**THE GREAT SHADOW**

**1 - The Beginning**

*"It's been so long since I dreamed Rubina."*

But in that dream she was there, still alive, with those sparkling eyes and flaming red hair that he still looks dancing before him, in the new day. It had been many years since his death, but sometimes it seems like yesterday. He still remembers the mountain meadow with that pungent smell, where he clutched her lifeless body. Remembering this, Actarus’ eyes grow damp.

*"It 's strange that I remember above all that sunset."*

Rubina was died when the sun began to decline. And that sunset was crimson, with clouds of undefinable colors. He cried like never before, in front of a sun of fire that was extinguished, and that emphasized the gigantic figure of Grendizer, who had a silent and indifferent expression. A giant robot could not cry, and at that time Actarus, even if it was absurd, hated Grendizer for this.

A thousand memories overlap in his mind when, at one point, he recovered and returned to thinking about that dream. Last night he dreamed Rubina. But what strikes him is the nature of the dream. Rubina of the red hair did not seem happy. Of course, when Actarus knew her, when she was alive, he usually saw a joy in his eyes which hid a fund of sadness, perhaps for being the daughter of Vega, or otherwise knew that only his spirit. Perhaps a dark premonition of how her story would end. But in that dream she was worried. And she said:

"Duke, the great shadow approaches. Be careful. "

*Duke.* His real name, which he led early, before being called Actarus, when he was on Earth. Rubina was the only able to call him Duke in that way deep, intimate, that always enchanted him.

It was not a dream, Actarus felt it. It was a warning. Something big is coming, something so terrible that even the Vega army cannot compare to this.

Venusia stretched in the bed like a cat. She had slept well, and now she sees the light of the sun that lights up the room. With a hint of a smile, she gets out of the bed and put on her robe. For a moment she looks in the mirror and she put a hand through her hair, straightening. Her long hair were become very beautiful. She should have them grow up a long time ago.

Once Mizar said to her:

"Why do not you grow your hair, Venusia?

"Do not be silly, Mizar. For one who works in the fields, long hair is a hindrance. Courts thus, are more comfortable "

"And how will you get noticed by Actarus, then?" He said with sly air.

"Mind your own business!" Venusia replied angrily, and Mizar had run away.

Venus is pleased remember: *that little thug Mizar! Naida, certain with her long hair would not have been happy to milk the cows ...*

*And since then I've come a long way,* thinks Venusia. *Queen of Fleed and wife of Actarus...*
At the thought of Actarus, Venusia turns to him. He’s standing, rapt, watching from the balcony of the garden palace with a look pensive and melancholy. She had not seen that look in his eyes for much time: Venusia realizes that something happened.

"Good morning, Actarus" she says suddenly, breaking the silence. "Did you sleep well?"
Actarus, deep in thought, is not responding. Then, at some point, he shake and speak in haste, as if to apologize:

"Good morning, Venusia"

Then comes back the awkward silence. Actarus is confused by what happened, and does not know how to proceed. But Venusia resumed immediately.

"There's something wrong, right? I see from your eyes "

"And what do they say my eyes?"

"A lot of things. For example: 'I am concerned that a sudden something happened and I do not know how to say it, especially to Venus, because she cares about me and I don’t want to worry her. No, it’s better not to tell anyone and keep it for me'. I know your style, king of Fleed. I guessed, eh? "

Actarus was surprised. Venusia never ceased to amaze him. Only she could read in his mind like a book. Nobody, except perhaps his parents, could understand his thoughts up to that point. Nobody, also Naida or even Rubina: who knows, maybe if they spent more time with him...but the meetings with them had been brief and tormented. But Venusia was different: Actarus and her had known and studied for many years and they become one the mirror of another. The days in which Venusia was looking at him only with admiration were past, and now her look remained, but more mature, combined with a deep knowledge of him, which perhaps had begun to develop since they had met for the first time. And he felt always so open to her to feel embarrassed: that is why he had never clearly open to her when they were together on Earth? Not only because of the torments of war against Vega, but also for fear? Fear to be deeply known by her?

Actarus, driving out those thoughts that had come like a waterfall, answers to Venusia in a tone almost of relief

"You guessed it, my queen. Yes, something happened. Last night I dreamed. Rubina had appeared to me and told me to pay attention to the Great Shadow."

"The Great Shadow? What's that? "

"I do not know. But I feel it is something serious. Maybe Rubina wanted to warn me from beyond. It was what I was thinking. "

"Maybe that Vega returns?"

"His planet was destroyed, along with his army and he is dust and ashes. We do not do novels: those who die will not return. "

Venusia hugs Actarus from behind, resting her head on his back. "So it's something else, something ..."

Venusia stops abruptly, as if it had come up with something. Actarus turns.

"What is it, Venusia?"

"Now that I think ..." Venusia became worried and puzzled, as if she is going to say something absurd, but perhaps not.

"Actarus, you know that sometimes I like watching the stars from the telescope of Mount Jibera...because I can see the Earth from Fleed"

"I know. Why you are talking about this?"

"Because ..." Venusia hesitated for a moment "because the other day the astronomer Larus showed me an area of ​​space, to the west, where there are no stars."
"There are no stars? What do you say? It will be a nebula, a cosmic effect that does not make them visible to the naked eye ... "

"No. At that point, before there were the stars. Larus told me. And that black area, without stars, it looked like a giant hand. It had the shape of a hand, believe me! I did not spoke to you about this because it seemed absurd, and Larus had promised to give me some more accurate data. Also, you should take me for a fool."

Actarus not believe her ears. It's the most incredible story he has ever heard. Possible that the monstrous "hand" is the Great Shadow? After a moment of silence, Actarus answers:

"It makes no sense. However, you were right to tell me about it. We're going to change us, now: the ambassadors of Geobaldi should come today. But as soon as possible I want to talk with Larus. I'd like to see things clearly."

Actarus encircles the shoulders of Venusia with one arm and kisses her to calm her.
"Do not worry," he says looking into her eyes.

"I do not care" reply with sincerity Venusia "and neither you should. Whatever it is, we will fitting together. Come on, let’s go!"

Hadi, the maid, moves the curtains. The sun is already high, it is time to rise up for everyone, even the prince. The room suddenly is no longer in the shadows, and the rays of the sun show the fine furniture, the coloured walls full of drawings of fabulous characters, the toys scattered everywhere.

Hadi looks to the crib in the middle of the room: the little prince Rex is still asleep. The maid looks down tenderly to him: he has not yet five months, and his hairs are beginning to grow. He holds tight the teddy bear with his arm and put his thumb in his mouth. He always sleep in this way, Hadi knows it very well: she loves that child as if he would be her son.

*Well, he has a peculiar name for a baby ... Rex King.*

The queen Venusia had explained to her the meaning of the name, times ago: "Actarus asked me how to call our son. Since Actarus here is called “Duke Fleed”, and “Duke” means “leader” for us on Earth, I wanted to give the child a name similar to his fathers’ and at the same time bigger, that means the best wishes for a happy life, a life as a “king”. But not that of a king who lives isolated in his palace, but a wise king at the service of his people, as to be twice times a king, **Rex King**: in fact, “Rex” means king in latin tongue."

After what has happened up to the planet Fleed and to the King Duke Fleed, give name of greetings to the children is a common thing. Many newborns have names full of hopes, as a reaction after the apocalypse that happened in the past because of Vega. Hadi also had to live out the experience, and her flesh and spirit will be forever marked.

*I hope nothing happens to him, at least,* thinks Hadi, recalling the cruelty of the invaders of Vega.

Suddenly, the queen Venusia enters to greet her son: every morning there is the same ritual. Hadi steps aside.

"How's the baby Rex? He slept well, Hadi? "

"Like an angel, your majesty"

"I'm happy" Venusia caresses him lightly on the cheek, without waking him. "Today we have visitors, Hadi: Geobaldi’s community. However, I will try to be in a hurry: I will be here at the afternoon, but I intend to do before. As much as possible, I want to be near him and feed him myself. You think of everything, Hadi, I trust you. "

"Thank you, Your Majesty"

At the same moment, a pair of snake eyes is watching the scene from an image surrounded by fire. A woman with long, straight black hairs, is observing the scene with his arms folded, smiling cruelly. In the smile, fangs are shining. With one hand shaking her arm, clad in burnished steel armor that covers the whole body of her from the neck. She turns to a shadowy, black point. Looking carefully, someone can perceive a vaguely human figure seated on a throne of stone. In all that black, just two flame eyes shine an unnatural light.

The woman, talking to the being with glowing eyes, observes:

"Here, Dark One. It’s him. Rex, they call it. How many idiotic things I must hear..." and makes a face of disgust.

"Let them do, Jezabel" responds the mysterious being on the throne, with a hollow voice, which seems to come from beyond the grave. "Now they cannot do anything, it's all in my hands. The Shadow will triumph over every expression of life."

Jezabel bows deeply in front of the being called the Dark One.

Actarus looks closely through the telescope of Jibera.

There is no doubt: in that area, at the west of space, there are no stars! It's a pure black, unnatural thing. Even its shape is strange: a huge, scary claw hand, which seems to grow and advance.

"But… it moves! That thing seems to move! “ says Actarus says, shocked.

Larus, the astronomer, nods. He strokes his black beard black, with traces of white, with a worried look. He holds a folder of data, which unfortunately he knows to be useless: that mysterious phenomenon is inexplicable. He became almost crazy to try to find a precedent in the annals of Fleedian astronomy, at least those who survived to the invasion of Vega. Nothing, not even the slightest hint of a similar event happened in the past. He shakes for a moment some hair of the beard to the nervousness, and answers:

"Yes, your majesty. No matter how absurd, that "thing" moves. "

"But what can that be? A sort of black hole? "

"I've never seen one like that in my entire life, your majesty."

"Since when there is it?"

"A few days ago. But it seems to come from very far away from areas not perceived even by the sonar. "

Actarus rises from the chair of the observatory, angrily.

*What the heck is that thing? The "great shadow" mentioned by Rubina?* *And how could I fight something that devours planets? If it were an army like that of Vega, I could do something. But here? I do not know even where to start.*

"Larus," he says suddenly, "this problem must remain secret as possible. The panic in front of such a thing would be tremendous. "

"Yes, your majesty. But it is difficult to hide something so obvious. I'm sure now many will wonder why there are no stars. "

"The important thing now is not talk about it, so that it is satisfied that an optical illusion or something due to situations that do not know. Of course, sooner or later it will happen, but better after then before. In the meantime, keep studying the problem and let me know the slightest anomaly. I want to be informed in real time. "

"Yes, your majesty. But what do you think to do about this? "

"I know some people who can help me out. Meanwhile, do as I said. "

Larus bows and Actarus exits quickly from the observatory.

*The situation is terribly serious. If that black hole - or whatever it is - comes here, it is the end for Fleed. I have to ask for help from someone else. Perhaps my father on earth ... and Alcor ... I have to contact them soon!*