

# Under the Red Moon

by Vitaly “*Horromancy*” Margevics

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**M**y young daughter’s eyes glimmered as she took in the sweeping views of the distant snow-capped mountains. This was her first time seeing the Alps up close, and she was in awe. She bounced around the gas station forecourt, firing off all sorts of questions, probably inspired by some cartoon she’d watched lately: “Will we see a dragon?” or “Is there a Queen of Snow that lives up there?” Like every parent, I tried to come up with decent answers that wouldn’t shatter her fantasies - something along the lines of “They’re very, very rare, but you might just spot one” and “She might be busy this time of year, but we’ll be driving past her castle.” Unfortunately, that only sprouted more questions, and it would have continued if not for my wife returning from the shop with some pastries and coffee. We stood there for a while, watching the mountains in the distance, bathed in morning sunlight.



The murky old basement window didn’t let much light through, but it was enough to tell that morning had come. Images and memories from my dream quickly began to blur away, leaving only the rare and unwanted feeling of comfort and warmth it had brought me. I tried to claw at them, to remember every detail, every sound, every smell, but they slipped by, like many times before. Comfort was quickly replaced with a heavy dose of sorrow. A sour lump in my throat that wouldn’t go away. I hated these visions for the grief they brought me, and then hated myself even more for it.

I would have sat there for hours, watching the damp wall of my shelter. Potentially until my stomach would remind me about the need to eat or drink something. Footsteps and voices outside snapped me back into reality. An old mattress creaked under my weight as I stood on top of it to reach the window. There were people outside - a dozen of them. They moved in a silent procession past the empty houses and cars. Those in front and back wielded hunting rifles and wore ramshackle armour stitched together from plates of metal and hockey pads. However the group in the middle, weighed down by heavy backpacks, had their arms tied together with rope. The whole procession was led by a smiling old man in dirty garbs. Slave traders or cannibals, I thought to myself. Not a surprising sight, but the issue was - they were heading in the same direction as me - east, towards Frankfurt.

About a week ago, while I was trying to earn some rations doing odd jobs in the settlement near Prüm, passing caravans had started a rumour that the Foundation was setting up a checkpoint in Frankfurt. Radio chatter also mentioned some sort of plan they had on how to make things right again. Promises of a brighter future. Most scoffed at it, but Leon and Anna were determined to get there. Understandable - they still had something to look forward to in their lives. Maybe even raising a family.

They were a nice couple who had found each other after the Day of Judgement. Relatively young, too. Leon was always upbeat and chipper, which came across as annoying most of the time. He had a long braided beard that he took pride in, often telling everyone he had the blood of vikings. Anna, on the other hand, was the quieter, more anxious type. She refused to talk much about what happened in the years after the Moons appeared and no one wanted to poke at that. Everyone had their stories they'd rather keep to themselves.

When we eventually left Prüm together, they asked me why I had decided to tag along. I didn't really have an answer. Maybe deep down I hoped the Foundation was right, or perhaps I just wanted to see Leon and Anna succeed.

Now, checking the map, it was clear, I'd have to take quite the detour to make sure I didn't run into the slavers by accident. My supplies were already thin and I didn't know these parts of Germany well, so it was a gamble. After taking another glance outside, I gathered my backpack, made sure my revolver was holstered at my side, and slowly opened the basement door.

The still air felt dense and smelled of rotting wood. The quiet, almost soothing rustle of trees gave the surroundings a veneer of normality. Through the clouds, however, you could spot the coloured circles of three out of the seven new moons. Too high in their orbits to make any substantial influence on one's mind. The dark red one was either the Angry One or the Hungry One. The other two were Greed, with its slightly golden shimmer and Sloth that always looked blurry.

I took the path north, sneaking between houses and through overgrown yards where I could, staying away from the larger roads. Empty cars, broken windows of ransacked houses, piles of old clothes. Same scenery everywhere you went, and it always served as a painful reminder of that one faithful night. Even now you could easily picture the cars stopping and people running out of their houses to witness the giant black hole ripping the Old Moon apart, only to look around and see their loved ones and neighbours blinked out of existence.



The pet store yielded no results. Same with a few other small corner shops I checked along the way. Everything had been picked clean years ago, no surprise there. I did, however, come across a new sleeping bag - and a good one at that. Rated to keep you warm even at minus forty, or at least that's what the packaging claimed.

Closer to evening, I was checking the kitchen of an old rural house. I snuck through the back door and went straight for the pantries. It took me some time to hear a sound coming from the living room. The gentle creaking of old boarded flooring made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. That feeling of someone stalking you, about to pounce from behind a corner, sent every sense into overdrive. I listened, but the stomping was too methodical; it seemed to go back and forth. With the revolver in hand, I inched closer to the living room.

In the middle of the room was a naked man. His grey skin was wrapped so tightly around his bones that he resembled a mummy. Thin, long strands of white hair hung down to his chest. A barely distinguishable tattoo marked his left shoulder. He - or rather it - was walking in circles around the room. Based on the abrasions on the floor, he was doing it for some time now. I holstered my weapon.

They went by many names. Some called them zombies or husks. Others had taken on a more poetic name - echo. No matter what you called it, this was most often a harmless and pitiful result of living too many lives.

It heard me. Or sensed me. For the first time in a long while, it stopped. Slowly, it turned its skeletal visage towards me. Beady, sunken eyes stared out, perhaps trying desperately to make sense of what I was. I looked back at it. For a moment I almost wanted to apologise for the intrusion - but then I noticed something in its hand. A chocolate bar.

These things don't really need to eat, drink, or sleep. An impulse might drive them to repeat actions they once performed while they were still a person, and perhaps that was why it had picked the thing up somewhere.

I came closer, slowly, without breaking eye contact, and reached out my hand. It glanced at my hand briefly, and for a second I thought it might react, lash out - but it just stood there. I snatched the chocolate bar from its grip and took a step back. The echo stood there for a moment, looking at me, then turned to look at its empty hand, and then back at me again.

"Sorry, bud. I'll need it more than you. No hard feelings, okay?"

It did not react.

Later that evening, after I had scavenged the surrounding houses, I found a tree of hanging bodies. Each one with a tattoo on their left shoulder.



The night I chose to spend in an old rusty minivan. It had driven itself into the bushes once the driver turned into a pile of clothes, so it was well hidden. The rain tapped on the metal rooftop, speeding up the process of me falling asleep. And right there, on the edge of seeing my family again, I was woken by someone crying for help. I opened my eyes and refused to move a muscle. Paralysed by fear, I hoped that whatever was happening outside was just my mind playing tricks. The man screamed again. A soul-shattering wail came from somewhere in a nearby field.

Any other time, I would have stayed in. Waited hours with the gun pointed at the door. Preparing to save one last bullet for myself. But against all my senses I turned on the flashlight and slowly went out. The voice was too familiar.

I sprinted across the road and dove into the field of mutated grass. Thick, tall, and razor-sharp, it could easily cut through cloth and skin if you weren't careful, but I didn't care. If it was him, I couldn't possibly run away again.

"Where are you?"

Another scream for help came as an answer, but something felt off. Same pitch, same expression. It sounded repeated. My light hit his bare shoulders and matted brown hair, there was no denying it. Leon screamed again, with his head tilted backwards, as if he was screaming at the sky. Same scream, same intonation.

He jerked violently. Like a puppet that was suddenly cut from its strings, his head slumped to the side. I stood there, paralysed, as a mass of muscle rose upright. Four appendages that served as its legs ended in sharp, bone-like protrusions. All four coalesced into a body with a single fanged orifice that held my friend's torso upright like a mannequin. I will never forget Leon's eyes rolled back into his skull. Mouth wrenched open unnaturally wide, now muttering something garbled and broken.

The nightmarish creature shook and spat the body of my friend into the grass. The mutant was done digesting him, and had successfully used his vocal cords to lure a gullible replacement. Without thinking, I unloaded everything I had into its centre. The gaping maw fountained black blood, but it didn't stop the spider from galloping at me.

The gun was empty, so there would be no easy way out. I realised that for the foreseeable future I would be serving as this creature's plaything. A screaming torso to attract others to their doom. Would I be conscious the whole time? Was Leon? Running wasn't an option. It was fast. Unnaturally fast for its size.

Thundering blasts of rifles surrounded me. Bright flashing fires illuminated the area. I saw the creature's mouth close in on me, then fall at my feet, leaking acidic bile.



They weren't slave traders or cannibals. I was wrong about that the last time I saw them. This group had zeal in their eyes, empowered by emblems, scriptures and even sermons, led by Father Richard. A gaunt, tall man in his seventies, with infected scars all over his body that he had to bandage up again and again. Almost every evening he preached with a wide smile on his face and a voice so inspiring it was hard not to listen. He talked about the great divine Moons above, who had come here to free the miserable human spirits, and how they were the chosen few to lead the flock into salvation. His followers listened, cheered, and then flagellated themselves in front of an effigy to their dark patrons with wads of barbed wire.

There were nineteen of us. We were forced to carry heavy loads during the day and stand upright tied to trees at night. Even our mouths were gagged at all times, so no one could bite their own tongue off.

The first couple of days I tried keeping track of the directions we were heading. But the exhaustion slowly blanketed my mind. The meagre scraps we were given were enough to keep us going, but nowhere near enough to let us even think of escaping.

At one point, while our human caravan was crossing a bridge, one of the tied-up people - a young woman with a shaved head - tried throwing herself off, but didn't even make it to the railing. Father Richard simply extended his hand and she fell to her knees, screaming. What she experienced at that moment, no one knows, but it was enough to practically lobotomise her for the rest of the trip. The bastard preacher was one of the rare Gifted. Many of them had sparked witch hunts after the Judgement and had been echoed in most places I visited before. However, there were some who revered them for their paranormal talents.

We marched for days on. Stopping almost at nothing until we found ourselves in an old nature reserve. The night before, I swore I could see a shimmering of colours in the dark sky. It looked like an aurora was covering the woods and the hill

ahead. The next morning I understood why. The giant trees twisted and turned under some unknown influence, moving on their own, slowly swaying without any wind, their tops covered in gently glowing violet and yellow leaves. The place was alive, like a coral reef.

Father Richard stopped our procession on the way into the forest and, with a toothy smile and arms spread wide, announced:

“Rejoice, my flock, for we have made it to the sacred place. Rejoice, for we are about to enter the most holy of places and be embraced by our divine parents. Rejoice, for our efforts and sacrifices will be compensated by bliss eternal. Brothers and sisters, we have struggled enough and earned our place at the table of our creators. Now let us venture in.”

Nothing was right about this place. The air tasted foul and smelled of rotting eggs. Grass and branches reached out towards us, like hands trying to tug at our clothes and skin. Here and there, I saw clumps of dirt and rocks simply floating in the air amongst bright glowing spores, drifting like stars on a tapestry of unnatural blackness that filled this forgotten area. Although sounds were muffled, as if someone had put cotton balls inside one’s ears, I could still hear the Geiger counter on the belt of one of my captors. The deeper we went, the harsher and more insistent the ticking became. None of it seemed to bother the ecstatic fools. They didn’t even notice that some of them had gone missing. There was something else out there in the murky darkness.



It was late at night when we arrived at a large clearing. A crater, as wide as a city block, lay in front of us. There, on the bottom of it, amidst the burned trees and puddles of water, stood a pillar of white light. Mesmerizing and almost beautiful, it floated above ground and illuminated the area around with its cold glow.

For a second, I thought I had gone insane. I thought that perhaps Father Richard had actually been leading us to some sort of salvation. Maybe the Gifted knew what he was doing and this was the place to escape our reality. A small hope flickered: perhaps I was to see my family again.

The party stopped. Exhausted, those of us who were tired and carrying heavy backpacks simply dropped to our knees. Father Richard preached:

“Here we are, brothers and sisters. As I have foretold - we stand in front of the gateway to paradise. The door to the birthplace of souls is right beyond that light and...”

“What are we waiting for, Father?” One of the cultists yelled out in excitement. This wasn’t taken lightly by the preacher. Richard raised a hand to pacify the crowd and with a caring smile he walked to the impatient man.

“My child, you must not have been listening carefully enough. For I told you...” He placed a hand on his head and the man collapsed in pain. Clenching his head, he writhed on the ground as if on fire. His eyes, ears, and nose bled so much it looked as though he was being drained from the inside. “The pathway to the House of Moons is paved with pain and suffering. They are the judges that came to watch us prove ourselves, and they hunger for our devotion.”

All the blood that spurted out of the poor man started to rise up into the air. In clumps and bubbles, as if in zero gravity, it floated upwards and began travelling towards the light on the bottom of the crater. We all watched in silence as the crimson tendril reached the light, circled it and collected itself in the form of a ball above it. The preacher was satisfied and stepped over the corpse, looking beyond the crater. A small red flare lit up the sky.

“The other group has made it as well, I see. Wonderful. Let us reunite with the rest of our flock and begin our preparations.”

We started circling the rim of the crater to meet another group of armed men that were just now appearing out of the foliage. For a second, I took a glance over my shoulder and noticed that the body of the drained cultist was gone.



The other group was led by an elderly woman. Her face, covered in bandages, revealed only her lipless mouth and eyes that lacked eyelids. She walked with a limp, propping herself on a staff with a large amount of clammering trinkets attached to its top. Along with her came a dozen armed cultists and a group of slaves, just like us.

My heart sank when, amongst the emaciated faces, I saw Anna. Dressed only in rags, with her bare feet bleeding, she stood in a group of tied people without an expression or emotion in her eyes. Even if she could see me, I doubted she would have had the strength to react in any way.

“Eliza, it is great to see you again. Moons bless you. I see you have made good on your promise.” Richard spoke.

“Moons blesh you. Good to shee you too, Rishard. We had ishuesh on the way here. Many were losht at the hand of those hereticsh.” The hag answered.

“I see. Then we have no time to waste.” Richard turned to the rest. “Let us commence our final prayers, brothers and sisters.”

In the hours that followed, the cultists participated in a form of ritual. Circles and symbols were charted on the burned ground with salt. Standing torches and candles were lit. Effigies of twigs and skulls were risen on the edge of the crater. Richard’s voice echoed as he spoke of his gods and asked for their mercy.

Once they were ready, they started to choose one of us. Screaming and fighting they dragged them to the brink of the crater and slit their throat. The body would be left there and the blood would slowly travel through the air towards the pillar of light. Cultists celebrated as the collected blood started to form a great levitating orb. Another passage was spoken by Richard. Another sacrifice followed.

I waited for my turn, with full submission. There was nothing left to do. I looked around only once and saw Anna staring at me with her sunken tired eyes. She recognised me and I thought I saw contempt. I couldn’t bear to look up again.



Our first days of travelling, after we left Prüm, were uneventful. We tried checking every place we came across for supplies, but little was scavenged. An old soup can here, some wild-growing potatoes there. Anna dreaded being outside a secure settlement and jumped at every shadow. When we saw a pack of wild dogs she insisted on doing a very large hook to avoid them. Despite all this, Leon always found ways to stay upbeat and keep me and Anna in better spirits, by trying to recite recipes he would want to try out cooking.

One of the nights was spent in an old workshop. It had multiple exits and a collapsed rooftop, so it was perfect for making a fire and keeping it hidden. The evening was spent roasting potatoes, playing cards, and making small talk.

“What do you think all of this is?” Leon asked, chewing on his food.

“What do you mean?” I answered.

“All of this.” He pointed upwards, at the barely visible red Moon overhead. “We keep calling it Judgement, but that seems stupid. Isn’t that some old superstition of wrathful Gods coming to destroy our world? Gods don’t exist. I heard this one guy at the bar, once...”

“Stop it. Not before bedtime.” Anna barged in, setting up her bedroll.

“Sorry.” He looked at Anna and then back to me. I think he hoped I would continue the conversation in hushed tones.

“I don’t know. Maybe all of this is a collective bad dream we’re in.” I was tired and didn’t really want to. Over the decades people have tried making sense of it from every possible angle. Gods’ wrath, parallel dimensions, and so on. No one knew for sure.

“Ha, good one. So this one guy I met - said he was a scientist. Now, he told me his theory and I think I dig it. He said when the anomaly destroyed the Moon - I mean the old one - it also swallowed our planet into itself. Sort of a black hole scenario, and...”

“Enough.” Anna said from her bedroll, more aggressively now. “None of it matters. Not like it’ll change anything.”

We both sat in silence for a minute. Leon broke first. He stood up and slapped me on the shoulder. “Your shift, buddy. Wake me up in a few hours.”

The crackling of the fire brought a soothing comfort. I finished reading a small book I had found on the side of the road the other day - a fun little sci-fi story by some Russian authors, with a very hopeful ending. With hours to spare, I sat staring at the Moon. A grotesque blood-red ball with dark spikes protruding from its surface. An uneasy feeling washed over me that made the hair on the back of your neck stand up. For a moment, the Moon gave an impression as if it was staring back. I pulled away and my thoughts started to wander. I remembered the 24th of December. A regular winter’s day, a week before the New Year celebrations. My daughter had been excited to get back to school for her last day before the break. In the car, on the way there, she couldn’t stop talking about some new boy in her class who had transferred from France. When the car stopped she gave me a kiss and slammed the door a bit too roughly for my liking. My wife, a nurse at the local hospital, was at work until late that day, so we only managed to gather as a family for a late supper with tea and lasagne. An evening like every other. Plans for visiting grandparents were discussed, presents were wrapped, and a silly

kids' film was watched. I remember tucking my daughter in for the night. Saying "I love you" for the last time. Then dozing off in an embrace of my wife on a couch downstairs.

I woke to a TV blaring a national emergency broadcast. The bright red screen said something about staying inside and that the situation was under control. I stood up, and I clearly remember my wife's wedding ring clinking to the floor and rolling under the TV stand. I didn't pay much attention to it at the time. Her clothes were there, but I didn't remember her getting up. I went upstairs hoping to find her in the bedroom, but it was untouched. My daughter's room was empty as well.

I tried the phone, hoping she had simply taken our child and driven away for some unknown reason, but the network was down. When I rushed outside I found the car still standing in the driveway, but my attention swiftly turned to the devastation in the sky. The moon was being split open by gigantic tendrils that grew out of a black-hole anomaly. Streets around me are filled with chaos and violence. People screamed, chased and fought with each other. Blood filled the pavements in a steady stream of red. Cars and houses were set ablaze in the distance, where a couple of helicopters circled the city.

Suddenly, a man charged me from the side, knocking me to the grass. He started pummeling me with his fists like a wild primate. Some hits landed on my face, and my vision blurred. I knocked him off me with my knee and swiftly jumped on top of him. My vision was slowly coming back to me. I wiped the sweat from my brow and looked around. I was by the fire, in an old workshop with a caved-in roof. Had I fallen asleep? I realised I was sitting on something soft. I blinked a few more times. I saw Anna's face - eyes rolled to the back of her skull, mouth foaming and still open, windpipe crushed.

"Leon! Leon!" I jumped to his sleeping bag and turned him over. He had a knife sticking out of his heart.



There were only a few of us left. Some still had the strength to yell for mercy and try to wriggle out of their restraints. I didn't. I hoped that this "ritual" would put an end to my aimless existence. Maybe this would be my last rebirth, and I would wake up as an Echo. Maybe it would be simpler that way. I wondered if I would still dream of my family while being a braindead husk.

I looked up to see a great ball of blood levitating over the glowing pillar. Engorged on tens of men and women it now pulsed and turned erratically like a living being or an organ in stress. Father Richard and his fellow cultists were rejoicing. Some were on their knees, bowing to the pillar. Some shook violently in a trance. Others drew their own blood to donate to the cause.

"The hour is near, my children! Look up and you will see our mighty patrons. Their attention is now on you. And you are worthy!"

The crowd erupted in cheer, which was suddenly broken by an unnatural, guttural howl. Deep and nasal, it echoed through the clearing. Something large parted the trees and stepped out into the glow of the pillar and torches. It snorted the air, exhaling a puff of heated smoke from the bovine skull it had for a head. Antlers caught on branches slowly pushed through. Hooves and matted fur - all evidence of its distant origin, but what came out of the forest was its nightmarish doppelganger. Bright yellow eyes darted between the group of what it perceived as food. Its slender, needle-like claws clicked over each other, and it took off.

In a matter of seconds it was amongst the cultists. First was the lipless hag, cut from shoulder to hip in one single motion. A few others followed as the stag swiped and crushed. The rest didn't even get to draw their weapons in their dazed state. The Stag continued slicing through them in a flurry of attacks. Goring them with its horns. Biting whole limbs from their sockets. Impaling some on its claws and lifting them up in a gruesome display. Some managed to open fire; others picked up torches and spears, trying to scare off the ten-foot abomination in front of them. Nothing seemed to harm it. Bullets either bounced off or passed through its thick hide. Father Richard stayed at the back, barking orders and pushing cultists to their deaths. Apparently, the preacher's powers didn't work as well on one of the spawns of his patrons.

I struggled against my restraints as much as I could, but the ropes binding me to the tree were tied too tight. Anna was doing the same. I felt her glances at me and wondered what would happen if she got loose. Would she run, or repay me for that night? Unfortunately, fate decided for her. A glancing shot from one of the cultists tore a hole in her temple. I couldn't believe it at first. Small streams of blood started forming and traveling towards the centre of the crater. It was because of me we had both ended up here. It was because of that one day when I felt like I could finally care about someone again. Anna and Leon could have made it to Frankfurt. They could have been safe.

"Fiend! Beast! Begone!" Father Richard, down to his last men, was screaming at the abomination, which stood in a pile of bodies with nothing but scratches on its patchy fur. The preacher reached out his hands. His eyes reddened and nose gushed blood. Whatever invisible power he projected at the oment - it stunned the creature. It froze in place. "Quick you fools! Bring the explosives!" Richard yelled at his subordinates.

You could see the Stag's muscles twitch, but it didn't take another step. It roared. Same guttural deep howl that we heard before, echoed through the woods. Then something answered back.



I watched in silence as the two creatures ate. They bit and ripped, swallowed again and again - bones, clothes, everything - but their gaunt bodies never filled up. Between them they shared a meal of thirty, maybe thirty-five corpses, and reached for more. I stayed quiet, pretending I was dead and wondering if I should make enough noise to attract their attention. Perhaps they would finish me off quickly.

Beyond the grotesque feast, the glowing light of the pillar was partly eclipsed by the blood orb, now so large and tense it felt like it could burst at any second. In the end, the preacher had been wrong. He needed far more sacrifices to achieve whatever he had been trying to do. Who knows - maybe killing all his followers had been his original plan.

Something tugged on my hands, followed by a quick hiss. Slender fingers worked the thick ropes, trying to untie me. Anna. She had come back for me. Me? The person who had ruined everything. I should have been happy, but I was furious. This was unjust. I had ruined everything for both of them. A thought rang through my head to call out for the beasts - maybe their approach would scare off Anna and I would get me what I deserved. But I hesitated, and hated myself even more for it.

One of the Stags - the one that seemed to be younger, the same one who had been late for the slaughter and had finished off the preacher by sending him flying down the crater - its skeletal visage, covered in gore, started looking around for a fresh bite. It even went on all fours and sniffed the ground like a dog. That's when its yellow eyes met mine. Curious, al-

most dog-like, it cocked its head to the side for a second, perhaps confused by the one that didn't scream, run, or attack. Then it howled and charged.

The rest was a blur of motion. Freed from the ropes, I rolled to my right and darted through the bushes. Anna retreated, in time for the Stag to ram its horns into the tree. The second one wasn't far behind, closing the gap in wide leaps. There was really no point outrunning them, so I ducked left towards the crater. A flood of adrenaline brought an unbelievable clarity to my mind.

I had spent far too long in the company of cultists and knew that one of our group had carried high-grade explosives, probably stripped from some military base long ago. The beasts howled behind me and I heard the thumping of both pairs of massive hooves. Good. None of them went for Anna.

Almost slipping on the gore and jumping over body parts, I got to the pile of backpacks. With my heart racing, I pushed aside one, then another. I hoped I would find it in an instant. But it wasn't there.

A painful blow to the ribs made me fly through the air and tumble down the crater. I managed to curl up to minimize further damage, but when I stopped rolling I realised that in my hands I was holding something moist and hot. My torso was serrated by three large claw marks, and out of my stomach hung ropes of gelatinous intestine. A cold went through my body. I tried screaming but choked on my own blood.

The Stags, their glowing eyes never leaving me, took their time carefully stomping down the crater. Animals as they were, right now they seemed almost human. Two proud hunters that had wounded a rabbit and were about to collect the bounty.

Agonising as it was, I rolled to my side and saw Father Richard. The preacher hadn't been as lucky as me when he fell. His limbs and neck were all twisted, as if he were nothing more than a discarded toy. I would have cursed and spat at him before I noticed that by his side he had a black backpack. The same one I had been looking for up on the rim of the crater.

If I could have, I would have laughed at my untimely luck. Truth be told, I had already made an agreement with myself that I wouldn't be coming out of this alive. I was fine with blowing myself up from the face of the world along with these abominations. Anna would hopefully get out of this forest unharmed, and perhaps she might even find Leon, maybe she will even find me if I resurrect. There was even a glimpse of hope that the preacher hadn't been lying. That my blood and the blood of the beasts would finally awaken whatever portal was glowing behind me. Maybe Anna would jump into it and end up in a better place, away from this unending, decaying, rotting planet. There was even a chance that I would finally wake up from this nightmare and hold my family again. I really hoped I would.



I felt bliss wash over me as I saw the mountains. A beautiful vista of snowy peaks under a blue sky with sprawling woods. There was a girl nearby, a child. She seemed to be talking to me, but all the words came out muted, as if she was speaking through a thick wall.

Words came out of me slowly and with great effort. I wanted to ask something, or at least answer her, but all that came out were moans and groans. A woman approached us, holding a paper tray with cups and bread. I didn't know her. I didn't know the girl. It was wrong. It was painful.

The sky darkened suddenly. A roll of murky darkness stretched over the horizon in the blink of an eye, and through that veil I saw the faces of the seven kings. Sitting on their thrones made of bone and marble, twitching faces and golden veins, they laughed at my despair.



Frankfurt's fortifications were almost finished. Blocks were isolated and cleared of threats by squads of linebreakers. Found Echoes were herded out of the city premises and sent off to wander in a single direction. Concrete walls, barricades, watchtowers, and even sentry turrets had been set up over the last few months. Over the blaring speakers you could hear an unending tirade about the great progress and the great aim of the A.R.K. Foundation to bring humanity back on its feet. It was inspiring only the first two times you heard it. After that, it ate at your nerves.

"Beat you again," said Felix as he slammed the table with a trump card, winning one of Lea's ration again. "By the way, what's wrong with you today? Why are you being so gloomy?"

"Don't know. Might be the Moons." Lea threw his cards on the table haphazardly and stood up.

"Hey, come on, how about after the shift we grab a couple of stimulants and go see that new place that opened up in the centre. I heard the girls there are..." Felix made gestures with his hands that described the proportions of said women. He even finished it off with a whistle.

Lea smiled in return and raised his binoculars. Didn't want to seem like they were slacking off too much, in case the superiors showed up. Their overwatch was pointed at a clear highway, and apart from a pack of dogs once, no one had seen anything here since the first settlers arrived. This time was different.

He saw a woman in rags, slowly walking towards the gates.