

[~3000]

The story so far:

Chapter 1

Two countries, Chemina and Erawa, are locked in a war. Chemina is in its early stages of industrialization, whereas Erawa's military is derived from supernatural phenomena wielded by its people.

A four-man fireteam from Chemina marches through Erawan territory, intent on sabotaging a military supply base. Their stealth is compromised and fighting ensues. One of the soldiers, Saito, is injured by a defective grenade. He wakes up in a medical tent, only to be euthanized.

Chapter 2

Saito's son, Thane, reads a military death letter. His uncle (Dagan) and girlfriend (Asra) decide the three of them must flee the country now that they are no longer waiting for Saito to come home.

Thane burns the family collection of banned history books. Before departing, they are accosted by military police as they attempt to leave. Dagan kills the officers in self-defense and they sneak onto a freight train to seek help from Asra's friend Vanna.

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Cargo Inspection

[The train slows and comes to a halt.]

Thane: Is this Chalt?

Dagan: Mhm. The Capital Spire is right there, see?

Asra: You know the city?

Dagan: I spent a lot of time here during the war. Chalt was a big tipping point. Conquering it was a huge feat, and one of the biggest reasons Somoza saw fit to make it the new capital. Hence the spire.

Asra: Either that or he's compensating for something.

Thane: Oh, come on. That's just a Debonese stereotype.

Asra: Wait, what? Somoza's Cheminan.

Dagan: Somoza's Debonese-Cheminan by blood. He grew up in Nenegi, but he had a lot of connections back in Debony.

Asra: How did he become so powerful? His whole platform is based on Cheminan nationalism.

Thane: Don't forget industrialization. He invested in factories and started making guns.

Dagan: You're leaving out a big part of what actually happened. In order to make those investments, Somoza needed money and support. Most of that came from Debony's public sector. Unofficially, of course.

Asra: No way. Did they know they were funding a civil war?

Dagan: Oh yes, and it's exactly what they wanted to happen, too. And it wasn't just weapons. People that hung around Somoza started getting all kinds of nice bonuses. That's how he got all the manpower behind his campaign.

Asra: If Debony is backing Somoza, why do we want to escape there?

Dagan: They used to support him. Back before the war, Debony was anxious to get its hands on our technology.

Asra: They still are.

Dagan: Right. Ever since we discovered electricity, they've been pushing nonstop for a way to start manufacturing their own goods. Somoza was supposed to seize control of Chemina, then send all the research and prototypes back home.

Asra: But he was having too much fun playing dictator to let Chemina turn into a puppet state, is that it?

Thane: So why didn't Debony just go to war with us?

Dagan: Hard to say. For one, it would be a complete bloodbath. They have a large enough military to overpower us, but our artillery would make it a very costly fight. The other reason is it's still in their interest to trade with us.

Asra: What do you mean they could overpower us? Isn't the Cheminan army the

strongest in Kabel?

Dagan: (Laughs) Who told you that?

[Asra makes a sour face just before it's illuminated by a bright light. She shrinks back into the shadows.]

Thane: What was that?

Dagan: Cargo inspection. Time to go.

Asra: Where? Curfew's still in effect.

Dagan: We'll have to figure that out later. If they're investigating after our little incident in Gheni, we need to find another way to Nenegi.

KNEW: Night Patrol Killed

[Thane unfolds a newspaper and begins to read]

Thane: "Early this morning, officers reported one casualty in Gheni Transit Center. Forensics confirmed the cause of death to be a gunshot wounds, some from Civil War-era weapons."

Dagan: Let me guess. A reward-

Thane: "A reward of up to 1,000 lauves shall be offered to anyone providing evidence leading to the capture of the suspects Thane Belikoff, Dagan Belikoff, and Asra Sacco. All three are considered to be armed and dangerous."

Dagan: Perfect, they already know who we are.

Asra: He was hardly the only guy we killed. Why not give the full report? Wouldn't they want to make us look less sympathetic?

Dagan: You think they'd admit they weren't able to contain the situation? It's better if it looks like a random act of violence. We're still the bad guys either way.

[Asra looks down.]

Asra: Thane... I'm a murderer now.

Thane: There was no other way. It's not like you enjoyed it.

Asra: ... I did.

[Beat]

Asra: I tried to tell myself they were people. With their own lives, their own families. But right before I pulled the trigger... It was gone. All I cared about was hitting them. Like it was some kind of game.

Dagan: So much the better. Hesitation is death.

Asra: Stay out of this!

[Thane and Asra make eye contact.]

Thane: I don't know what to tell you. It bothers me, too. But we have to keep going.

Asra: I know. It's just... (Sigh) What's it like for you? Do you find it exciting too?

Thane: Physically, kind of. Mostly it's just stressful.

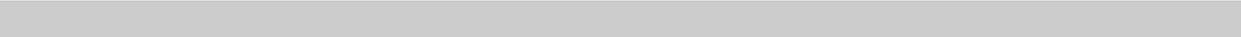
Asra: I never wanted to be in the medical unit, but at least I never felt bad about what I did. This... this is awful, and somehow it feels natural at the same time. I don't want to get used to it, but it's already happening.

Thane: It won't be like this forever. Vanna will smuggle us out and we won't have to do this ever again.

Asra: And then what? I can't just forget about this and move on like it never happened.

Thane: Don't try to figure everything out right now. I can't promise everything will be perfect, but I know you'll come to peace with this. Give it time.

Asra: (Sigh) Okay.



Streetwalker

[The group walks through the streets of Chalt, Dagan in front.]

Thane: Hey Dagan, those pants have a rip at the crotch.

Dagan: Nothing I can do about it. All the uniforms we've stolen are too small.

Thane: How have we still not found anything that's a good fit?

Dagan: We're not trying to. You want to hunt down someone the same size as me? We'd be better off going to a black market.

Asra: It might be worth it. But I don't think any of us have connections in Chalt.

[Beat]

Dagan: Stay here.

[Dagan approaches an escort on the corner.]

Dagan: Hey.

Thane: ... What is he doing?

Escort: Hey there. Anything I can help you with?

Dagan: Yeah. I'm looking for some supplies.

Escort: Sure thing, hun. I know someone that can help you.

Asra: Why does he think SHE can help us?

Thane: (Shrugs) No idea.

[The escort begins walking away. Dagan follows, Thane and Asra catching up.]

Dagan: I thought I told you guys to wait. Chalt is dangerous.

Escort: Whoa, what the fuck is this?

Dagan: Keep walking. We're not looking for trouble.

[The escort pauses, then continues walking nervously.]

Asra: She's just going to trust us that easily?

Thane: I don't think she trusts us. I think Dagan has a gun.

Asra: Okay, but... Why her?

Dagan: Chalt was practically torn to shreds during the Civil War. I spent a lot of time snapping photos in this area and got to know a lot of locals. Including the mob.

Thane: Meaning?

Dagan: Gangs in Chalt are well-connected, and there's a strong network for organized crime. Escorts were always a good entry point for things like drugs and weapons because they had the most visibility.

Asra: Isn't the job of any prostitute to be a good entry point?

Thane: Nice.

Asra: If you know the city so well, why don't we just find someone you already know? Wouldn't that be safer?

Dagan: I didn't stay in contact with anyone after the war, and even if I did, Somoza killed every dissident he could find. Even their kids.

Asra: He killed children just because their parents opposed him!?

Dagan: It's a good strategy. If you're in it for the long haul, the most important rules are to control what your youth sees and kill the youth of your enemies.

Meeting Malik

[The escort leads them into an apartment complex. She knocks on a door.]

Merchant: Yeah?

Fayth: Hey Malik, it's Fayth. I've got some people looking for gear.

[The door opens as much as the door chain allows, with a man behind it.]

Malik: Never seen these guys before. What brings you here?

Thane: We need a police uniform. For him.

[Thane gestures to Dagan. Malik looks him over.]

Malik: Not sure I've got anything big enough, but I'll dig around. What do you need 'em for, anyway?

Asra: Just playing dress-up.

Malik: Bit old for that, aren't we?

Asra: It's a fetish.

Dagan: Hey-

Malik: Whatever. Not my business. Give me a second.

[Malik closes the door.]

Asra: Is it always hard for you to find clothes?

Dagan: Not always, but it's pretty common. Sure wish it were easier to find things in my size.

Asra: To be fair, you are pretty big.

Dagan: Not really. It's more that you kids all grew up malnourished. By the time we got refrigerators and electric cookers there was hardly any food to put in them.

[The door opens again. Behind it, Malik is holding a uniform.]

Malik: This is the largest size I have. Twenty lauves, if you don't mind.

Asra: That's absurd! Fayth, how many blowjobs could I get for that?

Fayth: You specifically? Maybe you should take a health class or something, because-

Malik: You want 'em or not?

Dagan: We don't even know if they fit yet.

Malik: Try it on.

[Thane and Asra look away as Dagan changes into the uniform.]

Dagan: Better than the last one.

[Dagan hands over the money.]

Malik: Anything else?

Dagan: Yeah, got any painkillers?

Malik: Closest thing I've got is Ribatol.

[Dagan turns to Thane.]

Dagan: Ribatol? Isn't that the name of the drug they gave you in the evincer program?

Thane: Yeah. It's a hallucinogen, but you can use it for pain relief as a last resort.

Asra: Wait, what? Thane...

Thane: What? Quit looking at me like that.

Asra: Sorry. It's just... hallucinogens are scary.

Thane: Why? Did you have a bad experience or something?

Asra: Not me, but yes. A few years back, one of my friends started experimenting with mushrooms. Something happened. He started having relapses, even after he'd stopped taking them. The doctor diagnosed him with something. Can't remember what he called it.

Dagan: That sounds like HPPD - hallucinogen persisting perception disorder. I don't know much about it except that it usually only happens if you're a really heavy user.

Thane: Guess I got lucky. They gave us a lot of that stuff, but I never noticed anything unusual after the initial effects wore off.

Asra: Fuck. I can't believe they would take a risk like that. Why would they want to drug you to begin with?

Thane: Evincing is all about changing your perception to make it reality. Ribatol is supposed to facilitate that. The goal was to induce hallucinations that the user could control, and that was supposed to manifest them in reality.

Asra: Did it work?

Thane: Honestly, no. Although it was hard to tell. Some people seemed to get better at evincing when using it, just not me.

Asra: I guess I see the logic. Still, it's fucked up that they're using Cheminan civilians to test stuff like that.

Dagan: They probably tested it on prisoners of war first.

Asra: Oh. Well in that case it's fine.

Malik: You guys made up your mind yet?

[A shop opens.]

Squatting

[The group stands at Malik's door, at the landing of a stairwell.]

Thane: We should find a place to settle down for the night. We can't keep going around past curfew. We'll get ourselves killed.

Dagan: We could just sleep here.

Thane: I don't even know where this is.

Dagan: We're in the old uptown area. It's not a great neighborhood, and my guess is it only got worse after the war ended. We should stay put until morning.

Asra: This place seems as good a place as any. Let's try the stairwell. If it opens to the roof we can probably sleep on the landing without any trouble.

[The three climb just past the top floor.]

Thane: There's a slight breeze here, but it's not bad. Doubt anyone'll come up here in the middle of the night.

[Thane lays a blanket out. They huddle together on the landing. Dagan lays down and closes his eyes.]

Thane: You were great today. I know it's a lot to deal with, but you're handling it really well.

Asra: Thank you. I... How do you and Dagan do it? How does it not affect you?

Thane: It does affect us. At least, it affects me. If I'm being honest, this is way worse than the army. Back then I had a captain, a base, some semblance of a plan...

Asra: Feels like forever ago, doesn't it? I still remember the first time we met. Well, I'm not sure if it counts, since you were unconscious on the stretcher. Just talking about it makes it sound like the opening to some bad soap opera.

Thane: And the first thing I saw when I came to were those stormy gray eyes. And then you nursed me back to health and we lived-

Asra: Oh, shut up.

Thane: You're the one that brought up soap operas.

Asra: You call this happily ever after? Man, I'd hate to see what your idea of a downer ending is.

Thane: It's not much of an ending at all. We still have to make it to Debonny first. But it could be a worse.

Asra: Could be a lot better, too. What if we'd left before those officers tried to drag you away? We'd already be in Nenegi by now and no one would be after us.

Thane: They'd still be after me. You and Dagan would be in the clear though.

Asra: Ah, right...

Thane: But seriously, think about how shitty it would be to do this alone. Not to mention borderline suicidal. Having you here makes a world of difference.

[Asra cuddles up to Thane and closes her eyes.]

Asra: Yeah. I couldn't have done this without you, either.



Leaving Chalt

[The trio wakes up on the stairwell, sharing a can of food.]

Thane: So, what's the plan for today?

Dagan: That's a damn good question. After the debacle at the trainyard there's no way we can go back and hitch a ride to Nenegi. Our best bet might be going by horseback.

Asra: What about a car?

Dagan: How would that work? None of us can drive. Besides, even renting one would be outside of our price range.

Thane: Horseback should work just fine. Let's head downtown and see what we can find.

Dagan: I haven't been here in quite some time, but there used to be tons of stables in old town. We're probably better off looking there first.

Thane: Alright, we can start there. You think anyone in Chalt is going to be looking for us yet?

Asra: Hard to say. They might still think we're in Gheni.

Dagan: I wouldn't worry too much about it. Even if they know we're here, there's more than enough crime in Chalt to keep the cops busy.

Asra: Wouldn't Somoza want the capital to be... I don't know, nicer?

Dagan: It's plenty nice by all the government buildings and tourist attractions. Only the residential districts look like a dump. Which I'm sure suits him just fine.

KNEW: Remembrance of the Rega Massacre

[Thane opens a newspaper and begins to read]

Thane: "Today marks the one year anniversary of the Rega Massacre, a tragic event in which 413 civilians and 588 soldiers were killed in an unprovoked assault on Cheminan territory."

Asra: Hard to believe it's been a year already.

Thane: "General Jaromir reminds our brave soldiers that the enemy is ruthless and underhanded, and that it is tragedies such as these that demand our troops remain steadfast in protecting our great nation."

Dagan: Ugh, Jaromir... The sooner that leech dies, the better.

Asra: ... What?

Dagan: You heard me.

Asra: Jaromir's one of the best tacticians we have. Do you know how many of our soldiers would be dead if it weren't for him?

Dagan: Does it matter? It's one thing to be a strategist. It's another to play the part of some media rockstar and propagandize the war. I don't understand why you're getting behind a patriotic narrative like this.

Asra: It's not about patriotism! My parents died that day! I hate war as much as

the next guy, but it's not like we could just call for a ceasefire tomorrow and Erawa would stop attacking us.

Dagan: I'm not talking about the damned massacre, I'm talking about the article! Jaromir isn't from Rega; he's from Chalt. He doesn't give a shit about your parents, he's just using the massacre as an excuse to draw support.

Asra: It IS the anniversary of the massacre. What are they supposed to do, just pretend it never happened?

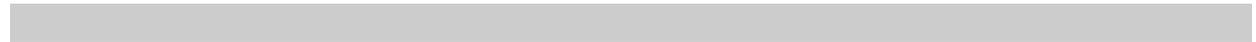
Dagan: No. I'm saying it's wrong to stand on the bodies of your parents to rattle off war propaganda.

Asra: That's pretty rich coming from you. You write shit like this all the time!

Dagan: It's not as though I enjoy writing that garbage. You know as well as I do that you have to toe the party line to make it in this country. I did what I had to do to support Thane. And you, in case you forgot.

Asra: So if Jaromir's pro-military it's despicable, but if you are it's just self-preservation. Is that right?

Thane: Are you two done?



Trolley

[The trio approach a stop where passengers are boarding a trolley.]

Soldier: Because our great leader is holding a rally at the square, the only routes in service today are those running to or from the downtown area!

Dagan: Just what we needed.

Asra: Doesn't cost us more than a bit of time. We can still get horses afterward.

Thane: At least it's only a rally. Better than a public execution.

Dagan: Hardly.

[The trio board.]

Asra: I'm sure a captive audience does wonders for Somoza's self-esteem.

Thane: Keep your voice down! Are you trying to get us killed?

[The trio boards a trolley and heads toward the square.]

Asra: There might be stables downtown, too. It's worth looking around while we're there. Might save us some time.

Dagan: Downtown Chalt is the most modernized neighborhood in the country, maybe the most modern on Kabel. My guess is almost everyone there uses automobiles. But you're right. It's still worth looking.