

Chapter Eight: Game On!

Klaus followed Unira through the city while keeping track of Camellia's general direction. No updates came from the Juggernaut, which meant nothing out of the ordinary was happening, and he'd gained a high-level of confidence that if anything confused her, she'd question it.

He had them slow down a little, so he could better observe the Clavex Ri'bot's culture. Not a lot could be seen of the main bustle of the Ri'bot's small city, but from the back streets, he was able to see the layer underneath the image they wanted to portray to the Nalveans and to be honest, he was a little surprised by what he found compared to Earth.

There were sections of areas designated to deposit fish guts or large insect exoskeletons, which seemed to function well as the two types of bins didn't overlap, and while it did smell something foul with insects buzzing around the waste, nothing spilled onto the street.

Several Ri'bot bustled past, likely taking shortcuts to reach their destination, and even though they gave their group a questioning stare, not one asked for an explanation or looked as if they feared him.

General bins to deposit wood and other such materials were seen further along, but everything seemed uniform, which impressed Klaus. However, judging by Nadraca's earlier reaction, everything here was more or less inspired by the Nalvean culture, which could have gotten a few of their own advancements from the Quen'Talrat.

The entire scene put a smile on his lips.

This should be easier than I expected.

Unira guided them back through a few alleys between streets to reach the docking area after walking another mile. Klaus could see a massive river dock, filled with goods and bustling Nalveans and Ri'bot, but halfway through the slightly narrow space, he turned to a well-crafted wooden door with an etching of the sun carved into the center, walking through.

Klaus followed, keeping his senses alert. He could tell that several Ri'bot were inside, scattered in the three rooms he could accurately detect, but only one made his smile rise a little.

Unira guided Nukara, Nadraca, Frinel, and Klaus to the second room, passing through what appeared to be a preparation room to enter a shrine to their left; two Ri'bot seemed to be in the process of bathing, splashing water over themselves in two large wooden buckets.

He had no idea how to distinguish between male and female Ri'bot, making a note of it while entering the room straight ahead.

Klaus' blue irises swept the humble space as he entered. For the supposed place of official residence for the Clavex's spiritual headpiece, the room left much to be desired.

A wooden chair was placed on a small stone dais, comprised of plastered down bricks that were roughly crafted considering the masonry he'd seen so far along the docks. It did have a few feathers tied together, hanging around it, and a splattering of random dyes, but it seemed utterly drab compared to anything found in the empire's capital.

Upon pondering the fact, he made a mental note about discussing a name for the fortress city; it would be essential to label it as their own as soon as possible to indicate a change of ownership, making it separate from people's mental image of the Quen'Talrat.

The odd thing that made Klaus' head tilt a little was the rest of the room. It was like a group of abstract muralists had gathered together and had a showdown to see who could come up with the most oddly shaped splatter of colors conceivable possible.

A cloth rug stretched across the stone ground, and even it wasn't spared from the battle. Yet, several rough patches showed more wear and splotches of color underneath, telling him this must be some kind of tradition, and there were many layers coating everything in the room.

Two Ri'bot wearing similar necklaces as Nadraca stood beside the chair with two other Ri'bot exiting the room as they entered. By the impression they left, Nadraca was at least twice as strong as them.

However, the Mother Superior was another matter entirely. Klaus felt like the elderly Ri'bot could put up a decent fight, perhaps only slightly weaker than Valdar in his current state, which was impressive. Although he suspected any of the Xaria he had met could likely kill her before she had a chance to fight back, she had the potential to deal significant damage, though.

The wrinkled figure sat upon her chair with calculating, frosted blue eyes as she observed their entrance, but her lips pulled back a little upon seeing Nadraca. "My girl," she said in a heavy tone upon spotting him, "it seems as if you have brought trouble to our shores ... it is nice to see you safe."

Klaus offered a respectful bow, but his guides only went so far as to show what he would describe as a nod of acknowledgment to their leader.

The Mother Superior's lips creased slightly; after she had visually checked Nadraca, possibly to view her physical health, her vision never left Klaus. "... Do you speak our language?"

Knowing exactly what he needed to do while having the stage, Klaus spoke moments before Nadraca and Unira opened their mouths.

"Mother Superior, it is my pleasure to stand before Your Holiness. I am Ambassador Klaus Klossner, and it is my honor to inform the Clavex that Her Holy Imperial Majesty, Supreme Chief of the Pits, Empress Elinor, has chosen me to represent her desires."

The Mother Superior's eyes narrowed slightly, folding her fingers atop her lap while noticing Nadraca and Unira's jaws snap shut.

"First and foremost," Klaus stated, crossing his hands respectfully at his front where everyone could see them, giving the tribal leader a soft smile, "Her Imperial Majesty wishes to impart a warning to the Clavex Clan; the Supreme Supreme Chief of Storms, Empress Yesenia, is currently amassing power within the Nalvean Capital, and she does not have a favorable view of the Clavex or any Ri'bot Clan."

Just as he had expected, the Mother Superior held up her hand for him to stop. "One moment, Ambassador Klaus Klossner."

He was a little impressed she didn't stumble with his name, such as many other Ri'bot had.

She hummed softly, studying every inch of him, and after a moment, dismissed the two Ri'bot beside her, and to Klaus' party's surprise, the Mother Superior requested everyone but Nadraca and Klaus to leave. After a few nervous glances, everyone walked toward the door in the back, pausing as the elderly Ri'bot spoke.

"Please, do not spread anything you have heard, Laurina, Nubraca. That includes the rest of you; do you understand my request?"

They all bowed without a word, tongues stuck to the roof of their mouths.

She gave them what Klaus assumed was a thankful smile before turning her attention to Nadraca. "Child, if you could excuse the rest of the young Priests and Priestesses in training within the area?"

"O-Of course, Mother Superior," Nadraca bowed, swiftly rushing to fulfill the command.

Klaus stayed silent, patiently waiting for the Ri'bot to drive the next turn of the conversation. The Mother Superior didn't speak again until Nadraca returned, but he could tell by her tight muscles that she felt pressured.

He suspected at least one of those two Ri'bot would have a loose tongue. The society was too lax to keep gossip from spreading, and it was the news of the strange and unusual that heated the normally mundane buzz of chitchat.

News of a Supreme Chief of the Pits would soon travel from house to house, and the origin for such a topic, why the Mother Superior's holy room, a trusted source; of course, no one would wish to be seen as a liar or wrong, so the belief would spread. An even bigger piece of news, a new ruler was making its way into the Nalvean hierarchy, and the Ri'bot's lifestyle could soon be in danger.

Whispers of these strange human creatures would blossom as eyewitnesses connected the two odd events, and then things would start spiraling with a few nudges here and there by people in the proper areas to spark civil unrest. The Butterfly Effect would cascade into a rumor that Ri'bot would link with as the imagination of this unknown Supreme Chief, ruling over the pits cemented in their minds, bridging with their own interpretations of their religions.

"Ambassador Klaus Klossner, if you could give me a moment to understand the current situation ... that would be most appreciated."

"Of course," Klaus nodded, tilting his head to each party to give a visual indication he was listening to the following Q and A.

"Nadraca," the Mother Supreme whispered in a tense tone, "explain to me *precisely* what has happened since you left on your ... escapade. What I do know is that you convinced Lacord to join you, bringing more than eighty warriors and trainees with you to accomplish some task ... and now, Lacord is dead..."

"Please, let me..."

"I'm not finished!" The elderly Ri'bot snapped, and for the first time, Klaus saw a sleeping tigress waking within the Clavex's holy figure.

Nadraca flinched knees and hands tightly pressed together.

"Not only is Lacord dead, but it was the Nalvean Imperial Head Captain that performed the task ... to every Ri'bot that returned from your trip, young and old. Even Elluinara was hesitant to even slip me that information, proving something frightening is happening behind the scenes, and now, you bring me this news? Explain, Nadraca!"

Nadraca's body began to quiver, tears making her large eyes shine, but her quakes instantly stopped upon Klaus placing a comforting hand over her twisted hands, causing her to jolt as if struck by lightning.

"No need to fret, Nadraca. Just speak the truth."

The Mother Superior's critical eyes shifted between them, but Nadraca seemed to have regained a semblance of her confidence as she began explaining all of the events that had happened since beginning her journey.

Many questions were asked, and Nadraca gave the best answers she could, turning to Klaus when something grew too tricky. He smoothly guided Nadraca back to the center of attention, directing her to the answer to not deliver any response that would make the Mother Superior suspect foul play.

The interrogation made Klaus suppress a smile, marking places the Mother Superior focused on and slipped by, gauging the way she thought, and halfway through this lengthy quest and answer session, Camellia's lovely voice entered his mind.

“He has met with two other Nalveans in a dark, dusty alley. Not many Ri’bot pass through this area, but I smell several old Nalvean trails.”

Hmm ... it could be a spy network area, designated as a remote area to pass along information. You can’t tell what they’re saying?

“No, all they do is touch each other’s hands or arms, releasing a very weak chemical while making motions on their scales. One’s female, the other two male ... Nalvean females smell worse. I remember them leaving behind a lot of chemical trails, and sometimes they’d use it as traps to catch weak prey that couldn’t tell the difference between real communication and lures.”

Interesting ... how would that translate through the Empress’ communication skill? Anyways, he muttered, steering himself back, it’s more important to document everything they do.

“Which should I follow if they split up?”

It was an important question that he’d already been pondering.

Hmm ... how strong are each of them?

“Weak.”

Yes, but I mean compared to each other.

“Uh ... the new male one is at least twice as strong as the others.”

So ... this is probably a report session before receiving new orders. Wait ... if the one you’ve been following was spying on the Mother Superior, then ... he had killing intent when you first spotted him, right?

“Yes. He was releasing a chemical that normally indicates Nalveans are really frustrated or angry. It’s tempered a little since then, but the other two are now showing weak signs of the same bodily reaction. Why is that important?”

Mmh ... I could have been thinking about this the wrong way.

Camellia’s tone returned, sounding even more confused. “Huh? They’re not going to kill the Mother Superior Ri’bot?”

No, no, I bet they will, but this is much deeper than just some random grudge match between Yesenia and the Clavex ... no, this is personal. A spy’s greatest malice comes in finding a double agent ... their killing intent is directed at Elluinara, not the Mother Superior. Oh ... this has become quite a fascinating turn of events.

“Oh, oh, I ... my mind is blowing!” Camellia squealed. “So, he was skulking about, doing his thing, and he heard one of the upper echelon Nalveans spreading stuff she shouldn’t, right? What is a word for a person like that ... I’ve never even considered that ... someone within a brood can try to hurt it? It blows my mind!”

Klaus laughed internally at the deadly innocence of the Thélméthra, and the more he learned about her, the more he realized how purposeful and dedicated the creatures were, which was likely one of the reasons they reached the pinnacle of the food chain wherever they landed.

They had no concept of traitors because it didn’t exist within their culture; Thélméthra were genetically programmed killing machines that focused entirely upon dominating everything.

They would call Elluinara a betrayer, deceiver, spy ... she’s an excellent candidate to function as our Empress’ personal turncoat!

“Wow ... that’s a lot of words! Uh, won’t they kill her, though? Wait, I guess that doesn’t matter ... no ... that wouldn’t work because to be a spy, she would need to be alive, right?”

Right...

Klaus multitasked, helping Nadraca when she needed it by providing short phrases to guide her to the answer she was looking for or was having a hard time putting into words while making plans with the Thélméthra.

... Here's what we should do. I'm guessing both of those weaker ones will be sent to different locations to search for a recruit suitable to murder the Mother Superior. The stronger one will return to deliver the news about the traitor in their midst.

"Oh, oh! I need to kill him, right?" She asked with giddy excitement.

That's right. Klaus darkly chuckled. And attach his dead corpse to the bottom of our boat with a web if you can manage it, but you'll also need to dispose of one of the other two, adding him to our collection we'll be returning home with.

"Okay, okay! I can have the drones handle the web part. Um, so, I kill the new guy and girl, then follow the first guy to see who decides to kill the Mother Superior, then kill that one too once the deal is struck?"

I'm impressed, Camellia. Klaus praised. You caught on very quickly. Send the last one off for the drones to secure under the boat after identifying the assassin, and return to wait for the attempt on her life. We must make her aware that this new force inside the Nalvean government is out to start a civil war.

Hmm ... I'm concerned there will be more to the plan, though. Make a note of who he talks to ... I suspect it will be a few dozen.

"A few dozen? Mmh, alright, I'll try to figure out what they're doing ... I'll figure it all out and let you know to come up with a plan!"

Our victory is assured with your talents.

"Hehe."

Camellia cut the connection, and Klaus continued aiding Nadraca where she stumbled.

Once finished, the Mother Superior breathed out a long sigh. "The Supreme Chiefs have come down from the Heavens ... a war between Supreme Chiefs in the physical plane?"

A lump dropped down her throat as she turned her vision to Klaus. "Many things do line up with that account. I do not doubt that Nadraca believes all of these things by how she responded..."

Klaus gave her a sober smile. "... But you require more evidence to stake your entire Clan's future on such a wild tale."

"A serious tale," the Mother Superior replied without a hint of humor. "If this is true, then ... everything is about to change for us, and it is not as if your claim is without testimony or proof ... I would just like some time to ponder the information you've provided."

The room fell silent; the thick brick walls and doors blocked out any noise from the outside world.

Nadraca squirmed in the stillness, but the Mother Superior and Klaus simply stared at each other, working through their own individual thoughts.

After a time, the elderly Ri'bot's intertwined fingers tightened around each other. "What can you tell me about the Supreme Chief of the Storms?"

Klaus kept his standing position, hands held calmly at his front, presenting an entirely business-like attitude; the only blemish to his slim-fit suit was the mud caking his shoes and lower shins.

"When she descended, many of some of her most beloved worshipers were slaughtered before her eyes, and still weakened from Empress Elinor's forced mass-exodus from the Heavens, was at that time unable to fully support them.

“Her power grows by the day, as does the other Supreme Chiefs that have landed on this physical plane, or will soon come through Gateways of their own, marching with their forces.

“I can sympathize with your position, and Her Imperial Majesty certainly has by extending her own hand. Empress Yesenia has developed a deep-seated grudge against the Ri’bot.

“Nadraca may have done everything within her power, and I can state with certainty from my Empress’ own mouth, most of your Clan went out of their way to not harm the human followers of the Supreme Chiefs, including suppressing those that followed her from using lethal force, which caused many Clavex deaths.”

A few tears fell down Nadraca’s cheeks upon his words, but it was a necessary point to bring up.

“The difference between Her Imperial Majesty and Empress Yesenia? The Supreme Chief of the Pits is merciful, and all will come before her throne. Empress Yesenia has no control over those that pass on, but she can whip up a terrible storm that could destroy the Ri’bot of this world if not suppressed, and she is not one that will easily forgive any action taken against her.”

He bowed again. “I am merely a messenger on Her Imperial Majesty’s errand. She offers a hand and is willing to aid those who believe in her, even against other Supreme Chiefs. It is an invitation. You must be the one to decide, but...”

The Mother Superior’s two teeth pressed against her lips. “... Yes?”

“... The Empress does wish to impart valuable information if you will receive it.”

“Is there a condition?” She pressed, making Nadraca glance over at him with a questioning look.

A soft sigh left Klaus’ lips as he frowned, lightly shaking his head. “No, Your Holiness ... it is just a very troubling piece of news to deliver. I wish we could have met on ... better circumstances.”

“Please,” she whispered, rubbing the sides of her throat, “continue.”

“... It pains me to inform you that the discussion you had with Elluinara, the Nalvean that sits on the Seaweaver Council ... it has come to my attention, the conversation was overheard by a Nalvean spy.”

The Mother Superior froze in her seat, working through his declaration. “H-How would you...”

Nadraca’s mouth dropped open. “... No, is that why ... why Great Chief Camellia vanished?”

Klaus nodded with a grave expression. “It is ... Great Chief Camellia has been following a Nalvean scout operating within the Ri’bot district, concealing his presence. I was recently notified that he met with two other Nalveans inside a secluded area, typically left untraveled by Ri’bot.

“I ask you, Your Holiness. If the information surrounding your people’s deaths are being suppressed by high-ranking Nalveans, and they learn that one of their own has been speaking of sensitive matters behind their backs ... wouldn’t it be fair to wonder what else she’s let slip off her tongue?”

“Secondly, with the current actions they’ve taken, how severe would the punishment be for disobeying such an order within the Nalvean Empire?”

The Mother Superior’s skin lightened, showing her shock.

“That is not all, Mother Superior,” Klaus stated, voice dropping a little to indicate the secretive nature of the next revelation. “I have reason to believe your life is currently in danger ... by your own people. There is evidence to suggest a small sect within the Nalvean government is following Empress Yesenia ... I’m sure you’d know who those individuals might be.

“My estimation ... they are going to use the Ri’bot that favor Nalvean culture to start a civil war, making use of those disenfranchised Ri’bot that have drawn close enough with their culture to spark that conflict by killing you, the figurehead the slowly dying lifestyle of the ancient Ri’bot ways.”

The Mother Superior hands had knotted around each other. “... For what purpose?” She asked, still managing to keep her voice stable.

“To justify draconian measures to restore peace ... by either evicting or killing the Ri’bot.”

“No...” Nadraca mumbled. “No, no, that can’t be ... many Nalveans see the Clavex as valuable friends and trading partners...”

The Mother Superior’s head fell a little, staring at her tight thighs. “... It wouldn’t matter ... not if there was bloodshed.”

“Mmh,” Klaus’s somber eyes narrowed, falling to the floor as he lifted his hand to his chin in a brooding frown. “Let’s take that scene one step further. What do you think would happen if during those riots ... this civil war ... what would happen if a Ri’bot killed a Nalvean ... or was simply blamed for it? It doesn’t have to be true, to be honest.”

The elderly Ri’bot’s throat seemed to have gone dry because she shakily got to her feet, walking to the side of the room to drink from a barrel. “... How can I be certain any of what you’ve told me is true ... that that horrifying future will come to pass?”

“Yes, I understand entirely, Your Holiness. This is not something to be decided on so rapidly. In all fairness, my information might not be entirely complete. It could be much less sinister than what the data I’ve gathered seems to suggest ... or, conversely, it could be much worse. The only thing I can offer as Her Imperial Majesty’s emissary is this...”

“There are many Clavex that have already pledged themselves to Empress Elinor, and it is because of that reason I am here before you today. The Empress does not want to cause her followers to suffer the pain of living without their family if it is avoidable ... this life is difficult enough without such loss burdening one’s heart. I am but an envoy of that compassion. Know that if you need our Empress’ aid, then just call out for her help, and a loyal servant from the Heavens will answer your call.”

Bowing again, Klaus smiled inside upon Camellia’s transmitted message; the three Nalveans had split up, and just as expected, the strongest one was heading toward the docks, right for the Nalvean district to report his findings.

“That is my message, Your Holiness. I do not wish to burden you during this critical moment of reflection upon these topics. Is there somewhere you would like me to stay until you have compiled a reply to Her Imperial Majesty?”

A long puff of air shot through the Mother Superior’s cheeks as she stared into the barrel’s water, hands held tightly against the edges. “... Nadraca, take him to your residence ... I’ll send someone to retrieve you before the day’s end.”

Nadraca bowed, much lower this time; her voice was hoarse. “Yes, Mother Superior ... and I’m so sorry.”

The Mother Superior didn't respond, staring at her wrinkled face as Nadraca hesitantly ushered him toward the side door, but he paused before exiting, turning to offer one last glimmer in the darkness clouding her thoughts.

"... Mother Superior ... what if I told you Elluinara could be saved from the fate that more than likely awaits her?"

Nadraca's entire body went stiff. "W-What ... how?"

"Nadraca!" The Mother Superior snapped, fingers trembling against the barrel.

The Priestess jumped, utterly taken aback by her sharp words. "W-What ... oh..."

Green blood was now dripping into the water, falling down the elderly Ri'bot's chin as her teeth bit into her skin.

I was right after all ... excellent.

"... If it were possible, then it would take a heavy burden off my chest. I don't know how such a thing could be possible, though..."

"Of course," Klaus replied with a sad tone. "It is a shame ... but with Empress Elinor, miracles are possible. I will leave knowing a weight has been lifted off your heart. Good day, Your Holiness."

"... Good day..." She mumbled in return, looking visibly conflicted.

Klaus made it two blocks in silence, Nadraca clearly preoccupied with troubling thoughts before Camellia bridged a mental connection.

"Eh ... how should I dice him up?"

Hehehe ... you've caught him?

"Of course! I've had him strung up between trees for a minute, trying to decide how best to kill him so the Empress can revive the thing. I'm pretty sure they need to be at least a bit intact, right?"

From what she told me, that is the case.

"... Why do creatures try to make loud noises when their mouths are tied up? Doesn't he know it's a waste of energy ... well, I mean, he probably could break my web if I didn't reinforce the trap ... I'm not a Weavemaster like Violet or Mom, but still, it's just weird ... other creatures are weird."

I suppose they are. Hmm ... how about poking a lot of holes in its skin? Will it bleed to death?

"Oh, and I can drink it; I like that plan! Yes, okay, poke, poke, poke ... hehe, he's struggling more ... I just don't understand these things ... poke, poke ... mmh, it's so sweet!"

Are their scales harder to puncture than Ri'bot's?

"Meh, I can't tell the difference ... the taste, though! I love the sweet juices inside the males ... the females are less enjoyable."

Mmh ... I'll take your word for it. Let me know when you've finished your mission, so I can explain the next steps of the plan. Just to be sure ... you've gone entirely unnoticed?

"Yup! This guy was the closest thing around here that could sense me, so I had to stay a bit back, but it wasn't that hard to lay a trap for him once he entered the jungle. Hehe, why don't other things watch where they step? I'm always super conscious of where my legs go."

You've got me! Okay, have fun on your hunt.

"Oh, I love this trip!" Camellia squealed.

Klaus restrained a smile, turning to Nadraca while mirroring her brooding demeanor. "If I may ask ... what is the Mother Superior's relationship with Elluinara?"

Nadraca's tone held a sad undertone; there was a level of envy hidden in her words. "The Mother Superior found Elluinara during the end of the Fire Wars ... it was during the transition when the Clavex was forming a bond with the Nalveans.

"A roaming pack of Quen'Talrat had swept through the south, breaking past a few blockades created by the Nalveans and Ri'bot ... attacking a remote Nalvean village. She went there to give as much support as she could ... Elluinara was the only survivor. She was a newborn, and the Nalveans there wanted no part in protecting her ... I don't know why, but the Mother Superior took her in.

"A lot of Ri'bot see the Mother Superior as their mother ... she does a lot with the children of the Clavex, but Elluinara has been a big reason why we have so much. She worked really hard and became fairly powerful ... even though she's not all that old by Nalvean standards."

A mother-daughter bond ... no wonder she responded in that way. In a war-ravaged land, she finds a baby that her own people want nothing to do with and raises that child from another race as her own. The proud daughter works her way through the ranks, finding an attachment to the Ri'bot, that up until this point, wasn't seen as such a negative thing ... but now ... opportunity.

"I see ... thank you for helping me understand."

Nadraca swallowed, glancing around nervously while rubbing her left arm. "Umm ... are you really going to help save her?"

"Hmm ... to be honest, Nadraca, I can't say one way or the other ... there are a lot of things that can change in a short time. We will see ... but I hope she remains healthy ... I truly do."