

Chapter 9

On the other side of the sea

—Concentrate colleague! Where do we go now?

The pilot of the helicopter was upset, several times they had mistaken the direction; flying in the present days represented an enormous stress because the beasts at ground level did not stop throwing fireballs at any aircraft they saw, the pilot did not want to stay in the air longer than necessary.

—Excuse me, dear Bushnell, but these names are really hard to read, how can they speak this language?

—I understand my good friend Baer, I understand; but know that we don't have much time, we still have to go to Monte Rosa.

—But you cannot deny dear doctor that this place is really beautiful; I could stay whole days admiring this beautiful landscape.

—That's exactly what we do not have Dr. Baer, days; those are running out and we need to get this one as soon as possible.

—How important is this one, Dr. Bushnell?

—Read the file and check it yourself; this boy is pure gold; we need him in the project.

Bushnell ignored his pilot's gestures of annoyance and waited patiently for Dr. Baer to check the file in his hands, a thick folder full of documents, diagrams, and photographs. Baer took one of these in his hand and looked at it, it was the photograph of a young and handsome young man, with abundant and tousled light brown hair, with fierce eyes of fire and a haughty smile. Baer took another picture, the young man was raising a trophy while smiling cynically next to other young people, he was a tall and athletic guy. A magazine was included in the file, had on the cover an annotation that said "page 86". Baer opened the magazine on that page and read the heading: "Professional Gamers." Baer scanned the photographs and found his boy in a large picture, holding a white video game controller and wearing a headband with a microphone, because his mocking expression was clearly posing for the image; the caption read: "The Pro-Gamer, Kl4ws preparing for the winter competition."

—He's an interesting prospect, —said Baer; —also physically more than fit for our program.

—Now you do understand why the hurry dear doctor?

—He has several championships and a lot of records, it is seen that he is someone who has been shaped by our old project, even more...

—Doctors, where are we going?

The pilot was already upset, he had seen several creatures on the trip and was beginning to worry, they had not attacked them but he did not want to wait for them to do so either.

They flew over a thick forest at high altitude, to avoid alerting the sheitans that were in the valley area, they did not go very fast as they were not sure where they were going. The

trees were huge and surrounded by mountains, the place was much removed from the urban areas so there were not many sheitans, perfect place for a shelter, which was what they were looking for.

With difficulties Dr. Baer managed to articulate the name of the place they were going to, the pilot could understand it and they flew for half an hour until they saw a beautiful castle on a rock over a river, surrounded by trees and mountains, a beautiful place far away of civilization and, therefore, far from the sheitans.

—At last. That's where we're headed, the Gräfllich Eltz'sche Castle. —Baer said, mispronouncing the name.

The Gräfllich Eltz'sche castle, usually called Eltz Castle, was a medieval fortress that had become an important tourist center due to its privileged location; it was almost like visiting a fantasy world. It consisted of a baroque construction that was raised on top of a hill more than two hundred feet tall, surrounded by the beautiful Eltz forest and whose only entrance was through a narrow and long rock bridge. Due to its remote location it was used as one of the organized shelters of that country because it was far from the populated areas. After the evacuation orders, thousands had been taken to take refuge inside the castle after their owners offered it for that purpose.

Undoubtedly Eltz Castle was a beautiful place, both for its location as for the construction itself, however as a refuge was not exactly the safest area one could wish for. Its interior was richly decorated but almost all the furniture had been removed from the place by the owner of the property since it were valuable antiques, so the spaces had been mostly empty and there were few places to sit or lay down. Its size was also a problem because it housed almost ten thousand people at the time, which had to squeeze into any available corner of the castle, including the dungeons. The high walls and the old construction, dating from the twelfth century, made it an extremely cold area to be; the refugees had to spend unpleasant temperatures inside because they did not have facilities that regulated either the cold or the heat. Of course, being there was much better than sheltering in a common home in the city, but the security provided was much more fragile than what existed in other areas. From being a luxury tourist attraction it had become one of the least desirable refuges, even the owners of the castle had offered it as a public shelter in exchange for being transferred to a better location.

The helicopter landed in the yard, not without difficulties because the people gathered in the place prevented the aircraft from descending, the guards had to force them to move in order to make room.

Bushnell and Baer walked squeezing through the crowd, forcing themselves into space, hearing loud cries in a language neither of them understood. They were just the two of them, they had asked their escort to wait in the helicopter because they did not think it would take them a long time to attend to the matter that occupied them at the time. They saw the emaciated faces of the refugees, children who were leaning on the ground because there was no place to lie down, old men with their faces marked by wrinkles and an eternal expression of pain. The people were so tight that they hit each other; everywhere they saw refugees with recent wounds, product of encounters with other people, either accidental or due to some conflict. They saw people arguing, children crying; the dining rooms were crowded but the food was scarce, consisting of water and sausages. It was incompatible to be in such a beautiful place and to harbor so much pain that was Eltz's refuge.

—What's the boy's name? —Bushnell asked his colleague, who still had the file in his hands.

Baer flipped through the document for a moment.

—His name does not come anywhere, only this weird nickname.

—How come his name does not appear? I specifically requested complete data! Someone will be fired for this; you can count on it my friend.

Baer continued to check the sheets of the file, looked for any name that had been lost among the pages; did not find anything the crowded of the population made him hit a refugee with which it dropped his documents, among them a photography that picked up a small kid.

—*Ich Kenne Ihn.*

The child held the photo and spoke with a huge smile, the doctors did not understand what he was trying to say but they could interpret it because the child pointed with his finger towards a corner where a family, consisting of an old man, a mature woman, an elderly woman, a child and a young adult, all dressed in rags, tried to operate a portable radiator.

The two colleagues struggled a little to recognize the young adult: he was thin, his skin was parched, his beard badly shaved and his hair looked less abundant than in the photographs; the boy was wearing an old green shirt with unpainted drawings that were impossible to identify, his pants were dirty, especially in his knee area, and were a couple of sizes larger than the size of the boy's small waist. He wore white tennis shoes that looked rather gray and had huge holes in the part of his thumb. It was necessary to approach to appreciate that glowing look and haughty attitude that confirmed them it was their boy.

—Kl4ws? —Bushnell asked the young man directly, ignoring the looks of the rest of the family.

—*Wer bist du?* —The young man replied with a gesture of disdain.

Bushnell extended his hand but the young man did not answer, the doctor held it out.

—We come to offer to change your life. —Told him.

The young man observed him with distrust, he stared at the two men in front of him; both neatly dressed, with an energy in their faces that he had not seeing in anyone around in months; they definitely did not look like refugees like him and his family, they were not scared, they were not thin; they seemed tourists who came for a walk, and of course, they were not his countrymen.

The older man, evidently the young man's father, tried to intercede but he exchanged a few words with his son and withdrew.

—Who are you? —The boy finally asked.

—I'm glad you speak our language; I was afraid that this conversation would be annoying. What manners mine! I am Dr. Bushnell and my colleague is the famous Dr. Baer, we came to you with a proposal that will change your life.

Baer watched the boy with his typical and affable kindly expression, was a man who easily won the sympathy of others, not so for Bushnell who certainly achieved the opposite. Baer smiled at the young man, who, thanks to that, shook without realizing the hand that Bushnell had extended.

—What do you want? —He asked.

—Are you the famous Kl4ws?

—It's me, what do you want? —Asked again.

—My colleague and I came from far away because we are extremely interested in you and your abilities. You are very famous in our country, did you know?

—What do you want? —Asked annoyed.

—You are a youngster who goes straight to the point, I like that, I identify with your impetus, I know that we will get along very well. —Bushnell joked, he was really starting to get upset over the boy's haughty behavior. —Well, well, to the point; we want you to join our project.

—I'm not interested. —He answered.

—Are not you interested in saving the world from extinction? —Said Bushnell.

—How am I going to do that? I am not a soldier or a super hero.

—In that you are wrong my dear Kl4ws, you are a soldier, only you do not know yet.

Baer flipped through the file for a moment and turned to see the boy, his good-natured eyes and his eternal smile took effect, and Kl4ws softened his expression.

—Fifteen championships in world tournaments, a real fortune in income in the last five years, just for playing video games. It is impressive what you achieve with the recreational machines.

Kl4ws listened to Dr. Baer's words; he was surprised at how seriously that good man spoke.

—What the hell does that have to do with saving the world?

Bushnell smiled, placed his hand on the boy's shoulder and even leaned a little on him. He handed him a folder that he took out from his briefcase, Kl4ws began to check him in disbelief.

—The Higginbotham Project? —Kl4ws asked. The propaganda still did not reach Eltz Castle, so he did not know anything about it.

—It is a government initiative to...

Kl4ws did not let Bushnell finish his speech, the boy abruptly handed the badly closed folder back to his strange interlocutor and retreated back to his family, only saying —*It's my egal.*—Bushnell and Baer were silent, undecided between insisting or moving away.

—I did not expect that colleague.

—Me neither.

The two men of science watched the boy get away. He was tall, athletic, a perfect candidate for the program, they needed to have him among their ranks.

—What do we do now dear friend? —Bushnell asked.

—It's a good boy; let's give him time to think. —Baer answered.

—Perfect colleague, perfect! Then we can take the opportunity to visit this beautiful place, not every day you have the possibility to visit a site with a history as rich as this one, no matter how crowded it is.

Kl4ws went back to his family, they asked him what those people wanted from him, two strange foreign subjects, they was amazed by the impeccability of their clothing and immediately imagined that it was something big.

—They want to enlist in the army. —Kl4ws Answered.

Kl4ws' mother immediately rejected the idea; just to think that his firstborn went out there, where the beasts roam the streets and ripped apart whoever is nearby, was a terrifying idea. The woman, with an emaciated face and a noticeable weight loss, supported her son

with a smile.

The day passed as usual at Eltz Castle; it was not a refuge where there were a lot of ways to pass the time. The family was first formed for about two hours to each receive a plate containing a couple of sausages, a piece of cheese and a loaf of bread; as well as a glass of water. Kl4ws and his father only nibbled some bread and took a couple of sips of water each, then gave their food to the mother, the elder woman, who was the grandmother, and the youngest son; it was something they used to do, both men were very thin on that issue.

After the meal, which did not last long, they retreated to a small corner of a dining room, which they had designated as their "bedroom". They had mounted some sheets on furniture that they found in order to form a fragile wall and become relatively intimate. Inside their cubicle they only had three old mattresses, arranged on the floor, with some dirty blankets and a few pillows. Their small room had no more furniture than those mattresses; their clothes were kept in backpacks and suitcases that they had brought with them since the evacuation and had not been washed more than a couple of times since they arrived at Castle Eltz.

Their lair had a small addition that caused the closest thing to happiness that the family could enjoy from time to time, a tall window was located right in front of their corner and allowed the entrance of warm and pleasant solar rays. Occasionally the child asked his brother to raise him on his shoulders to see outside and run into a beautiful wooded landscape. There, far from the city, far from the sheitans and their infernal fire, the exterior remained green and beautiful; the possibility of admiring outward was one of the few things that allowed them a moment of peace.

They stayed in their humble corner for a while, isolating themselves from the rest of the people with the aforementioned sheets. The father continued to work on the radiator, although it was a hot season, they were in a very cold area and had to be prepared for winter. The mother attended to the grandmother, who suffered from joint pains and emitted soft moans every time she had to make movements, the old woman tried to keep quiet so as not to mortify her family but the pain was evident in her face, the red eyes of the mother confirmed it.

Kl4ws played with his little brother, the kid loved to listen to the stories that his older brother told him about those championships in which he participated. Kl4ws told him about trips to different parts of the world, about the millionaire sponsorships that he received, about all the people he could meet and who lined up to take a picture at his side, about the interviews he had given and that he even sometimes rejected because he did not have time. The kid had rescued in the evacuation a trophy that was very special to him, a statue of a boy with a console video controller in his hands; the little one believed that it had been made on the basis of his older brother.

Kl4ws left the corner for a moment, leaving his family to continue his usual day, and toured the interior of Eltz Castle. He walked the huge, luxurious corridors, with high ceilings and walls of granite and marble; admired the chandeliers that hung from the heights, all turned off because they could not afford to consume so much electrical energy. It was difficult to walk among so many people, collided with other refugees and saw their sad faces; they were all dirty, wearing ragged clothes. Kl4ws turned to see his own hands, his nails grown and full of dirt, stained by the earth; he was frightened when he saw his bony hands, he had never had them like that before. Kl4ws walked intrigued to a huge

window where he could see his reflection; there he was, with his greasy hair and disheveled, his beard grown and his skin gray. The clothes were big, his arms were thin; from the neck of the shirt he could see his prominent clavicles. Kl4ws felt terrible, he used to be in excellent shape, strong, athletic, and popular; remembered the photo shoots for magazines and websites, the times he attended as a guest at different exhibitions, the cries of the girls who confessed their love to him. He did not know if he was crying, maybe he was too dehydrated to cry.

Kl4ws walked a little further through the castle, saw the scant security they had; only a few military elements patrolled from side to side, alert to any incident that put the refugees at risk. They were as thin as him! They did not look very different from the other refugees, their uniforms were dirty and broken, their faces marked by sadness and fear; only their weapons allowed them to differentiate, and they were so old that they might not even work.

Kl4ws came to the main entrance, a huge door of fine and heavy wood with intricate engravings; so big that a sheitan could pass it without problems. It was half open, sometimes the soldiers went out to watch and forgot to close it; The refugees were not allowed to go out except under the escort of the authorities, but Kl4ws did not care and left. He walked a little along the long stone bridge, with dozens of thick, green trees all around. He looked towards the sides of the bridge, on the slope of more than two hundred feet tall; a beautiful view, he listened and could not hear anything, at day time he rarely heard the roars of sheitans, anyway he knew perfectly well where they are. Kl4ws saw the horizon where a soft orange glow indicated the fire of what was once his home, his city.

Crestfallen Kl4ws returned to his family, once more he was forced during a couple of hours for another ration of bare foods that served as dinner; again he ate little and gave most of his food to his mother and brother. They all retired to their isolated corner where the radiator was open, screws scattered on all sides, his father observed the device with anger; Kl4ws saw his grandmother in an expression of anguish, his mother looking for medicines inside the backpacks and his little brother playing with his trophy; went away.

He walked through the interiors of the castle Eltz, was used to see the same faces, the same people, Kl4ws have gone through the same corridors and admired the same walls and the same decoration; now he tried to see his reflection in the glass. Ran into more soldiers, equally skinny, equally insignificant as him. —"They are in worse condition than me". —He thought. Kl4ws saw their weapons and remembered when he played shooters, he recognized those guns instantly, Heckler & Koch G95, he used them in some video games, he had even once practiced with a real one on a shooting range.

—There you are! —Kl4ws heard.

It was another language, he knew immediately from whom. Kl4ws turned around and ran into Dr. Bushnell, smiled at him; the truth is that, without realizing it, Kl4ws was looking for them.

—Tell me about your damn project?

Bushnell smiled even more, clasped his hands together and rubbed them; he proceeded to explain to the boy what it consisted of.

Bushnell handed the folder back to him and together they reviewed step by step the history of the Higginbotham Project, the way in which videogames conditioned the gamers and the general idea of what they intended to achieve; Kl4ws did not know whether to laugh at them.

—So, you want me to go kill sheitans just because I'm good at playing video games? — Kl4ws asked sarcastically.

—Well... you're more than good at playing video games, you're exceptional. —Doctors checked each of the statistics they had on the boy. —Analyze your numbers, your actions; we were provided with statistics and recordings of the competitions. Your mind works at another speed, your reactions are those of a true soldier.

—What do I get if I do it?

Bushnell congratulated himself; they had reached what he expected, the negotiation, the hook.

—Dear friend, you will not only be part of the story, you will not only help save the world, you will not just send those monsters back to hell. It will be... profitable.

Kl4ws was silent.

—I want my family to be moved to a better place. —He said later. —I want you to give them preferential treatment.

—Consider that done, my young friend, done. But...

—That is all. What I have to do? —Kl4ws interrupted.

The group traveled again by helicopter, boarding Bushnell, Baer, as well as the new member of the Higginbotham project, Kl4ws; who had flatly refused to provide his real name, as well as the pilot and the escort. Baer had taken time to explain to the new recruit about the other benefits he would get from his participation: —Your life would be resolved. —He said.

—If sheitans don't kill me. —Added the boy; Baer kept silence.

They were flying over huge snow-capped mountains; the wind was sharp and the snow made it difficult to see. All were well wrapped. They saw light in front of them, Kl4ws was surprised: Light being at nightfall?

—Don't be surprised, my friend. —Bushnell said. —This is how life is in the shelter of Monte Rosa; one of the most advanced on the planet, perhaps the safest of all, and the new home for your family.

At the top of the highest mountain in the world was an enormous construction, with walls that rose beyond two hundred feet tall. Inside, what appeared to be a small city, with buildings, houses, movement. It seemed to come alive; its lights of various colors were on each side of the complex as if they were going through it. The helicopter landed on a modern heliport; Bushnell jumped out of the chopper, trying to get warm, it was terribly cold.

They turned to several directions and saw small buildings in front, they had pink, purple, then green lights; neon lights that made the shelter look like a city of the future. While the buildings were not that tall, to be on top of a mountain was something impressive. Kl4ws could even breathe without problems despite the height. —Scientific stuff. —Bushnell said. —Grids like that, —pointed to the floor, —are everywhere and provide constant oxygen; the asphalt produces a soft heat that allows creating an artificial atmosphere and a bearable temperature for life to prevail.

The young man admired the place surprised; he did not believe that something like this existed in the world; it looked like movies, like from... video games. —The same technology that makes this place so wonderful will make you an invincible soldier. —Baer said with his

usual warm and affectionate smile.

—Friend Kl4ws, meet Monte Rosa camp, feel free to walk through its streets and visit each location; take this, consider it an advance of your victory, buy what you want; please eat something. Bushnell handed a wad of bills to the boy. —Everyone here speaks your own language so you will not struggle to find something interesting to do.

—A soldier will accompany you and bring you back when we give notice, take the opportunity to familiarize yourself with the place so that you notify your family. Do not be afraid, sheitans cannot get here. —Baer added.

—This will be our base? —Kl4ws was still surprised.

—No, no, no. —Added Bushnell smiling. —Although it could be because this place is a marvel. No, we will go to an equally amazing place, maybe even more than here.

Kl4ws was left in one piece, another equally surprising place? Even more than Monte Rosa?

—What do we come to do then? —The young man asked.

—We're coming for someone else, someone as awesome as you, —Bushnell took the file and checked again. —I think her name is...

—Don't do that! —Kl4ws said annoyed. —Does She come too?