

Just an interview

Evenings in the Zwischenstadt were never really dark. Lights burned in all colors, flooding from the high facades to the glassy veins of the pavement. Delivery drones hovered between the flow of traffic in the upper section. Anyone moving through the plains of this city could always feel the invisible hand of those who controlled the system. Everywhere in Trivadis, this patchwork of megacities, borderlands and the vastness of the Green Fields, there was unrest and uncertainty. But here, between two of the largest megacities, every breeze tasted of risk, of promises that arise in moments and evaporate just as quickly for mere mortals.

Rael Marvek had opted for a window seat, at the edge of the open gallery, where the glass did not distort the view of the city. It was his place of peace and inspiration, almost a hiding place. The Pavilion 6 café was a meeting place for anyone who wanted more than routine, a marketplace of hopes. The walls were full of graffiti made of light: slogans from start-ups, quotes from famous founders, glowing diagrams that changed subject every hour.

Rael rested his forehead on his hand. He was more tired than he had been since the exam weeks at the institute, but there was an electrifying underlying tension inside him. He felt flooded with feelings of greatness, power, of being wooed. There were too many possibilities for him to choose from at once.

His friend - Mikal, a year older and always blessed with the ability to remain calm in the noise of the world - pushed a steaming mug of coffee across the table. He sat down opposite Rael. "Was it that bad?"

Rael shook her head, a smile barely visible on her lips - but it was more resignation than joy. "Bad? No. But ...

different, so completely unreal. He took the mug, the warmth of the coffee seeping through the transparent material warming his hand. "I'm sure you're curious what it was like - Valerian, Cassian, the two greatest tycoons of our time - but honestly, I'm still not sure I really get it. With them, no standard we know applies anymore. They live in a world of their own!"

Mikal snorted softly. "In a world where you move people around like chess pieces and don't even blink. Do you remember Valerian's first network? How many small companies were simply wiped out back then?"

Rael nodded. "For him, it was evolution. For everyone else, it was the end. Valerian was just in the right place at the right time. Do you think he would have hesitated for a moment to risk everything if it hadn't benefited himself?"

Mikal nodded, scrolling through a news feed on his tablet without looking. "Of course I want to know. Everyone here is wondering who will strike first. Half the town's betting on Valerian, the other half says you've been with Cassian for a long time. And you?"

Rael let his gaze wander over the people. At one of the neighboring tables, a pair of founders discussed a new sensor technology with shining eyes. A few meters away, an old woman was negotiating with a young scout who was barely twenty and collected more data than he spoke words.

"I don't know," he finally said. "Maybe I'm the only one who doesn't know who I belong to yet."

It wasn't a lie and it wasn't the whole truth. He had felt tiny around them, almost invisible - a genius who could be disenchanted by them at a glance. Valerian, who drew people to him through his charisma alone, the Sun King. Cassian, the storm, the risk, the promise that everything could be different if you were only prepared to give up yourself and follow him. He had seen them both, had lost himself in their

visions and had returned as someone standing on the open road, blinded by headlights, not knowing which direction to take.

Mikal looked at him for a long time. "They say Valerian can convince you before you realize you've given in. And Cassian - he makes you throw away your own compass. Is that an exaggeration? Or is it really true? I've heard that some people only go to them for one question - and never come back. You're fascinated, become part of their world."

Rael hesitated, took a sip, felt the bitterness of the coffee, the echo of insomnia in her blood. "True - and not true. They are ... fundamentally different. Not only how they talk, but also how they think, what they want. It's as if they come from two worlds that were never meant to meet - and now they both want the same piece of the future, me."

He laughed softly, without mirth. "And I don't know what I'm more afraid of - being bought or standing still."

Mikal put the tablet aside and crossed his hands. "Tell me. I want to hear every detail. From the beginning."

The wind pushed rain against the windows, blurring the colors, drawing patterns through the reflections. The light changed in the café. A hologram projected figures onto the ceiling - statistics from the business journals. Rael closed his eyes, the tiredness omnipresent. Then he began to speak, calmly, almost intently: "It started with Valerian. I thought it would be special - but nothing was as expected. You'll understand why in a moment."

The way into Valerian's realm had been burned into Rael's memory, so cool, precise, unstoppable had the whole process been, like the security system that guided him through the corridors. He involuntarily had the thought: this is where the future is decided.

He had been invited, or rather summoned, and the wording in the message had left no doubt that his presence was firmly expected - as someone who would hopefully be worthy of being included in the circle of those who would decide. The elevator that took him to the upper levels of the central administration was so silent that Rael involuntarily counted his own breath. No snatches of music, no greeting routine. Instead, his face was reflected in the polished metal, half overlaid by the light display, which showed only one message: You are being checked. And then, instead of a floor, just a name: VALERIAN.

When the doors opened, even the air was different: cool, clear, a hint of ozone. A service robot stood ready, discreet, like shadows on the walls. Rael followed the corridor, which felt like a hallway between two worlds - opaque windows on the left, closed doors on the right, each glass panel a black eye that knew more than it wanted to show.

No one was waiting in the reception area. At that moment, he felt how alone he was. But there was also a feeling of importance and exclusivity.

Nevertheless, only a digital greeting confirmed his existence here: "Welcome, Rael Marvek." The writing was white on a transparent background, matter-of-fact, friendly, without warmth. He was asked to scan a palm. A brief blue flash - then a door buzzed open. For a moment, he was sure that this place would remember his imprint long after he was gone.

The conference room he was led into seemed less a room than a perspective: glass walls opened up an endless view of the city. The tables hovered, seemingly without legs, above the floor of pale, cool stone. There was a quiet whirring above everything that could be felt rather than heard - like the heartbeat of a machine that never switched off. At the end of the room, in the light of the displays, stood Marcus Valerian. His silhouette seemed peaceful, casual, but in the

way he paused there was the matter-of-factness of a man who was used to others waiting for his decisions.

"Welcome, Rael Marvek." Valerian's voice was friendly, with a soft emphasis on the name - as if just being here was an honor. No hint of vanity, but the certainty with which people lead when they know their decision carries weight.

Rael sat down after the landlord pointed to a stool. Then he noticed something that seemed out of place in all this expensive ambience, and yet he understood why it was there: on one of the glass walls hung, barely visible, the logo of Valerian's first network, the colors already faded. Rael wondered whether any of his old companions were still here - or whether he had long since replaced everyone who didn't fit in with his plan.

"You have achieved amazing things." Valerian's eyes rested on Rael in the manner of a scientist who already knows everything and is just looking for final confirmation. "Your last patent application caused quite a stir in the system. Are you aware of the impact your approach would have on our infrastructure?"

Rael nodded, feeling the words falter. For a moment, he felt like a student waiting for a question - except that the teacher in this room was both judge and god.

"I ... can estimate the scale, at least as far as the prototype is concerned. But the scaling - I don't know how the behavior of the networks in the megacities will change if ..."

A screen began frantically displaying data, a floor plan of the megacity that belonged to Valerian, part of it flashing red. Valerian raised a hand, elegantly but firmly. "One moment...!"

A face appeared, frantic, struggling to pull itself together, and stammered: "The experiment around SystemX has gone off the rails. The whole district is without power!"

Valerian didn't even look up at the screen when the message came through. Only his finger wiped an invisible smudge from his lapel, an almost bored gesture. "So what? It's an experiment, it's bound to fail."

"All the hospitals are offline and it's 38C outside, it's going to be a disaster!"

"Take care of it. It's an experiment, and experiments are allowed to fail." His gaze returned to Rael - as if the interruption was merely technical noise. And with that, his attention was back on Rael. "Uncertainty is part of the process. We model systems every day for which there is no historical blueprint. Their approach is ... disruptive, but controllable if channeled properly."

Rael caught himself staring dumbly at his palms. He didn't know what to say next. Valerian looked at him. Was there nothing to interrupt him, Rael wondered. He took a deep breath and concentrated, then looked at the display hovering between them. Valerian was currently projecting all of Rael's work - algorithms, evaluations, simulations, all with precise comments.

"Your network is more efficient than our best predictions. The learning rate, the self-healing function - remarkable. But I see gaps in access protection and in the ability to integrate with the existing control grid."

He didn't speak as if he were reprimanding, but like someone looking at a rough diamond: clear, sober, free of exuberance.

Rael sensed a strange tension. Here, at the center of the power of an entire city, of an empire, Valerian moved freely, as if all this were a matter of course. And nothing here should be. Even the last details of his work were secret and encrypted, he had thought.

"I'm working on a secure interface. But ... there are technical and ethical issues. Some applications could be exploited."

Valerian tilted his head, appreciating the caveat. "We're all part of a system that has to balance security and freedom. Our job is not to avoid risk, but to manage it. You will find access to resources here that no other company can offer."

The offer that Valerian formulated was clear, big, tempting: participation, access to resources, helping to shape the next era - but the condition was to take responsibility. Rael heard herself ask: "And my independence?"

A barely perceptible smile played around Valerian's mouth. "Independence, Mr. Marvek, is a fine idea. But true power lies in choosing the right team."

The conversation lasted less than an hour. In the end, Rael stood alone in the corridor again, between the black panes of the windows, the hum of the system in her ears. A thunderstorm was brewing outside, and for a moment his face was reflected twice - in the glass and in the eyes of a camera.

He drove home with the feeling of being tiny - but at the same time having been invited into a world that was bigger than anything he knew.

It had been a strange day between the two encounters. Rael had left the conversation with Valerian behind him, but the thoughts of it would not leave him. He kept replaying the scenes as if he had to find something important afterwards. He wandered aimlessly through the city - market squares, skyscrapers, glass arcades - unsure of where he belonged. The security that Valerian radiated did not allow him to rest. Everything seemed to function according to fixed rules - too perfect for him, too self-contained.

At the same time, he felt a resistance within him: the need for something that wasn't already fixed - for a chance to decide for himself where he wanted to go. When the invitation from the Borderlands arrived the next morning, he didn't hesitate for a moment. It was an opportunity to try something different.

He didn't know what he wanted yet - but this time that hardly bothered him. He was determined to find out.

There was no regular route to the borderlands. Those who came here followed an invitation, without a timetable. Nevertheless, a private cab was waiting punctually outside his door. The journey began in the familiar, where everything was settled, and ended in nowhere. Even the shuttle was unreal - foldable wings, bare steel, controlled by gestures and voice. The pilot barely spoke. The route seemed as if it could be changed at any time. The further they flew, the more clearly Rael saw the changes.

Below them, the land became rough and brittle, with occasional remnants of old infrastructure flashing between the rock and the wilderness. In between, provisional halls, containers, antennas, small campfires of workers. The light was different, full of dust and cold, a blur lay over the landscape. The landing site was a field of rough concrete, covered in the tracks of heavy vehicles, a few work robots were working on half-finished foundations. It smelled of metal, oil and distant rain.

Cassian didn't wait for the machine to come to a halt, but walked straight towards it, his coat open, his shirt crumpled, data goggles in one hand, a tattered notebook in the other. His appearance had nothing of Valerian's perfect demeanor -

everything about him expressed urgency and a thirst for action.

"Rael! Look at this." Without greeting, he held out his glasses to him as if every question had to become an immediate solution. "This is the new thing. This is what we've all been waiting for - with your technology, we can put something extraordinary here. That's exactly what we need. With your technology, my team, my resources - we can rebuild everything, it will be perfect."

They spoke as they walked. Cassian talked quickly, switching topics, often asking the next question before Rael could even answer.

"Your system is the best. But what if we rethink everything? No old rules, no holding patterns, no censorship. How far would you go? What are you willing to risk?"

Rael had to laugh, for the first time this week. It was a mixture of nervousness and fascination. "I don't know, give me some time to think."

Cassian stopped, looking at him, penetrating yet surprisingly open for a moment. "Then maybe you're the wrong person - or just the right person. It depends on whether you're afraid of yourself or of me."

They passed a building site. Workers shouted orders into the wind, drones raced over the trenches, holograms of planned towers and nets flickered between the foundations. Cassian led Rael into a building shell whose walls were made of light projections, no solid ground, just schematics in the air. Here, the future was always a sketch, never a plan, he thought.

The conversation was not an interview, but a test. Cassian wanted facts, hated stories - in this he was not unlike Valerian. He interrupted when Rael digressed, asked questions in quick succession, made offers only to reject them immediately.

"You can get anything you want here. Resources, people, access to the border systems. But you have to give it up if it doesn't work. I won't tolerate wasted time, perfectionism or a retreat into the old. Is that clear?" His voice never got loud, but it had an edge to it that didn't sound like compromise.

Rael felt the adrenaline, the temptation - the flood of ideas and possibilities. Here he could create his own empire with Cassian's means, regardless of convention. But he also recognized the danger: how long could you last at the side of a man who knew no breaks, had no anchor, tolerated no weakness?

In the end, they stood on the threshold of a half-finished tower, the wind blowing through the open scaffolding, the sky rough and full of movement. Cassian looked at him, calm now. "What is your decision, Rael? Do you want to attempt the impossible with me - or do you want to keep playing in the comfort zone?"

Rael didn't answer immediately. He felt the weight of the decision. It wasn't just about his company, but about who he would be in the end.

After the conversation with Cassian - full of visions of ideas and promises for the future - Rael followed the assistant back to the launch site through a corridor that lay in the shell of the building. Suddenly, the step in front of him faltered. Two employees were standing to one side in the shadows: a young technician, pale, hands trembling, was being supported by a colleague. "I ... I can't go on, I can't ..." he stammered, more to himself than to anyone else.

The other put his hand on his shoulder to reassure him. "You know how Cassian is. If you weaken, you have to leave. This is no place for the faint-hearted."

Cassian rushed past with three companions, his stride energetic, his face fixed on a display. He didn't give the two

technicians a glance, but stopped for a moment and looked at Rael again: "You decide: be there - or get out."

Then he was on his way again as if nothing had happened. No resentment, no anger, just this complete indifference towards the individual. What mattered was the pace, the goal, the next big thing.

Rael looked over at the technician, who sank staggeringly onto a bench and thought: The only thing that counts here is who can deliver. Failure means becoming invisible. Everything was quiet for a moment, except outside, where the wind continued to howl around the unfinished buildings.

It took a moment for Rael to return to the café - his mind was still half in the Borderlands. His thoughts needed time to find their way back - from the chaos there back to his old place. The voices around him were louder now, the murmur vibrated between the tables. Outside, streaks of rain had collected on the windows, blurring the colorful lights of the city into long, flowing lines.

Mikal had hardly said a word. From time to time he nodded or drew patterns on the rim of the cup, as if trying to find a boundary between what was possible and what remained. Now he looked at Rael seriously. "So, what are you doing?"

Rael leaned back. "I don't know. It was like two different worlds. Valerian - everything thought out, everything planned. Sure, but perhaps too calm, too closed off. Cassian, on the other hand - with him, everything feels possible, but there's no stopping, no pause. I don't know how long you can stand it without losing yourself."

Mikal smiled wryly. "Maybe you don't have to decide. Maybe you're exactly what they both don't expect - someone who can't be bought."

Rael looked out at the city, at the sparkling towers ducking in the rain, at the streets where the light was always on the move. The words of Valerian and Cassian circled inside him, voices from different worlds, each convincing, both dangerous.

"Or maybe I'll choose after all. For the city. For the in-between? The question is what happens then, neither of them knows the word NO."

They were silent for a while. Someone laughed at a neighboring table, a robot collected glasses, a timer beeped.

Neither of them said anything for a while. Rael rested his forehead against the window, exhaled slowly and looked at his reflection. Maybe it was a good thing that the future didn't belong to him - maybe that was what freedom meant.