

### **EXTRACT 3 – Stars**

The last explosions above the City had faded away. Jacques stood on the balcony and watched the darkening sky. Unifier's face showed up on a giant screen in the distance. He wished everyone all the best for the New Year and called for the release of the stars. This time Jacques thought his speech seemed shorter than usual, and he was grateful for that. He had to admit he felt a certain affiliation for Unifier, but now he wanted to get far away from his work and Unifier was reminding him who he was.

Everybody waited only for one thing after the fireworks. He did not remember precisely when this tradition actually started. Perhaps as early as the second or third year After the Hatch. At midnight on New Year's Eve, the whole sky would be lit up with stars. They looked a bit like snowflakes, but everyone called them stars and sent their good wishes up with them. Various shapes and sizes could be purchased everywhere in the City. All possible colors were sold, but gold and silver were in greatest demand. It was only necessary to buy the gas bombs to fill them up and make them glow.

Although there were only a few the first year, by the next year more and more people wanted to have their own star up in the sky. There were no objections to this. The plastic that they were made of disintegrated in the air after just a single day. Jacques knew that the stars could not get as high up as the Hatch. Yet he sometimes wondered what it would be like to look up, to see millions of shining stars and then open the Hatch and release them into the universe. He took the card from his pocket and turned it over in his hands. He would have to decide. If he handed the card in, he would gain a lot. But even if he gained still more, it would not fill his emptiness. If he kept the card, he would gain hope. But, really, the risk was too big to take. He knew that more time would not make the decision easier. He knew very well the price he would pay. It was too high. And nothing else mattered. He held the card firmly in his hand and looked at the starry sky. For the first time in a long while, he wanted to fill his emptiness.

Then someone knocked quietly at the door. He ignored it, but the knocking continued. What a nuisance - he left the balcony and went to open it. Unifier was standing there.

"I thought I might find you here. Can I come in for a moment?"

"Of course, Sir."

"I wanted to wish you all the best for the New Year."

Jacques smiled. "You have just done so, Sir," he said, nodding in the direction of the City.

"Oh, I see." An amused smile ran across his face. "I brought something with me. Do you drink Champagne?" He handed him a bottle.

"Not really."

"It's a Cristal. Not too old, but really delicious." He put the bottle on the table. "Fine then. So what do you drink?"

"Whisky."

"I like whisky. Will you have a drink with me?"

"Gladly, Sir."

"I don't want to detain you. Will you be launching a star?"

“I don’t fancy these things. But I like to watch.”

“As I thought.”

Jacques gripped the card in his hand. When he turned to the bar, he managed to slip it into his pocket. He drew a breath and then handed a glass to Unifier. “So, to the New Year!”

“I believe it will be a good year, Jacques. You’ll see it will be successful. I’m glad to have you on my team.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

After a moment, he said, “But I have to go. I have some more duties to attend to. I’ll leave the Champagne here for you, in case you get thirsty.”

As he was about to leave, he turned back and took a small package wrapped in Christmas paper from his pocket. “Oh, I nearly forgot. I’ve got something for you. It is time to change old habits, I think.” He smiled and placed the packet next to the Champagne and then closed the door behind him.

Jacques unwrapped the packet slowly and smiled. He carefully opened out the star and attached the gas bomb to the opening. He watched as the star inflated, the gold-colored gas filled it, and the star brightened the entire room. Then he watched the star rising up and joining the others. He liked this starry sky where everybody could have his wish. Even his teammates. He wondered why they had sent him the card. That damn door! The sender of the card could actually be dead already, unless he had escaped through the door. But Jacques was patient. Although Unifier had not authorized the journalist’s liquidation again, Jacques was well aware that he was not the only one doing Unifier’s dirty work. Maybe, if had he told him about the door, the situation would be entirely different now. But he suppressed the idea immediately. Although he had no option but to wait, he felt somewhere inside himself that this was not the end. Jacques did not belong to those who pulled the strings. He knew there were things happening around Unifier about which he, Jacques, had no idea. But suddenly he was as close as he had ever been before, and he could penetrate even closer. Yet, as he thought about it, was that what he really wanted?

The City seemed to be the whole universe, and Jacques often imagined it in this way. With Unifier shining in its center. Permanent, unchanging, as if he was to be there for thousands of years to come. As if everything emitted from him, and returned to him again.

There were a huge number of organized formations whirling around someone in the center and all orbiting the Unifier. Was not this the foundation of every order? But to which center should Jacques try to get? What would it be like to have the highest energy? What would it be like to wake in the morning if you were the center of everything? Jacques did not really want power. He wanted to get out of all the systems. To have real freedom. But was it possible to leave the system? Perhaps only God was superior to all those arrangements and structures. And what if even God was not the supreme being? To whom would one then be accountable? Only to yourself? Jacques was prepared for this. Man is his own supreme God. Everything else was just an illusion.

It would have been much easier if he had not seen that door. He did not want any part of this game. But if it was inevitable, he would play it to the best of his advantage. Jacques secretly hoped that Symbolion could provide answers to his questions. But he would not play according to their rules. People were weak and foolish.

He looked up at the sky, his thoughts floating high. He wanted to be like those stars. They shone freely and were not tied to anything, did not orbit around anything. They were the original source, where everything started. This was what he longed for. To escape from the system, become a star in the sky.

After a while, just a small twinkling dot could be seen in the sky. Then it disappeared too, and Jacques went inside and opened the Champagne.