

Simon Volpert

Endgame

"All armies are in position, General Archer," the operator reported, clicking a switch on the control panel. "The war fortresses and walkers took formation and are ready to move out at your command."

General Archer nodded slowly, clasping the command chair's handles with his hands. He was tense like never before, hardly a surprise: the endgame of many months, no, years of preparations, the final and decisive battle between virtue and vice, the forces of good and evil, between light and darkness, was fast approaching. Long negotiations, concessions, compromises, bargaining and cheating, betrayal and sabotage, everything he and his companions lived through during the last years, all the hardships and misery, all led here, to this very moment.

He swallowed nervously.

"Show me our enemies, Operator. Scan their ranks, try to identify the armies' composition and commanders' identities," he ordered. The operator's fingers danced across the keys, and a detailed panoramic view of the battlefield, with armies, fortifications, walkers and war fortresses marked came into view on the wide screen covering the entire wall.

Archer scanned the data, taking special notice of the command war fortresses. His eyes widened, and his mouth opened involuntarily.

"It can't be..." he whispered.

"What is it, Archie?" the advisor behind his shoulder asked, with concern.

"This fortress bears the signs belonging to my cousin..." Archer licked his dry lips. "This one seems to be under the command of Lieutenant General Noah Karr, my childhood friend and my best Academy companion... This army is led personally by my warfare professor... This one, by our trade partner, Iliya Zero... Brin... Hero... Erika Lyn... All of them are my former friends, many are distant relatives, Kris! How can it be, how did it happen, that they all stand here, to fight me?" his voice cracked.

"It is inevitable, Archie," Kris answered, with regret in his voice. "Remember how they joined your oppressors, one by one, the very oppressors who forced you to spend years in exile. Remember how they laughed during your unjust and unlawful trial, when the tyrant and villain Jordan tormented your companions and sent you and your loyal friends to be tortured!" Kris' voice charmed Archer and brought back long suppressed emotions. He felt the anger, the disgust, the shame, all the emotions that washed over him back then, in the immemorable past, when he swore vengeance, for the first time, whatever the cost, even if he'll have to tear down the United Lands to the last stone.

"You are being hailed, General Archer," the operator reported, switching off the buzzer on the panel with a touch. "It's Dio Jordan! Could it be, that the villain and

crook wishes to negotiate?"

Archer slowly straightened in his command chair and glanced towards Kris. Kris made a barely noticeable motion with his shoulder, as if saying it doesn't matter.

"Answer the hail," the General commanded. The switch clicked, and the view on the screen changed into the loathsome face of the tyrant, sitting in his command chair in the bridge of a war fortress.

"Juno Archer, son of a dog and a rotten degenerate," he hissed through his teeth, without a trace of respect, with a scornful grimace on his face, as if the very name of the General filled him with utter disgust. "I will give you but one chance to surrender to my mercy. Make your decision quickly, for my time is precious, as are my armaments, and I would loathe to waste them on a pathetic bastard such as you."

Archer closed his eyes, then slowly opened them, feeling the anger boil in his veins once again.

"You are deeply mistaken, Great Ruler Jordan, if you think me to be so easily taken," he spoke in an even, emotionless voice. "Even you, doubtlessly, are not blind enough to fail to see that our forces are practically even. If the battle was to start, all life on this continent will have likely been destroyed. Do you care so little about your citizens, that you are willing to doom them to certain death, just to get rid of me?"

"Don't pretend to understand what happens in my mind, you lousy scum," Jordan hissed, his eyes narrowing with anger. "You are a coward and a thief, a wretch and a snake, guilty of treason, sedition, terrorism, distribution of forbidden literature, money laundering and hundreds of other crimes, the punishment for which is death. However, I am merciful, and will consider softening your sentence to an exile for life to the labor colony on Titan, if you order your rabble to lay down their arms and surrender to my justice."

"You are as guilty as I am, Dio," Archer spoke through his teeth, keeping his anger at under control. "You are a tyrant and an usurper, who has taken a power he did not deserve. You have oppressed your citizens and robbed them blind, both directly and indirectly, through obscene taxes, stripping them of their last belongings and savings. Rightfully fearing for your life, having turned many powerful people against you, you have created a secret police, drafting its members from the farthest and poorest villages, training them in subversion and securing their loyalty with luxury, excess and total permissiveness. You bear responsibility for tenths of thousands of repressed people, whose lives were shattered at the slightest of suspicions, or even without one, arbitrarily, senselessly and meaninglessly. My side is not rabble, Dio, but the proud, free and strong population of the United Lands, ready and willing to throw you off your stolen throne, end your unlawful rule and return the power of government into the hands of the people, where it rightfully belongs. But, no matter how reprehensible you are to me, no matter how much I long to see you in rags and chains, I am ready to make concessions, Jordan, and I am ready to negotiate, for the last time, if only to save those people from destruction. My requests are very modest, indeed."

"To negotiate? With terrorists, such as you?" Jordan spat, his whole posture expressing utter contempt. "It won't be. I will give you ten minutes to decide, and then

either you declare a full and unconditional capitulation, or I will order my armies, my walkers and my war fortresses to crush you and your rabble into a wet patch on the ground, like the insects you are. That is all!" he gestured sharply and the image vanished. The screen was showing a panorama of the battlefield and a strategic map of the area again.

"The field commanders report their readiness," immediately said the operator. "The walkers and war fortresses are awaiting your command. The cannons are aimed and the shells programmed. Everyone is ready to move at your signal, General Archer. We are ready. Give us your order."

The general sighed heavily and his shoulders slouched. He felt awfully tired again, as if the immense weight of responsibility for the lives of innumerable people fell on his shoulders again, pulling him to the ground.

"Is there no other way?" he asked his advisor, exhausted. "Is there no way to turn time back, to return to how everything once was, to mend everything? Is there no way to avoid this unnecessary bloodshed?"

"I'm afraid not, my friend," Kris answered, his eyes glowing with a flame Archer has never seen before. "We followed this path for too long, and made many irrevocable decisions on the way. Look around you, Archie, and you will see that I'm right. We gathered great forces and even greater weapons, and the best of Earth's people rallied under your banners, leaving their former lives, their former attachments, their former friends and families behind. You are the focus point of great historical processes, and it is you who will bring upon a new era, a new epoch, a new world."

"I don't want any of this, Kris," Archer spoke tiredly. "God is my witness, things went beyond my power. This is not what I dreamed of, far from it! If I could have even the tiniest patch of dead, barren land, where I and my followers could live under their own rule, the rule of law, honor and justice, I would readily accept this fate."

"This was never meant to be," Kris spoke quietly, but there was incredible power in his voice, power Archer never noticed before. "Great Ruler Jordan is too jealous and paranoid to allow the existence of a place he does not control, anywhere on Earth. He fears you, Archie, for he knows: if he shows even the tiniest sign of weakness, his rule of fear and oppression will crack and shatter. And, know, that he does not intend to wait the full ten minutes he promised. Even now he feels anxiety, in three minutes the anxiety will turn into fear, and in five he will order his armies to attack. The only way to survive is to make the first strike!"

"There have to be honorable people among his armies, who will switch sides in a moment of truth," Archer desperately grasped at his hope.

"Know this: there is not a single honorable man or woman among Jordan's armies!" Kris spoke softly, but relentlessly. "Every single worthy person, anyone who valued honor before short-term profit followed you many months ago. Jordan has nobody but mercenaries, crooks and cowards on his side. Give your people the order!"

"No! I don't believe it! How can you know this?..." Archer groaned in agony.

"From my place, everything seems clearer, my friend," Kris replied just as calmly as before. "Your heart and your mind are an open book to me, and so are the hearts and minds of all other people. Have you not realized that, already?"

Something clicked in Archer's mind, and suddenly the events of the last few years appeared in a new light. He recalled, with full clarity, his every word, his every thought, his every decision... And everything Kris did all this time.

The realization rolled over him like a storm wave, making him freeze in terror.

"You... Manipulated everything," Archer said in shock. "You manipulated us, all of us! You nudged everyone around you towards certain actions, you provoked events. You caused this, this war, this massacre, this meaningless bloodshed!..."

Kris only smiled back.

"Hundreds of thousands of innocent people will die!" Archer moaned.

"Millions, Archie, millions." Kris corrected. "That is, not counting the tenths of millions who will die from the long-term effects of war, from the diseases, from the marauding, from the anarchy and the lawlessness, from the collapse of civil infrastructure, and from other pleasantries, that are so beneficial for the long-term health of society. Civilization will be destroyed and a long period of reconstruction will follow after."

"You're a monster!"

"This is a matter of perspective," Kris shrugged his shoulders so calmly and carelessly, as if he was engaged in a debate in the philosophy class at the Academy, instead of a battlefield, mere minutes before it will turn into a raging inferno. "After what you will do today, you will be declared a monster by your enemies, Archie, at least, the few of them who will live long enough, and also their families and their friends. But, since history is written by the victors, you have nothing to worry about: your deeds will be praised in song in the centuries to come as a shining example of heroism and sacrifice, bravery and wisdom, honor and compassion. As for your momentary weakness before the decisive battle, it will be considered a clear sign of your humanity, a commendable and excusable impulse, that you successfully overcome, thanks to your loyal friend and advisor, me."

"You brought this on us! You did, personally! Why, for what purpose?!"

"There are things, Archie, my friend, that are beyond the capability of limited human cognition," Kris smiled with the same kind and pleasant smile as always, but Archer suddenly realized, for the first time since the day they met, that Kris has something unsettling about him, something alien, something otherworldly, a barely noticeable shade from other worlds. Despite his young looks, he exuded the spirit of ages.

"What... Are you?..." Archer whispered in horror.

"Why are you asking unnecessary questions, Archie? You won't be able to understand the answers," Kris seemed to enjoy the conversation.

"You can't know that," Archer said through his teeth.

"Yes, I can, and you know it. What can an ant comprehend about the motivations of a human, in the yard of whom they built their shelter? What can it fathom about the reasons that make him appear, and then disappear again, and how can it imagine his appearance? What you see, is no more than a fingerprint of a multi-dimensional being on the surface of the Flat Universe."

Almost without thinking, Archer's hand moved to the blaster on his belt. Kris' eyes flared with an uncanny flame, and Archer realized to his terror, that he cannot move. Time and again he strained to break his paralysis, but to no avail. And during those long seconds, through the sweat covering his eyes he saw the ever-present playful smile on Kris' face.

"What... Have... You... Done... To me?..." Archer asked in despair.

"I merely borrowed us a few minutes to enjoy our chat, Archie," Kris answered, the playful smile still on his face. "And also prevented you from making a short-sighted mistake you will regret for the rest of your life, however brief it might turn out to be."

"What are you?" Archer asked stubbornly.

"I'm telling you, you won't understand," Kris was smiling, but Archer sensed a shade of impatience in either his tone, his posture or his gestures.

"Show me your true form," Archer demanded. "Or there will be no talk."

"Ah, the limitless human stubbornness, as naive as it is meaningless," Kris smiled and rolled his eyes.

"Show me your..."

Archer's consciousness dimmed and he felt himself falling through endless darkness. His mind screamed and thrashed in search of support, something to grasp, but there was nothing around him, only a dark abyss. He had no body and no senses, but nonetheless he could somehow see, and what he saw filled him with endless, paralysing, unbreakable dread. For in the heart of the darkness, was light, and this light was darker than darkness itself. And in the heart of this light was movement, alien, horrifying, abhorrent, unlike anything any human has ever seen and which no human mind could bear, a creature as ancient as the Universe itself, and just as incomprehensible; And this creature extended its appendages towards him, appendages vile and horrifying, as cold as the endless darkness around him, and yet somehow searing, appendages hungry, coveting, wanting to devour his mind and his soul. And a mere moment before the appendage of the Ancient touched him, he realized, to his terror, that more than anything in the world he wanted to be eaten.

Archer breathed heavily, his heart raced, his eyes were covered in sweat. He was still sitting in his command chair. How much time has passed? He couldn't tell for sure. He slowly raised his hand to wipe the sweat from his eyes, briefly surprised he can move again.

"Just as I said, Archie," Kris was still here, as joyful and chipper as before. For a second, Archer questioned his sanity, before the trained mind of a warlord took over again.

"I... Will not play your game," Archer said through his teeth. "I will not be your pawn."

"You were them always, all of you, from the very dawn of time. But I did not force you, and did not make you do anything against your will. You chose this yourselves," Kris gestured at the field of upcoming battle. "Time after time you made your choice, and the choice you made was always towards destruction. Look back at your past, my friend, and you will see that my influence wasn't that great. This is just human nature; It is not me, who brought you here, but the implacable logic of historic events."

"Then what do you need me for? I will shoot my own head with my blaster, vaporize it and leave you alone with my armies, to do as you please."

"I could erase your mind and strip you of your will," Kris answered calmly. "However, your despair has a pleasant taste." He laughed, a bright and melodic chuckle, as if a dozen glass chimes rang at once. "Besides, I do need a thinking, intelligent warlord, capable of making split-second decisions, reacting quickly to changes in the situation and adapting to the rapidly changing conditions on the battlefield, a man who can give orders and lead armies forwards by the sheer power of his spirit and authority. This warlord is you, Archie, and together we will turn this world upside down."

Archer was silent. His mind was racing in search for a solution, and couldn't find one.

"You torment yourself for nothing, my friend," Kris said softly. "This is hardly the time for doubt and cowardice. In this decisive historic hour your personal desires mean less than ever. Nonetheless, know, that the events of your life were true, as were the events of the lives of each and every one of your friends, companions, rivals and enemies. Each and every one of you has every reason to be here, on the fields of the Valley of Kings. You are bound by duty and by honor. Your duty towards the people who believe in you and trust you, and your honor of a true leader won't let you escape the responsibility you took upon yourself many years ago. And even now, hope begins to stir in your heart, the hope that given certain decisions, the number of casualties can be brought down, that by giving the right orders you can save the lives of your friends. And it is indeed so, General! The battle is inevitable, but its details are yet to be written. My involvement does not decide everything, Archer, it merely imparts a new, transcendent meaning on what is already happening. Know, that you were chosen by God for working His plans into existence. And know, that neither you, nor your comrades will remain unrewarded, a reward greater than any reward imaginable: to transcend the human world and become a part of your God. Therefore, calm and rejoice, General Archer! Arise and fight! Fulfill your duty and your destiny!"

Archer said nothing. His overloaded mind couldn't bear the onslaught of emotions.

"General Archer?..." he heard the operator's voice. He looked around the bridge of his war fortress, seeing the expectant stares of his crew, full of trust and awe, ready to fulfill any suicidal order without a moment's hesitation, loyal, faithful, brave, selfless people, believing him and in him completely and unquestionably, keenly aware that their lives are hanging by the thread and, nevertheless, ready to give their lives away

for the cause without doubt or hesitation, a cause they could not possibly understand.

And with the blood drained from his lips, barely hearing his own voice, through the growing ringing in his ears, through the terror and despair claspings his heart, the General of Resistance Juno Archer spoke only a single word:

“Fire.”

And clouds of winged infrared-guided missiles rose into the sky blotting out the sun and rained down upon the earth, wiping entire armies off its surface. The thunder of explosions mixed with the screams of the dying, torn apart, crushed and burning alive, and Kris Shein stood and watched, smiling.

He watched as the war fortresses crushed the cities. He watched as colossi, armed with flamethrowers, burned the towns and the villages, turning the fields, the forests and the fortifications into smoldering ashes. He watched as the walkers trampled entire armies, crushing armored vehicles and people inside trenches. He watched as railguns shot down aerial platforms and flying fortresses. He watched as precise-targeting nuclear bombs landed in the centers of military bases, seaports and metropoli, leaving lakes of molten glass in the epicenter.

And when the One, whose finger he was, had His fill, broke contact with the human world and departed to engage in activities beyond the grasp of mere mortals, when His shadow, which lingered upon the planet for so long, finally vanished, the miserable tribes of ragtag survivors, armed with sticks and stones, gathered around their campfires to sing the song of a great battle none of them had witnessed, trying in vain to preserve and recover the cultural legacy of a destroyed great civilization. And the center of these songs was always a God, who came down to Earth to restore justice, and a noble, virtuous warlord, who willingly and selflessly became His weapon.

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