  
The Sages will not hold it against you... this time.”

She steps closer, her gaze hardening.

“But for you, there will be no second chance.  
If you do it again, death is certain.”

Solveig holds her gaze, unflinching.

“He deserved a second chance.  
And I deserved hope.”

She moves even closer, so near their breaths mingle.

“You, on the other hand, suffer from a serious lack of empathy.  
Not to say... alexithymia.”

She laughs a clear, sharp laugh like a blade and flicks the tip of her tongue against Teya’s nose.

“If you know what I mean.”

Teya remains stone-still.

Solveig turns away, spins on her heels, leaves the room with brisk, ringing steps.

A long silence.

Then slowly, Teya’s lips curve into a discreet smile.

“Thank you anyway,” she murmurs.

She leans toward Andy, lying in the vibrating gel.

“Come back, Spartacus.”

She slips out.  
The door closes in a bluish sigh.

The gel begins to pulse gently around the young man's body.  
Andy squints, trembles, his muscles tightening.  
A dream seizes him and pulls him away.

•

In a living room bathed in soft light, Andy laughs, sprawled on a couch.  
He eats sweet popcorn.  
His parents laugh with him happy, serene.  
The television plays an old comedy.  
The smell of warm butter fills the room.  
Peace.

But slowly, the chairs sink into the floor.  
The walls distort, the laughter muffles.

Andy sits upright, panic on his lips.

“What’s happening?!”

His mother smiles at him, peaceful.

“Don’t worry, Andy. The company will pay for the treatment.  
The state will acknowledge our illness from asbestos.”

Andy steps back, hits an invisible wall.

“Lies! They don’t care about you!”

His father extends his hand, thumb raised.

“Have faith. America won’t forget us.”

“I don’t want to lose you!” Andy screams, hands outstretched.

But the chairs sink deeper, swallowing his parents.  
Their faces fade into gray light.  
Then nothing.

Andy falls to his knees.

“I hate this society!”

He pounds the floor, voice torn.

“I hate this country! I hate this injustice!”

The ground gives way beneath him.  
He sinks slowly chest... neck... eyes...



A hand bursts forth.  
Strong, calloused, powerful.  
It grasps his.

A helmeted gladiator stands before him.  
Spartacus.  
His gaze is that of a chained king, a man free in death.  
A flame burns in his pupils.

“Let me rise,” Andy proclaims, his voice changed, filled with a new breath.

The giant inclines his head, smiling.  
Around them, the world trembles.  
Chains shatter.  
Arena sands rise in clouds of gold.

Andy stands.  
His veins swell.  
His muscles carve themselves as if forged in flame.  
His skin bristles, his eyes open on a living fire.  
His pupils burst into vast, burning colors.

•

Andy erupts from the gel with a roar.  
His head snaps back, his chest rises, his arms splash the translucent substance.  
His pupils shine like two suns in fusion.  
He spits the liquid, gasping, roaring again.

The whole room trembles.  
The walls vibrate, the gel churns, lights flicker.  
The breath of his rebirth makes the floor tiles bend.

In his eyes...  
something very ancient has awakened.  
An inheritance.  
A fire.  
A cry from the depths of ages  
the cry of a man who once defied an Empire...

and whom even the stars could not extinguish.

## CHAPTER 11 : The Breath of the Earthling

The room was sterile, its walls smooth, indifferent, almost odorless.  
Andy stood there, almost naked, on the cold beige tile, facing his own reflection.  
Morning light filtered through the window, brushing his skin with pale glimmers where the heaviness of sleep and the tension of awakening still mingled.

Slowly, he reached toward an old CD radio, a relic of another century, stained with dust and memories.

A click, a shiver of electricity, then Kurt Cobain's raspy voice filled the room: *Rape Me*.  
The sound, raw, loud and alive, made the walls tremble. Like an invocation.

Then something awoke around him.

Mechanical arms emerged from the ceiling, animated with an almost human precision.  
They seized one by one the pieces of an ancient armor leather, bronze, polished iron.  
Each part locked onto his body with the rigor of a ritual.  
The breastplate clasped against his chest, the greaves snapped onto his legs, the cape unfurled in a warm breath of air.  
Finally, the Roman helmet descended slowly over his head, symbol of the warrior he was becoming.

His eyes lit with a new glow, cold, determined, almost sacred.  
He was no longer a man.  
He was a soldier.

•

Dust rose, the sand burned under his steps.  
The Giza arena roared with a thousand invisible voices, as if the pharaohs' ghosts witnessed the battle.  
In front of him, an Esrepian, tall and tense, watched him through his translucent helm.

The clash of shields burst like dry thunder.  
Above the pyramids, the hanging sun carved their silhouettes in a halo of gold and blood.  
Every strike became prayer.  
Every shout, an offering to war.

Under his helmet, Andy dripped with sweat.  
He struck, endured, resisted.  
In his arm vibrated the weight of the Earth; in his heart, the rage of a people he no longer understood.

Then suddenly, a blue flash erupted.

The energy barrier lit up, spread its invisible web and separated them.  
An unreal silence fell on the burning sand.

And already, the wind of another world was rising.

•

The desert dust faded in the wind and became urban mist.  
Now, iron ruled the sky.

Under the twisted carcass of the Eiffel Tower, Andy faced a Lactérien with ruddy skin, squat, covered in nacre armor.  
A mane of dark hair ran down the back of its neck.  
Its shield and double-edged sabre gleamed with murderous intent.

The air was dense, saturated with memory and rust.  
Sweat pooled in Andy's growing stubble, sliding down his throat like a salty stream.  
Their shields clashed with the fury of ancient legions brought back to life.

Andy stepped back, fainted, called his spear.  
He spun it, raised it, and struck.

The adversary's cry tore the daylight; blood fell on the cobblestones like a fine rain.

But the light, capricious, twisted suddenly:  
the energy boundary rose again, guardian of fate, isolating them in two worlds impossible to reach.

Silence returned, heavy, suspended.  
A single heartbeat, and war began anew elsewhere.

•

The sky of Washington tinted itself with copper and fire.  
The columns of the Lincoln Memorial stood tall, white and silent, witnesses to a battle without homeland.

Andy, aged now by effort, wore on his face the beard of survivors.  
Before him advanced a colossal Xiorcian, dark leather and muscles of iron, moving with the slowness of a coming storm.

Andy called his shield.  
The impact was brutal, animal, almost intimate.  
Their breaths mingled; their shields thundered like a gathering tempest.

Andy pivoted, hooked, chained his movements.  
His blade found the opening, drove itself repeatedly into the foreign flesh.

The Xiorcian staggered, then collapsed, blood flowing in dark streams.  
Andy raised his arms, his mouth open in a cry of release, a cry of man, of beast, of memory.  
Its echo rippled through the white columns, which seemed to tremble.

Thus ended another battle.  
And already, the day drifted toward the night of the heart.

## CHAPTER 12 : The Blood of Allies

Night fell, slow and gentle.

Under the translucent dome of the Terran dwelling, the dining hall stretched wide and warm. The walls diffused a golden light, almost liquid, like a tamed twilight.

Andy crossed the room with a steady step, his beard freshly shaved, his features calm but his gaze still burning with fire.

His mid-length hair brushed his temples; his body, denser now, carried discipline and mastered rage.

Before him, a large oval table supported by a trunk of organic material gathered the warriors of the world.

Some seats remained empty Diego, Kaan names suspended in memory like silent prayers.

The breath of the Earthling had awakened.

And in his veins, the echo of the gladiator still burned.

“Look who’s here,” Artémis said, an acidic smile on her lips.

“Would’ve been better if he died in the first fight,” Izumi sneered, her tone icy.

Solveig straightened, her eyes flashing like a blade of frost.

“What’s your problem?”

Her words cracked in the air like slaps.

A shiver ran along the table.

Mehdi raised his hands, calm and steady.

“Peace, ladies. Staying united will serve us better.”

Andy stepped forward silently.

Lobsang pointed to an empty seat.

“That was Diego’s.”

Andy sat slowly and bowed his head in respect.

A breath crossed the room.

Warrent, leaning back in his chair, allowed himself half a smile.

“I pretend they’re still here. Gives me appetite.”

“They’re dead, that’s it,” Clayton said, voice hard as flint.

Silence fell again, thick as ash.

Youcheng inclined himself toward Andy.

“I wish you a good meal, brother. I am Youcheng Qiang, a schoolteacher in Beijing.

I left behind my partner, Chang... and my students.  
A great commander lives within me now, and fights with me.”

Warrent, still mocking:

“Congrats on killing that Xiorcian. The fewer they are, the better for us.  
But be careful: their chief, Tusulac, won’t forget you.”

Andy raised his head, frowning.

“Tusulac?”

“Yes,” Alain Larroque replied. “The most fearsome of them all.  
He crushes to rule. With them it’s simple: ‘walk or die’, glory to the elite.  
The Xiorc race comes from the Shield–Cross Arm of the Milky Way.  
Not so far from home, apparently.”

Vlad cut in firmly:

“Let him eat. Here, anything you want is within reach. You only have to think of it.”

Andy set his palm on the table.

A soft vibration ran under the surface.

At the center, a dish formed steaming, real: a hamburger, golden fries, and the smell of nostalgia.

He smiled, simple and almost childlike, and took a bite of the warm bread.

“Tell me, Andy,” Bongani asked, curious. “What changed you? Why live, after wanting to die?”

Andy chewed slowly, dipped a fry in sauce, then looked up.

“My parents. Their death... their betrayal.

They believed in a country that rejected them.

I fight for them.”

Silence fell once again, heavy and deep.

Mehdi nodded.

“Every cause worth living is worth fighting for, brother.”

Clayton slammed his fist onto the table, indignant.

“You talk about a country you criticize! How can you deny its values?

I have more reasons to hate that flag: Native Americans were chased, massacred, stripped of their land without mercy.

And yet, today, my people honor that symbol above all.

You have to turn the page, Andy. Even the painful ones.

Patriotism lives in each of us.”

Solveig rose then, her clear voice slicing through the silence:

“Like all of us, he didn’t ask for this. We were abducted to entertain a dying civilization.”

“Solveig is right,” Mehdi said quietly.  
“Even without a flag, he is one of us.”

Lobsang clapped softly, calming the room.  
“At least it’s clear. Welcome among us, brother-in-arms.”

Clayton lowered his head, disappointed, jaw clenched.  
Around the table, the voices rose again, dissonant.

Izumi muttered, furious.  
Artémis spat her contempt:  
“Teya owes us explanations!”

A soft yet firm voice cut them clean:  
“No, Artémis. The Sages have nothing to hide.”

Teya had entered.

Her silhouette glided through the golden light like a fluid flame.  
Her attire, woven with threads of gold and light, seemed alive.  
She approached slowly, her crystal eyes sweeping the room.

“Andy was chosen for what he carries within,” she said.  
“The blood of an ancestor who sacrificed himself for freedom.  
The Sages saw in him what humanity has lost: faith in mankind.”

A solemn silence fell.  
Solveig placed a firm hand on Andy’s shoulder.  
“He will have our support, whatever comes.”

Artémis looked away, teeth clenched.  
“I don’t give much for his chances.”

“He’ll do what we all must,” Solveig replied.  
“What he was destined for.”

Teya watched the scene, her gaze sliding from one face to another.  
But inside the perfect blue of her eyes, something trembled a fracture she quickly suffocated.

When she spoke again, her voice quivered almost imperceptibly:  
“Tomorrow, some of you will face the Lactérians.  
They seek revenge.”

She turned away, as if fearing her own words.

Andy, calm yet burning within, finished his meal in a silence full of omens.

And under the dome’s light,  
everyone knew, without daring to say it,  
that a new era had begun.

## CHAPTER 13 : The Ashes of Courage

The icy breath of Russia swept across the plain like an ancient memory.  
The sky, low and pale, pressed down on the horizon in a white light without warmth or mercy.  
Everything seemed suspended between two heartbeats, between life and stone.

In the middle of that frozen immensity stretched an airstrip half-erased by frost  
a relic from an age when mankind still dared to challenge the gods by tearing itself from the earth.

There the Terrans walked, silhouettes of shadow and fire:  
Andy, Mehdi, Vlad, Solveig, Warrent, Alain, and Bongani.  
Their steps crushed the frost in a steady, almost solemn crackling.  
Behind them, their mechanical horses breathed into the cold, exhaling silver plumes of vapor.

Warrent stopped, frowning.

“Seriously... who picked this damn place? We’re freezing like statues!”

Vlad lifted his head.  
In his steel-blue gaze flashed a light none of the others understood.  
He inhaled deeply the biting air before a nostalgic smile split his broad lips.

“I did,” he said at last. “I chose this land. Here, freedom beats in every breath.  
This is my motherland.”

Andy, wrapped in a black leather cloak, raised a brow in confusion.

“And... what does that have to do with an airstrip?”

Vlad burst into booming laughter.  
His massive shoulders shook, and the echo rolled all the way to the mountains.  
He walked to the center of the tarmac, spread his arms and clumsily imitated an airplane in flight, his boots kicking up clouds of frost.

“I belong to Russian aviation, comrades! My first fan was my young wife, Ekaterina.”

Andy’s eyes widened.

“You mean... you were a fighter pilot?”

“Exactly! On a Sukhoi the air-superiority aircraft!” Vlad announced, proud like a child before his dream.

“Vlad! Fold your wings!” Alain shouted. “If you want to stay alive, get down here—the Lactérians are coming!”



The Russian's laughter died instantly.  
His face shut like an iron hatch.  
He called his war-hammer to his hand; it materialized with a thunderous snap.

"Let the skies tremble," he growled. "Today, the snow will drink fire."

Mehdi scanned the horizon.  
The wind lashed his cheeks, lifting the folds of his tunic.

"Their chief, Manamra, is not present... strange. Why?"

Bongani, massive, knelt and touched the snow, rubbing the grains between his fingers.

"It does not matter. They are warriors, just like us. Their blades are quick, their honor dangerous. Guard your lives as if they were treasures."

Andy straightened.  
The cold had seeped into his bones, but something else boiled inside him an ancient heat, an instinct no longer his to control.

He sprinted forward.

The force of his movement tore through the mist.  
Behind him, Solveig shouted something, but the wind carried her voice away.

The others followed, weapons raised, hearts beating to the rhythm of the world.

The clash was instant and furious: metal against metal, flesh against faith.  
Terrans and Lactérians collided with the violence of fire and iron.

Shields shattered, blades whistled, cries merged with the wind.

In the immaculate whiteness of the Russian frost, warm blood traced a red, honest path.  
Strikes burst sparks across the ice; snow dyed into a funereal pink.

Andy parried a blow, pivoted, and his gladius carved a perfect arc  
cutting empty air before slicing into a Lactérien's throat.

The body collapsed in a sigh, its blood steaming on the snow.

Around him, Vlad roared Cossack chants, Bongani struck like a blacksmith,  
Mehdi prayed between two blows.

The Terrans prevailed fierce, exalted, burning with an ancient pride:  
that of no longer being anyone's slaves.

When the last Lactérien fell, the wind rose again.  
It swept across their panting faces and erased the traces of battle,  
as if reminding them that the earth never keeps its heroes for long.

\*

In the Yaras dwelling, Teya stood before the great window.  
The golden light of the dome brushed her bare shoulders.  
Her features so often impassive seemed softened, almost human.

A smile bloomed on her thin lips, hesitated, then vanished at once, chased away by a thought only she knew.

In her eyes, a flicker of fear.  
A fear she had never felt since her creation.

She placed her hand against the glass; her skin shivered at the cold touch.

“Why must victory always taste like blood?” she murmured.

A voice echoed behind her low, metallic:

“Because blood, Teya, is the only language the living still understand.”

She turned slowly.

A hologram of the Sages had appeared, their silhouettes blurred, haloed with light.

“Remember your purpose,” they said in unison.  
“Observe, but do not feel. You are not human.”

Their images vanished.

Teya remained alone, her chest rising with a breath she was not meant to have.

\*

The next day, the Earth turned to another face.  
Dawn bathed India in copper light.  
The steps of the Taj Mahal glowed, their ivory reflections washing over the five Terran warriors: Clayton, Artémis, Youcheng, Lobsang, and Izumi.

Their gazes wandered across the marble whiteness, across that beauty suspended above the world.

The silence had the density of prayer.

Clayton broke the spell.

“Whose idea was this place?”

Lobsang nodded, solemn.

“The Taj Mahal is the symbol of pure love. Emperor Shah Jahan built it for Mumtaz Mahal, his beloved wife.”

Izumi's smile was sharp, bitter.

"And you forget the suffering. She died giving birth to their fourteenth child. Love sometimes kills more surely than hate."

Artémis observed the inlaid arabesques, the silent beauty of the stone flowers.

"Historians see in it the paradise of Judgement Day," she whispered.

Youcheng closed his eyes, pressing his palms together.

"Or perhaps the passage between life and death. Love is only a fragile bridge between two abysses."

A warm wind rose.  
The air vibrated.

Clayton shivered.  
He turned sharply and called his weapons.

An Esrepian emerged from the shadow, face hidden beneath a golden helm.

The clash was immediate brutal, primal.

Clayton struck, dodged, rose again, his cry cutting through the mist.  
His hatchet spun a perfect arc and buried itself in the enemy's chest.

Around him, the Terrans moved, swift and precise.

The Taj Mahal temple of love and mourning became an altar of war.  
Blood splashed the marble, ran through the floral patterns, dyed red the symbols of paradise.  
The echo of blades rose beneath the dome.

When the last enemy fell, Izumi knelt.

"Forgive us," she whispered to the monument.  
"We stain beauty to save our lives."

\*

Far above the worlds, Tusulac, chief of the Xiorcians, adjusted his black helmet.  
His armor vibrated with contained energy.  
He advanced toward the observation bay; images of the battles drifted through the air.

His reptilian eyes followed the Terran silhouettes.

Then a slow grin spread across his face.

“These Terrans... weak, pathetic.  
They believe they dominate, but they will bow beneath my will.  
Their courage is only a mask to hide their fear.”

Behind him, his guide a young woman with a shaved head and a childlike face stood with lowered gaze.  
Her dark dress revealed her bare shoulders, marked with blue symbols: signs of obedience.

“They fight to survive,” she murmured.  
“Perhaps... they deserve your respect.”

Tusulac turned his head, his eyes glowing with cold fire.

“Respect? For flesh?”

He shoved her aside without looking.  
She fell, her hands scraping the metal floor.

He walked away, his heavy steps echoing through the chamber.

The young guide raised her head, green eyes shining with restrained tears.

“One day,” she whispered, “what you call perfection will collapse beneath the weight of a single human heart.”

## CHAPTER 14 : The Ball of the Survivors

Night fell upon the dome like a mantle of amber.

Under the transparent vault, the sky of Yaras unfurled its many constellations, twin suns slowly withdrawing into the sleep of the void.

The great hall pulsed with new life, with an intoxication nothing seemed able to contain: music, laughter, echoes of accents from every land of Earth.

For the first time in a long while, the bloodshed felt washed away in wine and song.

The warriors, still covered in dust, drank, laughed, and recounted their victories as though recalling ancient legends.

Their voices rose into the dome and fell back in golden fragments across the tables.

Andy, standing beside Solveig, savored a beer of iridescent blue a Yarasian drink tasting of hops and copper.

She laughed, her eyes flaming beneath the shifting lights, her red hair loose like a blaze in the dimness.

A few meters away, Alain and Youcheng, seated like students from another century, smoked a water pipe.

“What tobacco!” exclaimed Youcheng, exhaling a thick cloud. “The Yarasians definitely have taste!”

“They know what they’re doing,” Alain chuckled drunkenly.

Then suddenly, he straightened, chin lifted, fist on heart:

“For France!”

Joyful, Warrent raised his glass:

“And for Teya! Where is she, anyway? She exists so intensely!”

Laughter rippled through the hall.

“You dream, my friend,” said Youcheng. “She doesn’t care about you. She treats us the way a pig would treat its trough full of jam.”

“A pig?” Warrent repeated, amused.

“Yes but what a pig!”

Voices rang out, sincere and almost naïve.

For a moment, the peoples of Earth were nothing but young souls around a table, as if on a campus before the war.

Solveig, amused, gently tugged Andy toward the dance floor.

“Come. Just one dance.”

He hesitated, then shook his head.

“Thanks for the thought,” he said with a smile, “but I don’t know how to dance.”

“Then follow me,” she simply replied.

The music shifted.

The soft notes of a terrestrial slow, *Going To A Town* by George Michael, floated in the air like a melancholy prayer.

Their hands reached, their bodies found each other.  
The world seemed to fall silent.

Their steps, clumsy at first, aligned with the rhythm.

“An architect and a builder,” she whispered. “Who would’ve thought?”

“Apparently, madness has no social hierarchy,” Andy said softly, laughing.

But his smile faded when Solveig continued in a trembling voice:

“And your fight, Andy? Is it finally at peace?”

He remained silent for a moment, his gaze drifting into the dome’s void.

“Yes... I think I’m beginning to understand. I’m no longer fighting just for myself.  
But for them. For all of us.”

“Give them time,” she murmured. “Some wounds take longer to heal.”

“Time... that’s what we might run out of. The tournament is accelerating into such cruelty.”

“Then let’s dance,” she answered. “Just for tonight. And like the song says: despite the running away, keep your emotions, your pain, and your love for that country.”

She rested her head on his shoulder.  
Their breaths aligned.

The world could tear itself apart outside; here, under this dome of glass and gold, there still existed a fragile, burning humanity that refused to die.

\*

In the shadows, Teya watched them.

Her eyes shimmered with an indecipherable glint somewhere between jealousy and fear.

She placed a hand on her chest, as though to restrain a heartbeat she did not want to acknowledge.

She, the perfect hybrid, was beginning to feel.

And that terrified her more than death itself.

\*

At a nearby table, Lobsang, Warrent, and Izumi sipped their drinks.

On the holographic surface of the table, a miniature battle was displayed: Tusulac versus a Lactérien.

The images pulsed with light and blood.

Izumi turned away, icy.

“I wouldn’t want to be in his place.”

“He packs a punch,” Warrent admitted.

“Watch closely,” said Lobsang. “Every gesture teaches us something.”

A final strike burst.

The screen flushed red.

The Lactérien collapsed in a cry of agony.

The three Terrans recoiled, stunned.

Warrent emptied his glass in one gulp.

“So... shall we dance?”

“Yes,” Izumi replied.

“And me?” Lobsang attempted.

“Not with us!” they said in unison.

Lobsang laughed despite himself.

For the first time, the strangeness of this world felt soft: for a fleeting instant, the Terrans resembled who they once were living people.

A little further away, Vlad, beer in hand, toasted with Clayton and Bongani.

“We grow stronger every day,” he declared.

“True,” Bongani replied.

“The aliens have understood,” added Clayton. “Humanity rules supreme.”

“Not so fast,” came Mehdi’s calm voice.  
He approached, cocktail in hand, with Artémis by his side.

The Greek warrior wore a dark silk dress, her helmet abandoned on a chair.  
Her eyes blazed with contained fury.

“That bitch Teya has surely made some pact with the Sages,” she hissed bitterly.

Vlad stiffened.

“Whatever their schemes. We are the best. And when it’s over, we will go home.”

Clayton raised a thumb.

“Vlad is right. I’ll see my girlfriend again, and everything will make sense again.”

They toasted, glasses ringing with sincere brotherhood.

Mehdi observed them thoughtfully.  
Then he raised his glass as well.

“Together,” he said, “we stand every chance of winning back our freedom.  
And finally going home.  
As for me finish my political studies, and one day start a family. *Wallah.*”

He drank slowly.  
But in his eyes already shone something else: the worried gleam of a man who, in the middle of celebration, begins to doubt the price of victory.

\*

In the shadows, Teya drifted away from the dancers.

Her steps barely echoed on the glass floor.  
She stopped before a translucent wall.

Behind the luminous veil stood the chamber of the Sages.  
Their hooded silhouettes rose, immobile, haloed in silver.

“Report on the Terran household,” she said coldly.

“Is cohesion stable?” asked the eldest.

“Yes,” Teya replied. “Too stable, perhaps.”

“Too?” echoed another.

“They’re bonding. Becoming human. Feeling like brothers.”



A dense silence followed.  
Then the Council's voice cut through:

"That is precisely what we fear.  
Emotion breeds weakness.  
The bond must be broken."

Teya lifted her gaze.

"And if, instead... it was their strength?"

But the Sages said nothing more.  
Their light dimmed, then vanished, leaving her alone in the corridor.

She remained there for a long moment, fists clenched, until a whisper escaped her lips:

"If weakness is human... then I'd rather be human."

## CHAPTER 15 : The Tomb of the Gods

Dawn rose over Mexico like a golden blade.

Under a newborn sky, the timid sun brushed the crest of the pyramids of Teotihuacán.

The wind slipped over the ancient stones, carrying with it the murmurs of a vanished people.

On the highest steps moved Andy, Clayton, Bongani, Izumi, and Lobsang silhouettes of steel and flesh carved against the reddening horizon.

Before them, the valley opened wide, paved with legends and light.

Clayton stopped at the edge of the void, knelt, scooped a handful of dust, and let it fall between his fingers.

“Forty-six meters high,” he murmured. “This is the Pyramid of the Moon, sanctuary of the Storm God.”

“So we really are in Mexico...” Bongani breathed, lifting his face.

“Yes,” Clayton answered. “And there,” he added, pointing north, “the Avenue of the Dead.”

Andy approached, troubled by the emotion vibrating in his brother-in-arms’ voice.

“Why so much emotion?”

Izumi replied, low and honest:

“Because this is the land of Diego Fuentes the first to fall for Earth.”

The name hung in the air, heavier than stone.

Clayton rose slowly, his eyes burning with a contained flame.

“Today we face the Xiorcians. And this time... Diego will have his revenge.”

“So be it,” Andy said. “Even if the space is narrow, we’ll hold our positions.”

“Five levels, five guardians,” Clayton concluded, pointing at the pyramid.

“Andy on the first, Izumi on the second, Lobsang on the third, Bongani on the fourth.

As for me... I will defend the summit.”

They exchanged a silent, solemn glance, then began their ascent ready, if needed, to die for one another.

\*

### At the Terran Hall

Teya stood straight before the vast window, draped in golden light.  
Her face seemed impassive, but beneath the surface ran an odd glimmer a thread of doubt, barely visible.

“The surprise will be considerable,” she whispered, more to herself than to anyone else.

Behind her, Artémis watched bitter, mute guessing without understanding the silent battle tearing at the guide.

Teya pressed her hand to the glass. In the transparency, she imagined she could feel the distant vibration: the breath of combatants, the dust of stone, the stubborn heartbeat of a human she feared to hear her own.

\*

## The Battle Begins

The sun climbed, striking the pyramid with white fire.  
Nothing came.  
On the first terrace, Andy waited, impatience tightening his fingers.

The morning wind slipped between the steps, lifting dust that reminded him without knowing why of his mother brushing picture frames before school.  
He looked up at the burning sun, then lowered his gaze to the stone.

A Xiorcian appeared.

He approached, weapon in hand; behind him, his steed followed like a silent shadow.  
The alien extended his arm  
a spear materialized instantly.

Andy drew a long breath, summoned his sword and shield, which materialized with a metallic whisper.

“May Spartacus open the path of victory for me,” he said, his voice grave and steady.

At the very top, wind whipped Clayton’s long hair.  
The shadow of a colossus advanced dark cuirass, iron gaze, imperial posture.

Tusulac.  
Chief of the Xiorcians.

Clayton reopened his eyes. His hands trembled with burning energy as his two axes flew toward him.

“Tusulac... at last.”

He raised his face to the sky.

“God of the Storm... hear my plea. Strike our souls with your lightning.”

The Xiorcian expanded his chest and raised his weapon: a triple-blade saber.

“You shall fall beneath my blows, human.”

They hurled themselves at each other.

The impact made the entire pyramid tremble.

Steel against steel.

Breath against breath.

Silence against cry.

\*

## First Level

The sun reached its zenith.

Andy fought with fury.

His blade cut through air, his shield thundered; his opponent dodged and countered.

Their bodies wove a dance of rage and dust.

## Second Level

Izumi, face drenched in sweat, fought a formidable tactician.

She leapt, parried, feinted; every strike of her sword became a silent conversation between life and death.

## Third Level

Lobsang, breath harsh, struggled against a warrior of rare skill.

Under their feet, the stone seemed to breathe; dust rose in clouds of ash.

## Fourth Level

Bongani, muscles taut, breath short, kept striking each blow heavier than the last, each step harder than the previous one.

The sun dipped; his axe burned like a coal in his hand.

\*

## In the Hall

Teya watched the fights.

Her face, smooth at first, tightened little by little.

She crossed her arms over her waist as if to hold back an inner fall.

In her eyes swirled fear and fascination and beneath them, a trouble she refused to name:

*“Why does that human name echo louder than the others?  
Why, among the multitude of faces, do I see only one?”*

\*

## The Fall of Clayton

Evening fell over Teotihuacán.  
The sky ignited with deep red.

At the top of the pyramid, the struggle endured.  
Clayton, covered in blood and dust, swayed. His ragged breath hammered his chest.  
He raised his axes one last time to the sky.

Across from him, Tusulac almost unharmed breathed calmly; his torso, marked only by faint cuts, rose like a rock defying the storm.

“God of the Storm... grant me... your lightning...” Clayton murmured.

The sky remained silent.

Two whistling rings.  
Tusulac’s triple-blade flashed.  
The Xiorcian charged, swift as a hawk.

The blades tore through the air  
and pierced the Terran’s heart.

Clayton staggered back one step, then another.  
His arms opened.  
His gaze drifted into the last embers of day.

“Peace never comes by surprise...  
It comes to those who prepare it,” he whispered.

And he fell.

Tusulac withdrew his weapon, lifted his chest toward the horizon, and roared:

“Let my will be fulfilled!”

With brutal force, he seized the lifeless body  
and hurled it into the void.

“The gods you prayed to did not hear you, human.”

\*

## Andy Falls

Below, Andy was still fighting wounded, breath raw.  
His opponent circled with icy precision.

Then a heavy crash shattered the terrace.  
A body had struck the stone.

Andy froze.  
He recognized the armor.  
The axes.

“Clayton... no...”

The instant of shock was enough.

The Xiorcian leapt.  
The spear cleaved the air  
and plunged into Andy’s plexus, crushing him to the ground.

Fire spread under his skin; the world shrank to the size of his pain.

The enemy lifted his weapon for the killing blow  
but a blue wave burst, cold and sharp.

The energy barrier activated, stopping the strike.

On his knees, Andy screamed:

“CLAYTON! NO!”

The Xiorcian stepped back, smirked, and walked away proud, victorious.

Andy collapsed, empty-eyed, breath broken.

His lips trembled:

“This... this can’t be...”

Then the world faded into silence.  
And night, very slowly, covered the Pyramid of the Moon.

\*

## Among the Sages

In their chamber, the luminous silhouettes watched the scene.  
Their voices intertwined, distorted by the dome’s resonance.

“The losses are heavy.”

“The Terran spirit intensifies.”

“The blood of Spartacus stirs.”

Teya stood apart, silent.

Her eyes fixed on Andy his face bruised with ash and light.

She felt her own heart beat in unison with his.

A tiny tear slid down her cheek.

“You are crying, Teya?”

The Sage’s voice froze her.

She wiped the tear quickly.

“No. I observe.”

But the Sages replied as one:

“No, Teya. You *feel*.”

Then they vanished in a sigh.

She remained alone, trembling.

Her gaze drifted toward the window, where her reflection mingled with Andy’s.

“If this is a crime... then I am guilty,” she whispered.

\*

## Funeral Fire

Night had swallowed Teotihuacán.

The Terran warriors lit a fire at the summit a beacon to the stars.

Their shadows stretched across the ancient stones.

Izumi prayed.

Lobsang closed his eyes.

Bongani kept silent watch over Clayton’s body.

Andy stood apart, eyes lost among the constellations.

The warm Mexican wind still carried the scent of blood.

He thought of Spartacus, of his father, of Earth.

And in the quiet, he swore:

“As long as one breath remains in me,  
they will never claim our freedom.”

The fire rose into the night  
a straight, human flame,  
a challenge hurled at the heavens.

\*

## Teya's Awakening

In the Terran hall, Teya closed her eyes.

Against the glass beneath her palm, she felt a cold that belonged to no climate.  
For the first time, a human's pain pierced her chest a truth no doctrine had foreseen.

“Andy...” she murmured.

Her lips trembled.  
She stepped back, heart pounding, gaze lost in the flickering screens.

Her reflection merged with the wounded Terran's.

And she whispered words no one would ever hear:

“You must not die...  
not you.”



## CHAPTER 16 : The Shadow of Revolt

The next dawn was strange suspended, almost unreal.  
Under the dome, silence dominated everything:  
a churchlike silence after the battle,  
where even the machines seemed to pray.

Clayton's body lay in the Hall of Memories, bathed in golden light.  
His weapons, crossed upon his chest, glimmered softly as though they still breathed.

The Terrans stood around the translucent coffin, heads bowed.  
No one spoke.  
Even Warrent, usually talkative, remained mute.

Andy, his torso bandaged, stood before him.  
His eyes were dry, yet his face no longer bore anything of the boy from Cleveland.  
It was the face of a man who had understood that death was not an end,  
but a debt to honor.

Solveig stepped closer, her trembling hand seeking his.

"You can't carry everything, Andy."

"I carry nothing," he answered, voice hoarse.  
"I'm only returning what was given to me."

She opened her mouth to speak again,  
but he turned away.

In the distance, the bluish torches went out one by one,  
like souls abandoning their vigil.

Teya entered.

Her presence made the air quiver.  
She wore no uniform today, only a simple pale tunic almost human.

"Clayton has fallen," she said softly.

"And others will fall," Andy replied.  
"But not in vain."

She hesitated.

"The Sages... congratulate themselves on the situation."

Andy turned toward her,  
and in his gaze burned something immense, uncontrollable.

“The Sages have made us puppets.”

Teya remained silent.

For the first time, she felt fear.

Not fear *of him*,

but fear of what he was about to awaken.

The breath of Spartacus, perhaps.

Or the shadow of a revolt even the gods would fail to extinguish.

## CHAPTER 17 : The Breath of Time

On Earth, beneath the porch, Lindsay pulled her coat tighter with a weary gesture. The days were growing longer, but inside her, an obstinate winter refused to melt.

She hoisted the strap of her bag onto her shoulder and cast one last look at the house that hollow heart where Andy's voice no longer echoed.

"Mrs. Lindsay Storm?"

She startled.

At the bottom of the steps stood a police officer, cap low, his eyes carrying that professional compassion which comforts no one.

He opened a notebook, skimmed it too fast as if hoping to find a miracle there then closed the soft cover.

"Officer James. I'm investigating your brother's disappearance. I'm sorry... as of today, nothing indicates where Andy might be."

Lindsay rushed down the steps, her anger preceding her like a sharp slap.

"Ten days! Ten days since you patched up that damn hole in his room, and you keep repeating the same lines!"

The officer instinctively stepped back, politeness raised like a shield.

"We're continuing the investigation. We hope for better news soon. I understand your impatience"

"You don't understand anything," she cut, voice cracking.

"My brother didn't leave. He wouldn't disappear without telling me.

I would know.

I would *feel* it."

The officer bowed his head, defeated by a certainty that belonged to no earthly logic.

"We will find him. Believe me."

The door closed on his promise.

The wind stirred the leaves on the porch, and the house fell silent again.

\*

On Yaras, the room vibrated with another kind of time.

*Fade to Black* by Metallica crawled through the air like a weary prayer.  
Andy stood before the mirror, arms hanging, gaze blurred.  
His wounds had vanished.  
His skin, smooth once more, held only the dull memory of pain.

He slowly raised his trembling hands  
and clenched his fists until the knuckles whitened.

“Just barely... You came very close to death as well.”

Teya’s voice rose behind him soft and firm at once.  
She appeared in the mirror’s reflection:  
a silhouette carved from light, beauty sharpened like a blade,  
a smile hovering near provocation.

“Fortunately, only Clayton died,” she continued, almost light.  
“At Tusulac’s hand, I admit. But you and the others safe and sound.  
A few scratches, nothing more.”

Her eyes slid toward his scars; a polite grimace crossed her face.

“All right... perhaps more than scratches.”

Andy spun around abruptly, anger trembling in his breath.

“Are you human? What’s wrong with you?”

Teya raised her hands a defensive gesture that looked almost like an offering.

“What did I say wrong?”

“You’re indifferent. Insensible. Unfeeling!  
Nobody in the group can stand you.  
You’re... detestable.”

Silence.

She didn’t move for a moment.  
Then she took one step toward him.

Her gaze suddenly trembled.

She moved closer, close enough for their breaths to mingle,  
and gently wrapped her arms around him  
a clumsy gesture, almost childlike.

“Then... teach me,” she whispered.  
“Teach me to become human.”

Her tongue brushed softly against Andy’s lips.

He froze cold, absent, removed from the trembling body pressed against him.

“Get out of my room.”

Teya’s smile withered.

She stepped back, melted into the translucent door, and vanished.

Andy wiped his lips sharply.

The shower called to him,  
water to wash away anger.

But before he could move, footsteps echoed in the room.

“I said leave me alone!” he shouted.

“Andy, I would like to speak with you,” a calm voice answered.

He turned.

Solveig stood there straight, dignified.

In her hands rested a folded American flag,  
deep blue, serene stars, stripes like ancient scars.

“I... I’m sorry,” he stammered. “I thought”

Solveig stepped forward, laying the flag between her palms like an offering.

“Time is unpredictable and inexorable,” she said softly.

“No matter how long we’re given, we must shape it with our actions.”

“I don’t understand,” Andy murmured.

She placed the flag in his hands.

“We are—whether we want it or not the actors of time.

So give it its greatest dimension.

Let it remember us for what we chose to be.”

Andy stayed silent, fingers tightening around the sacred cloth.

The rough silk reminded him of his father’s touch  
that old gesture when they stepped down the stairs to go vote together,  
side by side, under the rain.

Solveig watched him for a long moment, then added:

“Clayton believed that every man must one day defend the memory of his dead.  
Not for vengeance, but to honor the life they left him.”

Andy lifted his eyes.

“And you, Solveig? Do you still believe all that?”

She smiled faintly.

“No.  
But I need to believe it.  
Otherwise... what’s left?”

Silence enveloped them.

Outside, the sky of Yaras turned an uncanny violet  
the color of metal and dusk.  
A shooting star sliced across the dome like an open wound.

Andy pressed the flag against his chest.

His reflection in the mirror was no longer that of a lost boy.  
It was the face of a man ready to defy the gods.

## CHAPTER 18 : The Call of Blood

Night had closed over Yaras.

Beneath the dome, the city seemed to hold its breath, as though the stars themselves feared to disturb the silence.

Andy sat alone, the folded flag resting on his knees, his fingers slipped between the creases of the fabric.

Every thread seemed to speak to him, to remind him of faces erased by time: his father, his mother, Clayton.

He closed his eyes and for the first time in days, he felt no pain.

Only a gentle warmth rose inside him, a warmth almost fraternal, blooming from his heart.

A soft sound startled him.

The translucent door opened with a quiet sigh, revealing Lobsang.

The Tibetan still wore the brown meditation robe he kept for the nights before battle.

“I knew I’d find you here,” he said softly.

“You should sleep.”

“And you?” Andy asked.

A faint, joyless smile curved his lips.

“I think I slept too long before coming here.”

Lobsang stepped closer, his gaze falling on the flag resting across Andy’s lap.

“Clayton would have entrusted you with the mission of guiding the others.”

“Guiding myself would already be a miracle.”

“The miracle, Andy,” murmured Lobsang, “is to go on despite fear.

It’s what men do... when the gods fall silent.”

Andy lifted his eyes.

The words echoed inside him, like an ancient memory.

A vibration climbed slowly along his spine, a shiver of remembrance.

“When the gods fall silent,” he repeated slowly... “then let us speak for them.”

## Chapter 19 : The Colors of Courage

Under the vast dome of the Terran foyer, the afternoon light filtered through the high windows, stretching long golden trails across the polished floor. The great clock of time read three-thirty — Day +11.

The warriors, dressed simply, refreshed themselves in silence. Their measured gestures betrayed the weariness of a day burdened with too many shadows.

Andy, standing near a table, set down his cup. His gaze passed over each of them before he stepped forward, straight and resolute, to the center of the room.

His voice, deep but controlled, cut through the ambient murmur.

“May I have your attention, please.”

Conversations ceased at once. Every face turned toward him, including Solveig’s attentive eyes.

Andy drew a deep breath before continuing:

“Today, we honored the brave Clayton for the last time, and”

A sharp slap cut off his sentence. Artemis had slammed her glass onto the table.

“Where are you going with this, Andy?” she snapped, irritated.

Andy turned toward her not angry, but with the calm firmness they all knew from him.

“I would like to carry and represent my national flag.”

A ripple of surprise swept through the assembly. Izumi stepped forward, brow furrowed.

“What flag?”

Before Andy could answer, Solveig interposed herself, standing tall.

“The flag of the United States. The one Clayton proudly carried.”

Artemis frowned and took a step toward Solveig.

“The Sages never gave him an official flag. Why should we care?”

“He knew from the beginning,” Izumi retorted. “What’s the problem?”



Andy joined Solveig, standing at her side.  
His eyes moved slowly over each face.

“I disagree. Before I learned my ancestor was the most famous Thracian in history, I was an American citizen. I was born on that soil, like Clayton. And as such, I have the right to represent my national values.”

Bongani, silent until then, looked up, intrigued.

“This isn’t about racism or segregation. But why the sudden change, Andy? Up until now, you fought for the honor of your parents unjustly forgotten.”

Andy nodded slowly.

“I realized that my faith and my patriotism were in these colors. My judgment was only the reflection of my anger.”

Warrent stepped forward, offering a theatrical bow.

“No problem for me, as long as you don’t unilaterally decide to become our leader.”

Youcheng joined his hands and nodded in approval.

“We are and will remain independent in our choices. Each represents their flag and remains master of their own decisions.”

Andy mirrored the gesture, respectful.

“No issue, Youcheng. Besides, I have no intention of mothering you.”

Alain burst into hearty laughter.

“I love this Thracian!”

Lobsang, grave, placed a hand on Andy’s shoulder.

“No one escapes their destiny.”

Mehdi approached in turn.

“I accept that you now wear the colors of your country. I’m honored to witness this solemn moment.”

Artemis spun toward him, furious.

“This is against the will of the Sages!”

“The Sages know nothing of human reality,” Mehdi replied calmly.

Vlad stepped forward, his gaze carrying quiet wisdom.

“We don’t have to submit to the whims of the Yarasians. Each of us must act according to our conscience.”

Artemis stiffened.

“Fine. Celebrate your symbolic victory. Meanwhile, we’ve lost the advantage of fighting on our own grounds.”

Andy moved closer to her, eyes burning with resolve.

“Wherever we stand, nothing will shake our determination.”

He turned toward Solveig, gaze incandescent.

“We will become the chosen of the Yarasians. And then, we will finally go home.”

At the back of the room, Teya watched the scene, half her face drowned in shadow. In her eyes shimmered a quiet jealousy mixed with a strange admiration.

\*

The next day, the Terran foyer was summoned to the great hall.  
The twelve survivors took their seats around the oval table.  
At its center, the dome’s hologram projected the map of the arenas to come.  
Red zones pulsed slowly: enemy territories.

Teya entered.  
Her stride was steady, but tension betrayed itself across her face.

“The Sages have spoken,” she announced.

“More orders?” Izumi snapped.

“No. Warnings.”

She slid her fingers across the table; a light appeared, drawing constellations around them.

“Each victory alters the balance of Yaras. The Esrepians are weakened. The Lacterians are retreating. The Xiorcians are gathering their forces. And the Sages want... to accelerate the tournament.”

Warrent, agitated, slammed his fist onto the table.

“Let them come! We’ll make them pay for Clayton, Diego, for all of them!”

“Calm down,” Mehdi replied. “Rage alone won’t save anyone.”

Andy rose.

All eyes turned toward him.

His face had changed: firmer, graver, illuminated by a new determination.

“No, Mehdi. This time, rage will save us but guided, controlled, human.”

He began walking slowly around the table.

“We’ve followed their rules. Obeyed their orders. And each act of obedience costs us brothers.”

He paused, his gaze settling on Teya.

“Today, that ends.”

A murmur rippled through the hall.

Izumi frowned.

“You’re talking about disobeying?”

“I’m talking about choosing.”

Teya straightened, icy.

“Andy, watch your words.”

“No, Teya. Yours are the ones killing me. Since day one, you’ve repeated their sentences, translated their laws... But what about you? Where is your choice?”

She froze, unable to respond.

In her eyes flickered a brief glint fear, and something she did not understand.

Andy approached her, his voice softening, almost intimate.

“The Sages don’t seek peace. They want perfection.

And perfection is the death of the living.

We Terrans are not perfect.

We hurt, we fall, we love, we doubt... and that is our true strength.”

He laid his hand on the table.

The hologram reacted; the red shifted to gold.

“I won’t fight for them anymore. I’ll fight for us.”

A deep silence followed his declaration.

Then Bougani, in a low voice, said:

“Then I walk with you, brother.”

Mehdi nodded.

“Me too.”

One by one, the others followed.

Even Izumi, her eyes narrowed in irritation, surrendered with a sigh:

“Might as well die free.”

Teya stepped back.

In her mind, the voice of the Sages already whispered, threatening:

Do not let instinct corrupt the mission...

But her heart beat off-rhythm too strong, too human.

She closed her eyes.

When she opened them again, Andy was still watching her.

In his eyes burned the same flame that once ignited Rome Spartacus’s own fire.

Teya murmured, almost against her will:

“So... the revolt begins.”

Andy replied, calm and unyielding:

“No, Teya. It already has.”

## Chapter 20 : The Pact of Souls

The next morning, a livid sun slowly climbed above the Esrepian warrior city. Under the translucent dome, the arena revealed itself like a world apart: a serene network of structures leading to an island paved with gray stone, bordered by wild, towering vegetation. Thousands of multicolored flowers swayed under a generous wind, muffling the birdsong beneath their rustle.

The Terrans, sweating, stepped onto the island with their horses and took their positions, hearts heavy.

Alain, Youcheng, and Lobsang walked beside Andy, their expressions hard.

“No Moon, no earthly pull on this damn planet, but these weird trees sure smell good,” Warrent muttered, raising his gloved hand.  
“And this is supposed to represent Esrepian art?”

All across the island, thousands of white rocks rose massive formations, each sculpted differently, their purity gleaming beneath the sun.

“They’re watching us, no doubt,” Youcheng replied, drawing his sword.  
“Let’s split up and catch them off guard.”

Vlad nodded, hammer in hand, snapping it with a dry crack.

“Youcheng is right. I’ll head east. I hate these hide-and-seek games.”

Bongani and Artemis armed themselves and followed him without a word.

Izumi, Mehdi, Warrent, and Solveig went west. Solveig summoned her shield and spear, then cast one last look toward Andy before disappearing between the stones.

Alain approached Andy, a satisfied grin curling at the corner of his lips.

“How about joining me in this madness, brother-in-arms?”

Andy answered with a slight smirk, drawing his gladius from its sheath.

“I’m in, Alain. Let’s go and no mercy.”

Under the harsh zenith light, Andy, Alain, Lobsang, and Youcheng advanced silently, weapons in hand, through the countless rocks whose whiteness almost blinded them.

Lobsang lifted his gaze.

“This place... it must be sacred to them.”

“Sacred or not, the Esrepians are taking their time. Where the hell are they?” Alain replied.

Andy shielded his eyes from the sun and looked toward him.

“You’d better keep your weapon ready, my friend.”

Alain snapped his axe forward and tightened the bronze helmet on his head.

“Just for you, my Thracian! Today, it’ll be the axe. I need to vent a little,” he added arrogantly.

He took one confident step... and everything collapsed.

The Esrepian chief, Pilôsitt, burst forth in a single leap, shield raised, and drove his double-edged blade deep into Alain’s stomach before he could react.

A cry. A shock.  
Blood splattered across the white stones.

“No!” Andy roared.

Shield up, he charged at the enemy.

All around him, Esrepians erupted from between the stones, fast and silent.

Lobsang, clutching his hooked spear, engaged the fight.  
Youcheng spun his blade with precision.

Battle erupted in a storm of metal and muffled screams.

On a distant height, Pilôsitt his mask crowned with three golden spikes watched the melee with icy satisfaction.

Evening fell quickly.  
The violet sky cast a mourning glow over the city.

Andy, exhausted but still standing, continued striking at his opponent with his gladius.  
Youcheng, dripping beneath his helmet, fought with desperate courage, his iron whip lashing through the air until two daggers pierced his chest clean through.  
He collapsed instantly.

Lobsang, breath ragged, stumbled, wounded... then fell as well.

Pilôsitt screamed his triumph and raised his arm high.

Andy, gasping, felt a strange vibration:  
the energy barrier activated between him and the Esrepian, sealing the end of the duel.

They froze, separated by a shimmering field of light.

Andy slowly lowered his sword, slid it back into its sheath, and saluted his opponent.

“May your honor follow you in death or victory.”

His gaze drifted toward the sunset, wavering among the stones.

“Youcheng... Lobsang...” he called.

“Let’s bring Alain’s body back. He deserves a final farewell.”

But when he turned around, silence answered him.

Before him, the ground was soaked in the blood of his two brothers-in-arms.

Andy stood immobile, frozen, eyes wide.

\*

Later, in the calm of the foyer, the survivors gathered around an amber fire. The flame, fed by Yarasian essence, danced slowly at the center of the room.

Andy sat down, his face marked by grief but his mind clearer than ever.

“We won,” Vlad said, his gaze empty. “But at what cost?”

“The cost of truth,” Andy replied.

He lifted his head, and his eyes met Teya’s, standing in the shadows.

“The Sages don’t want peace,” he murmured.

“They want control.”

Silence fell heavy.

Even the fire seemed to waver.

Teya stepped forward.

“And what if that’s false? What if I told you the Sages did not choose war... but balance?”

“Then they failed,” Andy answered.

“Because balance without justice is only another form of domination.”

She froze, lips parted struck by the precision of the word.

Balance.

That word she had served, repeated, obeyed since her creation...

Suddenly revealed itself as the mask of a tyranny she had never dared to see.

Solveig placed a hand on Andy’s shoulder, like a silent vow.

“You know they’ll fear you now.”

Andy gave the faintest smile.

“I know. But fear... is the beginning of respect.”



## Chapter 21 : The Twilight of Certainties

In the silent great hall, the air seemed frozen, suspended in the flickering glow of the torches. Time itself, on Yaras, appeared to have stopped.

Teya entered without a sound.  
Her black silhouette cut through the golden light.  
Her steps echoed softly on the marble.

Before her, the bodies of Lobsang, Youcheng, and Alain lay side by side, wrapped in funeral cloths.  
Their peaceful faces looked as though they were sleeping.  
Around them, the Terrans had gathered exhausted, eyes reddened, shoulders lowered.

She stopped at a respectful distance, silent.  
Then, slowly, she knelt and bowed her head.

“May their souls find the light...” she murmured.

Andy, standing before the bodies, clenched his fists.

“You weren’t there. You didn’t show up.”

“I was summoned by the Sages,” she answered in a low voice.

“And you said nothing to defend us?”

Teya raised her eyes.

“Do you really think they still listen to me?”

Their gazes met two worlds that could not be reconciled.  
Anger in Andy’s eyes, resignation in Teya’s.  
Between them, silence stretched like a rope ready to snap.

Solveig shattered the stillness:

“Enough. We’re alive, and it’s up to us to act. Not the Sages.”

She stepped forward, addressing everyone:

“Lobsang believed faith could outgrow war. Youcheng said wisdom guided courage. Alain... lived each moment like it was his last. So let’s honor their words, not their deaths.”

Her voice floated through the hall like a half-whispered vow.

Andy nodded slowly.

“You’re right. It’s time to do what the Sages fear most: think for ourselves.”

Vlad straightened, arms crossed.

“If you’re going where I think you are, you’re taking a big risk, Andy.”

“Maybe,” he replied, “but we risk everything by obeying.”

Artemis scoffed, shaking her head.

“And what, exactly, do you propose? A revolution? An army of ten against gods?”

Andy stepped toward her, gaze unwavering.

“No. A spark. Gods fear light more than weapons.”

Silence followed heavy, dense.

Then Bongani placed a hand on his shoulder, a brotherly gesture:

“Then be that spark, my brother. And we will be the flame.”

Teya looked away, unsettled.

These simple words made something tremble inside her something she believed extinguished long ago.

A flame, yes... but a dangerous one, capable of burning down the world of the Sages.

\*

That night, Yaras slept under an obsidian sky.

Andy stood alone on the dome’s terrace.

Below his feet, the city breathed faintly, a mosaic of dim lights and whispering winds.

He looked up at the stars toward Earth, invisible somewhere in the vastness.

“Father, Mother,” he murmured. “Can you hear me? I think I understand now. You wanted me to live free... not for myself, but for all those imprisoned in the name of order.”

A cold, pure wind rose.

The flag on his shoulder fluttered softly, its folds glowing under the moons.

Behind him, a shadow approached.

Teya.

She stopped a few steps away, hesitant.

“Why do you remain here, alone?”

“To remember.”

“Remember what?”

“What we were before becoming their pawns.”

She wanted to speak but no words came.  
So she sat beside him.

For a long time, they remained silent, their breaths carried away by the wind.

At last, Teya asked:

“And now?”

Andy looked straight into her eyes.

“Now we stop waiting for their orders. We act.”

A shooting star crossed the sky, drawing a golden scar between two worlds.  
Teya followed its path, her heart tightening.

“You’ll condemn us all.”

“No,” Andy replied, voice firm. “I’m going to set us free.”

\*

The Terrans froze in the great hall, unable to speak.  
Only the distant roar of waves and the clash of weapons filled the room, as though the entire arena echoed inside their chests.

Solveig clenched her fist.

“This isn’t a tournament anymore... It’s an extermination.”

Bongani, pale, nodded slowly.

“They’re not fighting for glory but to survive the madness of their masters.”

Mehdi, leaning against the railing, sighed.

“The Sages wanted to turn war into an art. They forgot it remains a crime.”

Teya, standing slightly behind, didn’t respond.  
Her face remained impassive, but her fingers, tightly gripping the rail, betrayed her anxiety.

Her eyes followed every movement of Tusulac that titan she knew to be unstoppable.  
With each blow struck, each strangled cry, a shadow of doubt grew in her gaze.

Then, the light began to flicker.  
The twin suns dimmed behind an ochre cloud; the stands blurred into sudden fog.  
The roar of battle became distant, muffled.

A final strike sounded sharp, absolute.  
Then silence.

The hologram vanished.  
The arena dissolved.

Only the ragged breathing of the Terrans remained, and the trembling reflection of their faces on the glass.

Andy broke the silence, voice hoarse:

“This is what they want us to become. Butchers. Instruments.”

Warrent, arms crossed, looked away.

“And yet look at them: they obey. Just like us.”

Teya slowly turned her head toward him.

“No,” she said. “You’re not like them.”

“Not yet,” Warrent replied bitterly. “But we’re getting there.”

Mehdi laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Then we must act before that happens.”

Everyone fell silent.  
The word *act* hung in the air heavy, irreversible.

Solveig looked at Andy.  
He didn’t speak, but his gaze said everything: the decision was already forming.

In the shadows, Teya turned away, lifting a hand to her communicator.  
A deep voice emerged, vibrating with authority:

“Guide Teya, the Council demands a report. Immediately.”

She drew a long breath, her eyes fixed on Andy, and answered softly:

“Tell the Council... they should prepare to hear what they never wanted to understand.”

## Chapter 22 : The Fall of Brothers

The blades clashed like shattered prayers.  
Under the three suns, the ice cracked with every step.  
The horses reared, terrified by the roar of the Lactérien winds, which seemed determined to erase even the memory of human courage.

Warrent, drenched in sweat beneath his visor, circled Manamra.  
Their duel was no longer a fight: it was a rite, a symphony of rage and grace.  
The Lactérienne leader leaped, double-bladed, her sickles whipping the air.  
Warrent parried, dodged, struck a sharp, precise blow but his sword hit the twin shield, bounced off, leaving his flank exposed.

Manamra seized the opening: two movements, two clean cuts.  
Blood splattered across the snow.  
The Terran fell to his knees, gasping, his gaze locked on the red jester mask.

“You... you won’t win,” he stammered.

“I do not win, human. I survive,” she replied with an unfamiliar, almost gentle accent.

Then the sickle came down.

Bongani screamed.  
His arrow flew like a cry and pierced an opponent straight through, sending the body rolling across the ice.  
Vlad, roaring, carved through the melee with axe and hammer, each blow releasing a burst of bloody crystals.  
But for every enemy that fell, two emerged.  
The Lactériens fought in silence, disciplined, without hatred only with the cold conviction of duty.

Andy tried to rally his people.  
He raised his spear and pointed it toward the sky.

“Hold the line! For those who fell! For Earth!”

The red diamond atop the arena suddenly pulsed.  
A scarlet wave swept across the battlefield.  
Weapons vibrated, armor groaned.  
Then, without warning, the ground began to tremble.

Cracks snaked across the ice.  
The sea beneath them awakened.

Vlad turned, horrified.

“By the gods... they’re collapsing their own sanctuary!”

“It’s a tactic!” Andy shouted. “Fall back to higher ground!”

But it was too late.

A whole section of the battlefield crumbled into the gray sea.  
Horses, fighters, fragments of armor all vanished into the raging waters.

Andy felt the void open beneath him.  
His mount screamed, panicked.  
He drove his spear into the ice and hauled himself onto a narrow ledge just in time, gasping.

Below, Vlad was still fighting, striking blindly, his hammer shattering frozen stone.  
Bongani, his bow snapped, was trying to reach Warrent, now motionless.  
Manamra stood on a fractured slab, watching the scene without moving.  
Her milky-blue eyes seemed to reflect all the misery of the world.

“Enough!” Andy shouted, his voice echoing through the sanctuary.

The sound carried, bouncing off the walls until it blended into a deep rumble.

“This tournament is nothing but a slaughterhouse! You want honor? Here it is!”

He threw his sword onto the ice in defiance.

The Lactériens froze.  
Even Manamra seemed to hesitate.  
The wind softened, as though the planet itself held its breath.

Then, from the sky, a voice thundered  
Cold. Imperious.

“Terran, your insubordination will not be tolerated.”

Andy looked up.  
A golden beam descended from the celestial dome, pure as a sentence.  
The Sages were speaking.

Their light pierced the ice and wrapped Andy in a translucent prison of energy.

Solveig screamed his name.

But he was already vanishing.

## Chapter 23 : The Judgment of the Sages

When he opened his eyes again, the white light blinded him.

He floated in a space without contours, suspended in a void where even sound seemed forbidden.

In front of him, three silhouettes materialized motionless, golden, almost weightless.

The Sages.

One of them spoke:

“Andy Storm, descendant of the rebellious Thracian, you have disturbed the balance.”

“The balance?” Andy replied, his voice hoarse. “You call a massacre balance?”

“You have spread disobedience. You have reignited the flame of revolt.”

“I chose only to stop killing without reason.”

A long silence followed.

Then the central figure, deeper and colder, declared:

“Then you will be judged according to your lineage. If Spartacus failed against Rome, let his blood fail once more against us.”

Andy clenched his teeth.

“You may condemn me... but you will not silence what you yourselves created.”

A new fire gleamed in his eyes.

“You made me your weapon. I will become your judgment.”

## Chapter 24 : The Blood and the Memory

The roar of the Xiorcians died in a deep echo, swallowed by the mist rising from the roots. Under the ochre sky, Pilôssit's severed head spun slowly atop the spear shaft, displayed like a barbaric trophy.

The wind, timid at first, carried away the last screams, and then only silence remained a heavy, thick, sacred silence, the silence of cursed battlefields.

In the observation hall, the Terrans were petrified.  
No one applauded, no one spoke.  
Even Teya, standing behind them, lowered her head.

Tusulac's victory rang like a death knell.

Andy stepped forward, eyes fixed on the glass wall.  
His reflection appeared to him: pale, exhausted, foreign to himself.

"It's over," he murmured.

"No," Solveig replied in a white voice. "It's the beginning."

Mehdi clenched his rosary, lips moving without sound.  
Izumi rested her hand on her sword, gaze lost in the artificial horizon.

"They're preparing for us," she said calmly.

A shiver crossed the group.

Warrent, voice rough, answered:

"Then we get ready for them."

From the shadows, Teya finally stepped forward.  
Her face seemed aged, almost human in its weariness.

"You will face Tusulac in three Earth days."

A breath of dread swept through the hall.

Andy lifted his head sharply.

"Three days? After everything we've lost?"

"It is the will of the Council," she replied without looking at him.

Izumi's fists tightened.



“Their will, or yours?”

Teya held her gaze without blinking.

“I no longer decide anything.”

Silence.

Then Andy, voice hoarse, said:

“Then it’s time someone decides for them.”

The words fell like stones into water.

No one reacted at first.

But in Mehdi’s eyes, and then in Solveig’s, something ignited a discreet, living spark.

Warrent broke the tension with a short laugh.

“I don’t know what you’re planning, Thracian, but count me in.”

“It isn’t revenge,” Andy replied. “It’s deliverance.”

“Same thing,” Izumi whispered.

Teya moved a step toward him.

“If you do this, you condemn the entire program.”

“This program is already condemned,” Andy answered bluntly. “It doesn’t create heroes. It buries peoples.”

The Yarasian guide stayed silent, lips parted, struck by the truth of the words.

Then, slowly, she lowered her eyes.

“The Sages already hear you.”

“Good,” he replied. “For once, let them hear what a free man has to say.”

\*

That night, Yaras did not sleep.

The corridors of the dome vibrated with a new tension.

Surveillance cameras blinked faster, drones swept lower, as if the system itself sensed the threat.

In the lower hall of the Terran quarters, Andy, Solveig, Izumi, Mehdi and Warrent gathered around an holographic map of the city.

Their faces bathed in blue light, they spoke softly, quickly.

“The dome’s energy sources are here and here,” Mehdi explained. “If we neutralize them, the connection to the Sages will be cut for a few minutes.”

“Long enough to act,” Solveig whispered.

Izumi nodded.

“And long enough to die too.”

Andy lifted his eyes.

His face, carved by fatigue, carried an expression of absolute calm.

“To die for a cause is to live twice.”

Warrent tapped his shoulder.

“I always dreamed of having a great last line, man. You just stole mine.”

They exchanged a smile a real one, sincere, perhaps their last.

Then, slowly, Andy placed his hand in the center of the map.

“For our dead, for our Earth, for our freedom.”

The others did the same.

Five hands joined.

Five fates intertwined.

And in the shadows, a fragile spark was born the spark of an uprising.

## Chapter 25 : The Judgment of the Sky

Andy stood beside Teya in the observation hall, watching the outside world through the great window.

Beyond the glass, the world had taken on the color of blood.

“We’ve reached the final stage,” she said without emphasis. “Only the winning race will earn the right to the finish.”

Andy turned toward her, a new kind of fatigue in his eyes.

“You didn’t come, once again, to the funeral of three valiant warriors.”

“I... I’m sorry,” she whispered. “It’s stronger than me.”

“Why?”

“I don’t feel concerned by their death, and I prefer to stay isolated... Yet I feel genuine sorrow for them.”

“That’s already something,” murmured Andy.

They fell silent, swallowed by the theater of worlds unfolding before them.

Later, when the Xiorcian war-cries rose from outside, Teya brought her hands to her face, as if trying to contain a sudden dread.

“You should come see who your opponent will be tomorrow,” she said.

Andy approached the window and grimaced.

“The Xiorcians. And their leader, Tusulac.”

“You overcame the death of your parents,” she continued softly. “You reclaimed your flag, forgave their negligence. You can cross this threshold too.”

Andy clenched his fists.

“I think I’ll go to bed.”

“Only trust will help you move through your doubts, Andy.”

He pivoted abruptly; anger overtook exhaustion.

“Leave me alone!”

He left the hall with quick, sharp steps, carrying with him the scent of a man overwhelmed, searching for the cure to his own cause.

## Chapter 26 : Tragedy

On the thirteenth day, the terrifying Xiorcian combat arena unfolded, drowned in clouds, a floating grid carved into the sky beneath two rising suns and three moons.

Gravity there was distorted: suspended platforms, linked by needle-thin bridges, cut the heavens into dizzying fragments.

Each warrior stood isolated from the others, visible to all, delivered to a destiny not of their choosing.

No one knew who would come for them.

Andy, armored and resolute, fought first swift, energetic, precise.

His spear sliced across his opponent and drove him back several steps.

In a brief moment of respite, Andy cast a glance across the aerial grid; a grimace crossed his face a premonition.

Farther away, Warrent, visor down, charged at a Xiorcian on foot.

His lance lowered, he struck but the impact turned against him.

The Englishman was thrown to the ground.

He staggered back up, called his weapons bare sword, shield forward.

The duel resumed, harsher, heavier.

Mehdi fought with courage and method, alternating weapons, feints, sharp angles.

Wounded several times, he clenched his teeth and continued his plan like one reciting a prayer.

Izumi, relentless, made her long blade sing: her dexterity earned her the advantage, though her opponent, fierce, marked her with precise counterstrikes.

Solveig, alert, waited for her foe.

Bursting through a dense cloud, Tusulac appeared, growling his fury.

He summoned his diamond-shaped shield and triple-bladed sword.

Solveig, unshaken, leapt like a wild beast, dodged, countered with her axe.

Facing Tusulac, she forced him back several steps; for the span of a heartbeat, the entire grid seemed suspended by her audacity.

\*

Teya, alone in the observation chamber, stood tall, dressed as if for a ball to which no one was invited.

She bit her lip, clenched her fists, then let out a trembling breath.

“You will win this battle... I’m certain of it.”

\*

The sun dropped quickly, slicing the grid into alternating blades of light and shadow.

Sword in hand, shield summoned, Andy struck hard at his foe and delivered the final blow: the enemy collapsed into a dark pool, gasping until silence.

Andy raised his head, caught his breath, searched for his brothers-in-arms... and froze.

Warrent, sword and shield forward, threw himself in furious determination against a living wall of steel.

The enemy deflected his final combination and, closing in, drove a decisive dagger into the Terran's neck.

He fell with a dull crash; his blood spread, armor clanging against the suspended stone.

Mehdi, battered, used every inch of his platform wisely; exploiting his opponent's exhaustion, he stepped back, summoned his javelin, and hurled it with force.

The strike found its mark and pierced clean through.

Panting, he swayed but remained standing, the wind lifting his hair, his hands open toward the sky as he murmured a few words.

Izumi, wielding her twin blades, continued her fierce and agile duel, every strike calling the next like a refrain of survival.

Solveig, drained, had drawn her sword; she was accomplishing the impossible—holding Tusulac at bay.

Cornered, the Xiorcian chief hurled two razor-sharp rings, forcing her to loosen her pressure.

The duel shifted: a tiny, cruel opening appeared.

Tusulac seized it he drove his sword in a single thrust into Solveig's abdomen, then, with a fluid, mastered gesture, grabbed a ring and placed it beneath her throat.

"No!" Andy cried, voice torn, sprinting across his bridge, desperate to reach his sister-in-arms.

\*

Teya's tears spilled silently down her cheeks.

Her hands flew to her mouth; her eyes stayed glued to the glass, as if staring hard enough could reverse the scene.

\*

Tusulac paused and turned toward Andy.

A look of challenge distant, across another square of sky.

In that suspended silence, Andy let his sword fall.  
The metal struck the stone with the weight of a funeral bell.

“Solveig...” he cried, voice breaking.

Blood on her lips, breath ragged, Solveig turned her head slightly toward him.  
In her eyes gleamed a thin, peaceful smile as soft and secret as a childhood memory  
whispered across an abyss.

Shaken, Andy tore off his helmet and collapsed to his knees.

Then the gesture fell, under Tusulac’s raging roar: the ring completed its arc.

Solveig’s head slipped free; her body toppled into the void.

“No!”

Andy slammed his fists into the stone with a violence rarely seen.  
Even the sky seemed to tremble before his grief.

The stars sank, leaving the dead in an equal, bitter dusk.

The two galactic races separated but for some, the intention remained unchanged.

## Chapter 27 : The Day of Ashes

The next day, the light beneath the dome seemed colder, higher, almost cruel.  
Under the great vaults of the Terran foyer, silence reigned  
a church's silence, a tomb's silence, the end-of-the-world kind of silence.

The remaining Terrans stood motionless around an empty table.  
Their faces, drawn and pale, looked as though they had been carved out of ash.

Andy had not slept.  
He remained standing, his gaze lost in the void, his eyes red from holding back too much.  
Before him, on the table, rested Solveig's helmet.  
His fingers barely brushed it, as if he feared profaning a relic.

"She fell fighting," said Mehdi in a fractured voice. "She never stepped back."

"And for what?" Andy replied, his tone raw. "To feed the spectacle of their gods?"

Izumi closed her eyes.  
"Don't speak of her like that."

"I'm speaking of all of us," he growled. "Of this celestial farce they dare call honor!"

He struck at the empty air, his fist narrowly missing the table.  
The helmet rolled to the floor.  
Its metallic clang echoed across the hall like a funeral bell.

Warrent approached, limping, a hand on the wound that cut across his side.  
"That's not what she would have wanted, Andy. She still believed in you."

"In what?" he snapped. "In a ghost of freedom? In a man who buries his friends?"

Teya, standing at a distance, watched without daring to intervene.  
Her eyes searched for a word, a sentence, anything to say, but nothing came.

Andy abruptly turned away.

"Leave. All of you."

"Andy," protested Mehdi, his voice heavy with worry...

"GET OUT!" he roared.

They left the room one after another, abandoning behind them a wounded silence.

Teya stayed.  
She took one step, then another.



“You are not alone.”

“No. I am the loneliest man in this universe,” he murmured, without looking at her.

She came closer, close enough to breathe his breath.

“You carry the pain of the world. But you still don’t know that this pain is your power.”

Andy lifted his eyes toward her.

“My power? Everything I touch dies. My parents, my brothers-in-arms, Solveig... Even Earth rejects me.”

“No, Andy. You *are* Earth. Its flesh, its anger, its memory. You’re the last one who still believes in it.”

She placed a hand on his cheek, slow, hesitant.

“That is what they fear.”

A flash tore across the glass ceiling.  
The dome vibrated.  
Sirens wailed in the distance.

Teya stepped back sharply.

“The Sages... they know you are doubting.”

“Then let them come,” he answered, his voice suddenly calm.

He picked up Solveig’s helmet, set it on the table, and laid his palm upon it.

“I promise you,” he whispered. “No one else will die for their glory.”

Teya stared at him, shaken.

A shiver ran down her spine; she understood that something had just been born.

Not hope.  
A decision.

## Chapter 28 : The Peace of a Moment

Music filled the room intoxicating, melancholic, like a sea that had forgotten its shores. Andy, stretched out on the blankets, stared at the ceiling, wounded beyond words.

The door materialized with a controlled sigh.  
Teya entered, concerned, elegant, beautiful with a beauty alien to any comfort.  
She walked to the foot of the bed.

“Andy.”

He turned his head toward her, his eyes still heavy with the sorrows of the sky-damier.

“Go away.”

Teya approached softly and touched the speaker with a fingertip; the music softened until it was nothing more than a murmur.

“Always this sad music...”

“You’ll never understand,” he replied in a hollow voice.

She hesitated, then took a step toward him.

“I... I’m sorry.”

Andy kept his gaze fixed on the ceiling.  
Silence stretched between them dense, almost sacred.

Teya intertwined her fingers, nervous.

“It’s been two days since they left us,” she said at last. “And I am truly saddened. But today, I can tell you who your opponent will be for the grand finale.”

“That changes nothing,” Andy murmured.

“I saw him... Tusulac. He tore Manamra apart, without remorse, with unmatched power. With his men, he slaughtered every last member of the Lactarian race. Tusulac held up the chief’s head, her jester mask still attached, before throwing it onto her frozen lands.”

A shadow passed over her face at the memory.

“I thought you’d be glad to face him again.”

Andy sat up, his face marked by sadness, exhaustion, and a contained anger.

“What difference does it make? Death is what awaits us.”

“But... the fact that Tusulac killed someone you loved wouldn’t that give you an advantage?”

Andy stood abruptly.

“An advantage?”

He stepped toward her, almost nose-to-nose, his voice trembling.

“Solveig and Warrent, like all the others, were unique and inseparable. We were one in this trial.”

“I thought Solveig...”

“Yes, I had a special bond with her, an instinctive understanding. But that changes nothing: we all carried the same cause. You cannot understand you’re not a Terran.”

He moved toward the shower room, features tightened.

Teya, wounded, watched him go.

“I really regret not being a Terran myself,” she said softly.

“But you, Andy... you should trust yourself more and trust the future. I still believe in it.”

“Congratulations,” he replied dryly before stepping through the door.

She remained there a moment, downcast.

Then, slowly, she left the room, her steps dragging, her head lowered.

\*

Under the shower, water pounded Andy’s shoulders.

His hands were pressed flat against the wall, his forehead leaning forward, letting the heat wash away his fatigue.

Steam filled the room like a fog of dreams.

In the breath of the water, he thought he was imagining it at first:

two hands gently settled on his back, grazed his shoulders, then stopped.

He turned slowly.

Teya stood there, naked, her gaze full of a tenderness that held no command, no duty.

“I don’t want to lose you, Andy,” she whispered.

He looked at her for a long time, torn between rejection and emotion.

Then he gave in.

In a simple movement, he took her hands and pressed them against his heart.

The steam around them seemed to turn into light.

Nothing more was said.

There was only a shared silence, a human contact fragile and necessary in a world where everything was coming undone.

They kissed, tenderly, then passionately, letting their hands discover each other's bodies.

And when the artificial rain softened, Andy closed his eyes.

For the first time in a long while, there was no fear, no rage  
only the peace of a suspended moment.

## Chapter 29 : The Colosseum of Shadows

Under the twin rising suns burning like twin embers the Xiorcian arena stretched out in blinding white. Andy, Izumi, and Mehdi, armor scuffed, hair whipped by wind heavy with dust, advanced side by side. Their horses, kept at a respectful distance, snorted nervously, digging shallow trenches into the bare ground; their hooves stirred up a fine powder that drifted in shimmering clouds.

Nothing here recalled the elevated, chanting architecture of the Xiorcians: war had razed everything memories, plants, the marks of ancient builders until all that remained was this barren plain, silent, sterile, like an altar prepared for sacrifices.

Izumi, her long hair whipping behind her until she pushed it back with a sharp gesture, narrowed her eyes toward the flat, inscrutable horizon.

“What is happening?” she whispered. “Are the Xiorcians preparing some new trap for us?”

Mehdi, calm as the deep water of an old well, let his gaze travel across the sweat-slick brows of the warriors, the twin suns glinting off metal and flesh.

“We have been here sixteen days,” he answered slowly. “But here, time no longer has hold over us. Only victory will end the countdown to death.”

Andy, tense, lifted his helmet for a moment and fixed his gaze on a point to his left; his face tightened, hardened, darkened beneath the dust.

“Tusulac... and his three warriors,” he said, in a voice that allowed no surprise and no fear. “They're waiting for us. They know they have the advantage of numbers.”

Izumi and Mehdi exchanged a quick, surprised look but not a fearful one.

“Whatever happens,” Mehdi said firmly, “I will be the one to face Tusulac.”

Izumi shot him a look of sharp irritation, amused and angry at the same time.

“Short straws, really?” she protested. “And advantage of numbers or not, samurai's word I won't retreat.”

Mehdi found the handle of his sword, ran his thumb along it like one performs a ritual, then pushed the blade back into its sheath with a precise movement.

“Chance has no place here anymore,” he added. “But I won't let anyone else take Tusulac.”

A bitter smile flickered across Izumi's lips. Mehdi answered it with a short laugh.

“If we survive this, I'll invite you both to a real meal in Arabia. My mother still knows the ancestral recipe, I promise.”

“And I,” Izumi replied with a raised eyebrow, “will make you taste sushi in Tokyo—on me. Promise.”

Andy watched them, strangely moved despite the tension. Then, with a voice heavy with oath, he added:

“What matters is brotherhood. Whatever happens, I will never forget that.”

“For all our brothers-in-arms who died for humanity and for someone else’s arrogance,” Izumi concluded, her voice sharpened by pain and pride.

They stopped at a safe distance. The white dust rolled like a wave between them and their enemies. Mehdi joined his hands, closed his eyes, murmured a prayer; Izumi pressed her palms together silently; Andy made the sign of the cross, lips tight, before fixing Tusulac with a gaze full of darkness.

At last, Tusulac appeared, surrounded by his three warriors: a massive figure, muscles sculpted like forged iron, his helmet sealed shut like the face of a stone titan. His steps were slow, heavy, deliberate an effortless arrogance emanating from every gesture, as if victory were already a cloak he wore.

Three meters from the Terrans, he stopped and theatrically extended his hands. When he spoke, his voice cracked like the cold strike of a blade.

“I am honored to soon offer you death,” he said, his words moist with contempt. “The death that will make my people the dominant force of this galaxy. The death the Yarasians will choose as the seed of their new race.”

Andy blinked, stunned.

“He... he speaks our language.”

“Since the beginning,” Tusulac replied with smooth, venomous irony. “We hear you moan, complain, and pray in your little dialects. It is a gift granted to warrior peoples. Unlike you, we know how to keep silence.”

Izumi snorted, disdainful.

“Keep talking like that and you’ll choke on your own arrogance.”

A sharp, blade-like laugh escaped Tusulac.

“You are not without humor, nor courage, woman. I hope you will be my first victim. Crushed by my own hands.”

“I will be the one to face you!” Mehdi shot back, his voice sharp as the edge of a sword.

Tusulac slowly lifted his head, weighed Mehdi with a cold stare, then nodded once barely perceptible. He unsheathed his triple-bladed sword; his fingers glided along the metal in a barbaric gesture of affection for the steel.

“Before I grant you death,” he continued solemnly, “I offer you one final privilege: choose the place where your existence will end. Let your blood mix with the dust of your world, without staining mine.”

Izumi tightened her jaw and pulled her hair back into a tight knot.

“How considerate...” she muttered. “But I have trouble appreciating his manners.”

Mehdi smiled faintly, hair whipping in the wind, then turned to Andy as if sealing a shared destiny.

“Do us the honor, Andy. Choose the place. Then we close the chapter.”

Andy remained still for a moment, surprised by the solemnity of the request. He closed his eyes, inhaled slowly, and when he reopened them something burned there a cold flame tuned to the exact height of sacrifice.

“Very well,” he said at last, his voice low as a promise. “We choose the highest ground, where the wind can carry our names. Let us be remembered not for fear, but for our choice.”

Silence fell, heavy and sacred. Even the dust seemed to pause midair.

The three Terrans stepped into formation. The Xiorcians answered with a near-animal growl; the celestial arenas were ready to become the stage of destiny.

And in the heat of two suns, under the impassive stare of the moons, the Colosseum of Shadows opened to their struggle a place where flesh and memory would be measured by steel.

Suddenly, the scenery transformed like a child’s dream or a god’s illusion.

The ground vibrated, cracked, roared beneath their feet.

Columns erupted from the dust. Arches formed in a thunder of stone. Walls rose, stands took shape. Sand became flesh, and wind became a roar.

The Colosseum of Rome was reborn vast, golden under two foreign suns, saturated with an invisible crowd chanting in echoes: “*Fight! Blood! Death!*”

Izumi, awestruck, let her eyes travel slowly around.

“By the gods... if I had known, I never would have bet I’d end up in this amphitheater.”

Andy stared at the stands, dazed, as if recognizing something carved deep within his own blood.

“I don’t even know why I chose this place,” he murmured.

Mehdi smiled softly.

“It wasn’t you, Andy... it was Spartacus. He chose for you. And it’s perfect.”

At these words, Tusulac stepped back, involuntarily impressed. His eyes scanned the ancient majesty of the arena.

“Impressive,” he growled. “No escape... a tomb worthy of me.”

He spread his arms; his three warriors did the same. Their shadows stretched across the white sand.

Opposite them, the three Terrans unsheathed their weapons simultaneously.

The clash of metal erupted instantly.

Andy struck first: shield raised, he slashed with a violent blow, forcing his opponent back a step. The Xiorcian parried with mechanical brutality. Sparks burst with each strike.

To his right, Izumi fought like a storm two blades singing in her hands. Every movement was a prayer. The two Xiorcians hounding her attacked with coordinated precision, but she spun, dodged, sliced two silver arcs under the suns.

Further away, Mehdi faced Tusulac alone.

Their duel became a hurricane. Blades wheeled, metal screamed. Mehdi called his daggers and hurled them like lightning. Tusulac deflected them with his triple-ring shield, though the shock vibrated up his arms.

Mehdi seized the opening shouted, leapt forward

But Tusulac was faster. He pivoted, lowered his blade, and in the same heartbeat swung upward.

A red flash burst.

Steel met flesh.

Mehdi screamed. His body jerked.

A second strike fell clean, final.

The Terran’s body dropped, decapitated, with the wet thud of flesh on stone.

\*

In the observation hall, Teya clad in a diaphanous blue dress watched in silence. Under the screens’ glow, her features were carved in fear.

Her hands trembled.

She pressed her fingers to her lips, her eyes wide.



The arena's cries traveled through the glass and died against her heart.

For the first time, she felt fear. A human fear.

\*

In the arena, Andy staggered under the repeated blows. His battered shield vibrated with every impact.

Breath ragged, he turned his head just in time to see Tusulac's blade carve through Mehdi first the arm, then the torso.

The scream hung in the air like a torn thread.

Then the head rolled. Blood spilled across the white sand.

"NO!" Andy roared.

Rage engulfed him.

His cry tore through the roar of battle, awakening something primal in the heart of the Colosseum.

He shoved his opponent back with a violent bash, pivoted, struck without mercy.

Blow after blow hammered down like a storm.

The Xiorcian tried to counter, stumbled, fell.

Before his lance could return to his hand, Andy leapt forward, drove his blade straight into the creature's skull.

The body stiffened, then collapsed.

The sand turned red under the wild cheers of the invisible stands.

To the right, Izumi struggled against her two attackers. Their strikes were precise, relentless.

Her swords were knocked from her hands a double impact sending them flying across the arena.

Panting, she staggered back and summoned her war-scythe: a curved blade, long and moonlike, mounted on a staff as tall as a spear.

Blood dripped onto the shaft, but she held firm.

The Xiorcians prepared their counterstrike.

One summoned a triangular shield; the other conjured three steel darts.

Izumi hurled her scythe.

The weapon sliced the air, split the shield in two, and carved a deep arc across the warrior's chest.

A masterstroke worthy of the great schools of Kyoto.

But behind him, the second Xiorcian had already released his darts.

Two sharp impacts  
one pierced her arm,  
the second her thigh.

Izumi collapsed to her knees, dropping the scythe.

Blood spilled onto the sand.

She summoned her sword in a desperate gesture. Steel snapped into her hand.

The two warriors charged.

Andy saw it his eyes bloodshot.

“IZUMI!”

He summoned his javelin.

Three steps.  
One breath.  
A perfect throw.

The weapon screamed through the air, pierced the Xiorcian's head, and halted him midcharge.

The corpse crashed onto the sand.

Tusulac turned, furious.

“You broke the rules, Terran!”

“There are no rules anymore,” Andy replied, his voice low and burning.

Izumi, kneeling, lifted a trembling hand, refusing his help.

Andy met her gaze for a heartbeat an unspoken promise.  
Then he faced Tusulac.

The Xiorcian chief roared and summoned his last warrior.

The colossus advanced.

Andy charged, shouting with all the fury in him.

His steps thundered across the sand.

He called his daggers two lightning bolts in his palms then hurled them with deadly force. Mid-stride, he leapt.

The world hung suspended.

He summoned his spear.

A streak of energy flared in his hands, a line of fire between sky and ground.

And before the Xiorcian barely finished deflecting the daggers could react, the spear pierced straight through his chest.

The massive body twisted, nailed to the sand, blood erupting in crimson fountains.

The entire Colosseum roared.

The stands trembled with the violence of their cheers.

Andy, covered in blood, panting, stood tall alone arms spread wide, facing the Xiorcian chief.

\*

In the observation hall, Teya, pale as moonlight, pressed a trembling hand to the glass.

Her heart hammered so violently she nearly lost her breath.

Before her, Andy walked alone toward his fate.

And in his eyes burned something both human and divine:  
the fury of a man...  
and the memory of a slave named Spartacus.

## Chapitre 30 : The Judgment of the Sages

The sand had stilled, as if it were holding its breath.

Andy stepped toward Tusulac, one slow step after another, until they stood at the same height. Between them, silence stretched thick, almost sacred crossed only by the fading echo of the distant stands dissolving into light.

He removed his helmet and threw it aside. The metal rang, then died in the dust. With slow, methodical movements, he unfastened his cuirass, his pauldrons, his greaves each piece falling with the weight of an ancient burden. Soon, nothing remained but a bare torso marked by clean wounds and sweat, battle-worn sandals, and a clear, taut gaze anchored in that of his adversary.

“I understand now why Spartacus chose this place... this Colosseum.”

He picked up his glaive and cast away the scabbard with a sharp gesture.

He turned toward his horse, toward the flag planted behind him, and his expression softened without faltering.

“My ancestor, a famed gladiator, fought here for his freedom, and against the oppression of his own people.”

He returned to Tusulac, bent down to take Mehdi’s shield stained with the red of a brother and strapped it firmly to his arm.

“But today, I do not fight for a flag... nor even merely for freedom or against oppression.”

He paused. His breath settled.

“Today, I fight for something far greater... for what humanity holds most precious.”

Tusulac raised the tip of his triple-bladed sword. A strange flicker almost difficult to admit passed through his voice.

“I admire your courage and your valor, Terran. Before I grant you death, tell me your name.”

Andy tightened the strap of the shield again. He lifted his eyes to the sky, sent an invisible kiss upward, like a final farewell.

\*

Before the glass, Teya, hands clasped against her chest, let rise a prayer she had never learned.

“I love you, Andy...” she whispered, her voice trembling.

\*

Andy faced Tusulac, his face bathed in light.

“Know this, Tusulac! I... I am what every Terran is!”

A smile—broken yet liberating touched his lips. He inhaled deeply, then shouted, his voice crashing against the very stones:

“I AM SPARTACUS!”

The clash of blades exploded instantly.

Tusulac unleashed his full strength, each blow slicing the air like a restrained bolt of lightning. Andy dodged, struck, stepped back, seized the initiative again. The sand turned red; veins throbbed at temples; steel sang bright and sharp.

The Xiorcian blade bit an incision at his flank. Andy growled, closed in, countered. His riposte was a line of angles and faith: feint, hook, slash, backcut Tusulac’s guard faltered.

Then the Xiorcian chief flung a handful of sand.

Andy’s world became a saline night. He staggered, nearly fell, felt death brush his throat. Cold rage dragged him back upright. One step, then two he shoved Tusulac off, found his guard again, and brought his glaive down, jaw clenched.

Tusulac, cornered, suddenly deployed not two but four cutting rings.

The discs whistled in a crossing pattern of steel, Tusulac’s sharp laugh cracking like dry bone:

“Now I will carve you into pieces, gladiator, and let your guts stain your Earth!”

Andy closed his eyes for a heartbeat, drew a steady breath, furrowed his brow.

“Take my war-scythe!” Izumi screamed, her voice raw.

He turned his head and dashed toward her. The rings were already flying, guided by Tusulac’s malice. Andy summoned his shield and covered his torso: the first impact ricocheted with a scream of metal; the second tore into the rim; the third struck the edge and shattered.

He seized Izumi’s fauchard the curved moon-blade hummed and threw aside his warped, useless shield.

Tusulac charged.

The scythe’s curve fluid and swift broke the momentum of the remaining rings, met the triple blade three times, then closed like a trap around Tusulac’s wrists.

Foaming, the Xiorcian chief snarled.

Andy let the weapon slide, summoned his glaive again the metal snapped into his palm like a rediscovered vow.

The fight tightened.

With each strike Andy delivered, it was as if another hand guided his the hand of someone older, more patient, born of an enslaved past turned legend. One gesture, then another, then the rhythm of an entire people lodged itself in his shoulder, elbow, fingers. Spartacus was no ghost he was muscle memory, duty in the flesh.

Tusulac faltered. Three clean, parallel gashes opened across his flank, shoulder, and thigh.

He dropped one knee, then the other.

The sky spun around him.

Andy, veins swollen, breath pounding, placed the tip of his glaive at the Xiorcian's throat.

"Now your turn. You will pay."

Slowly, he slid the blade upward to remove the mask.

The face beneath was shockingly young almost insolent in its youth pale skin, a spiral tattoo on the temple, eyes of deep green. Beneath the armor, an adolescent bent under a glory far too heavy.

Andy raised the glaive with both hands.

It hung suspended.

The mask lay on the ground, staring sideways.

"No..." Andy breathed.

The anger dissolved. The point lowered.

Then the steel vibrated an underground pulse, deep and resonant, running through the blade, into his wrist, up to his shoulder. The ground trembled.

"What... what is happening?" he said, stunned.

Already, the Colosseum was dissolving.

The arches paled, the stands emptied, the cries died like a fire smothered in sand. Two suns and two moons remained, clear, almost gentle.

Andy rushed to Izumi. He lifted her, held her, felt the fragile warmth of her breath.

"No... not you too..."

"Andy!" Teya called. "The Sages grant us the honor of their presence."

The survival pod slid toward them, opening like a shell. Smooth mechanical arms lifted Izumi, placed her gently inside. Her eyelids fluttered one last time; her breathing slowed. The lid closed, and the pod vanished with a soft hiss.

\*

A point of light widened to the right.

Five silhouettes emerged from a golden halo.

The Sages.

Their slender bodies wore long white silken robes patterned with shifting symbols. Their elongated faces, broad foreheads, bore two black eyes deep, moist, contemplative. Their noses and mouths, minimal, seemed lit from within. The tallest among them had a single white diamond embedded in his forehead, glowing like dawn.

Behind them, the Yarasian city appeared for an instant: tall opal towers suspended by glass bridges, bluish light, hidden mechanisms. Beyond that, an endless beach, wind-sculpted sand, and waves breaking with ancient patience.

Andy picked up his still-vibrating glaive and walked to Teya. The Sages approached. The first stopped before him. His gaze met Andy's like someone entering a silent room.

"Why so much brutality?" Andy asked, his voice broken.

The Sage took the glaive with a jeweler's delicacy. He observed the glow it emitted, seemed almost to listen to it, then returned it with respect.

"Nature offers its most precious gifts," he said, "and when we forget their meaning, she reminds us sooner or later."

"You are so advanced... so wise... so intelligent... then why?"

A faint smile touched the Sage's lips.

"This brutality is a universal truth. Any species that wishes to live must struggle. We abandoned this truth too long; our race softened to the point of collapse. Our breath leaves us. We needed to remember strength not as cruelty, but as momentum."

He exchanged a look with the others, nodded softly.

"We needed your vitality. Your stubborn will to live."

The four other Sages stepped forward.

"Human values," said the second, "are rich and essential. They are the key to all renewal."

He turned to Teya, his tone almost tender.

"Love, respect, acceptance, consideration..."

"Appreciation, openness, reciprocity, intelligence," added the third.

“Solidarity, benevolence, listening, empathy, mutual support,” said the fourth.

“Brotherhood, loyalty, discipline, tolerance, and mercy,” concluded the fifth. “These are what you Terrans embodied in the midst of death. We present our apologies, on behalf of the entire Yarasian race.”

The first Sage knelt beside Tusulac. He examined the young chief, who still breathed faintly, then lifted his gaze to Andy.

“I ask you,” Andy said firmly, “to heal him. Let him return to his people.”

The Sage smiled and nodded.

A medical sphere appeared, wrapped in a green halo. Soft tentacles lifted Tusulac. The young Xiorcian turned his head; his eyes met Andy’s grateful, relieved.

Then he faded into the light.

A female Sage approached. She took Andy’s glaive, holding it in open palms like a sacred relic.

“Andy Storm, also known as Spartacus, you have achieved what none before you could: you restored to this metal of memory the power of listening. It will hear you still, between our two worlds.”

Her features softened in a silent ecstasy; she carried the weapon through a door of light and disappeared.

The last Sage, remaining beside Andy, placed a hand on his shoulder.

“You must return to Earth and resume a normal life. Know that from now on, we will be guardians of the Terran race, as promised.”

Andy’s eyes widened.

“We... we did it...”

He searched for Teya, fear rising in his throat.

“And her? What will become of her?”

The fifth Sage turned calmly toward the young woman.

“We shall decide later... whether she lives or dies.”

“No!” Andy cried.

He stepped forward, ready to run to her but a sudden flash struck him full in the chest. The same light that once tore him from Earth. His body froze. His eyes locked onto Teya’s two oceans overflowing with tears.



“Andy...” she breathed.

He vanished cleanly, silently like an ember blown out.

Teya collapsed to her knees. Tears fell in silence. She bowed before the last Sage a gesture of obedience or final plea while around them the theatre of death folded in on itself, swallowing its sands, its weapons, its ghosts beneath Yaras’s warm suns.

The sea, far off, resumed its eternal ebb.

And in the light, an ancient name continued to beat:

Spartacus.

## Epilogue : The Renewal

Three months later, on Earth.

Evening was falling, washed in a sky of red-gold and heavy summer clouds. Andy stepped off the bus, his stride calm, his gaze at peace.

The warm, gentle wind stirred the national flag hanging from his porch. He stopped for a moment to look at it, nodding with a faint smile.

This time, he felt neither shame nor anger.  
Only peace.

At the end of the walkway, Lindsay burst out onto the porch, overflowing with energy.

“You see? I told you to trust me!” she shouted, beaming.

“What’s going on?” he asked, puzzled.

“We won! The State acknowledged the company’s wrongdoing. They’re going to pay all the compensation owed to the workers... and to our parents!”

Andy froze for a moment, then let out a laugh pure, disbelieving, relieved.

“That’s... incredible. They deserved it so much.”

“And don’t you ever run away like that again, you hear me? Finding you half-naked on your bed is still haunting me!”

“Promise. Never again.”

“See you tomorrow! Your dinner’s in the oven. Oh, and I almost forgot: a certain Izumi wrote to you. Her letter is waiting on your desk.”

She waved cheerfully and headed to her car. Andy watched her go, his heart lighter than it had been in months.

Then he walked up the porch steps and opened the front door.

•

Later, in his room, he set his bag at the foot of the desk. The radio was playing an old melancholic song, one from another age Nirvana.

He picked up Izumi’s letter, turning it in his hand without opening it. The paper felt warm, almost alive.

Then he lifted his eyes toward the window. Outside, the first stars were flickering.

He closed his eyes.

A memory flooded back: the warmth of skin, the murmur of breath, the steam of a shower, and that word he had never forgotten: love.

When he opened his eyes again, he felt a presence.

The door had opened slightly, letting a golden light spill into the room.

“Lindsay?” he asked softly.

But it wasn’t his sister.

A silhouette entered graceful, tall, sensual. Her jet-black hair fell to her waist, her gaze shimmering with an almost celestial glow. She wore a strange outfit, half armor, half silk, like a heroine from a manga, with a long sheath strapped to her back.

Andy froze, eyes wide.

“Teya... That’s impossible...”

She smiled, gentle and proud, as if she had just awakened from a long dream.

“The Sages have decided that I am worthy of living among the Terrians,” she said calmly. “On one condition: that someone teaches me your world. I recommended you, and they agreed.”

She touched the sheath on her back.

“They even gave me a new identity... and a profession.”

Andy stood speechless, breathless.

“I... I can’t believe this...”

“And yet, here I am.”

She approached, placed her hands on his chest. He felt his heart beating strong, free.

He gave in, pulled her into his arms, and kissed her with an intensity no war could have broken.

When their lips parted, he looked her over, a spark of mischief in his eyes.

“You might have to change your outfit... otherwise I’m going to have problems with the neighbors.”

“I expected as much,” she said with a crystalline laugh.

She slowly removed the sheath from her back and handed it to him.

“The Sages charged me with delivering this to you. It is your glaive.”

“It will allow you, one day, to communicate with the spirits of Yaras’ children.”

Andy unzipped the case and uncovered the blade. As soon as he touched it, the metal vibrated, releasing a deep, almost organic hum.

A soft light filled the room.

He examined it long and quietly, thoughtful, then sheathed it again and set it on the desk.

Teya moved closer, took his hand, and kissed it.

Their breaths mingled.

They kissed again, this time harder, and their bodies came together with the tenderness of two souls lost and found again.

Under their gestures, the world dissolved leaving only warmth, skin, and the gentle light of the falling evening.

•

Far away, in the luminous city of Yaras.

The five Sages stood before a vast translucent cocoon suspended in the air. Inside floated a newborn child, peaceful, bathed in amber liquid.

The third Sage plunged her hands into the viscous substance and lifted the glistening infant. She handed him to the first Sage, who received him with solemn emotion.

The child’s eyes opened.

They shone with all the colors of both human and Yarasian heritage.

The Sage raised the infant high before his peers.

“May all the first children of Yaras’ new generation bear the names of those who fell for its rebirth.”

The third Sage delicately cut the umbilical cord.

The first Sage continued, his voice trembling:

“And may this child bear the name of he who rekindled our values... the name Spartacus.”

The cord came free.

The baby’s cry rose into the air raw, vibrant, almost human.

A cry of life.

•

On Earth, at that very moment.

Andy, lying with Teya, suddenly sat up, his eyes distant, as though struck by an invisible flash.

“What... what was that?”

“What is it?” asked Teya, worried.

He ran a trembling hand through his hair.

“It felt like... life bursting inside me. As if... something had just been born, somewhere.”

Teya placed her hand on his cheek and smiled softly.

“Another strange gladiator thought... Forget it.”

Andy smiled back.

He pulled her close and whispered:

“Make love to me.”

They came together again, under the gentle light of the evening, while far away, a summer storm broke like a beating heart.

•

In the arm of Sagittarius, at the edge of the Milky Way, a swarm of stars ignited, pouring across the darkness.

Their radiance crowned a distant solar system with gold.

At its center, the planet Yaras breathed a vast sphere of ocean and light, cradle of a new life.

Its two moons drifted slowly across a violet sky, watching over the rebirth of two united worlds.

And somewhere, carried on the whisper of the stars, a name echoed still, borne by the winds of the cosmos: Spartacus.

THE END