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SOAR

by

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CHAPTER 1

Metallic hands hidden neatly beneath faux flesh crushed the door, splintering it with haste. Raucous cries followed as Led ran into the coffin, unaware of his destination, his mind focusing only on escape. The room was small with space enough for a mattress on the floor and a tiny cooler for food. A televisior hung from the wall. A meager bathroom without a door was the only other room. A woman sat on the toilet screaming at the intruder.

“Damn,” Led cursed. He looked about, electric eyes scanning walls. There he found the thin lines of a hidden passage unseen by unaided Meater eyes. He wished desperately to take the exit, but knew he couldn’t, not with the woman so near.

It was late afternoon. People would be returning home or already home from work. He was going to have problems finding an empty coffin.

The woman screamed hysterically.

For a moment he thought of slaughtering the Meater woman and escaping through the hidden door. Led winced in disgust at the thought. He had little choice. He had to continue to run.

Led jumped back into the hall where more Meaters were collecting, peeking out of their coffins to wonder at the screams. Several stepped back into their coffins, slamming doors shut at City Guards heralding their approach with leather funnels and yells. Led's broad shoulders grew wider, his back straightened.

The crack of a gunshot sounded to his right. The smell of fresh gunpowder filled the hall. A hot, white pain sank into Led's ribs to become sore and stiff.

Someone yelled. The dim gas lamp lighting in the hall and wafting gun smoke made it difficult for Led to see.

He turned away from the sounds of pursuing Guards and ran the length of the hall. Ahead he could make out the reflective surface of a glass window that opened onto a fire escape. His mind pumped juice and commands to his legs where the whirl of tiny hydraulics began. His world filled with screams and gunfire. The hallway exploded all around him as balled bullets slammed into plaster and wood. A few riddled his back. He felt them, but was largely unaffected by the missiles. His eyes blurred with sweat. The ragged *danke* covering his torso like a poncho swung and swirled in the rush. A black and tan striped *sacho*, a cravat, flowed its full five feet in length behind Led.

With a dive he crashed through the glass. Shattering starlets burst into the air, falling to the streets below. The steel fire escape caught his back, bending under the force and weight of his body. Led scrambled to his feet and climbed the ladder towards the roof.

Guards peered out the broken window, leaning to look up, their faces covered by featureless black masks flowing seamlessly from helmets, smooth and egg shaped except for a tiny bit of filigree where a filtration apparatus and voice box was placed for speaking and breathing. Their heavy pants and *dankes* were royal violet, their boots and gloves black leather. Few had guns and only then flintlock pistols. The rest carried on their backs and in the crux of their arms fire-blackened flamethrowers.

Led climbed higher and higher at an unnatural rate. His heavy brown boots made the steel of the ladders creak, screaming, straining not to buckle. He passed by the massive red lettering announcing to the world the complex of tiny apartments held within the building as the Empire Arms.

The building stood a hundred stories tall and ten-thousand coffins wide. A good number of the city made residence here. Led had once lived here, briefly, long ago as a child. Each coffin was exactly the same as the next. Each coffin housed either a single person or a few generations of a single family. Each coffin was cheap and served its purpose as home.

As Led neared the rooftop he could hear the low thrum of dirigible engines. He leapt the rest of the way to the roof, landing on his feet, ready to run in whichever direction was open to his escape, but found instead six of the great dirigibles surrounding the rooftop, battling unseen currents. Winds blew darkly, marring the skyline with dust, sulphur and smog.

The sky grew dark purple and brown. The exhaust of the great air-whales spit darkness as they hung in the bruised sky. Led's breathing became shallow. He reached to

his neck and grabbed the *sacho* and wrapped it about his head and face. He pulled it tight over his mouth and nose so that only his eyes were left peaking out. His breathing eased.

Of the six dirigibles, four were clearly marked with the black and violet colors of the City Guard. The other two, flying higher, were undoubtedly media broadcasting the inevitable stand-off.

Black ropes dropped from undercarriages.

Guards descended.

Four, ten, sixteen Guards surrounded him, flamethrowers at the ready. One was yelling commands. Led thought for a moment the Guard was yelling at him. He could hear nothing over the whirr of the nearby engines.

Blackened air swirled behind the airships.

Led steadied himself, looking across the great expanse of the roof. There he found a massive crane placed not long ago with plans to remodel and build more layers atop the already enormous Empire Arms. Between him and the crane stood the Guards. He wished his hydraulic legs were more powerful, allowing him to leap over the Guards and climb the crane or somehow descend the building, to leap off without concern. He considered this.

A lone Guard stepped forward, unarmed except for special binds used to capture and hold Phreakers. His odd faceless head nodded as though telling Led things would end well if only he would cooperate. Led knew better. If they did not torch him now, they would only stake and burn him later at a public exhibition near the park at the center of the city.

Led jumped at the approaching Guard with unnatural speed, grabbing him by the arm and neck. Led's shoulders rotated, jerking the Guard off the surface of the roof. He continued to lift the Guard and twist his shoulders, creating momentum until he launched the Guard high into the air, throwing him with supernatural strength.

The Guard sailed, limbs whipping wildly, binds falling away, hands grasping desperately at nothing. He arced high before gravity took full control to pull at him, sending the Guard screaming into the streets far below.

Another Guard charged, this time armed with a flamethrower belching naphtha bile at Led.

Led stepped backward, placing a foot on the building's ledge and jumped over the spewing stream. He came crashing down on the Guard. He rolled to his feet holding the terrified Guard as he had held the other. Led looked to the sky, aimed and threw once more. The Guard flew, trailing a fiery tail, comet-like. He did not fall like the previous Guard, but instead slammed into the side of a dirigible.

The great air beast exploded in screaming death throes, sinking and drowning in flame. The rooftop of the Empire Arms was engulfed.

CHAPTER 2

"Him!" cried Aerol Standish. He pointed at the television and declared, "I want *him!*"

He was a short, plump man. He smelled of oils and incense and sweet fruit liquors. A pure white toga was wrapped about his body while a thin branch clustered with olive leaves was wrapped around his head. His hair was thin, dark and matted.

Beside him stood Doc Savini, his thin frame looking thinner next to Standish. His face, wrinkled and gaunt, was long. He was tall and wore a gray *danke* with a single bold white stripe over the right shoulder. And to his side was Havelock, a man dressed all in grays. His *danke*, his *sacho*, his trousers and derby all matched. Even his handlebar mustache was the very gray of his clothing.

Great wooden ceiling fans carved to replicate palm fronds hung overhead, twirling the air but not cooling it. They were operated by deaf mutes draped about the waist in white cloth cranking gears and pulleys wrapped with ropes.

The three men stood together, watching. The television's flickering lit their faces pale white, throwing unnatural shadows that battered them about the heads. They watched as the City Guard pressed in on Led, watched as he grabbed hold of one of the Guards and threw him into the city far below.

"He's rather brutish," observed Doc Savini.

"All the more endearing to me. A beast of beauty. Surely you know him?"

Doc Savini squinted at the blurry, static-filled image. "I believe so, in the past. He holds within his frame some very fine work. He uses his enhancements to procure money from individuals who owe his employers. He's kind enough, but he always struck me as gruff and reckless. I suppose we witness that now. Are you certain he'll be the one? He's a bit high profile at the moment."

Standish nodded vigorously, his fat face jiggling. “All the more reason to have him! To show the world we can tame a beast, make an angel of a demon.

“I’ll have him. I *want* him. He shall be our catalyst for change, our hallmark, our Gabriel.”

The image on the television blurred further more. They could barely make out as Led threw a second Guard, flaming, into the belly of a dirigible.

“His form! His power! He is excellence unleashed. Think how wondrous he will be when I have him! And I *will* have him.” Standish turned to the man in grays.

“Havelock, go for him now. Let us hope we can recover him under the cloak of this confusing conflagration.”

CHAPTER 3

Led crouched atop a giant stone bust at the corner of the roof. The gargoyle protruded from the building without wings or deformity, but in the likeness of some ancient philosopher he did not know.

His torso naked, back straining with new muscles wrapped around the frame of wings. His black and tan *sacho* covered his nose and mouth.

He had always wanted to fly. It was a wild and youthful dream. Six months ago the dream had been realized. With sixteen hours of groundbreaking surgery and two months of constant pain the dream was born into reality. First there had been the pain of new hardware invading his flesh, then the pain of new muscles strengthening themselves under the weight of wings.

He had already flown, but only within the confines of labs and odd chambers with a dozen or more men in white coats watching. This would be his first time in the real world, over the streets of New Haven.

Led looked down. The streets were alive with the activity of Meaters, purists that followed the law and refused enhancements. People afraid of technology, a fear born in the War Against Machines. It hadn't been much of a war. It had been more of a crusade.

If the wings refused to work this day, he faced a fifty-story plummet.

He stretched the wings at the sunset made gold by pollution. He couldn't see the sun, only its golden glowing effects.

He felt the air currents rippling through the feathers, judged the unseen and knew what to do to leave gravity behind. He felt the importance of the moment. He was about to realize humanity's greatest, most universal dream.

His leg muscles contracted and he jumped.

He soared.

The wings flapped once, twice, arcing to cup the winds. He was glad for the solitude granted to him on this occasion.

Led soared.

The embers of the sun fizzled to the west over the blackened waters of Lake Wakshasa. The city streets below filled with long, drawn-out chants from unseen chanters. Stars largely unseen hinted at life high above. What few could be seen were somehow closer, though Led knew they weren't. Not by much. Quickly they faded out, drowned by the city's gas lamps sparking to life, forming a great galaxy of golden stars dancing below.

Led soared.

He felt like a god spying the outer edges of a galaxy.

He soared.

Streaks of lights grew brighter as the heavens grew darker. The city swirled like illumined lily pads in the night. Each light became an outpost of hope, of life, chasing away primal fears and dancing as candles at the witching hour. Led had never seen the city more beautiful.

He soared.

He twisted, spying on the city below. Each light represented a life to him, a cell within a greater organism. It was wondrous. He smiled.

Led smiled.

A fat Aerol Standish sat in his massive office at an equally massive desk topped with white Italian marble. His chair was leather, cool and plush. He sat like mighty Caesar in a soft, white gown. The room dwarfed even this, the most important of men. Decoration within the office was sparse. Only an imported hand-woven rug lay in the center of the room and atop it another chair matching the one Standish sat in. An odd wooden arm descending from the ceiling near the desk held a large television. Potted trees and framed pictures of jungles and wild men filled the spaces of two walls. A third had a hand-painted fresco of Julius Caesar, though many people visiting the office in the past had mistaken the likeness for a younger, leaner Standish. The fourth and final wall, the wall behind him looking over the city, was nothing but a line of windows from corner to corner and from marble floor to vaulted ceiling, stretching out behind him like great wings.

He flipped through some book with disinterest. He knew Led would take his time flying about the city, which he was perfectly happy to allow.

A knock at the door.

“Come,” his voice echoed through the office.

Twin golden oak doors opened and Led walked in.

Standish looked up and noticed first the smile of his winged man. “Now there’s a sight I like to see. How was it?”

“Unbelievable!” Led said.

Standish waved him to the open chair in front of the desk. Led passed on the offer. “It’s difficult to sit in chairs now,” he explained.

Standish nodded with understanding.

Led approached to lean on the desk and stared at the book.

“Don’t worry,” Standish said. “No one will see it lying there.”

Led picked up the book and flipped through it. Standish was amazed by Led’s bold acceptance of the book. Led was not surprised a man of Standish’s position and wealth knew how to read. He skimmed a few of the pages.

Standish recognized the act. “What’s this? Does our brute have a brain? Can he do more than wield the knife?” Standish smiled emphatically.

Led hesitated with answer.

“Come, come, my boy. We are free to speak here. No Guard will swoop down from the mountain to purge the world of our ilk. Here I am king and master and shall forever be. The arms of the Lord High Mayor cannot reach here unless first I grant permission. Tell me, dear boy, and tell me true: Can you read?”

Led nodded slowly and only once.

Standish stood, laughing. “What a find you are! A brute, a beauty and a thing of intellect! How could I ever hope to be so lucky?” He came to stand near Led and peered at him with something akin to greed. “Now tell me *what* you have read.”

Led lowered his head and shrugged.

“Don’t make me work for this. Tell me and tell me outright. You cannot be afraid. Here we are in a time of regressive technology and I’ve made you into a man with wings, how could your simple confession of reading be any worse?”

Led looked up, “The last thing I read was *The Prince*.”

“Machiavelli? By the gods, you *do* have a brain! It should be no surprise it’s one of my favorite texts. What think you of it?”

“It was an old thing. I got it from-” Led quickly looked at Standish. Books and reading were illegal and Led was afraid he almost inadvertently gave away the source of many of the books he had read. He continued, “Well, its pages were fallin’ out and the edges were torn. It smelled of dust and wet paper that had dried. I kinda liked the smell.”

Standish shared Led’s smile.

“But the text itself I didn’t like,” Led added.

“Why? For what reason?”

“It was good until the end. The last part revealed it all to be a shallow ploy, a pitchman’s call, a scam. It was another sale tailored for a mark. It was just another advertisement.”

Standish leaned back on the desk and considered Led curiously. “Maybe so, but that should not abolish its worth. There are some strikingly good things elsewhere within the text.”

Led shrugged and stretched his wings. “Maybe. It always seemed to me the schemes of today are our own. Only our actions will see tomorrow. That book was nothin’ but schemes. Schemes for position, power and money.”

“Not all the pursuits of money are unholy, my dear boy. And not all the advertisements are pursuits of money. Machiavelli, while unhappy in his new life, had nothing but luxurious time to pursue anything he wanted. All his cares were tended to. He may not have been rich nor in a position of power as he had once been when wrote *The Prince*, but he was no street urchin either. He was a gentleman of the country.”

Led nodded. “I know.”

“Then why your disapproval?”

Led was slow to answer. Finally he said, "I'm no mark."

Standish thought on Led's wounded pride the book must have brought to him. "Making a sale is truly a delicate thing. Do it too forcefully and you risk offending the customer. Do it with a passionate plea to some universal truth and you shall be hailed practically religiously. Again, it's not always about money. Some pursue pride and immortality. Some strive for better things for themselves or their community. It is what you and I do now with those wings and the coming Expo. What make you of us?"

Led shrugged. "It's all the same to me."

"Please enlighten me, dear boy."

Led thought a moment before he spoke. "It's about validation. You're right, money isn't always the purpose of a sale. Most times ideas are being sold and, I think, the most passionate salesman sells his own ideas, validates his own perception by spreading his ideas. Who am I to argue with you? Who am I to argue with one of the master salesmen of New Haven? You want to sell the idea of technology back to our world. I want these wings, hoping that, maybe, some will be envious of me. Some may even accept me."

Standish thought on this, began to speak and stopped short. The two sat in silent shared contemplation.

"Now what?" Led asked.

Standish drew nearer Led. His squat frame made Led look down at him. "We take on the world, my dear boy! We make a good pair. I'm all show and your handsome as hell. It will be easy to show you off."

"I don't wanna hang out in any more labs."

Standish shook his head. “You’re through with the labs. I’ve set up more appropriate and, hopefully, more comfortable quarters for you.”

“In this building?”

“We need to keep you close. And in two weeks we’ll unveil you to the world at the New Haven Business Exposition.” Standish’s smile was wide.

Led’s smile ran away. “Am I to be a prancin’ pony?”

“Not exactly, dear boy. Tell me, what am I best known for?”

Led hated Standish’s way occasionally of answering questions with questions, feeling as though he were being baited, much like the purpose of *The Prince*. What scared him more was he felt he was growing used to it. “You’re the second richest man in New Haven?” Led guessed.

“And quite powerful, but I mean what *business* am I known for?”

Led shrugged. “It’s well known you dabble in everything. My guess would be most of your money comes from landholdings, but your biggest news-getters are your pursuits of technology. It’s your most controversial work, at least.”

Standish smiled again. “Correct! And who would be my greatest rival in that respect?”

Again Led shrugged, guessing, “Merricksen Consolidated?”

“You pay attention.”

“To my enhancements, yes.”

“Merricksen Consolidated is owned by Rollus Merricksen. One of our agents planted deep in his company recently relayed to us that Merricksen will be personally unveiling the VK-111 at the Expo.”

“What’s that?”

“An amazing piece of machinery. An automaton.” Standish grimaced. His forehead furrowed with thought. “It means my worst fears are coming true. The future of any society is its present technology.” Standish paced before Led. “These idiot politicians and religious men, these *leaders* do more to suppress technology. All because of the War Against Machines. Idiots! Uneducated, unenlightened, backwards idiots! Yet we call them our *leaders*!”

Standish grew feverish in pace and tone.

Led remained quiet.

Standish looked to his winged man. “This means Merricksen is years ahead of everybody I’m involved with. Only Savini seems to have some foothold on the future.”

“Doc Savini’s good.”

“The best! But he’s only one man. Merricksen has surrounded himself with an army of architects and designers. And now he’s got an automaton. Most companies are afraid to even dabble in robotics for fear of the law and social repercussions. But not Merricksen. He has charged ahead. He’s a devilish plan in the works if I know him.”

“Robots would be a hard sell in New Haven,” Led put forth. “He’s shooting himself in the foot if that’s his great secret for the Expo.”

“One would think, my boy, but Merricksen is a sly bastard. He has a gimmick somewhere an idea, something to make people put aside generations of technological fear and accept a new kind of automaton.” Standish continued his pacing. His bare feet slapped against the marble floors. His breathing became erratic, heavy.

Led let Standish pace for a while.

“It’s bound to be the single most advanced piece of machinery the world has ever seen!” Standish reasoned. “We don’t have much in way of detail, but it’s fully automated. I worry it may be a policing machine. With such an automaton, people would no longer be needed to guard city streets. There’s bound to be some backlash, but the argument in support of the automaton would go something like ‘Better to lose a machine in the line of duty than a life.’ The City Guard! Private security! You name it! And the cold shadow of burning clouds you have made may lend themselves to the argument. Thirty-two! Thirty-two dead by your hands alone atop my Empire Arms!”

At this Led winced.

Standish rubbed his head nervously, ruffling his matted hair.

“But the War Against Machines...” Led reminded.

“Has left us suspicious of automatons. We’ve destroyed them before. We’ve slaughtered them, insomuch as one can slaughter lifeless machines. We’ve thrown ourselves into another age of darkness and terror. I am a student of history, my dear boy. Our fellow man, however, designs against the past in some ideal for the future. Bacchus plots against Clio. What wounds he digs are deep. The mutilated muse suffers his scarring and is piecemealed together as something more Promethean.”

Led leaned on the desk. He had learned the fat man was prone to soliloquy. He eyed Standish. Led found him to be simple, though adorned outwardly in odd elaborate trappings, and self-educated. Though Led often did not understand the ramblings, he listened to the words, the tones and pace. When he felt prompted, he would reply.

“The science of the Shanist Temple is all the people answer to now and turn to for answers. To risk reintroducing robots is bold. Merricksen could be setting forth his own

undoing, but influence through litigation can push past social response to achieve any end.”

“It sounds like something you would do,” Led said.

A wry smile was planted, blossoming upon the face of Standish. “Indeed,” he answered. “Rollus is gambling on the need to save, to cut costs. It’s a bet well hedged.”

“He wouldn’t risk losing everything with a line of automatons when I can’t even walk the streets,” Led said. “The backlash would be immense. He’d swing from the gallows.”

“Times change, my dear boy. Attitudes shift. It is the ebb and flow of humanity’s will that dictates technology’s progress, not science itself. Everything within society must first be justified within the popular consciousness. It’s all in the marketing and alteration of common perceptions. It’s in the ideas, just as you said. With the right image you can sell a murder. Everything can be justified if lighted properly and photographed from the best angle. This city is a ship adrift in the great stream of human consciousness. Push and pull at the rudder, steer the ship, change the course of history and attitudes and belief and reality is recorded anew.”

Led thought he could feel the tides flowing, unseen, around him. How fragile the perceptions of society now appeared to him, more fragile than human life. He felt lost, floating, a prisoner at the fingering whims of another.

“Where do I come in?” Led asked.

Standish gave another wry smile. “The VK-111 will be big news, something most everyone will be speaking of.”

Standish slowly, dramatically, approached the towering plane of windows overlooking the gas-lighted city sparkling in the night. The dancing lights were the color of aged papyrus: bright, twinkling and yellowed. Led walked up behind him, unconsciously spreading his wings to match the expanse of glass and sprawl of the city. Wings upon wings upon stars upon heavens.

“How was it... to fly?” Standish asked softly.

The smile returned to Led. He shook his head, opened his mouth to form words but was met by a drought. Led was far from a wordsmith. He was at best a street thug, a goon, the city’s cheapest muscle for hire. At least, he had been before Standish rescued him from atop the Empire Arms.

He didn’t have an answer.

He didn’t need one.

“Imagine, dear boy,” Standish said, “Imagine the Expo. Merricksen shows up with the VK-111 and gets all kinds of attention, both good and bad. Now imagine as we let loose onto the world a *man that can fly!* And under his own power! The VK-111 would be a giant, indeed, but a giant standing in the shadows of a god. You are the dream of Man, dear boy. Of every man of every age.”

The two men stood in silence together watching the city as two men staring at an aquarium. Standish was reveling in his self-made elation, his pre-conceived victory. Led’s mood melted into brooding. He wasn’t one to do things to please others. He was solely interested in fulfilling his own pleasures. But Standish had made his wings possible, among other things. *Perhaps*, Led thought, *I can put on the song-and-dance*

routine for Standish. I've made my deal with the devil, now it's time to dance. But a bitter taste remained and Led couldn't help himself from saying, "A prancing pony."

Standish turned his attention to Led. "Just for two weeks, my dear boy. After that you'll be as a folk hero, accepted and loved everywhere."

"What do we do until then?" Led asked.

"You fly, dear boy! You fly!" With a swoop of the hand Standish indicated the city far below. "Let them see you down there, flying high above their architects! Let them scream and yell and talk about you. Let them call you The Gargoyle, show them Mercury, let their eyes touch Gabriel in flight! Let them talk and wonder and toy with the ticklish fringe of panic! But don't let them get hold of you or those wings. Simply fly!"

Over the next two weeks Led would fly at night and in broad daylight. He would promote himself freely and wildly. He would drum up business in the form of media frenzy. He would play the billboard, the poster, the advertisement. Led cared little for this, but he wanted to fly. He wanted to fly.

The next morning, without breakfast and very little sleep, Led made his way to the top of the building. The city lay sprawling before him, a giant painting splattered golden with morning sun glow. Van Gogh had been resurrected and put to work landscaping the early horizon. Windows twinkled like gas lamps at night. Stars amongst steel. Tiny shines between streets.

All was quiet.

Led soaked in the silence.

He jumped.

He soared.

He smiled.