

ABOVE/BEL0W

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Prologue

Millions tuned in to watch. Numbers not seen in decades. In the Upper, they flocked to their favourite bars, stood in crowded plazas, or stayed home with their families and their large semi-holographic displays. In the Sub... well, they watched however they could, crowded around tiny displays, ten to a screen. A lucky few would have spent their hard-earned Lights to get a day-pass to the Upper to watch in style, for this was to be a special broadcast. Forty years after his death, someone from Amrit Ruth's family had finally agreed to an interview.

Watching from his shabby 'penthouse' in the Sub, a little less than halfway up the abandoned Chambers' hotel, Roman leaned forward in his seat, watching the display at the far end of the room. He wasn't alone. Around him, practically filling the room, were his grifters: people from the Sub who'd proven themselves capable in one way or another. Pulling scams, acting as muscle, running head-spice. He'd hired a few simply because they looked threatening. There were maybe thirty of them here, and the same again – or more – out on the streets. He'd built himself a little empire these last ten years, gained followers, lux, and tech. He was as rich as one could get in the Sub, but none of it compared to what the Upper had.

"Welcome, everyone, to our Fortieth Anniversary broadcast," said the female presenter as the tinkling introductory jingle faded.

"Quiet," Roman snapped, though few in the room were doing anything louder than breathing. Still, if they couldn't keep their inhalations quiet, he'd see them kicked out. They could catch up later, or go find a smaller display to watch on the dingy, dirty streets below.

Vicky Plumes, the most recognisable face in talk-show holovision beamed at them from the display, sat in a pristine, white-upholstered armchair. Pristine, white teeth shone out of her pristine, white face. At that very moment, Roman knew, giant versions of her would be staring out across the Upper, smiling across verdant plateaus and walkways. Elegant neons glowed gold beneath Vicky's skin where a necklace might otherwise have hung, in the V-shaped gap left by her dress. Women like Vicky Plumes didn't need to go overtly flashy to give off the impression of wealth. They exuded it. Vicky had it in droves, but the woman sat near her took it to another level.

Opposite Vicky, in an identical chair, was an older woman with cropped white hair and dark skin. Her grey dress was business-like yet elegant, dotted here and there with sparkling clusters of what might have been

actual gemstones. Her stylist had somehow made even priceless gems look subtle and understated. This second woman was sat up straight with her hands folded in her lap, looking decidedly more authoritative than her interviewer.

"This is a very special year," Vicky said, still looking into the camera.

"You bet it is," said someone to Roman's right.

"Shut up," Roman barked, his gravelled voice filling the room.

"I'm joined on this, the fortieth anniversary of Amrit Ruth's death, by his niece, the current matriarch of the Ruth family, Koda Ruth. Koda, welcome."

"Thank you, Vicky, pleasure to be here." Koda's smile faltered on the word 'pleasure', as though the lie hurt. Most people wouldn't have caught that, but Roman caught it. Reading people had helped get him where he was.

"We've got an action-packed show for you all today," Vicky continued, not meeting Koda's gaze or reacting to her pleasantry in the slightest. Roman smiled slightly; Vicky was playing the game, but she didn't know who she was up against. Koda had been around decades longer; she'd eat Vicky alive if it came to it. "We'll look at some of the last year's most popular Equaliser theories, take you on a live tour of Amrit Ruth's pristinely-preserved penthouse apartments, and discuss new details uncovered about the last year of his life with experts on the Ruth family. And, of course, in half an hour, we'll have the interview we thought would never happen. With Koda Ruth herself. Welcome, Koda."

"Thank you, Vicky, pleasure to be here." The hint of a frown flickered across Koda's face. She wasn't the kind of lady you made repeat herself, but nor was she the kind who lost control of her emotions like that. She was letting viewers know she didn't like Vicky.

"We'll get to the interview proper in a while, but... it must be hard for you," Vicky said, finally turning to look at her interviewee, "even after all this time. I know you and your uncle were close. Thank you for taking the time to speak with us, and thank you for allowing us to film here, in Amrit Ruth's very own Upper Central Arena VIP box. Am I correct that nothing in here has been changed since Amrit's death all those decades ago?"

"Whoa," said Glen, a short man sat to Roman's right. "That really his box?"

Roman thought about smacking him. He was near enough that he wouldn't even need to stretch, but he liked Glen. Glen hadn't let him down yet. Not in all the years he'd been running packages through the Sub.

“Looks that way,” he said, instead.

“Yes,” Koda Ruth replied on the screen. “It’s cleaned frequently, and we do use it ourselves when matches are on, but everything is as it was. Jetball was a favourite pastime of his, so we preserve this in his memory.”

The camera momentarily cut away from the two women to pan around the circular room.

“Take notes,” Roman ordered. People in the room began shuffling. Those unfortunate enough not to have working ocular implants – a good third of those in the room – began writing things down on paper. Actual paper. At another time, Roman might have weighed up the pros and cons of getting a few of his more useful grifters fresh implants – well, used-but-working implants – but right now he had other priorities.

The semi-holographic screen gave the image of the room more depth than a standard screen would. At this distance it didn’t do much, but closer to the screen it would have been easy to feel like he was actually in the room. Still, he could see enough detail. A curved wall coloured deep purple made up two thirds of the circumference of Amrit Ruth’s VIP box. It looked to be a single piece of brushed metal that had been stained somehow; it had that kind of sheen to it. Along it at intervals were portraits in gold frames of great pioneers from Earth’s history.

“That’s Faraday,” someone in the room chimed.

It was. And Roman recognised Curie next to him, and Yuri Gagarin. In front of each painting was a marble plinth with one of Amrit Ruth’s early prototypes sat comfortably atop it. Decryption plugs, ocular mods, ID chips, and all manner of other gadgets. Roman had seen pictures of this room before, and studied the prototype schematics in his youth; didn’t feel like seeing them here would be of much more value, but he squinted at them as the camera passed anyway. Nothing he hadn’t seen before. No clues. Disappointing, but hardly surprising.

Finishing off the room was a giant window looking out into Upper Central Arena itself. Rows of stands stood around a large, oval patch of grass. Hover cars zipped to and fro through the sky above, gleaming in the light of Gliese 667 Cc’s three suns. Skyscrapers, suspended walkways, and distant, hovering plazas stretched as far as the eye could see. Giant adverts littered the sides of buildings, some automatically blurred by the cameras to avoid giving free publicity to brands that hadn’t paid for ad placement. Several screens showed smaller versions of the view from the box, the broadcast streaming to them live, ever-smaller screens within them. Above the city was

an enticing blue sky, artificially cleaned and brightened by the cameras. The camera pan finished, cutting back to Vicky and Koda.

"People have been seeking Amrit's Equaliser for four decades now with no luck," Vicky said. "They've tuned into this interview from all over the Upper and Sol-Three, even the Sub – well, probably not the Sub." Vicky fake-laughed at that, turning to look knowingly at the camera, then back to Koda.

"Bitch," someone near the screen shouted. Roman couldn't disagree.

"They're watching in the hope that you might have a new clue for them. We'll save the really juicy stuff for our interview proper, but, perhaps we should give the viewers something to whet their appetites. So," Vicky said.

"Notes," Roman said again. He prepped his own ocular mod, looking up and right, then blinking to open his notes app.

"...what do you know about the location of Amrit's Equaliser?"

Koda raised her eyebrows at the brazenness of the question. She took a deep breath. A predatory smile crossed her face as she exhaled. "Nothing," she said, looking Vicky straight in the eye.

Others in the room gasped, but Roman chuckled. He closed his notes app. There'd be nothing here to help them find the Equaliser; Vicky was about to get eviscerated.

"I-," Vicky began. Her ordinarily unflappable demeanour flapped as she glanced offscreen – probably at her producer – for help. Two seconds, then her smile then reformed, only marginally more transparently than before. She looked back to Koda. "You told us that you had discovered a hidden map on the back of a portrait. Could you tell us about that? Is it one of these around the room?"

Someone in the room whistled high and long at the mention of a map. Roman saw it for what it was: bait.

"No. I made that up to ensure you went ahead with a live interview. I want this to reach as many of your idiotic viewers as possible. I cannot tell you about the map because no map exists, and nor does the Equaliser. It is a myth."

"Koda, I-, I wouldn't call it a myth. Amrit detailed the existence of the Equaliser in his-"

"The Equaliser *is* a myth," Koda said, her jaw tight. "Amrit was a great man, responsible for much of what we have today. He gave us our ID chips, the computer systems that run our great city's infrastructure, anti-gravity engines, and much more, but he was not the same man towards the end of his life. He'd always been

eccentric, but by the end he was delusional. He began working on things no one would ever need. Ocular mods too large to be implanted, and other equally redundant bits of technology. A shadow of the man who gave us these.” She jabbed a finger at the plinths by the wall.

“But I can guarantee you,” she continued, “that despite the changes in Amrit towards the end, and despite his penchant for philanthropy, he loved his family until the day he died. He helped build an empire for us, and there is not one member of the Ruth family who believes he would allow any of it to fall into the hands of anyone but his descendants.”

Vicky held up a finger as she opened her mouth to speak. Her smile was long gone. “In the diary entries Amrit released from his deathbed, he clearly talks about a great Equali-”

“Those diary entries are works of fiction, not written or released by him, but by someone looking to subject the Ruth family to decades of scrutiny. They should never have been taken seriously. They are falsehoods, romanticised over decades by people like you, turned into urban legend about stealing our money.”

“What about the sightings? It’s widely believed the Equaliser is housed in a vehicle, and several people have claimed to have seen the Equaliser over the years, but never-”

“There have been no sightings. Amrit owned only three vehicles during his life, all luxury hover cars, all on display at the museum dedicated to him, where people have had access to them for decades. There was no fourth vehicle.”

“If you believe that to be true, why did you agree to this interview?”

“My family has been plagued by this hunt since Amrit died, and we’re sick of it. We can't go anywhere without being pestered. We're hounded in the streets. Any business with the Ruth family name is unendingly picked apart by people looking for clues, and our employees are contacted around the clock by loonies unable to let go of a myth. Just last week, my daughter’s apartments were broken into by people looking for it. I have come here today to put an end to this.” Koda stood and addressed the camera directly, brandishing a stern finger. “There is no Equaliser. It does not, and has never existed.”

Silence filled the next five seconds, Koda’s eyes boring into Roman’s through the display, her shoulders rising and falling heavily. Then she turned and left.

“Let’s go to adverts,” someone said off-screen.

Vicky began saying something, but whatever it was got lost in a sudden eruption of cheering from Roman's grifters. They jumped up and down, shouting and laughing. As far as they were concerned, Koda's vehement denial that the Equaliser existed was proof that it did. Roman had thought the same way once, but now he wasn't so sure. The marketing for his event had made him think that maybe, just maybe, his passion for hunting the Equaliser would come back, but he knew more than he had a decade ago. He understood the world now. He could recognise someone else playing the game.

Koda's denial of the Equaliser didn't prove or disprove its existence. It said nothing about the Equaliser at all. It was designed to generate a frenzy, to keep people interested in the Ruth family and their many businesses. To keep people buying.

Roman's scowl deepened as Glen nudged him, wondering why he wasn't celebrating too. Roman glanced at the man's beaming face, thought again about punching him, then got up and left. He had an empire of his own to run.