

SIPHON - REBIRTH

I

GOD AND THE LUNAR LAKE

What is the cost of lies? It's not that we'll mistake them for the truth. The real danger is that if we hear enough lies, then we no longer recognize the truth at all. What can we do then? What else is left but to abandon even the hope of truth and content ourselves instead with stories? In these stories, it doesn't matter who the heroes are. All we want to know is: "Who is to blame?"

-Valery Legasov

DOMOS, MARS

YEAR: 2337

APRIL 40

POPULATION: 13,256

DOMOS, MARS

YEAR: 2237

APRIL 47

POPULATION: 253

PART 1 - REBIRTH

1. FELICUR: RITUAL

“Honestly, I don't remember what life was like before that day.”

Felicur's juvenile voice echoed through the colossal sphere-shaped auditorium. *It's like every human in the cosmos is here.* It was definitely the majority. Thousands had gathered. Thousands had come to hear the word of god. A weekly service, mandatory for most. With a pleasant treat of divine royal powers at the end of every gathering. A flex of what makes them *different*.

He looked up to the glowing chandelier floating above them, a glass chamber with a seven point star etched into its bottom. One member of the royal council sat at each point, their identity partly concealed by the stained glass at its base, mostly by the blinding spotlight positioned at its center, directly under the standing microphone. He looked down and scanned the audience of peers and more and locked eyes with his friend, Jaymus, who shook his head, sandwiched by a hundred other juvenile soldiers. Felicur stopped himself from laughing and cleared his throat. “Six years have passed since that day, the Massacre of Equality.”

One of the seven council members begrudgingly rose from their throne.

“Since then,” Felicur picked up the pace. “We’ve been locked in a cold war. With the single goal of making Mars a place where Humans can live free from war.”

“Down with the Devils!” Micky shouted from the crowd and immediately lowered his head in embarrassment but murmurs of approval followed. Felicur glanced back up to the Council of Royals looking down at him. Displeased. *Reigning from behind their impenetrable glass wall.* He thought.

Kelvin, an older gentleman sporting a tall brown hat with a matching molluck-fur coat, spoke into the crystal microphone poised at the center of the royal semi circle. “Your history, Felicur.”

“My apologies, Heir Kelvin...” Felicur waited for him to sit back down. “We are gathered here today because a bug, sorry- ‘a kypia’, flew up my nose. Now I feel like I always have to sneeze.” Chuckles in the crowd were quickly covered up.

Kelvin tilted his head, annoyed..

“Okay, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’ll be serious.” He sighed. Not understanding the weight of this threat. “Well, where should I start? My first memory is from that god-forsaken day. So, I guess start there. Fortunately, a lot of it is quite vivid.” He took a deep breath. *Just tell it how it happened.* “Jaymus and I were playin’ some kinda game, or maybe we were just wrestling. I don’t know. Hi Jamie.” Felicur’s voice shook nervously.

He waved at Jaymus, who covered half his face with one hand the other with his shoulder length black hair. It was the longest the crusaders allowed it to be. “But... my mother burst into the room with this absolutely terrified look on her face. I’ve never seen her look so worried.” *I wish I could remember what she looked like happy.* “She immediately locked the door behind her and got to our level. ‘Jamie, felly’ Nobody can call me Felly by the way.” He said abruptly, shaking the nerves off a little. Hushed chuckles in the crowd. “Okay, I don’t know what she said exactly, but basically ‘there’s giant kangaroo-looking lizards outside’. After some more panic and hushed yelling, it happened... Bang.”

Felicur paused for dramatic effect. “The shot heard round the world. Deafening.” Some people nodded throughout the crowd.

“But... what I remember more than the shot, was the scream. That blood-curdling scream right after the shot. So much pain, anger, vigor. Such raw *emotion*.” Felicur’s body tensed. The scream replayed in his head. *Breathe*. He gathered his thoughts and continued. “From that point to the tunnel, a constant barrage, a blur. Explosions, rubble, red blood, blue blood, gunshots, stabs, screams- so- so many screams. We left our house out the back narrowly escaping one of the Selthians. However, my mother... She lost half of her leg to one of the Selthians during the escape. Luckily, Jaymus- ‘little Jayman’s papa’ came to the rescue. He fought off a couple Selthians and did a damn good job at it too. For one of them he did this sick- like- spin jump slice thingie. It was pretty kick-ass. But, we ended up getting cornered and out-numbered. By those cloaked lizards.” A pause. His breathing quickened. “Only one way out, and with my mother... my poor mother.”

Come on, Felly. Wrap it up. Felicur couldn’t bear to stay on this subject much longer. “There was an explosion that took out the both of them... I hope it was painless.” He took a deep breath glad to be past that part. “Luckily, it sent Jaymus and I through that very gap out of there. We were picked up to our feet by- by... by someone traveling to the tunnel.” He almost said Takuan’s name, forgetting that his name is taboo in front of the royals. “He saved us. Jaymus managed to stay alert- he was one tough cookie. It should really be him up here, not me.” He smiled.

Jaymus smiled briefly, Felicur continued. “Little ole me was still trying to process what the hell was even happening. Next thing I knew we’re in the clearing. The tunnel, just up ahead. I was being dragged by my elbow. Half running, half sliding. I looked behind and caught a glimpse of my father running behind us, covered in dust and rubble. I broke free from the grasp that was pulling me and ran towards him. and then... that’s when it happened.”

Felicur paused again, He fought the bubble growing in his throat. *Breathe. Push it down. Come on.* “A spike... A metal one, pierced straight through his back and, hooked on to his chest yanking his

momentum to a stop.” Felicur’s voice grew monotone. A defense mechanism. “A Selthia- sorry, Devil. A devil got him... I remember blood dripping from her spike tail. Her black chain, flowing cape, and curled back horns. The devil pulled on the chain, yanking the spike out, spun it around, and flung the blade popping his head clean off...” Felicur took a deep breath. “His head bounced on the ground and rolled toward me wrapped in a coat of dirt and blood, and when it finally stopped his eyes were still open. He looked me right in the eye... He was still blinking.” Shivers. Everyone in the audience was silent. A shared reflection.

Felicur took a moment to catch his breath, to look at the hieroglyphic littered walls. The history of wars on Mars etched into the perimeter of this cylindrical auditorium. *Escaping the all consuming Earth, The battle against robots, the gods gifting mankind two enormous metallic umbrellas, The civil war against engineers, and lastly, the battle of Equality.* In front of it was a blank slate. A spot for the next chapter in history. *The unknown.* The thought of it invigorated him. A desire to contribute to it.

Felicur cleared his throat and took command of the microphone. “There’s a gap in my memory after that moment. All I know is I ended up making it in the tunnel. Jaymus, and I were one of the last people to make it. But I remember this part, and for some reason, I’ve never heard anyone else mention it before.”

Felicur looked up at the council. Some of them shifted in their seats, Kelvin, uncrossed his legs, and sat forward in his chair. *It’s now or never.* “One of the selthians, I’m unsure of who it was, since they were wearing a mask and I was only three years old at the time. But, one of them entered the cave. They could’ve wiped out everyone in there. That includes little Jaime and I. Collapse the tunnel. But, they didn’t.” Felicur saw Jaymus shaking his head. Kelvin stood up from his chair again. An obvious warning to stop, but Felicur ignored it and continued. “Instead, they spared us. They said that they came in peace. That we shot first despite them lowering their weapons. The Selthians apologized and pr—” CLUNK. Felicur’s mic cut out. The spotlight abruptly shut off too. *Well, shit.* The warm glow from the lights’ attention yanked, leaving a cold dry air.

An ethereal light beamed to the council. To Kelvin. He stood with a cold rage but somehow still appeared angelic. The power of good lighting. “Have you forgotten the consequences of perjury in the presence of the council?” His voice was a drawn blade pushing against Felicur’s neck.

The two crusaders standing guard behind Felicur stepped forward casually readying their glaives in sync. They held the blade gently against each side of his neck, crossing in front of his chest. A light grew brighter from the tip of Kelvin’s pointing finger. A spinning ball of flame that grew tighter and tighter. He aimed it at Felicur casually.

The spotlight blasted Felicur. This time brighter than before. Hotter than before. He felt heavy. His black uniform stuck uncomfortably against his sweat-covered back. “I’m sorry, Heir Kelvin. Perhaps my memory has changed over the years.” Felicur clenched his jaw. *Shut up Felicur. You’re gonna get yourself killed.*

Kelvin commanded, “Would you like to participate in the annual convict death tournament Mr. Stapific?” His voice echoed.

Felicur adjusts his shirt. *Shut the fuck up Felicur. You can’t die here.* “No, Heir Kelvin. I’m sorry. I’ll continue.” He tried to swallow in a dry throat but couldn’t. He pushed through the discomfort. “We got through the tunnel, Ja- Jaymus and I, both– we both lost our parents to the Sel- Devils.” His composure was shot to smithereens. His words were getting jumbled, his heart pounded in his throat, and everything felt hot. Really hot. Kelvin smirked. His struggle was very entertaining to the royals. Watching the little boy squirm under pressure. He sat back down.

Felicur clenched his fist looking up at the royals. *One day, you’re gonna be looking up to me. Just you wait.* He saw Jaymus gently nodding. A reminder to breathe. So he did. A deep breath before continuing. “Next thing I knew we were in Domos. Thank you for giving us shelter dearest royals. I remember seeing fliers posted all over town, invitations to join the crusaders. To ‘avenge the fallen’. So I joined with Jaymus.” He smiled. His confidence returning. It was easy to have confidence when he was lying, pushing their agenda. *I joined because you did.* His gaze fixed on Jaymus. He looked at the higher

elevation seats, the ones at the peak of the inverted dome. “I joined to avenge my fallen mother and father. To avenge the fallen soldiers of Equality. To protect humanity!” He threw a fist in the air.

The majority of the soldiers from his class shouted back in approval. It was good that they were all stationed closest to him spread along the ground.

The farther away you were from the stage, the higher you sat on the incline surrounding him. The other seventy percent of the crusaders, the ones sitting on the incline of this sphere shaped room, kept quiet like they were supposed to. Kelvin rolled his eyes.

Felicur waited for his peers to quiet down with a much improved confidence. “Ten years later. I have completed three missions, the first two were just securing intel from the d-Devils. My last mission, well yesterday, I was tasked with executing a bureaucrat. Arcon, a supply chain executive from Romohgarr. To which, I was able to complete, thanks to my incredible squadron. However, after completing the mission, on our way out I noticed something was off about the Devil’s house. There was a room that had an airlock seal. So, to gain more intel on what was happening behind enemy lines. I pried the door open to find the room was no bigger than a janitor’s closet. Then it happened. Woosh!” He imitated the path that the kypia took using his hands, ending with his finger pointed up his nose. He jolted his head back reenacting its entry for the crowd. “That feeling might’ve actually been worse than losing my parents!” A couple giggles erupted from the crowd.

“Okay. That’s enough. Thank you, Felicur. For your succinct synopsis.” Kelvin’s annoyed voice boomed through the auditorium freezing all movement. “We will now be conducting the ritual oath.” A new spotlight grows. Its light deified a person moving down the center aisle, fully shrouded in white garments carrying a pillow with a horned skull on it. Behind this floating man was graphic, terrifying images of selthians, etched into the wall with exaggerated horns really driving home the devil imagery. *Finally, I wonder if it’s really him.* He thought.

The veiled person scaled up the steps like a phantom. Their large frame, finally apparent. They stopped in front of him, towering over the child. Nearly double his size. Felicur gulps. His heart rate quickens.

“Your blade.” Kelvin commands from the booth.

Despite the fact that this promotion would lead to the next tier of armour, Felicur may have been the only person in the crusaders history to dread this kind of promotion. His hatred of the royals made every promotion feel like a slap in the face. That he was getting closer to them, while he wanted to be as far away from them as possible. He unsheathed his thigh mounted dagger and rested the blunt side against the middle of his forehead. *Just need to get this over with already.*

Kelvin continued. “By blood or by break. It is our responsibility to guide the wicked away from sin. To break the devil’s grasp on their demonic soul. Now, cleanse the wicked. Save them from their impurity.”

Breathe. He slowly brought the blade down. He paused. The sharp edge rested on the scar that already stretched across his palm. *Come on. Pull it. Pull it. Pull it dammit. Everyone’s waiting. Pull it already!*

Slit! He pulled the blade quickly, cutting the entire width of his palm. Thick red blood oozed out. It dripped down his wrist and fingers as he brought it to the skull resting on the pillow. He placed his hand on the forehead of the skull, in between the two great horns. *The infected skull of Jaqzel the great. Selthian leader who came in peace to Equality but left in the bag of a human soldier... So unfortunate. And that must be the bullet hole from the legendary ‘shot heard round the world’.* The skull was nearly twice the size of his. Blood dripped down the skull from all angles, tainting the pure white pillow beneath it.

“I, Felicur Stapific” Kelvin’s voice shook Felicur’s composure.

“I, Felicur Stapific.” Felicur recited.

“Vow to recite every god-spoken word from the kypia to the council, verbatim.”

“Vow to recite every god-spoken word from the kypia to the council, verbatim.” I *can't believe I'm doing this*.

“I will obey every order given to me by the kypia without question or hesitation.”

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“I understand that failure to comply with the kypia's order will result in my termination from crusaders and the removal of said kypia.”

“I understand that failure to comply with the kypia's order will result in my termination from crusaders and the removal of said kypia.” The echo gave a moment of comfort until the crushing silence stole it away. *This silence is too long*.

“I, Kelvin, prince of the royals, and heir to the throne, declare Felicur Stapific, Crusader of Martian Security, promoted to ArchBishop. Your security clearance badge will be given to you after the ceremony. Congratulations Felicur.”

“Congratulations, Felicur.” The crowd said in monotone unison. Claps rose from the crowd. Felicur removed his hand from the skull of Jaqzel and stepped back. He stared at his blood-stained hand and paused to reflect before looking at the crowd. At Jaymus. He was the only one who didn't clap.