

Aquarius

BOOK 1

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The Traveler



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*To my families.
My blood family, for the love
and the support it has gifted me with.
The family I chose: Love, friends, brothers,
for allowing me to find them again.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Writing is a growth process.

I have never imagined that by writing these pages I would be able to dig so deeply into myself: I laid bare my defects, my fears, my monsters. As well as I gained a mysterious awareness that usually remains dormant in the unfathomable recesses of our Self.

Who am I truly? Who are you?

I have no idea. I just know that reading this story you have to make a choice: to what extent can it be real?

I firmly believe that part of the answer lies in how much this represents you, the readers. I am certain of one thing: we are the only ones who shape reality, who we want to be, what is or is not possible in this world.

Regarding the characters mentioned in the book and who existed, there is no will to praise them or tarnish their deeds. I intend to preserve their memory as great men belonging to a past that unfortunately risks of being forgotten.

References to existing localities and structures also have purely narrative purposes.

Everything else is fantasy. Or not?

Roberto Fagnani - July 2019

PROLOGUE

Macerata, Italy, 1573

Heavy rain was flooding the old, dirty streets of Macerata. A small Italian town lost in the Marchegian hills. Dark chimney smoke was filling the air, mixed with pungent notes of muddy soil and strange home cooking: the blend of excrement and onion was making the air barely breathable.

Everardo Mercuriano, superior general of the Society of Jesus, was sitting comfortably in his chair, in front of a cosy fireplace, safe from all the rain and sickening odours of the outside world. He was in a building which was impossible to distinguish from all the others, but the door was protected from the inside with heavy hinges and various chains. Everything had to happen in extreme secrecy, no one could have joined Mercuriano and his special guest, or he would have been tortured and killed.

A tall man was standing in front of his door decisively, he knocked twice, then waited. A long black cloak was covering his whole figure. The wind moved the dark fabric in a slow, sinister way, enhancing the intimidating aura of his already grotesque figure.

Finally, he heard heavy footsteps echoing from within; after the last thud of the final lock, Alessandro Valignano made his entrance, announcing his name to the host.

“*Good*”, he thought. The superior himself was receiving him, the sign of something important that had to be disclosed, yet the reason of this visit was still unclear to Alessandro: they had previously agreed on the terms of his mission: Alessandro had felt honoured. What else was left to discuss?

Mercuriano made a gesture to sit down. Valignano left his cloak hanging by the door and took a seat in the second chair by the fireplace, moving with unexpected feline grace. Despite his stature and strength, he was able to move so effortlessly in the space, a sign of the innumerable hours

of training, to sharpen both his body and mind. It was the prerogative of his society: to create the perfect harmony of acuity and tenacity.

On the small mahogany table, several bottles of the best kind of wine were sitting untouched; neither one of the two men seemed to care for a glass: they both had other concerns, one worried by what he had to say, the other worried about what he was about to hear.

- Alessandro, welcome. You must forgive me for all this secrecy, but there was no other way for me to communicate... my whims. -

- Master, you will always have my loyalty and respect, please ask anything you may desire. -

The old monk seemed to grow distressed: he struggled in his chair trying to find a more comfortable position.

- Well, son. As you know the journey you're about to begin will take you to unknown faraway places. You're going to see men who behave like animals, people who practice all sorts of heresies. You're going to witness slavery and death, violence and, Lord have mercy, you may even find yourself a victim of these atrocities. But your sacred mission is going to give you the strength to persevere, to resist obstacles and fear, and may the Lord be always with you. -A pause.

- Now... You knew all this already. You've accepted to carry our voices into the uncivilized world gifting them our light, together with the brothers already present on these foreign lands. Yet, a thought continues to keep me up at night. -

Mercuriano reached towards one of the bottles of wine, letting his words, suspended in midair, landing deeply on his guest's consciousness.

- I beg you please, tell me what's the matter. - Valignano whispered.

The host nodded.

- As you know, in our society we are all well aware of the difficulties you had, following the death of your previous mentor. You neglected the moral path, you've indulged into youthful frivolousness; then the accident, fourteen years ago, which led you to a year of detention in a Venetian prison. None of those sins is so severe in the eyes of our Lord, believe me. He has infinite compassion for the follies of a reckless young boy! - Mercuriano took another sip of wine and continued.

- But the details you revealed during our confession triggered a terrible

doubt in me, and awakened a deep-seeded fear hidden in my memory. -

The atmosphere was visibly tense; the older man was trying to find the right words to free himself from such a heavy burden.

- The person you hit in the face, leading to your arrest, had been intimidating you for some time, right? -

- Yes, he kept insisting he needed my skills and, one night, Lord have mercy, while I was rowdy and drunk, I finally had enough and I tried to get rid of him once and for all. -

It almost seemed unreal to see the gigantic man bow his head in remorse, sincerely ashamed for his sins. The Superior General felt compassion towards him once more, feeling the need to explain the reason for all his trouble.

- My dear Alessandro, it's time to tell you some truths which from now I will disavow till the day I die. -

- It's a timeless tale. About your youth, your strange... dreams, and the vastness of the world. I didn't connect the events, at first: a few newcomers had told me about unusual oneiric experiences. After all this life you chose can destabilize any young mind. The intense studies, the tough physical training... But as you continue to grow the phenomenon hasn't stopped, rather, it has intensified. Your case is quite unique. -

Another pause, as if Mercuriano was still struggling to accept this reality.

- It's not easy, my child, to pick the right words to confront this topic. You see, history, like all the knowledge we possess, has been written by men. Humans have messages they need to share, ideas. We are innovators, warriors, fathers, sons...and we often make mistakes. Not willingly, maybe just following an ideal, but anything that reaches our consciousness is irreparably filtered by the scribe behind the desk, a victim of his time and all the forces at play. -

Everardo Mercuriano took another sip of the crimson red wine, lost in thoughts, gazing in the distance, then a thunder brought him back to reality.

- Dear Alessandro, you've always been open-minded towards new...“plans”, so I'll make a plea to your ability to forgive the uncertainties of your old teacher. -

- Sir, I've always trusted your judgment, and this situation is no different than the others; so I beg you please, continue. -

- What I am struggling to say is that our religion, like all the past

knowledge, has been subject to all the imperfections of men responsible for reporting it to us. A thousand hands and a thousand opinions have touched our Holy Scriptures, while a large portion of ancient wisdom has lost its right to exist in this world. When the interests of the most powerful come together, there is no limit to the changes they can force upon history. -

The rain was slowing down; an electric silence was filling the room. The general's glass was resting empty and forgotten on the table, glowing with the reflections of the fire, now looking like a demon, burning and laughing at the expenses of these two poor mortal men, grappling with their problems.

- The same destiny marked the life of the man who inspires us all, our Saviour. The son of God, descended on earth to sacrifice himself in the name of love and compassion towards his brothers, to give us hope... The man, Alessandro. The man. Amongst his brothers. -

A note of melancholy cracked the old man's voice.

- Christ has become a symbol and a martyr, he performed miracles, some of them bestowed upon him. He was the channel, the strength through which the light of perennality worlds was able to shine, for the first time, upon this dimension of darkness, to set it free. But whoever was in charge, was only able to filter this light, blinded by its brightness, and unable to even remotely understand its meaning. The powerful have tried to steer it in their direction and use it in their favour, with no real results other than being overwhelmed by it. History and myth, reality and fiction, deceit and necessity have been fused in a unified kaleidoscope, giving birth to what we know.

- But the man, Jesus, the Being of light incarnated as the son of God, has done much more... There is no point in me spending more time talking about these events. But, in virtue of the divine substance that unites us all and makes us brothers, you do need to know that others have walked the path of Christ. An active evolutionary process, if we choose to call it so, and now I wish I could talk much more... But I am old and tired, and I don't want to confuse your mind beyond necessity. -

Valignano was still listening quiet, still; he was sure his Master would soon have reached the crucial point in question.

- You must know, some of these men obtained gifts, gifts that have

opened doors to new realities for them. Superior to this material world, but still far away from the eternal light of God's Paradise. Indeed, in those middle reigns, the power of evil is strong, and many have fallen, seduced by its opulent offers. I can see in your expression that you're not following me anymore, right? -

- Master, I don't understand, what are these different realities you're speaking of? And these gifts you mention? -

- It's the Power, Alessandro, the Power is the key to everything! Our conviction... When a common man gets placed on a higher ground than his peers, almost always that man will feel the desire to dominate all the others. Whichever gift, as divine as it might seem, it's just a test, always remember that. It's a higher plane, agreed, but that's where a bigger enemy comes into play: our Ego. If we can't beat it, we inevitably become its slaves, and we never see the Light. -

A pause; the two men stared at each other for a long while. Silent questions were chasing after each other in the air, like dust particles.

- You're probably still wondering what all of this has to do with you... The person you almost killed was part of this congregation, this sect yearning for power. His objective was to convince you to serve their purpose, using your gift. -

Alessandro remained speechless after those words; in some strange ways, several puzzle pieces were now finding their place in the intricate canvas of his memories.

- You know how to travel with your spirit, son! And it's one of the most precious gifts. What happened in prison, the episode you told me about in tears, was their last desperate attempt to make you their adept. But you resisted, you won, you beat the monster. Reason more to make you one of the chosen ones, who also has the most precious awareness by his side: you know that what you are capable of is not the objective of your research, but rather the first step towards the long evolutionary path of your Soul.

- That's why you are here today: the Evil is becoming stronger and more audacious; we must fight it with any means at our disposal. The journey you are about to begin in the East will take you to a place that gathers special and devoted men to the greater good, eminent masters of wisdom. I was given no knowledge about the location of their monastery, but I am sure our Lord will help you. Find them, Alessandro, find

and join them in the fight against the evil which is nipping this world of damned... it is the last wish of a dying man. -

Alessandro Valignano observed the man in front of him: wrinkles and baldness witness the signs of ageing, but eyes veiled with tears were clear and strong as always. They looked like green gems set in the wisdom of those who had dedicated their lives to the good, the study and the prayer with dedication and humility. And Alessandro trusted him.

- All right, father. I am going to do what you demand. -

Shortly thereafter Valignano took leave of what was almost certainly his last visit to his elderly mentor.

The conversation had shaken him much more deeply than he had shown, awakening memories he believed he had buried forever. Yes, the prison... Many eyes were staring at him, and then that night, that incident. He has been so lucky to meet the old convict...

Alessandro suddenly stopped in the middle of the road, careless of the storm. The old man... the one who had rescued him in the darkest moment, teaching him how to master his gift and revealing the same strange realities the General Mercuriano had just set him apart.

He recalled the image of a frail man with a silver trident hanging from his neck, which was similar to the gallows with the central point shorter than the other two. The man was so short yet capable of arousing such immense fear both in the wardens and in the other prisoners. He didn't know why he was there, but he had been grateful to the Lord and the destiny for that meeting.

He had not mentioned any of this to his teacher, but he was bound by a promise: to keep in his heart all the old prisoner's teachings. This memory came to the rescue of him, troubled by the small omission against General Mercuriano.

Lost in his thoughts, Alessandro Valignano resumed his journey headed for a new and unknown world; burdened by a mission that, unbeknownst to him, would have drastically changed the path of humanity.

PARTE PRIMA

New York, 1997

CHAPTER 1

New York, New York State, United States of America, September 1997

- Jin, dinner is ready! - Like every teenager, her son loved to stay all afternoon locked in his room, listening to loud music while reading comics or playing on the computer.

Beavering away, Karen found herself ponder bitterly on how the kids of her days liked to meet outdoors, go to shopping malls or just stay to talk and joke the whole day, leaving their bicycles on the side of the road.

Even as the rain began to wash away the summer heat, giving way to autumn breezes and to the first inevitable ailments, she would have preferred her son to go out to meet his friends, instead of hanging around watching bullshit in front of a screen.

- Honey, I don't think he heard you. -

Mark's voice came from afar, making its way through her thoughts. There he was, the man of her dreams, completely laid-back in his favorite armchair, watching TV while waiting for dinner. She smiled at him.

- Why don't you get up and smoke him out of that room? -

- Why don't you do it? -Mark didn't seem very keen on leaving his spot.

- Because I'm setting the table. - She argued.

A few grunts, the sound of crumpling cushions, the shuffling of a pair of slippers, and Mark leaned out from the kitchen door which opened into the living room.

- Nice butt! - He winked at her and started up the stairs.

Karen loved the serenity her husband could instill in the people around him. He was able to make her forget any problem. Smiling gleefully for the points scored by her lower back, she resumed her work on the stove.

Jin wasn't very hungry, he was even less inclined to go downstairs for dinner. Not that he felt bad being around his parents, on the con-

trary: they were young and easy-going, even if at times they couldn't mind their own business, especially when it came to girls.

The problem was that damn game: he just couldn't get over the sixth level. No matter how many *cracks* he could discover, there was always one tool he had to drop that he would surely regret at the next level.

He took a break, visiting a website suggested by a friend, when he suddenly heard the unmistakable creak of his dad's approach coming from the stairs.

He closed the tab on his screen and picked up the joystick, pretending to play indifferently, while the melancholic and angry notes of the latest Gray Daze CD resounded in the room.

Two short firm knocks on the door, then his father was in the room.

- Dinner's ready, come on. -

- Just a moment, I almost finished the level. - Jin protested.

Mark glanced at him, assuming the typical expression of someone who knows better, then he went back to the door.

- You can finish the level later, the soup is getting cold. - Mark went out leaving the door open behind him.

It was time to go.

Jin got up from his chair, slipped on his flip flops and turned off the stereo, while leaving the terminal in standby for the long after-dinner session.

All three gathered around the table, Karen shifted her gaze from her husband to her son. She was always amazed at how the two looked alike, with very long raven hair framing their sharp lines and high cheekbones. The grey and intense eyes gave a melancholic look but, in reality, they hid an innate joy for life and a priceless ability to grasp the emotions of anyone who observed them for too long.

Mark had recently decided on a shorter haircut, accompanied by a full beard streaked with grey and the first wrinkles on the sides of the eyes... that radiated whenever he gave her one of his secret smiles and that made her legs tremble, even if Karen would never admit that.

- How was your day at school? - She asked.

- Good, we did nothing. - Typical response. Never once did Jin make an effort to tell anything about his school activity. Karen had gotten used to these evasive phrases for some time now, but apparently that evening Mark wanted to insist.

- The fact that the lessons have just started does not authorize you to take them lightly. Do you have any new professors? -

- No, they are the same as last year. - Jin was not a great talker.

- What about the girls? - Karen grinned, aware of her intrusive curiosity, and she accepted with amusement her husband's annoyed look and even more the son's embarrassment.

- Mom! None of your business! -

“*Precisely*”, thought Karen, reaching for the empty plates.

The second course was one of her specialties: meatloaf in hot sauce with baked potatoes. The boys immediately filled the plates with large portions, she just tasted. Being the only member of the kitchen staff, she got used to quench her appetite while preparing meals. She always ended up eating minuscule portions of what she put on the table, but it benefitted her diet.

- Tomorrow Philip and I are going skating after school. - The boy said.

- What about the homework? - Mark asked.

- Already done! - Jin answered promptly.

- No more talk about school. - Karen said. - How about watching a good movie together after dinner? -

- Sounds like a great idea! - Her husband.

- I don't feel like. - Jin, at the same time.

“*Obviously*”, thought Karen, resigned. “*Young people and their boundless desire to spend time with their parents.*”

- Well, it means that your mother and I are going to watch an R rated movie. - Joked her husband.

- Haha. Funny. I'm going back to my room now; I have to tidy up a bit before going to sleep. - Jin replied, putting an end to the conversation.

- Don't be late. Good night. -

- 'Night! -

Karen started clearing the table. Her husband got up and joined her from behind, holding close his wife and kissing her neck. All in all, it wasn't so bad not to have Jin around.

Luckily, his father entered first, otherwise his mother would not have spared him a good spanking about the state in which the room was reduced. So now he really would have to tidy up if he wanted to get into bed.

First of all, the music: without a little background noise the whole

operation would have been deadly boring.

So Jin began: first he picked up the poster behind the door, which never wanted to be stuck on the wall. A couple of strips of tape and Bruce Lee was in his own place again.

He then moved on to the bed, the eye of the storm; he began by stacking the clothes on the corner armchair, then it was his gym bag's turn, which he didn't even dare to open. And here was the hidden treasure: CD cases scattered everywhere, mostly empty (a sign of Philip's passage), a table tennis ball, a nunchaku and, to top it off, the permanent marker he used to write on CDs, and that he had been missing for a couple of days. Uncapped.

"Fuck! Now who deals with Mom?!"

He was just in the mood for a good night's sleep; at least he had finished clearing the bed. He hastily put on his pajamas, tossing the clothes haphazardly over the rest; he turned off the computer, the stereo and the lights, and finally laid down.

An hour later Jin was still staring at the ceiling. Something was troubling him, preventing him from falling asleep. A banal thought, just below the surface, so elusive as to make it go round and round without stopping. He closed his eyes again, trying to clear his mind from worries, perhaps fantasizing a bit about that blonde girl who had just moved from Maine, who never missed a chance to give him a mischievous glance every time they crossed the school corridors.

"Damn, she's really cute..."

Finally, he began to doze off and his thoughts changed shape: from sharp and precise they gradually became a little fuzzy and vague. Immediately afterwards he felt extraneous elements creep into the scene he had built. The school corridors widened, taking on the color of the asphalt, and he was now driving. No, he was talking to his friend Philip. But they were still in class then. Except that there was a TV instead of the professor. Background noises, voices... more and more shadows and a thin mist enveloped what now looked like a miniature city... he fell asleep.

He was suddenly awakened by laughter. Raucous, disturbing. In an instant all the lights in the room were on; obviously there was no one.

"Weird", Jin thought. He was almost sure he hadn't imagined it: it had been a gash in the dream dynamics, an event on the edge of his vi-

sion, of his perception of reality, yet so vivid that it was still resonating in his head.

He decided not to think about it anymore, going back to bed.

“I have to stop watching all those scary movies, I’m becoming a chickenshit!”

He managed to fall asleep again, not without some perturbation.

Five minutes later he was trembling, sitting up on the bed again, his hand searching for the lamp switch.

“What the hell was that?!” This time he was sure it wasn't a dream. While he was actually dreaming, at a certain point everything turned black, a feeling of abandonment and despair fell upon him, while invisible hands touched his ankles. And again that laughter.

The room was silent. Only the usual noises could be heard: the ticking of Mickey's alarm clock resting on the bedside table, the low buzz of the 33.3 Mb/s ATA hard disk - the masterpiece of his room - and lastly the inevitable background hum in every house in the Hudson Bay area: the constant and uninterrupted sounds of traffic.

Everything was normal.

This time, however, falling asleep was going to be damn hard.

After checking his room one more time he decided to turn off the light. Unfortunately, fear had taken over him by now: shadows and sounds played with Jin’s imagination, taking the shape of terrifying beings who came out of boundless nightmares.

He spent an apparently endless moment, after which his thoughts resumed the trend of dreams: the warmth that enveloped the body also spread to the mind, while the images developed there began to follow a random course. The topics and foreground scenes arose spontaneously from the boy's subconscious, intersecting with each other in a growing cacophony culminating in the dream itself.

Jin sleeps. He's lying face down, just the way he likes. The dream has just vanished, leaving behind a blank space of memory and only darkness lying before him. And there it is again. That laughter. It is not alone this time. Jin sees the origin: a bony face, blurred silhouette, with disheveled hair trickling down onto the face, and an evil grin that takes shape from a toothless mouth. It is ice blue, lifeless, and exuding hatred and desire to kill.

Jin is paralyzed with horror; he feels two hands slashing his ankles, and despair replaces his fear as he finds himself suspended in the air, thrown out of his body. The force dragging him is incredible, inhuman, but he clings the first thing he manages to grab with all the will left. His own back. Yes, he grasps to his own back. He can't figure out how this is possible, but he is too upset to care. In a moment that feels like an eternity, cyan blue fingers float in the air in front of the young man's wide eyes, then sink into his flesh, giving him an unpleasant tingling sensation. His fingers, his own flesh.

The evil force taking his life doesn't seem to give up. Jin gives the last burst of energy, available only for someone sentenced to death. He sinks his fingers back into his own back, coming across the pelvis bone, which allows him to hoist himself up.

Yet the hold on his legs doesn't give up. Jin screams, despairs, sees his lifeless body abandoned on the bed. He grabs to himself with all the strength he possesses, kicking against the monstrous creature in a last, anguished yearning for life. He falls.

A spasm shakes his body. Everything's quiet.

Jin fell out of bed screaming. His parent's excited voices came from the room at the end of the hallway, then a frantic trampling. The door opened and his mother catapulted herself into, to check what was happening. The boy still couldn't tell if he was still dreaming or if he had managed to wake up. His mother's words were coming from far away. He struggled to stand, still shaking, then he wiped the sweat from his forehead with the pajama sleeve. His mother was bombarding him with questions, but Jin heard nothing, nothing except the echo of that devilish laughter. Silent tears streamed down his cheeks. He sat on the bed.

That was an unreal nightmare, from which he would never escape.

- Jin, Jin! What happened? -

- Just a nightmare Mom, it's okay. - But he didn't believe it either.

After a lot of reassurances and sweet words, Jin managed to convince his mother to go back to her room.

He went back to bed, leaving all the lights on: by now it was clear that he would never sleep again that night.

He stared at the room ceiling, motionless; not even the everyday objects could give him any comfort. The photos, the sports trophies, the

school books, the electronic devices, even the puppets from when he was younger had lost their familiarity on that irrational and frightening night.

He was uncomfortable on the bed. His sheets had probably been creased in all the commotion. He got up to fix them but, to his amazement, he realized that everything was in order. So what was that discomfort he felt in his back?

“Wow, what a shitty night!”

Thinking about it, he felt a slight lumbar strain even when he was standing; he massaged himself as best he could, but the tingling still persisted: a longitudinal pressure ran down his lower back, not homogeneous in its feeling but divided into thin furrows.

A thought flashed through his mind. It wasn't possible.

He headed for the bathroom, being careful not to make the slightest noise. He turned on the light and took off his pajama shirt, then, hesitantly, walked over to the mirror and turned around.

He remained motionless for few seconds, staring at something that didn't belong to his reality, with a stupid smile on his face.

Long white scars clawed Jin's back, starting a little above the first lumbar vertebra and stopping abruptly on the pelvis, as if someone's fingers had engraved there their despair, their attachment to life.

PART TWO

*United States of America,
Nowadays*

CHAPTER 2

*New York, New York State, United States of America, February -
Nowadays*

OCME, the New York City Office of Chief Medical Examiner, has its headquarter at 520 First Avenue, just four miles from its main employer: the NYPD One Police Plaza.

The facility, consisting of two horseshoe-shaped buildings joined by a central corridor, is divided into hundreds of offices and laboratories, most of which are specialized in forensic sciences.

All the people who died from violent or at least unusual deaths passed through this place, before continuing the way towards their own “dead realm”, chosen with no conviction while they were still alive.

Consequently, just like his loyal client *the crime*, the building and its inhabitants never went to sleep.

Just that morning a new guest had joined in the unwanted purgatory. Now resting in one of the many cold rooms in the East Wing, which like a macabre beehive kept the bodies waiting to be examined by the medical team assigned to the case.

It was 11:32 pm when the man interested in that particular body entered the complex. In his thirties, athletic body, with a baseball cap over a military-style haircut. His beard was neatly trimmed but fake, like his New York Hospital Medical Center uniform. The two cold grey eyes with an Asian shape were the only distinguishing and not camouflaged feature, although hidden by the cap visor.

He went over to the concierge and showed his card. At that hour the entrance hall was practically deserted, except for the receptionist. The typical night clerk who used to spend his working hours in front of a small TV, hidden under the counter, while the kilos on his stomach progressively exceeded the dollars in his wallet.

The visitor saw the man check the data, looking bored. In the mean-

while, discreetly, he began to scan the angles of the walls, searching for hidden cameras; his contact had assured him that none were working at that hour, at least not along the route he was supposed to take. In any case, it was better to verify on his own.

The voice of the man behind the screen caught his attention.

-Wait a moment, what is the reason for your visit? The computer doesn't ... -

A hard plastic blade magically appeared from the stranger's left hand, darted like a snake into the night watchman's throat, plunging deep into his jugular and choking his last words in a gurgle of blood. He probably didn't feel pain: he didn't have the time. He went from shock to death in a second.

The assassin had considered this possibility since he was prepared for every possible scenario. Never trust too much in false identities, nor overestimate the others' negligence. As a precaution, he had equipped himself with an old worn scarf, bought for the exorbitant sum of twenty dollars from a hobo met a few blocks earlier. He quickly wrapped it around the victim's neck, so that at first glance the blood could not be seen. Then he arranged the body on the armchair as if he had peacefully fallen asleep. Everything happened in under two minutes.

The ceiling camera lights were off, as he had been assured. Moreover, due to some technological artifice beyond his reach and interest, a tape was loaded onto the surveillance monitors with the footage of the deserted corridors, leaving it to run in a loop. A point in favor of the Organization, his employer.

The solitary agent, known in his environment with the code name of Striated Buffalo, had only to enter the dark and deserted corridors of the building, of which he knew the planimetry by heart. He proceeded calmly, walking in perfect silence. It should have been easy to complete the mission.

He soon became one with the darkness enveloping him.

CHAPTER 3

New York, New York State, United States of America, March

Unspoken things. Sentences left unfinished. If humanity were to record on a sheet of paper the river of voices that follow each other and battle in the air every day, it would have filled a book with ellipsis. Because this is the ultimate reality of human knowledge: empty spaces.

Not silences of course. On the contrary, everyone is committed to saying as many words as they can put together, full of themselves, full of excitement and euphoria and... full of bullshit. Just like the student standing in the front row of the class, a regular attendee to Jin Parker's medieval history course.

Jin awoke from his thoughts, interrupting the boy in the front row.

- Ok Michael, thanks for your introduction. - Jin looked thoughtfully at the clock.

It was almost 11:00 am: the high school was dedicating a minute of silence to the memory of Jack Williamson, a young student of Jin's who had died within the complex around three weeks earlier in mysterious circumstances.

His body had been found in the men's locker room, apparently with no external injuries. The previous evening a major basketball game had taken place at the institute, and the team Jack was in had faced the first in the league, scoring a landslide victory. As a result, no one at home had given too much weight to the boy's delay: the parents knew that he would celebrate till late night with his mates and the cheerleaders. At their age, any excuse was good to party, and this occasion certainly provided an excellent one.

However, the cold light of dawn froze all hope of resuming life from where it had been left: the Williamsons had discovered their son's bed empty, the call to 911 and the searches had started almost immediately, and just as quickly came the news of the body discovery in the school complex.

According to the front page articles of the following days, the toxico-

logical examination did not detect psychotic drugs nor any other kind of drugs in the boy's body, which had probably never even left the locker room after the game. The teammates said they had left him behind so that he could talk to a girl, Linda Rose, who had been questioned intensively by the police, but she was completely unaware of the incident: many could confirm her presence elsewhere during and after the match.

A starting point. Or, rather, a deadlock: the investigations had not brought any more results, not even the autopsy, and the journalists had speculated on the most bizarre and crazy hypotheses. The death became the prey to the media circus, typical for every event that was any way out of the ordinary. The boy's family believed in the illness hypothesis. Apart from that minute of silence and the veil of sadness that still hovered in the eyes of his closest friends, life had largely resumed to its daily routine.

That was twenty-first century New York, too accustomed to violence and fear to mark its heartbeat to the rhythm of unfair young deaths.

The clock struck eleven.

- Guys, a minute of silence. - Jin said, bowing his head.

At that moment someone knocked on the door.

Jin ignored it. Everyone in the school knew about the commemoration moment, could there be something so urgent that they couldn't wait even a minute?

- May I? - A woman burst into the room without too many pleasantries.

- Professor Jin Parker? -

-Yes, what do you need? -

There was a pause as the eyes of the two met.

- I'm sorry to disturb, but you have to follow me to the meeting room immediately. -The mysterious woman said, in a tone that did not allow replies.

Jim looked absently at his companion while they were walking in silence through the deserted corridors of the school. She was in front of him, agile and confident in her athletic physique, so their gazes never met. The man was about to ask for an explanation when she preceded him.

- I haven't introduced myself yet. I'm Sergeant Cora Hoover, from Homicide. -

- Sergeant? -

-I know that about a month ago you lost a student in... rather strange circumstances. -

- Yes, that's right, but the case has already been closed. -

The fast walk, making her long raven hair floating over her shoulders, now was reduced to a slower pace that seemed to prelude the weight of the revelations she was about to make. Jin could perceive the feeling of discomfort she emanated, poised between despair, guilt and sadness, but she couldn't know that.

-Mr. Parker, I'm sorry to be the one informing you, especially under these circumstances, but the case is going to be reopened. - Sergeant Hoover stopped and turned towards him. Despite everything, her eyes were intense and conveyed firmness.

- And another case just opened. - The Sergeant added lowering her voice.

Jin looked at her not understanding, then a shadow made its way through his thoughts, and his face darkened. She kept the same tone, delicate but firm.

- This morning a janitor found the body of a student in the back of the kitchens. We haven't notified the family yet, but we know the boy's identity, and he was also attending your course, so we would like to ask you a few questions. - Sergeant Hoover presented her request as politely as possible, but that did not make the news any less shocking. Two deaths in one month.

Jin leaned his back against the wall, unsteady on his legs. It was not possible. Now, Tommy Sherper was dead too. It was not difficult for him to put the pieces together; he was the only one absent that day.

As much as the world tried to dirty its canvas with blood-red splashes, every hour of every day, there was no way to get used to these perennial shades of death, especially when they outlined the contours of a single existence.

In those moments of silence, due to justice and respect for the pain of the person in front of her, Cora Hoover tried to get an idea of Professor Jin Parker, as was the prerogative of every good policeman: to record as many details as possible at the first meeting and to make a complete scan of the subject.

Nonetheless, the frame, the overall vision, was immediately blurred, as if those deep grey eyes had magnetized all her interests. Transporting

her to a distant and unknown place, on the threshold in which a veil of sadness descended to block a passage that even the bravest human could not have crossed without pledging a piece of his soul.

She abandoned her thoughts, an illusionary refuge on the abyss of the new horror awaiting her, and she led the way into the room equipped as a temporary operations center.