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*September 7, 2501 – 5:38 am local time; the 'Lantern Tower', Tokyo, Asian Confederacy, United Earth Compact*

The man that people know as Basil Francisco stands in the thin air on the small balcony of his home on the 550<sup>th</sup> floor of the Lantern Tower (translated from Japanese). The building gets its name from its rotund, lantern shaped profile that looks like a lantern when the building is properly lit at night. Standing at almost a mile and a half tall, the Lantern Tower is the tallest building on Earth, at least for the moment. Getting the builders to add the small, protected balcony was a major achievement. Many debates and exorbitant fees were required to get the final permission from the city government. Even more money was spent getting the architect and builders to include a private lift that runs from the underground garage to the top floor. Both the balcony and the lift have made him the envy of everyone else in the building. Being the envy of everyone else was not his goal, he simply wanted to live higher up than anyone else on the planet.

From his perch, he looks out over the city of Tokyo, upon the sprawl of humanity laid before him. As he watches the aircraft come into the airport at the end of another busy day, his gaze searches for the southern horizon as his thoughts drift towards the city of Buenos Ares in the Unión Sudamericana (translated as 'South American Union'). On the vidcomp terminal in his hand are the preliminary sketches of another building to usurp the title of tallest building on Earth from the city of Tokyo. The proposed design would top the Lantern Tower by at least 25 floors. He looks back at the terminal, frowns, and says to no one in particular, "I definitely do not want to move again."

Although the rollers on the sliding door were engineered to be silent, his keen senses pick up on the door opening and someone stepping through. Knowing who it is because only one person would even contemplate coming onto the balcony; a sudden high pressure gust of wind could easily carry someone off the balcony to their death below. Although the airstream at this height is smooth, the constant motion of the air around the building creates a dull roar in the background.

"Yes Alfred," Basil says without turning around.

"Master Francisco," the well-dressed middle aged man says, elevating his voice to overcome the dull roar, "The guests you were expecting have all arrived and are in the main dining room partaking of refreshments."

"Thank you Alfred, I will join them shortly. You may retire for the evening, I will need nothing else," he replies.

"As you wish sir," Alfred says as he gives a slight bow of the head, "Have a good evening sir!" He then passes back through the door and disappears into the apartment.

A few moments later Basil looks back down to the vidcomp and says, "For another time then," turns it off and makes his way towards the main dining room.

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Four people meander around the main dining room, sipping at various drinks and eating from the several platters of finger food arrayed on the dining room table. The walls of the room are tastefully decorated with artifacts from various periods of human history; some of the periods are not found in the history books.

The most noticeable person in the room is a massive 6' 5" blonde man with electric blue eyes. His long blond hair stretches halfway down his back and his custom made clothes speak volumes about the durability of fabrics made in the textile factories.

He holds a quiet conversation with a stunningly beautiful brown skinned woman with jet black hair and dark eyes. Her silk, form fitting dress is covered with sequins, beadwork, and small jingling adornments. Every time she shifts her weight or takes a step, the pleasant sounding jingles sound almost like music.

At the opposite end of the room, the third person is a black skinned male a little bit shorter than the blonde and far less massive. His well groomed, short trimmed beard has streaks of gray running through it. Dressed more comfortably in an expensive looking sweater, a turtle neck shirt, and khakis, he sips champagne from a flute as he tries to unsuccessfully strike up a conversation with the fourth person sitting at the end of the dining room table.

Seated at the end of the dining room table is an unkempt older man not wearing any shoes. His face has never seen a razor and all of his hair is uncombed and sticks out at various angles. The swatches of cloth and animal

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skins barely hold themselves together to form a one piece cover over his thin frame. A small knife resides in a handmade sheath at his side. Anyone getting close to the man notices a dusty smell. An untouched glass of ice water sits on a coaster on the table near him, the condensation forming a pool around the base of the glass. He sits quietly, with his arms crossed and a slight scowl on his face. His glare focuses on the entry into the dining area as if waiting for something or someone.

Basil quietly enters the room wearing a white loose fitting button up shirt, white pants, and white shoes. He stops just after the archway and says in the language of creation, "Welcome. I take it your needs were being adequately addressed?"

The unkempt man just stares at Basil. The other two men nod yes to the man but say nothing more. The woman steps away from her conversation partner and eases herself down into a chair at the table. Once she is seated, she stretches herself across the table much like a cat would do. She looks up to Basil and says sweetly, "Why yes Michael. The Child took very good care of us. So why not be a good dear and tell us why you called us here and in this fashion. I am very... very... busy."

Basil, the man addressed as Michael, stands at the entryway with his arm held in the small of his back. He looks at each of them then says, "Some of the Fallen have begun acting differently. They are becoming more organized in their actions. We need to closely examine what they are up to and stop it if need be. As to my method of calling you, I needed people here to see me entertaining folks. Since none of you are known to them, they will keep themselves occupied trying to figure it out."

The blonde man looks at the unkempt man, chuckles, then looks back up, "Yes, you will keep them guessing for a good long while. But the Fallen I have noticed recently have been engaged in their normal activities of trying to draw the Childrens' attention away from the Maker. Besides, the Fallen recognize us." The others, except for the unkempt man, nod in agreement.

"That is precisely why I chose you three for this investigation," Michael replies, "You will not be missed if you go off on what they would consider wasted efforts. You each have made inroads among the Children, go among them now and use them as your eyes and ears. They will be doing the same, trying to convince the Children to do their bidding for them. Once we know their intentions, we will act."

The dark skinned man looks at Michael confused then says, "You said three, there are four of us here."

Michael smiles and nods to the unkempt man, "I have a special mission for you. Instead of watching the Fallen, I want you to relocate the Pieces. When you find them, establish observers over them."

The unkempt man smiles and says in a dry, husky voice, "You fear their reassembly."

Micheal replies, "I am concerned. As you know, the Fallen would like nothing more than to destroy the Children, either directly or leading them astray, out of pure spite towards the Maker. They could easily influence someone to collect the Pieces and cause all sorts of problems. You all know what they could do if they were reassembled into their original configuration."

"None of us know their actual location, the Maker scattered them well away from each other," the woman says.

Michael looks down at the unkempt man, "One of us does... the one who fulfilled the Maker's original command."

The unkempt man simply stares back at Michael for several moments before answering, "And hidden they will remain. I will prepare guardians to defend the Pieces, but I will not go anywhere near them unless someone violates their sanctuary. And I will know if someone does that."

"Very well," Michael says, "You have your assignments, go now and report back within a week."