

THE LIBRARY
A Story

Author: Povey Balkanski

Tereus was standing on the balcony and looking at the smoke rising in the distance and the fires flickering here and there. He was trying to keep a cool head or rather to ignore his emotions and breathe calmly in spite of the lump that he felt in his throat.

‘They are advancing, and they won’t stop! They won’t stop until they have wiped us all out.’ His chin started trembling, and he turned away. He stood like that for a little while, watching a flock of birds circling above the nearby hill. ‘At least you will be left. You will be the silent witnesses of this devastation. And some day, you will tell the story to the one who will follow in our steps.’

He was about to turn to the valley again and to subject himself to the torture of watching his own nation, his own educated and spiritually lofty people, being most ruthlessly destroyed by a group of...

At that moment, he heard the sound of steps, coming from the staircase. He looked at the tower and noticed that Zenick, his personal assistant, had appeared under the archway of the widely open door.

‘I beg your pardon, Your Omniscience,’ he said, bowing. ‘The War Council has gathered in the Ebony Hall and awaits your arrival.’

‘I will be there in ten minutes,’ answered Tereus, who then turned quickly to look at the valley.

Autumn had come. The sun was going down. Orange and red hues added colour to the already mottled valley that stretched all the way to the foothills of Mount Roy, which raised its snow-capped peaks far in the south. The red sun, the taste of smoke, the flickering flames and the winter, slowly creeping in, created an atmosphere of doom that depressed him even more than the enormous responsibility weighing down on his shoulders. Not scented with smoke, the air was now ripe with the aroma of blood. His blood. The smell of burning at the stake of several millennia of aggregated history of knowledge and culture.

Tereus’s eyes brimmed with tears. He turned purposefully, then proudly crossed the narrow balcony that girdled the top of the highest tower in the Palace, and he sank into the dark mouth of the only exit. The heavy two-winged door closed slowly and silently behind him.

The Palace complex was located in a small hollow encircled by low hills. The hollow had an opening to the south, connecting it to the vast valley. The Palace’s architectural style was lavish: golden domes and friezes, numerous statues and panels; the walls were painted pale green, sky blue and violet. This complex had been built in the distant past. Inside, there were hundreds of rooms and corridors, hallways, reception rooms, guest rooms, rooms for servants, greenhouses, barracks, stables, secret passageways known to very few, and many other rooms, built, demolished and rebuilt over the many centuries of its existence.

But all of them were newer than one particular room. A huge room, located at the heart of the complex and so ancient that no living soul remembered who had built it. The largest room in the Palace was reserved for its library, and the only reason as to why anyone would still call it a ‘hall’ is that only one person had the right to enter into it. Only one person knew what was inside and how it functioned, and perhaps it was the tremendous privilege and honour endowed

upon him that made his heart sink while he was walking quickly down the corridors, glittering in gold and blue, to the senior officials waiting for him.

The Ebony Hall was situated high in the Palace's central block, allowing for an unobstructed view of the valley. The hall's shape was elliptical, and one of the ellipse's arches and the ceiling were lined with ebony wood. The second arch was taken up by huge windows, through which the last of the sun's rays penetrated obliquely. This hall was not large and was used only for official high-level meetings, most often held in private. At its centre was an oval table with twelve chairs, two of which were now occupied by people dressed in the formal attire of senior officials—ankle-length gowns of navy blue, merging into black, with golden edges. One of those seated was slightly overweight, with greying hair and a moustache, and the other was tall, with jet-black hair and calculating eyes. In front of each of them was a tablet of information. Both were looking dully at the reddish surface of the wooden table without speaking.

Ketrizeris was standing by the huge window, his face expressionless, and staring unceremoniously at the setting sun. Holding his hands behind his back, he was outfitted as always with the light armour of a senior army general—pure black with fiery-red edges—fastened tightly around his chest and legs. He had taken off the armour pieces from his arms, revealing the light-sky-blue shirt he was wearing underneath his suit of armour. Strong, flexible gloves were hanging at his side. He had no weapons upon him.

The heavy doors opened smoothly, and the Chief Librarian walked in with a purposeful step. His parade robe was gleaming deep red and orange. Hanging by an exquisite gold chain upon his chest was the key to the Library—a small crystal, placed in a metal casing. At first glance, the crystal seemed dark blue, but, if one looked more closely, they would notice that the colour was changing and acquiring all the shades of water of a mountain lake: from sparkling white to dark blue. Why, when and how this happened, only the Librarian knew.

The Minister of Human Affairs and the Chief Merchant stood quickly and turned towards the door. Ketrizeris lowered his body into a bow and remained as such until the doors had closed behind Tereus and the latter had made a formal gesture for them all to sit down. Then there was silence. Everyone was waiting for the Librarian to open the meeting with the usual protocol greetings, but he did not do so. He was just sitting there, staring absent-mindedly into the dying red glow on the table and looking disconsolately troubled.

'Your Good Science,' started Satris, the tall, dark-haired Chief Merchant, 'forgive me for breaking protocol, but with the current development of our situation we have to make a decision as soon as possible.'

'Of course,' uttered Tereus, looking up. 'You are forgiven,' he added, raising his hand above his head as a sign of high favour. 'I was just listening to the voice...'

For a moment, all of the others lowered their gazes.

'Any ancient wisdom would be most welcome now,' said Ketrizeris, not letting Tereus finish. 'Forgive my persistence, but I would like to inquire again whether you have located in the Library historical evidence of such an invasion in the past. Practical experience is indispensable in warfare.'

'You are forgiven,' remarked Tereus magnanimously. 'But let me remind you once again that peace and harmony have always been at the core of our existence, since the establishment of the Republic. Also, I would like to ask you not to refer to this as "war". It is simply barbaric destruction without any strategic thought.'

'Barbarian destruction which we must deal with as soon as possible, and on top of that—with our own forces and resources,' added the general.

'Not necessarily!' objected Satris, as he touched the beige tablet in front of him. Pale-blue text appeared on the table's surface, in front of each of the twelve seats. 'I give you a draft agreement with the Shatars. In exchange for crops, livestock, knowledge sharing, building materials and other supplies, for a period of ten years, they will provide us with a division of their army. I would like to point out that they often engage in warfare and are experienced warriors, and for us the price is reasonably acceptable. Especially considering what is at stake. I think I could renegotiate some points, but...'

'What do they mean by "knowledge sharing"?' interrupted Tereus, who had read the entire text of the draft agreement in a single quick glance.

'This is one of the negotiable points, but in general they want to receive from us some historical and scientific information, perhaps limited access to some sections of the Library that have not been specified yet...'

Satris fell silent as he caught the Librarian's contemptuous look. The latter did not even bother to comment on what had just been said. Even children of the Republic knew that the only person who had ever had access to the Library was the Chief Librarian and that this situation would never change.

'The exact numbers and weaponry are not listed anywhere!' exclaimed Ketrizeris, who had just finished reading the text. 'We cannot be sure that we are going to receive significant support, and this is something that must be established unambiguously. Otherwise, we can run into trouble with the foreign military command. This could lead to insubordination or incompatibility of our military strategies and even to the loss of friendly forces. Personally, I first want to meet the division's commanding officer before continuing with the negotiations.'

'From what I know,' Satris began explaining, 'one of their divisions has almost as many soldiers as our entire army, and their weaponry cannot be incompatible with ours, as they bought military technologies from us more than two decades ago...'

'And when we refused to continue the export of knowledge,' interjected Tereus, 'they proved willing to do anything to acquire it by force! Just like those mindless creatures who have already occupied the entire eastern half of the valley.'

'Your Deep Thought,' gestured Ketrizeris, 'I fully accept your noble anger, but I must oppose to a certain degree your inflexible stance against any deal.'

Satris lowered his eyes in silent consent, and Tereus stared blankly towards the huge panoramic window. The sun had set, and the amber lighting panels were glowing on the ceiling and in the corners of the hall. On the ebony walls, the outline of golden frescoes depicting scenes from the Republic's long history had started to appear, activated by the reduced light levels. The atmosphere in the hall and in all other areas of the centuries-old castle exuded spiritual

elevation and cultural tradition that went beyond the confines of time. This was a nation composed of people who considered war a senseless and savage venture that deserved no attention. The fact that they had an army, although not numerous, was entirely a matter of respect for the traditions and history of the Republic. Its citizens were accustomed to seeing their military only at parades and celebrations, as guards of the government castle or on rare peacekeeping missions performed mainly in neighbouring countries. But now the army was on every city street.

'I also have to express my disagreement with our Chief Merchant,' continued the general. 'A deal at any price would be a sign of weakness. I'm sure there are other nations that would help us in this difficult situation.'

'I express my respect for you, Commander-in-Chief,' Vrigkakis started, entering the conversation for the first time, 'but you must agree that we don't have enough time to wait for a better offer. I come straight from the city, where total chaos reigns. People are confused and scared and do not know what to do. I feel that they are starting to doubt our ability to protect them. I heard that some of them have even fled to the west, outside the Republic's frontiers. I think,' he continued, 'that we need to take urgent measures to stop the horrible extermination of our people. Today, for the first time in my life, I saw a school that had been burned down...' He paused, visibly upset. His hands, resting on the heavy table, were shaking, and his face was pale and glistening with sweat.

'A war means a war,' Tereus said coldly, then added, 'More than three millennia ago, at the times of the Zurlyats' invasion, almost one-eighteenth part of the Republic's population died.' The Librarian's voice was cold and impersonal. He was sitting upright in his chair, his hands on his belt, and was staring straight ahead. The key of the Library was gleaming sky blue. High officials had shared in private that in similar situations in the past some of them had noticed a halo around the Chief Librarian's head and body. 'There were mass executions of civilians, looting and fires; one-sixth of the city was destroyed. Volunteer brigades from all over the Republic were mobilised. After two months of fighting, the Zurlyats were pushed back into the woods. Subsequently, as a protective measure, a wall was built around the perimeter of Mount Aemon.'

Tereus paused and leaned back in his chair. For a while, no one said anything.

'Thank you for sharing the wisdom of the Library with us,' added the raised voice of Ketrizeris. 'It is obvious that in our history there have been many difficult periods, but, thanks to our knowledge and skills, we have survived until today.' He paused for a second and then continued, 'Drawing on my experience as Commander-in-Chief, I believe this to be true: we need to increase the maximum permissible age for mobilisation, which will allow us to increase the number of volunteer squads, as well as the number of their members. I also propose to strengthen with additional technical equipment the six city locations of most fierce fighting. And finally, as soon as possible, to renegotiate the terms of our agreement with the Shatars and to require their immediate support. If not, we need to seek help from another nation. From which one exactly... I leave that decision to you,' and he pointed to the Chief Merchant.

'The merchants,' Satris responded without delay, 'have looked at four proposals from highly belligerent nations, and the one that I propose to you is

the most advantageous for us. All of the others would require a minimum of fifteen years of trade as well as a much greater number of public and education services and last but not least—more knowledge from the Library. The Centreys even mentioned something about direct access to it.’ He bowed his head to avoid Tereus’s piercing gaze.

‘People do not want to participate in voluntary squads,’ interjected Vrigkazis. ‘During my meeting with citizens yesterday in the partially demolished auditorium of the Eumolpiya district, many of the families shared with me that they would rather leave town than go to the front. There is great resentment against the level of training in your training centres,’ he said, looking cautiously at Ketrizeris, and continued, ‘They complain that you are sending their children for cannon fodder, pardon the expression, Your Omniscience.’

‘We cannot achieve much in a single week of military training,’ interjected Ketrizeris. ‘You are aware that our professional soldiers train for years. For this reason, I have one more suggestion for you, Your Omniscience. I was thinking of doing it, if it turned out that we could not immediately make a deal for external assistance, and, since this is already a fact, I think I can do it now.’ He looked respectfully at Tereus, who gestured to him to continue. ‘This is a difficult moment for the whole nation, and I believe everyone will feel encouraged if you make a formal address. People are desperate, and, if they hear your words of wisdom, the nation’s spirit will be uplifted and the army’s morale will be strengthened. I think this will motivate all volunteer squads to vigorously fight back the enemy invasion until outside help arrives.’

Vrigkazis quickly nodded in agreement. Satris, his lips tight, was staring intently at the text tablet in front of him, and Ketrizeris was sitting upright, staring blankly at the Chief Librarian. His manly face betrayed no emotion. He was ready to fight or to retreat, to mobilise every man in the Republic or to dissolve the volunteer squads, as proposed by the Minister of Human Affairs. Everything depended on the decision of the wisest man of the nation, who sat silently, staring down at his dark-blue, almost black, medallion.

There was a long silence. The conversation seemed over. Each party had expressed their opinion, but there was no consensus, and no one could take independent action.

‘Your Wise Words,’ started Ketrizeris, ‘we need to make a decision tonight.’

Without showing any special interest or haste, Tereus looked up, rose from his chair and spoke as if he were addressing a packed hall:

‘We cannot enter into an agreement for the provision of friendly help under such barbaric conditions. We are the premier nation of the world, and other peoples should be aware of this. To help us in difficult times should be a matter of honour to them, just like we help them with knowledge, spiritual enlightenment and guidance, without asking for anything in return. We must seek a new agreement—one that does not degrade the spirit of our ancient culture. In the meantime, we will protect ourselves from the advancing enemy forces. I will appeal to all citizens of the Republic with the guidance sourced from the millennial wisdom of the Library. This will be delivered tomorrow at sunrise.’ The meeting of the War Council was concluded.

Tereus left the hall with the same purposeful step with which he had entered it, leaving behind two desperate statesmen and a general who was ready to serve with dignity and honour, whatever the cost.

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In the westernmost area of the huge city-republic, occupying the valley of the Matoas River, a family was preparing to go to sleep. They did not expect to have a good night. Both the father and the mother clearly realised that they would not get any sleep, just like they had not for over a month. They kissed their children anxiously, trying to reassure them, and retired to their bedroom. They listened to the rhythmic artillery shots coming from the east. Every now and then, they could hear the sound of sirens and the distant roar of heavy machinery... The Republic's insignificant army was desperately trying to do something for their people, to save their homeland from the clutches of greed and moral corruption. Most of the soldiers realised, however, that they would not be able to achieve it. Some of them even knew that they would not last to see the break of dawn.

Invisible in the darkness of the moonless night, the enemy hordes advanced towards the city. They could already see the lights of the first houses. The well-organised army of the Shatars had just accepted a clearly beneficial offer of the Dyernians, which promised untold riches and new technologies, and had spread out along the full length of the city's western perimeter. A new front had been opened, and the soldiers had been promised that anything they could grab during their deadly march would remain theirs.

The column of combat vehicles and the soldiers coming slowly after them reached the first houses. These were just houses with gardens where there was nothing of value. Flames erupted and turned the houses, together with their inhabitants, who were just beginning to realise what was going on, into embers.

The invasion from the west had begun.

* * *

The Republic's Regular Army was small but very well trained, and, although it lacked experience, it had much more sophisticated weapons than did the enemy. Its main problem at the moment was that it had to do too much at once.

The Commander-in-Chief, General Ketrizeris, was the world's best military strategist and was highly regarded by all neighbouring nations. He came from a family with rich military traditions, which was a requirement for the selection of candidates for all senior positions in the Republic. Perhaps it was this fame of his that had forced the attacking Dyernian hordes to seek an alliance with two other armies: that of the greedy Shatars from the west, who had been offered bribes and booty, and that of the tribes of the mentally retarded Zurlyats from the north, who were tricked by means of simple manipulations, such as murder and robbery, allegedly committed by nationals of the Republic but in fact the result of a secret and well-planned military operation. These people, mutated as a result of their long isolation, were ready to do anything for revenge.

The invasion had started about a month earlier with an attack on trade caravans and diplomatic missions, which quickly escalated into an all-out war against the Republic. General Ketrizeris had realised the true intentions of the enemy, and, although he did not want to believe that someone had decided to destroy them completely, the strategic analysis of the situation had forced him to take extreme actions.

His long years of military discipline and strategic training, which he had received from his father and grandfather, had taught him that one should not disrespect facts but act upon them. He could still hear his mentors' words, 'Sometimes, it is necessary to swallow your pride in order to save your life.'

Despite the enormous reluctance of the Palace Council and the clear opposition of the Chief Librarian, Ketrizeris had cited martial law and was given authority over the Palace's west wing. Following his orders, the largest possible part of the city's movable property was relocated there: valuables, precious works of art, technology samples and other valuable possessions, even including the families of the higher dynasties' heirs. Ketrizeris had personally organised this very expensive 'hotel' for the housing of the aristocrats.

Having taken care of the families and valuables, he separated out the most elite part of the army, a hundred soldiers, and deployed them as the security detail to the Palace. This was what Tereus had most difficulty in accepting.

It is because of the enormous resistance that Ketrizeris had met, despite the obvious threat, that the final part of his 'insurance' was done in secrecy, and he had entrusted it to only a few senior officers, who had readily performed what they had been ordered. The task was indeed shocking: they put destructive charges in all Palace rooms to which they had access. Ketrizeris did not want to leave untold riches to the enemy hordes in the event of an unfortunate turn of events. Those riches were precisely why they had come.

As for the people, he had only one plan for their salvation, and he did not like the plan at all. So, it was important to convince Tereus to make a deal, and, in the meanwhile, the troops protecting the city had to withstand enemy attacks.

The war was not yet lost.

The Commander-in-Chief donned his helmet, engaged the protective field and left the armoured transport. Fiery streams from the attacking Dyernians' flamethrowers hissed above his head. A fragment bounced off of his chest armour. He stooped and ran to find the commander of the Second Battalion.

He found him in the armoured command tent, pitched behind the ruins of what was previously a bakery. Lieutenant Colonel Driant was leaning over a three-dimensional map of the front line along with two of his company commanders. When Ketrizeris appeared at the entrance, all stood to attention. He sharply gave them the command 'At ease!'

'Report!'

'They are pressuring us from the east and south,' began Lieutenant Colonel Driant. His helmet was covered with soot, and the armour on his left hand was broken. 'They broke through our defences at the bridge over Tsiabrus River, and we lost the ground connection with the First Battalion. Since the beginning of the attack, we have lost about ten percent of our personnel and had to retreat three blocks to the west.'

Ketrizeris looked at the map. The enemy offensive had started 1 hour and 47 minutes ago.

‘What is the state of our heavy weaponry?’

‘We have lost three autonomous defence systems and a tank...’ Driant looked closely at the map and corrected himself, ‘Two tanks.’

Three consecutive explosions went off in their immediate vicinity, and the dull rumble of a collapsing building followed. The earth shook, and broken bricks and pieces of concrete rained down on the tent. Ketrizeris looked outside through the tent’s front cover. The soldier who had been guarding them was dead.

‘Retrieve all trench machines from the front line!’ he ordered. ‘Autonomous defence systems must be redirected here and here,’ he said, pointing at the map, having studied the disposition of the enemy forces. ‘We will try to divide their attack into two arms. This will allow us to incapacitate the larger part of their heavy equipment when it reaches Setoya Boulevard. How many anti-tank mines do you still have?’

One of the company commanders looked at a small screen on his wrist and reported, ‘Sixteen sets.’

‘Position all of them along this firing line,’ the general instructed, starting to draw it on the map, when the communications indicator on the map started blinking and the silhouette of the commander of Military Intelligence, Colonel Tarops, appeared in the air above it.

‘General Ketrizeris,’ he bowed, ‘allow me to report!’ He was so excited that he could barely speak.

‘Go ahead.’

‘The street wardens of Eordaea district just told me that a huge military force is invading the city from the west. Aerial reconnaissance has confirmed that ten blocks have already been destroyed. Here is the direct feed of incoming information.’

He waved his hand, and the heartbreaking picture of ruthless extermination appeared on the map.

‘How did they manage to circumvent...’ started Lieutenant Colonel Driant, visibly surprised.

‘These are not Dyernian troops,’ Colonel Tarops interrupted him. ‘The army of the Shatars is invading us from the west!’

General Ketrizeris gasped in surprise. For the first time since taking the top military post, he was unable to control his emotions. No one in the military had ever seen from him anything but the look of one who never loses his cool and always makes reasonable judgements. That face was now distorted by a spontaneous outburst of despair, hatred and tragic doom. His hands were shaking.

Two further explosions were heard nearby, and their echoes mixed with the rumble of many others, tearing the fabric of the entire city. For the first time in thousands of years, the evacuation sirens blared.

There was dead silence in the small armoured tent right next to the eastern front. Flabbergasted, the four men could not move. It was as if they were not in a tent but in a sinking boat in the middle of the ocean and were helplessly looking for a straw to hold on to before inevitably going under.

Even the general had lost his cool, but after the first strong explosion he recovered and said in a trembling voice, 'Colonel Tarops, give me a direct link to all troops and all commanders of street wardens!'

The silhouette floating in the air signalled to someone behind his back and, after a moment, the reception lamp on the table lit up.

'This is General Ketrizeris, Commander-in-Chief of the Republic's Armed Forces,' he started, with practised confidence in his voice. 'Due to the sudden and unexpected attack from all sides and in view of the fact that the enemy outnumbers us considerably, I hereby command all military personnel to begin an immediate retreat to the north, to form a circular defence around the Palace's walls! We must preserve as many pieces of heavy weaponry as possible without taking unnecessary risks and without undue resistance. All street wardens must see to the immediate evacuation of all civilians to the north, with the aim of temporary sheltering them behind the walls of the Palace! In this operation, our objective is to save people, not property. Over and out.'

He turned and left the tent without looking at anyone and leaving behind the petrified officers, motionless as statues. Nobody asked aloud the obvious question of how the general was planning to shelter all city residents behind the walls of the Palace and how this would turn the course of the military campaign.

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Tereus stood alone in the silence of the Library and thought, 'How did we get here? Why are there such people in the world or, rather, why do such evil people have access to the knowledge needed to create so many weapons? ...' He knew that in the past they had voluntarily conferred some knowledge to less worthy nations—mainly for charitable reasons but also because of their persistent nagging, often under the pretext that the knowledge would be used for peaceful purposes. But, after all, if you know how to build a good tractor for tillage, with a little ingenuity, you could learn how to make a good tank for war. 'Do these barbarians truly have inquisitive minds?' he asked himself. This, however, was the subject of a longer reflection for which it seemed there would be no time that day. He wanted only to find out where he had gone wrong—he personally or some of his ancestors. Whether the problem was rooted in the fact that they had not managed to defend the knowledge well or that every nation was destined to acquire it, however absurd that sounded? Now, if he still had to concentrate on the present situation, whatever had given rise to it, in order to take the right decision for his people and for the Library...

At that moment, the emergency notification signal flashed on the rough surface of the table before him. He had never seen such bright red and orange. Obviously it was something quite important. He knew he had to answer, but he did not want to. He preferred to remain in the depths of his thoughts.

* * *

Ketrizeris came out of the armoured transport right in front of the huge front entrance of the Palace fortress, which even now was open wide to the city, as if ready to accommodate it in its sky-blue arms.

‘Close this giant gate immediately!’ he shouted. ‘When people start coming, let them in through the side gates, and direct them to the barracks! Where is the captain of the Palace Guard?’

‘We take orders only from the Chief Librarian and...’ the guard Ketrizeris was addressing started to explain automatically but then stopped.

A quiet hiss was heard, and two huge fiery jets struck the invisible dome protecting the Palace fortress, then with a shriek turned into fireballs and dissipated into the darkness, sprinkling their heads with hot ash.

The general, without as much as flinching, looked searchingly at the frightened soldier and, without a word, entered the fortress, walking along the central paved alley leading right to the Library.

One of the creatures grunted. It seemed to be their leader. After his signal, the warriors who followed him split into two columns that advanced in two directions: one to the left, and the other to the right, noisily breaking the forest vegetation. In just a short time, they had deployed along the entire north wall of the fortress, still keeping a respectful distance. Right in front of the wall, there was a well-lit strip of about one hundred metres in width, completely free of vegetation.

The army of the Zurlyats was obviously afraid to attack the Republic. They had done so on many occasions in the past, and every time it had cost them numerous victims without any conquests to show for it. What drove them mad was the fact that they had not managed to kill a single enemy soldier. On every occasion, they had had to fight the strange spider-like robots that popped up over the wall at the moment they set foot into the lighted area. Even now, the ranks of swine-like creatures glanced fearfully at the ramparts of the green fortress that looked suspiciously vacant. The two things that gave them courage were their chieftain’s confidence that this time their new allies would secure the victory, and also the weapons that had been provided to them.

A new series of grunts ordered the relocation of four rams to directly behind the vanguard. In the forest thicket, the rest of the horde was grunting, stirring and squealing, seemingly trying to be quiet. The chieftain, standing proudly at the edge of the forest, was staring with hostility at the nearby watchtower, listening to the sounds coming from the strange little device that he had received from the Dyernians. Everything was ready. All they were waiting for was the signal to attack.

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Ketrizeris stopped at the high wooden gate adorned with gold-and-jade bas-reliefs praising the inveteracy of Knowledge. He bowed and made a salutary gesture. After a moment, the friendly face of the Librarian’s main assistant, Zenick, emerged from the door’s surface and informed him that His Omniscience was busy but would soon be able to receive him, then apologised on the Librarian’s behalf and kindly asked the general to wait.

Ketrizeris bowed again, and, after the polite face had dissolved into the air, the general started running towards the headquarters of the Palace Guards, which was currently being used as the headquarters of the Army Command. He

had immense respect for the Chief Librarian, and he could not understand where the strange desire to send him to the brig had appeared from.

When he entered the brightly lit control room, the sentry signalled and everyone, including the chief of the Palace Guards, stood to attention. He sharply gave them the command 'At ease!'—there was no time for formalities. The general stared at the huge map of the city turned into a battlefield and tried to calmly assess the graveness of the situation. At the exact moment when he learned about the invasion from the west, he had realised that it would not be possible to contain the attack.

Ketrizeris noticed the fear in the eyes of the group of officers who had clearly expressed their relief when he entered the small room. How many people would perish and how many would be enslaved? What would happen to the oldest and most developed country in the world? Would the very concept of 'honour' still exist after all this was over?

Completely unnecessary questions! The general knew what to do, and his military duty and discipline gave him confidence that he would be able to accomplish it. His humanity, however, appealed for him to wait.

'Place all long-range artillery mounts along the southern wall! Move the front to the north side of Matoas, and destroy all the bridges! All the mine-laying plants must begin work on the south coast!' he ordered. 'Where are we with the evacuation of civilians?'

He would wait. He did not know for how long or why. Out of the blue, he wanted to hug his dead father and maybe learn how to laugh freely and deeply, as he had seen other people do.

* * *

'Knowledge is the highest power! Compassion is the highest virtue! Nobility is the most important possession! ...'

Tereus was in a trance. He had completely immersed himself in the infinite universe of the Library and neither could nor wanted to come out of it. He received all of the information from the outside but did not want to react to it. Things were going to sort themselves out, as they had on so many occasions in the past.

He knew. He was the only one who knew.

It was quiet in the makeshift control room. The ten men inside it did not speak to one another. The atmosphere was depressing, and there was a tangible feeling of impending doom. They all stood around the huge three-dimensional map representing the battlefield from which the only sounds came: mostly alerts of destroyed combat units, or another platoon was dispersed, another fortified position destroyed. A group of civilians was surrounded by enemy forces. All street wardens had either been killed or been captured. No one could stop the attack from the west. From the east and the south, the front was moving before their very eyes. Another intersection, and another, and another... Closer and closer to the Palace. And what would happen when the barbarian hordes reached the heart of the Republic? Nothing different from what was already happening in the streets. Devastation.

For the first time in his life, Ketrizeris was biting his lip. For the first time, he truly did not know what to do, and he felt sure that he had no useful move left. He could only stand and watch in despair as his subordinates were waiting on him to offer a solution, although they probably realised the inevitable. It was high time that he gave the order, and, the sooner he did, the better the chance to save at least something from their millennial culture. His throat was dry, and his limbs felt icy cold. He was standing frozen by the table, watching the small, red clouds that burst on the map, incinerating another part of their protection, almost defunct by that moment.

Suddenly, they heard a low rumble. The northern side of the map, which has so far been a reassuring dark blue, flashed fiery red, and a new front line emerged along the border with Mount Aemon. The last signal to attack had been given. The last hour was upon them.

Ketrizeris's seemingly infinite inner strength that everyone admired so much appeared to have been depleted, and in its place fear and resentment had taken hold. He looked up from the map and with tears in his eyes nodded to Berisades—the commander of the elite army battalion. It was time. Berisades ran out of the room.

'Dear friends...' Ketrizeris started shakily, but he quickly realised that these people were still looking at him with great respect and even harboured the hope that he might offer them a miracle to prevent the inevitable end. He restored his self-control with difficulty and continued, 'No one knows whether today is our last day on this earth and whether our Republic will survive. However, we are the military, and what we know well is how to wage war. And that is exactly what we will do—we will fulfil our duty! Our military honour will not be taken away by enemy fire or bomb fragments. Amadock,' he turned to the chief of the Palace Guards, 'throw this squealing mob out of the Palace! Everyone else—take command of your units! We will uphold the strategy of perimeter defence. I will personally oversee the eastern front. Does anyone have any objections or recommendations?' All were silent, paralysed by panic. 'Dismissed!'

After a brief moment of confusion, the order finally sank in, and the commanders bumped into each other on their way out, running to their armoured machines. The general was just about to leave the now-useless command centre when the communication channel opened and Major Berisades reported without first asking for permission:

'General Ketrizeris, the Chief Librarian has locked himself in, and we cannot evacuate him. I am waiting for your orders.'

'Coming!' the general barked and then ran towards the dome of the Library.

The wooden gates, where Berisades and four soldiers were standing, were about five metres high and three metres wide. At the moment when Ketrizeris entered the vestibule, Zenick's pale-blue image appeared in the air in front of the door and kindly started explaining that the Chief Librarian was not currently available but as soon as...

The general waved, and the blue haze dispersed in the air.

'I hereby request access to the Library by the power of the War Act.'

'Access is possible only with the permission of His Omniscience, the Chief Librarian,' pronounced a disembodied voice.

There was no time for such formalities. Not now.

‘Do you have the destructive charges?’

Snapping out of their state of shock, each of the soldiers handed him a single grey sphere. The general positioned the spheres, evenly spaced, upon the door, and the six of them came out of the building.

The Library had been built a long time in the past. The large double gate looked very solid, but Ketrizeris was sure that it would not withstand the combined power of four modern army charges triggered simultaneously. He was hoping solely to avoid injuring the Librarian and destroying what was inside the building. No outsider had ever set foot inside, so the general had no idea of what to expect.

He ran his finger along his bracelet, and they all heard a sharp and powerful explosion that shook the earth and cracked the walls of the vestibule. He and his soldiers rushed inside, sheltering their eyes with their hands from the smoke and dust. There was a huge hole in the door, and, on the inside, to their great surprise, there was nothing—just empty pitch-black space without specific dimensions. Without a second thought, Ketrizeris rushed into the darkness, followed by his subordinates.

For the first time in millennia, outsiders had penetrated the Republic’s most closely guarded place. Having passed through the dimming mirage at the entrance, all except the general froze in awe and wonder. He also slowed his step but rather to orient himself without losing his composure even for a moment. He looked for the man he had come for but did not see him, or at least not immediately. Perhaps because the hall was huge—its diameter was over sixty metres. In addition to that, it looked nothing like a library. There was not a single book in it. Before their eyes lay a huge lake that occupied the entire area under the dome. The small ripples caused by their feet quickly broke the smoothness of the lake’s surface. They were up to their ankles in water. It looked crystal clear and transparent, but they could not see the bottom, which was supposed to be just below the surface. In the centre of the lake, they saw a small island. A covered pavilion stood on it. The huge dome above their heads seemed from the outside to have been built of solid stone with a metal supporting structure. From the inside, however, it was completely transparent. During the day, the sun penetrated through it, and one could see the clouds, and at night you could watch the stars and receive information about the constellations that were delineated in the air. Now, one could see only the flames that engulfed the city and the dashing, fiery projectiles.

Ketrizeris started walking towards the small wooden pavilion, leaving the stricken soldiers at the exploded door. The closer he got to the island, the deeper the lake grew. When he finally reached the pavilion, he was wading in water up to his knees. The general came to the shore. It was covered with what looked like freshly mown grass—thick, rolling down to the water’s edge. Below the surface, the bottom descended almost vertically, without any mud or sand, as far as he could tell. The general crossed the narrow strip of grass and entered the modest house, which inspired humility.

The Chief Librarian was the only one who could tell the story of the first building of the Republic, raised more than eight-thousand years ago, when their

ancestors decided to settle in this place. Before that, they had been nomads and lived in the vast steppes east of the valley. They had had no written language and culture. Instead of God, they had worshipped Nature, because she had been gracious to them. However, times had changed, and drought had settled in. Lush pastures dried up, and flocks scattered or died of starvation and thirst. The ancestors lost their usual way of life and were forced to march west in search of a new habitat. Here, in this valley, they came across the great but muddy river of Matoas. Its water was not suitable for drinking, but it provided for ample grazing for their domestic animals, so the ancestors decided to settle next to it. In the small valley, where the Palace now stood, they built this small wooden pavilion—the first solid structure in their history. They built it to praise and protect what they had learned to honour the most: water. Here, in this place, there was a clear spring that quenched the thirst of the whole tribe. And this is how the town in the valley was built, near the pastures. Crafts developed, arts evolved and science was gradually born. The city grew, and before long the Republic was founded—an independent city state.

Centuries passed. The people learned many new things, but they did not forget their history. So when one day the spring dried up, they built the Palace around it, and the latter stood at the heart of their statehood. And they placed the Knowledge, for which they felt an ever-increasing respect, in the small wooden pavilion in the middle of the Palace courtyard. A long time passed, and this ancient temple that had become the centre of civilisation acquired even greater significance. So they chose someone to look after it and to keep its secret. They called this person a 'Librarian', and the protective dome received the name of 'Library'. All the knowledge and culture, and all the history of the ancient Republic, were housed there. And every new piece of acquired knowledge was inducted into the small wooden hut, which exuded humility rather than grandeur. Because, as every librarian knows, 'prosperity is the work of the majority firmly based on the wisdom of the few.'

Tereus was sitting on a small wooden chair. He had folded his legs underneath himself, and his hands were resting in his lap. He was staring into the empty space in front of him as if he were sleeping with his eyes open.

'Your Omniscience! We have to go.'

There was no reply. Ketrizeris looked around. He had no idea what state the Chief Librarian was in or how to bring him back to the real world. The general waved in front of the Librarian's eyes, but Tereus did not even flinch. There was no time for guesswork. Ketrizeris appeared at the entrance of the pavilion and called two of the soldiers who were examining the Library with open mouths. With their help, he carefully lifted the Chief Librarian, who offered no resistance, and laid him down on a transport platform. Tereus curled and lay on his side, without a sound, his eyes still open.

The octagonal pavilion was almost empty. Its interior was sparsely decorated with carvings, and at its centre was a low table, above which a kerosene lamp was hanging.

Ketrizeris picked up the chair and took a small pastoral painting from the wall and also the oil lamp, which was empty and had no fire burning in it. He had no idea whether these things had any value. He did not know where exactly the

Knowledge was and whether it was possible to carry it out from there. It was clear to him, though, that Tereus would not help him in this endeavour, and Ketrizeris could not afford to take the whole pavilion. He hoped that he had been able to save at least something. He looked around the small room, which inspired respect with its passive humility. It was not unlike an old man who does not talk much, but his eyes show that he understands everything—and still does not need to participate in the affairs of the young, since for him they are just vanity.

‘I am sorry!’ the general uttered as he rolled a small sphere on to the floor.

In fact, he was glad he did not know what this building was—he did not know its secrets, although he intuitively sensed that it was something that should not be destroyed. On the other hand, military honour told him that, if the Republic did indeed have something that should never fall into enemy hands, it was precisely this old cabin.

He jumped into the water and hurried as quickly as possible to the dome’s exit. But, the moment he left the small pavilion, his heart sank. He could not help but turn to take a final look. Behind him was only the yellow-brown cabin of old, split wood, covered with primitive carvings.

‘Put charges throughout the entire building, and get out of here!’ cried the general, looking back at his subordinates with difficulty. ‘I also want an aerial charge placed up there!’ he said as he pointed to the dome. ‘Two minutes from now, you must be out of the Palace!’

‘It will be done!’ curtly answered Berisades.

Ketrizeris came out of the Library and headed for the main entrance of the Palace, where his armoured transport was waiting for him. He stopped and turned. Two hundred metres away, the northern front raged. People and machines battled desperately with ugly, deformed creatures and slowly but inevitably retreated further and further.

He heard a loud crackling. The sky overhead flickered and then faded quickly. The generators had been destroyed. Their shield was down. He gritted his teeth. Palace guards were being slowly overrun by panic. Fiery jets hissed over their heads from all sides; guided projectiles whizzed. Ketrizeris ran with all his strength to the fortress wall. He had to get to this transport to be with his soldiers and not be alone in this place. He wanted to die on the front line with his head hung high, following the example of his distant ancestors.

He had just reached the vehicle when the bracelet on his arm vibrated. He stopped and looked at it—next to the pale-yellow stripe, a green one was blinking. The evacuation was completed. He turned and for the last time looked with a stony expression at the Palace complex. There was no room for emotion, no time to say goodbye.

He ran his finger along his bracelet. Bright blue light flashed from every building. There was a sharp scraping sound, mixed with high-pitched whistling. Then came a loud bang. The dome of the Library split and collapsed. The rest of the buildings followed suit. The Tower of the Morning Glow was no longer the tallest structure built by man—it collapsed with a deep rumble on to the now-demolished Library. The era of the Old Republic was over.

* * *

Somewhere deep underground, a long convoy numbering more than five hundred people was travelling through a narrow tunnel. Built centuries ago, it was known only to the military elite. Nobody knew who had had the idea to build such a facility for Palace evacuation, but everyone present felt thankful that they had done so. The tunnel started from the basement of the south wing and progressed eastbound. After about two kilometres, however, it turned sharply to the northwest. Berisades, who was leading the convoy, looked at his bracelet, to make sure that the rear guard was far enough from the corner, and motioned for a stop. He was standing in front of a small panel of black glass built into the wall. Berisades ran his finger over the glass surface, drawing an intricate symbol, and then signalled for departure. The convoy continued its sad march, greatly increasing the speed with which it was advancing. After the last cargo platform had passed by the small black panel, a distant rumble echoed in the tunnel. The elite of the nation exchanged anxious looks, but, as no command had been issued, they continued their silent march. Berisades did not tell them that the rumble was due to the collapse of an entire section of the tunnel to cover the bend in such a way that even excavations could not establish that the tunnel had changed direction.

'We are safe!' was all that Berisades whispered in response to persistent questions by the people around him.

He was just as confused, surprised and angry by the unfolding of events as everybody else. The general had entrusted him with the salvation of national treasures but had given him no orders on how to proceed after that. Just like the soldiers in his unit, he would have preferred to stay on the front lines, defending the dignity and honour of the nation.

A hundred metres in front of the convoy, another group of lighting fixtures lit up to reveal another stretch of bare brick walls and a floor paved in stone slabs. The fixtures would go off on their own, a hundred metres after the last group of cargo loads had passed by. The tunnel was over six hundred kilometres long and led deep into the bowels of Mount Aemon, far beyond the overhead settlements of the Zurlyats. At the current speed at which the cargo platforms moved, they were supposed to arrive at the tunnel's end just before dawn. Ahead of the convoy's members was a sleepless night filled with repressed hatred and the absence of any news about the fate of their beloved Republic.

The tunnel ended in a small hall, not big enough to accommodate everyone. Berisades entered the small hall with a dozen of his soldiers, having ordered everyone else to wait in the tunnel. He stood in front of a metal gate, two metres wide and three metres high. He had no idea what could be waiting for them on the other side. With difficulty, he pushed aside the rusty cover of the narrow porthole built into the door, and he peered ahead. There was only darkness.

Berisades sighed. He knew that salvation depended on him, but he did not know what to do. He wished that the wise general were there with him. Berisades gave the order to open one of the gate's wings. Before them stood a wall of boulders and earth. The commander overcame his sudden outbreak of despair and ordered his soldiers to dig. To their delight, the layer of accumulated stones and earth was not very thick, and they were able to quickly clear it,

revealing the exit of the rescue tunnel. Berisades cautiously stepped outside and looked around.

The exit was located at the base of a small cliff sitting on a low, sloping hill. The pile of stones had served to conceal the gap in the rock that housed the door. He immediately understood why the Zurlyats never came there. Before his eyes, in the faint light of the dawning day, was an endless sea of low hills covered with thorny bushes and yellow, withered grass. They had fled from paradise to find themselves in the middle of a wasteland.

He sent scouts to the nearby hills and helped his people to leave the tunnel. By sunrise, all that remained of the Republic could fit on to a small hill surrounded by a sea of thorns, with those present waiting for the scorching sun to squeeze out of them the last drops of faith and reason.

Just as Berisades was wondering where to march and generally what to do with their lives from that point on, the court doctor reported on the last blow of their bitter fate. During the journey, the Chief Librarian had passed away. He was still curled up as when he had first been laid on the platform. He had passed away silently, taking with him the wisdom of their ancestors that they needed so desperately.

'We'll head west,' said Berisades, addressing the crowd. He sounded confident, but it was an act. He was just trying to be the leader that they needed.

They loaded their luggage on to the transport platforms and departed without purpose in a meaningless direction. Before leaving, they had buried Tereus within the stone crack at the exit of the tunnel. Upon his chest, they put the key to the Library: the key was now as black as tar. It looked like cracked volcanic glass without any value. They did not mark the grave, as they wished to leave no traces. Only one of the court scholars dared, without being seen, to scratch the Republic's emblem on the stone wall, leaving the last dim and distorted memory of a greatness bygone and never to be resurrected.

The End