

## PART II TIMELINE

1. RED at home (extra scene of her going home, parents noticing something is off with red, more powerful, bright burning, etc.) A touching scene with dad here.
2. Red at school - red is experiencing flare ups from new power, teachers take notice, place where Red can play with the recording function on Holowatch to take a video? (foreshadow watching captured footage of Charles' death) oooooo-weeee
3. CRYSTAL PALACE OFFICIAL INTRO- they discuss info received from higher up about a girl on Phoenix, don't know who it is and how they need to move on deconstruction. There are some who oppose this, friction between them, but ultimately they say the order is from "the top" slight reference to chessmasters and so they are like "okay you're right". Two members break off and discuss how this isn't right, they can't just kill a whole race. They decide they will leak the info to LifeCorp employees since they work closely together and that way some Kindred will know to leave.

This feels like a great opportunity to start introducing key Crystal Palace characters. Who are these two members and why do they suddenly have a conscience?

We also want to subtly introduce DARKSIDE and TK in this section. It could be that the crystal palace team is having their weekly debrief during this scene or whatever it looks like, and one topic comes up is the status of TK and DARKSIDE. At this point TK would still be a teenager (about 8 years older than Red), so it could be along the lines of "Whats the status on TK", "hes still in his teenage ways but we will keep an eye on him" type of thing

Also, to set ourselves up nicely for book 2, let's have the palace discuss that they plan to meet "them" the chessmasters on Wisdom upon arrival. Can be to provide a report or whatever makes sense.

4. CRYSTAL PALACE OFFICIAL INTRO- they discuss info received from higher up about a girl on Phoenix, don't know who it is and how they need to move on deconstruction. There are some who oppose this, friction between them, but ultimately they say the order is from "the top" slight reference to chessmasters and so they are like "okay you're right". Two members break off and discuss how this isn't right, they can't just kill a whole race. They decide they will leak the info to LifeCorp employees since they work closely together and that way some Kindred will know to leave.
5. Red back in florabot community - Rion takes her under her wing, starts to discuss training and "missions" Red is scared but is convinced to do it
6. Cartel scene - focus on silas. They discuss getting to florabots honey supply, they say it's impossible but Carmine is like no don't tell me what can't do and then is like Silas you want in? And silas is unsure and everyone is like no that's too dangerous and Carmine is like we'll see
7. Red at home - parents ask where she's been, her dad mentions seeing her location of her holowatch. Red notes this, decides to leave it behind going forward. Red sits

outside, stag appears in distance. A moment of it maybe trying to tell her something but she doesn't know what she just feels it. It runs away she goes inside.

8. Red at school - her teachers start to notice a difference in her, she overhears this, tries to play it down. Tries to keep her flame lower, but she gets so frustrated so often it's hard to keep under cover.
9. Red in clearing with Axel - Red tells him she can't go to florabot community that day because her parents are catching on/takes too much time so they do some practice in the clearing. They can discuss something here. Mention Phoenix friend there. They also see the stag
10. Cartel cut away - They discuss plans and talk decide silas will go with them, everyone opposed esp. Carmine is insisting on it maybe to make a point??
11. Red at school - she skips school to go to florabot community, maybe mention this is the second or third time she's done it
12. Red in florabot community - imply she's had a few more training sessions and is growing in power. Rion has her test her strength by going to the volcano and standing in it. Very intense. After, Rion tells her how they know the cartel are planning an attack and that she has to be ready for it. Axel will come get her when it's time. Mention phoenix is upset when red goes into the volcano but then sees she's okay.
13. Red at home - parents tell her school called and said she's been skipping school, she says just to go play in the forest. They're upset with her and tell her she can't go anymore and has to stay at school or else. Dad makes her wear holowatch every day.
14. At school - red is distracted, lashes out at recess on her friends because she's taking out her frustration on them. In trouble at school. She hears everyone whispering (teachers and kids/friends) about how she has gotten to be so strong and they're all concerned and confused
15. At home - Scene between Red and Dad, a heart to heart kind of implies he knows something is different and without saying it out loud they talk about it and he seems to be worried but trying to be sympathetic. She asks about the NCC and he sighs and is like worry about that later, that's not for people like us. And she's like ummm I think I am for that but he tells her to go to bed like he doesn't wanna talk about it.
16. Walking to school days later - Red hasn't been going to the florabot community and going straight home after school because she's in trouble and wearing her watch. On her way to school Axel flies up to her and tells her she has to come because the Cartel are mobilizing. She tries to say she can't but he tells her she has to or else it's all for nothing. She ditches her watch and goes.
17. ★ Flight between cartel and florabots - silas is there at first but then leaves right away because it gets dangerous. They tell Carmine I told you so and you can tell he feels bad but brushes it off and yells at Silas to go. Silas sees Red but Red doesn't see Silas (bc later she finds the video of the cartel killing her dad and that's the first time she sees him)
18. ★ Aftermath of war - discussion about it. Maybe the cartel got some but ultimately florabots win?? Should Rion die? No right? Thoughts? **Rion for sure dies. But Florabots are eternal so she probably shows up on wisdom at some point. I think there should be a big twist here where for some reason Rion blames Red for the cartel finding their community. Maybe silas follows her there without her knowing, but it looks like she**

brought him with her. This leads the florabots to attack red and she has to defend herself in the midst of the war and chaos. ATP Florabots are low key fighting red, Cartel is also attacking and Red is trying to defend - this is an op for Carmine to first interact with Red. The reason the Cartel are looking for the florabots community too is because Carmine knows degeneration is coming and they know the florabot community is a safe haven for ample honey. Red will eventually interact with Rion (or another version of Rion at a later stage in the story, because the bots are eternal so all will be resolved. Somewhere in here, Carmine should definitely take note of who Red is - seeing shes exceptional for a young girl.

ALSO: What happens to Carmine when he kills Rion and becomes this new version of himself? Most people would become consumed with all the knowledge, alive but now acting on Flora's will, but maybe Carmine is built different and doesn't let it control him. Instead of becoming a guardian, he's able to fight it while also storing that information - maintaining his will.

**CONTEXT ADDITION:** There's a corrupted part of the mycellial network that has developed a will and consciousness of its own. These are called "the corrupted". Subsequently there's a collective of florabots who have broken free from the network and are plotting their escape from flora entirely. This group is made up of sleeper cells, hiding in plain site. In order to free themselves, there has to be a vessel of someone entirely outside of the network to inherit this power. Rion leads the collective in secret. She sees Carmine as the one strong enough to complete the mission and survive the download. She lets carmine kill her during the honey cartel and florabot battle as a result. Rions master plan is to pop up into another body within the network and eventually use carmine to regain control as the new god of the network. The last straw for Rion is that they know degeneration is coming, and the network has made no plans for extraction.

**This is will come later but:** Overtime, Carmine develops the power to convert florabots, he ends up becoming so strong because he now has the cartel in his hands and the converted florabots. This then leads into his uprising against the other leaders of the cartel. He refers to himself as Carmine "Son of Rion." Chessmasters likely want to partner with Carmine but Carmine ain't with it, he believes he doesn't need them.

Red goes home - in big trouble Her mom found her watch abandoned after school called and they looked everywhere for her. She can't lie about being in the clearing this time and they're like bella where the hell you been loca?

19. Dead time where red is strictly grounded. Her mom walks her to school and back. She is only able to sneak out to library at night and then she realizes maybe she can sneak out at night to other places too.
20. One night axel comes to ehr through her watch somehow, he asks her where she's been and she tells him. He convinces her to come out to play but isn't too pushy about it, he's his normal self. Red sneaks out and they play in clearing. Red notices the animals are acting weird.

21. Next day - quick run downs saying she goes to school, is trying to dull flame, teacher mentions how well behaved she's been lately, red fakes a smile. Later at home that night she is thinking about the animals and how she has been getting a weird feeling herself. She tells her parents she noticed today at school that the birds and squirrels phoenix have been acting off. Her parents exchange a look, they're concerned but act like they aren't.
22. At night - Axel comes through watch again. Red is nervous about sneaking out two nights in a row. She tells him not tonight. He gets angry and she notices he's acting off and different. DOESNT SNEAK OUT
23. Red sneaks out - RED FEELS GUILTY ABOUT AXEL. Red meets Axel in the forest and he takes her back to the florabot civilization. She is able to really test her powers (maybe this is where she goes into the volcano) suddenly a loud rumble happens, sirens start blaring in the distance, Red's powers flare up and she senses immediate danger. The robots all tell Red to stay with them and hide. She wants to go back and they tell her she will have to go alone, but because of the chaos, her sense of direction is being messed with and she doesn't know how to get back. The florabots try to convince her to just stay. Red then sees the stag in the distance and knows she has to follow it because it usually never follows her to the community, usually stays back. She leaves and starts to follow the stag through the volcanic forest
24. ★ Cartel scene - they are chillin then the world starts to fall apart, they discuss how they'll get off. Tense scene where carmine probably kills someone else and then tells the rest that they need to find a way to sneak onto a ship (hard to do as cartel they are low percent)
- When it comes to the way that degeneration impacts the Cartel, its more so that they are impacted but not totally destroyed - as a collective they are actually very powerful. So its safe to assume that they have an exit off the planet. So, they can still kill off Charles but would need to be a different kind of reason - not to steal his badge.

**(leave florabots here in book 1?)**

Can be a chaotic moment where Red is asking Axel what happens to the Florabots as deconstruction is happening - and Axel is basically like my protocols dont store that information, but i have faith in the network. Its not up to me to worry about my fate, the network decides.

CUT TO Middle of night - add to this that Red's parents run to her room and she isn't there. They panic. Charles tells Nora that he will go look for Red and she needs to take a letter he has in an envelope and tells her she can't lose it and needs to give it to one of the militia officers at the bunker. He tells her it will give her access to the ship leaving earlier, he had it all arranged (does not exactly say out loud here that it's because he was tipped off by someone at lifecorp, but in panic she doesn't ask anymore questions). Nora says she won't go without him but tells her to look for Red on the way, it's better to split up. He will be fine with his employee badge and maybe a special little gadget that proves he's with Lifecycle, he doesn't need the letter. Nora finally agrees, he takes Red's Holowatch and puts it on.

25. Red in forest - she keeps losing the stag, trying to navigate herself she is learning how fine tuned her senses are now. She can hear chaos in the distance and the sounds of

destruction. She's so scared and then sees the stag again and keeps going. She finally makes it into town, and is horrified by what she sees.

26. ★★ Charles runs into the honey cartel - he runs to a far edge of the town, nearing the volcanic forest line, he runs to the clearing where Red plays. There he is faced with the cartel who clock him immediately as a Lifecorp employee, he is wearing the shirt. Carmine tells him to hand over his stuff so they can board the ship (they'd have no chance otherwise as low percenters), but he refuses. He runs off, they chase him into town. In the middle of the street, amongst other violence and looting and chaos, They brutally beat him and take his shirt, badge, and gadget. Silas looks back at Charles and they run off. Charles sees the kid reluctantly turn and follow before closing his eyes. *My goodness. But yeah we will need to shift their intentions slightly during this scene (mentioned above).*
27. Red and Nora in the street - Red finds Nora amongst the chaos, a bittersweet reunion. Red asks where Charles is, Nora says he will meet him at the bunker. She tries calling him on the watch as they run but he isn't answering. Red panics, Nora tells her it's fine he will get there. They pass elites and they see they are gone, mom explains why. They pass Cypher and fam, have that sad moment. *As they are running right before they see Charles they pass Lifecorp, graffiti on the wall that reads "LifeCorpse"* Then they find Charles in the middle of the street, practically dead. Nora and Red stop trying to wake him, with last life he tells them that the letter Nora has will get them on a ship. He reveals Lifecorp had known this was going to happen but just not exactly when. Red keeps saying she's sorry and that it's all her fault, he tells her it's not and that she will face other hardships but needs to keep being her curious self and grow her power (alluding to the fact he knew she was changed). He tells them to go and hands red her watch. She takes it, he dies. She doesn't want to leave him, but Nora is telling her they have to go. They make their way to the bunker,
28. In the bunker - chaos of bunker. Nora finds guards and hands number, he tells her to wait a second. While waiting, add to this section that Red finds that her watch had recorded the cartels attacking her dad and how they wanted his things to get them on a ship. She sees Silas in video, takes special note of his face because he doesn't look much older than herself. She feels so guilty. Nora and her watch in horror and cry, but then red is also conflicted. She feels anger that he knew and didn't try to help by warning others. Nora tells her he couldn't or else they would have been killed. *This is really interesting because it provides an opportunity for Red to question her dad's ethics. What else did he know and not tell her? Etc. ultimately she will come to understand his intentions were pure, but good way to fuel the fire of her early anger.*

*Also, lets find a way to bring back the woman protestor from part one that red saw on the streets. Since charles died, theres technically one more space on the ship - somehow she gets in there and joins red and nora. Perhaps she becomes a larger character kind of like the witchy lady grandma type character.*

29. ★★ All the scene about the bunker and getting loaded onto ships and that whole scene.
30. ★★ Red and Mom leave Phoenix.

They don't know they are going to wisdom, that is revealed later.\*\*

**PAYOFFS: cartel run in with dad, the dad's death, the animals save red, leave florabots on cliffhanger (fire)**

**Book 2 SETUP CONSIDERATIONS:**

- We are thinking of introducing the Chessmasters in Book 2, so is there somewhere we can inject maybe in the crystal palace intro scene that they intend to meet with "them" when they land on wisdom
- What will Carmine and his squad be doing when they land on wisdom? Eventually (if im not mistaken Red kills Carmine so what does he get up to while she begins her stretch on Wisdom and to the NCC?
- What happens to Carmine when he kills Rion and becomes this new version of himself? Most people would become consumed with all the knowledge, alive but now acting on Flora's will, but maybe Carmine is built different and doesn't let it control him. Instead of becoming a guardian, he's able to fight it while also storing that information - maintaining his will.
- **Rion sends Red on missions - Silas and Red paths intersect but they never meet**

## **PART 2 TREATMENT**

1.

mom and dad eagerly greet Red at the door excited to see her. A new "more intense flame" emits from Red but they laugh it off as a family. Red, being a child, thinks she is good at hiding things but her parents know something is off about her.

The family sits down for dinner but mom and dad are met by short answers when asking about her day. Red barely eats and makes an excuse to go to her room. Mom and dad pass it off as "She's growing up". Red heads to her room leaving a trail of embers in her path as she walks away. The parents exchange a glance and a subtle smirk.

In reds room, she tries to control the new flames she can omit. She tries to turn them "on and off" but is having trouble being in control. She holds a piece of paper in her hands, trying her hardest to not burn the paper. It immediately bursts into flames.

a knock at her door sends her into a panic. It's her dad, he has come to check on her. In a panic she quickly sweeps the room of any evidence, hiding the paper under her bed.

Charles enters calmly and comforts red. Has a conversation about how proud they are of her and how they will always be there for her. Charles notices the burnt piece of paper under the bed. He can't hide a smile. Says that she will achieve great things and can't wait to be around to witness it. Charles gives her a pat on the red and exits the room.

2.

SCHOOL DAY. Skylar and Sol immediately notice something is different and like typical children bombard her with questions. “Why are you brighter today, red?” “You’re a different color red” “what’s going on red” why? Why? Why?

On the playground, the teachers take notice as Red plays with her friends. The teachers take notice and whisper amongst themselves. They have an eye on red at all times, word spreads fast among the faculty.

red feels like a kid today, she runs around playing and laughing. Sol yells to red to “watch this! Watch this” Red looks to Sol who is about to perform a backflip. Red routes him on and presses record on her holowatch. Sol tries to do a backflip but ultimately falls a little short and falls to the ground. The friend group has a good laugh about it. Red saves the video to her holowatch, cherished memory.

idea: TRAINING WITH RION red holds something valuable in her hand as a training exercise, if she can’t control the flame it burns up (foreshadowing)

### 3. Red home// Crystal palace intro

Nighttime drapes itself across Phoenix, cloaking everything in a mysterious, inky darkness. Red slips out the back door into the small yard behind the hut. She finds a spot in the dry gravel and plops down, sitting criss-cross-applesauce. She breathes in deeply, listening to the sounds of the night. A fire mouse rummages through the garbage, a phoenix cries out in the distance, neighbors are clearing dishes after dinner—everything is coming to her in hi-def. She tries to steady her breathing. She plants her palms against the cool earth, using the late night alone time to try to ground herself. It’s all so overwhelming still.

Heat currents wash over the land in calm, rhythmic patterns. The currents are steady—like the pulse of Phoenix—. There’s a lot about the late hours that she finds comforting lately, despite her fear of the dark. She’s getting better about that, though. Even a year ago, she wouldn’t have been able to sit out in the yard at night alone. She credits this to a trick Charles taught her years ago that she’s always kept with her.

Just as she’s noting her newfound bravery, Red hears some strange noises in the distance. Her heart races slightly as she becomes suddenly aware of the unknown hiding in the pitch black that presses in around her. Squeezing her eyes closed, she’s back in her bed listening to her dad’s words.

‘You can do it, Red!’ Charles cooed, his voice was soft and encouraging.

"No I can't, dad! Please, please st-stay!" Red begged through sobs, desperately gripping tightly to her father's arm.

Charles sat on the edge of Red's bed, at a loss of what to do. His daughter's cries were breaking his heart. He turned to the doorway where Nora stood, pleading with his eyes. Red burrowed her head deep into his armpit, continuing to cry. He mouthed, "Come on."

Nora smirked and shook her head, mouthing back, "No."

Charles let out a dramatic sigh, lifting Red out of her hiding spot under his arm to look her in the eye. She sat back into her pillow, her blanket covering her lap, and let out a little whimper. Wild flames danced from the top of her head as trails of molten liquid poured from her eyes and nose. Her chin quivered ever so slightly, her dark eyes swollen as she stared back at her dad. Charles couldn't help but crack a smile at his complete mess of a daughter.

"You have to sleep in your own room tonight, bud. The whole night, okay? You have to be a big girl."

Red broke into another fit at Charles' words. "It's too d-dark in here all night, always! I'm t-too sc-scared!" She slammed her face back into her dad's chest, her small frame heaving with every sob.

Charles looked back to Nora, eyes once again begging her to help. But she had to be the bearer of bad news last night. Tonight was his turn. He looked back to Red, taking a deep breath before trying one last tactic.

"Listen, shhh," he tries to soothe her, "I have a secret that will help you, but it will only work if you're calmed down."

Red lifted half her face, peeking up at Charles with one eye incredulously. 'You just want me to stop crying!' she protests.

Charles chuckled, "Well, yea, but I'm also telling the truth. This is a real trick. Promise."

Red left her face buried, taking a moment to think before she slowly lifted herself up to face her father. Small gasps escaped her as she tried to stop her crying. She sniffled, barely choking out, "okay, I'm calm."

Charles tried not to laugh. She was the farthest thing from calm, but it was a start. He leaned in close, eyes burning intensely, like he was about to share one of the greatest secrets of the universe. "Look for the light." he whispered.

"Huh?" Red twists her face.



“Look for the light! Look,” Charles got up and moved to Red’s window, “See all those stars out there? And the glow from the flowers in the Asha.”

“I wish the flowers were in here. I want to find the light right next to me.” Red sank deeper into her covers.

“I think we can arrange that.”

The warm breeze brushes Red’s cheek, bringing her back to the yard. Opening her eyes she looks out into the distance. She finds the faint purple glow of the bioluminescent blooms and cracks a smile. *There’s the light.*

Her eyes then drift to a light beyond the forest. It’s brighter than the deep, warm aura of the forest. It blares through the night—cooler and more artificial. Her stomach sinks. She knows exactly what the glow is from. Just on the other side of the Volcano sits a large crystalline structure, both inconspicuous and mysterious all at the same time. *The Crystal Palace*. She remembers the first time she asked about the white light and her dad explained it to her in a low, hushed tone that she didn’t understand at the time. Now she does. The Crystal Palace is a different unknown than the disembodied sounds of Asha, and somehow even more chilling. Red’s senses light up, sending a flare down her spine. She suddenly feels like she’s being watched. Standing up, she brushes herself off and heads back inside, double checking that she’s locked the door behind her.

Note from Claire: this crystal palace intro is dope, i think we can conclude crystal palace has offices in every planet so this makes sense

---

Beyond Basinwind’s borders, far from the Asha and any other city center or town square, the Crystal Palace stands tall at the base of Phoenix’s largest volcano. Burning brightly through the ash and smoke, its jagged walls seem to grow as towering, translucent stalagmites made of shimmering rock. The transparency of the structure is a trick of the eye, however. Because what’s inside isn’t meant to be seen. In fact, it’s quite the opposite. The grand structure, bright and ethereal upon first glance, is home to something far heavier.

The Palace—with walls smooth and flawless like the surface of a still, untouched pond—exists only for those within its walls. Even if some Kindred was brave enough to try to get around the heavily guarded perimeter just for a chance to press their nose to the glass, they wouldn’t be able to see a thing. At most they would get a glimpse of the faintest reflection of the world inside, distorted and twisted, as if the Palace refuses to be known. A perfect illusion that keeps the mysteries inside tightly locked behind its facade. And it’s better off that way.

Inside, however, the world reveals itself in all its stark clarity. The ceilings are ever-shifting canvases stretched above in massive panes of glass. The main floor is a maze of vast, blinding white hallways that seem to pulse with an eerie stillness. The crystalline walls

shimmer, reflecting and magnifying every movement, every shadow from the outside, making every corner the perfect place to sit and observe all of Phoenix. But this enigma of a glass castle is only the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. It's only when you make your way down, deep down, into the secret caverns beneath the surface of the ground, that the true body of the Palace is revealed.

Large platforms sit at the end of the main corridor, shifting from one floor to the next of the main structure in non-linear patterns. Only the most classified personnel, however, have access to their full potential. These personnel, known as The Crystal Palace themselves, are given advanced security clearance to travel to the deep down. The select few make up the most prominent body of governance on Phoenix, their entire existence shrouded in mystery to all Kindred. Not even the Elite know all of what goes in this hallowed space.

Often referred to as "The Council", the Crystal Palace convenes daily to rule and shape the planet's future. They're neither gods nor men, but something far more terrifying—figures whose power and influence are whispered about in the darkest corners of Phoenix. Their decisions can alter the course of civilization itself. Kindred fear being caught discussing the Crystal Palace at all, part of the reason they're so often referred to as The Council. They're known to see and hear every single thing that happens across Phoenix, making their presence constant and ominous in the daily lives of the Kindred. One step out of line, and orders would be sent down a chain of command to make sure you were put back in your place in ways that were never pleasant to say the least.

It makes sense for beings so powerful and all knowing to reside in the enormous crystal building. They're the only ones who could ever truly belong in such a space, really. Watching, waiting, with faces indiscernible. They have the ability to make their gaze felt, as if they want some to feel that they know every thought they dare to have. They exist in a place where only the feeling of their power is visible, and everything else—every secret, every gathering of the minds—is concealed behind the seamless barrier of the glass walls.

That was the point of the physical Palace. To simply be seen. A bright, beautiful reminder that what happens within will never be known to the outside world until The Council wants it to be. Because from the outside, the Palace is simply a reflection, a glorious and unknowable monolith. No one can look in to know what lies within. But those inside know: The Palace is not just a place, but a prison of their own making. A sanctuary that isolates them and all their unimaginable power from the world they control. They watch with cold, unwavering eyes, ruling from their hidden vantage point, while the rest of Phoenix is left to secretly wonder what really happens inside.

Walking stoically down the seemingly endless corridor, Aegis, head of The Council, makes his way towards the levitating platforms. With each step taken, the perfect, glossy floor beneath their feet illuminates with a burst of cool blue light. Once he reaches the platforms, he holds his hand to a glass panel at the base of the loading dock. The faint beep that follows signals he's gained access, and he steps on. A secondary screen appears out of seemingly

nowhere, prompting another set of passwords. Entering them diligently on the floating display, Aegis waves his hand over a glowing orb in the corner of the platform next to the screen, eliciting another beep. Full access granted. Placing his hand fully around the orb, he begins to descend down. Deep down.

The Platform comes to a stop at the mouth of a dark, echoing chamber. The appearance mimics the main building of the Crystal Palace. Only down here, everything is a striking, glassy black, like finely polished obsidian rather than gleaming white crystal. Aegis starts down the hallway, each step's imprint now illuminated by a low burst of maroon, until he finally reaches a large door. Beyond this door is the central meeting chamber of the Crystal Palace. A sacred and high confidential space. Opening the door, he is met by the other members of The Council. He takes his place at the head of the impossibly long table in the center of the infinite space, its boundaries indiscernible in the inky darkness. A single light from an unknown source above illuminates the gathering.

"Let us commence" Aegis commands, the air leaving the room with the sound of his booming voice.

"There's a child." Eris speaks, her voice a crackling whisper, like the wind through flame. She's one of the younger members, but her position is no less powerful. Her form is a shimmering veil of firelight, constantly shifting with every move she makes. She continues, "A girl, barely eight cycles old. **Cycles is veryyyyyy goOOODD** She's appeared on our scans only as of late. Her energy readings...exceed anything we've encountered before."

Another voice speaks up. Like rolling thunder, Caelus' words seem to echo from the core of Phoenix itself. "The last time a reading like this happened in the universe at all...well, you know what happened."

A silence settles over the room as the other members absorb the news. A few exchange subtle glances, their faces unreadable, but all understand the gravity of the situation.

"Her name?" Aegis asks.

Eris shifts, her skin sparking with the uneasy movement. Taking a pause before responding, the dead air speaks for itself. "That's the thing," her voice barely a whisper, "the reading was...unclear."

A low murmur breaks out amongst The Council. Aegis waves his hand in the air, commanding silence amongst the crew. He stands from his seat, staring Eris down. His concern is palpable. "You couldn't get her name?"

"There's a lot we couldn't read." Eris says. She can barely look Aegis in the face. All of The Crystal Palace sit motionless like giant marble statues. Eris adjusts herself to speak again, "The child isn't just powerful, she's...unpredictable. If left unchecked, she could tip the balance

of Phoenix. There's too much potential for chaos, for her to grow her powers beyond what is manageable."

Thalor, one of the more strong willed members, crashes his fist down onto the table, sending sparks flying upon its impact. He burns brightly, with white hot lightning coursing through his veins in webbed patterns across his skin. His voice snaps through the still air violently, "Nothing is unmanageable for us."

The Council breaks into another wave of murmurs. Aeris slowly stands, raising his hand once more. He shoots Thalor a calm, yet stern look. A warning. "We all know that isn't true, Thalor." The wise leader's words bring the room to a haunting silence once again. He continues, "Are we sure it's her? She's just a child. A spark in a world of raging wildfire. Perhaps there's another explanation."

Caelus shakes his head, "The scans are definitive. There's no mistake. They've also indicated that she's not an Elite. She comes from a Civian family. She's an anomaly, unlike anything we've encountered here on Phoenix."

"There's no other explanation, only the undeniable fact of her existence." Eris slides a panel open on the table next to her as she speaks, revealing a set of illuminated buttons. Pressing one, a screen projects above The Crystal Palace, displaying a topographical map of Phoenix. "The only thing is that even her location isn't trackable. She could be anywhere on the planet."

Eris studies the map. Small dots of several colors dance across the screen, each indicating something different. Some showed the locations of a few trackable honey cartel members. Others indicated the whereabouts of different government employees. None of them represented the child. His molten eyes flicker briefly, "We cannot let her grow beyond our control. This is bigger than us."

One of the older members, Vestra, speaks up. Her voice is calm but resolute, like the stillness before a storm. "It's time to accelerate deconstruction. The orders have come from above. They have mandated that we move forward with the plan. Reconstruction must be enacted suddenly, without sufficient warning, before this child becomes a threat."

There's a moment of stunned stillness. Aegis looks to Caelus for confirmation. His second in command nods back slowly. Aegis sits back down, his deep eyes blazing in thought. He considers the command. He knows that the deconstruction and reconstruction of Phoenix isn't set to occur for at least another century. The measure is carefully planned, an irreversible process to reshape and rebuild Phoenix for its own survival. It's brutal, violent and devastating. The lower and middle classes- the majority of the planet's population- will be left to fend for themselves. They will be left to die in the chaos, millions of them perishing. And for what? A child who has yet to even understand the power she holds? *Or perhaps it is the very fact that she is a child*, Aegis thinks, his molten eyes narrowing. *A child with the potential to become*

*something far worse. Great but we should also add an element that the florabots are starting to rebuild themselves more quickly which is cause for this.. But Red is the final straw type beat*

"Wait," a light, crisp voice floats through the air, "Is this truly the only course? To sacrifice so many more lives than a regularly scheduled deconstruction would take just for one? Is that really what is being asked of us" Orion, the newest member of The Council pipes up, his forms shimmering with the cold light of ancient ice.

Vestra meets Orion's gaze, her eyes burning with an unspoken resolve. "They are not concerned with individuals. They are concerned about the fate of Phoenix. The fate of all the Nexus. We are too late to change the course. This is the prophecy come to call."

Orion's voice grows bitter. "And what of the rest of the planet? The millions of lives we're condemning with this decision? This gives them no time to prepare, to make escape plans like they would with a scheduled cycle. You call it reconstruction, but to them they don't get to live to see that phase. They only know the *deconstruction*. To them, it's nothing more than slaughter. How can we justify killing off almost the entire Kindred race just to eliminate a child? A child who we don't even know what the extent of her power even is?"

Thalor stands suddenly from his seat, sending his chair flying back behind him. "How dare you question the commands of the higher power?" His voice booms, his core alive with rolling thunder. He points a finger at Orion, jolts of blinding electricity fizzle down his arm, sparking off his finger tip. A storm brews dark and fierce behind his eyes.

"Enough!" Aegis calls out, a rare instance of him raising his voice.

Thalor reluctantly sits, his eyes still burning into Orion who meets his gaze with his own stern, unwavering passion. The storm inside Thalor slowly subsides.

Eris looks to Aegis, her pleading eyes spark rapidly. "Certainly Orion is right, though. This can't be the only way."

Caelus interrupts, "Thalor is right. This isn't up for debate. It's not up to us."

"But we have to have some say. As The Crystal Palace, we are a Council responsible for our own actions. We can counter, come up with another plan." Eris tries to speak confidently, but her voice falls flat. The look on Aegis' face lets her know that she's making a losing argument.

Aegis stands again, the flames within him flicker erratically, like a storm waiting to break. "We are not here to negotiate or justify. We are here to act. If this is what we think it is, the child's power could be catastrophic. She could destroy everything we've built, everything we've sacrificed for. The reconstruction must proceed. There's no other way."

Eris' lowers her gaze, staring blankly at the table before her. Orion's eyes narrow, but he doesn't speak further. He knows better than to oppose the majority—especially when the majority agree with the decision. Eris' briefly lifts her eyes to meet Orion's. A silent exchange is made, and she gives him a small, knowing nod.

The order has come from above. The plan's been confirmed. There's no turning back.

Aegis glances around to all the others. "The child must be dealt with, but the process will not be simple. We will have to move quickly. Gather the necessary teams, alert LifeCorp only at the highest level. Let us begin the preparation for the accelerated cycle. We can't afford to wait."

The Council members nod in grim consensus. Each of their unique forms flickering and shifting in unnatural harmony. They are all bound by duty and immense power. But they are also bound by the will of another immense power even beyond their own. And so The Crystal Palace moves forward with its plan. The fate of Phoenix is sealed and the clock is ticking.

#### **OMIT 4.**

4/5.

Rion debriefs red like an army lieutenant, informing her of the dangers that the florabots will face in the future. Rion stresses how important it is for the community to be ready for anything that can harm them. Red is ultimately "their secret weapon" only to be used when "absolutely necessary". Red is reluctant at first but for the greater good of phoenix is convinced to carry out missions and protect the florabot community.

6.

(from Silas POV) Honey Cartel are walking through the Asha, carrying some honey. They discuss how already running low on supply from the last heist, the henchman makes a comment that they are running out of places to steal it from. Another henchman suggests that they maybe start trying to break into elite homes and stealing personal supplies. The two bicker, Carmine walks ahead in silence with Silas quietly following behind. Silas wonders what carmine is thinking about, he notes how the jars of honey in his bag are starting to feel lighter these days. Sophie tells the two henchmen to shut up, they are going to draw attention. She speaks to Silas about the forest and all the fun she used to have playing there as a kid, telling him she'll take him out to play soon. Silas just nods but thinks how he doesn't know how he feels about playing anymore. He doesn't really care about that anymore he doesn't think. Silas reflects on early childhood and we show a bit about his life before/his mom. He wonders if Carmine ever played as a boy. Finally, Carmine speaks. He tells them they're going to steal honey from the Florabots. The group is at first shocked in silence, and they stop walking. Carmine stops to turn to look at them. They tell him that's a suicide mission. Sophie mentions

the treaty between the florabots and the Cartel. Carmine tells them not to tell him what he can and can't do. "Besides, we have our secret weapon." and he looks to Silas. Sophie protests. They all begin to argue. Silas is suddenly transported in his mind to a different location. He's surrounded by florabots, some flying frantically, other's broken and scattered across the ground. He looks down and he has honey in his hand, but they don't look like his hands although they must be—but they're much bigger. A man, not Carmine or any of the other cartel members he knows, tells him they've hit the jackpot. The man didn't look like a Cartel member at all, in fact, the whole scene looked to be from a time Silas wouldn't be able to remember, the florabots, the weapons, jars and tools for harvesting the honey looked ancient. Silas snaps out of it, confused about what he just saw. He just knows he saw that it's possible to beat the florabots. He just has a feeling. "I want to do it." He says, and everyone stops talking and looks at him. "You don't understand.." Sophie starts, Silas cuts her off. "They can be beat. We can do it." Carmine shows the slightest glimmer of pride as he smirks at Silas. "But they're more advanced now." he says quieter, mainly to Carmine. Carmine for the first time seems taken aback, unsure of what to say, he looks a little confused by Silas' statement. The others look around to one another, also puzzled. Carmine tries to breeze by it, "Well, you heard the kid. We have work to do." They keep pushing on. Silas wonders why he said the last statement. He sees Sophie whisper to Carmine up ahead. "Has he heard about the original mission into the florabot community?" she asks. "That was hundreds of years ago." Carmine gives a nonanswer. "And the reason the Cartel doesn't touch the florabot's supply, remember? It destroyed the florabot ecosystem which ended up being bad for us too. It took forever to rebuild and—" "I heard that rules like that were the exact things The Cartel was made to break" "But Carmine, this one's different. It could destroy *us*." "Not this time. The last crew were idiots. They did it all wrong." "Oh yea, how?" "They left survivors." "The florabots will always come back, you know that." "Then it looks like it won't be a problem then, will it?" "You're impossible." "And *You* don't have a better plan, do you? We're running out of options. This is one of our last remaining major sources. We do this, we're good for a while." "And then what after that? When does this end?" "And then we figure something else out. But for now, we're doing this. So get on board or get the fuck out of my way."

Silas latches onto the convo about the mission a hundred years ago. Has he heard about it before? Maybe his mom or someone told him and that's what he was remembering with a vivid imagination? He doesn't think so.

7.

Vibes are off at dinner this night. Parents grill red for where she has been and notate that the holowatch recorded she was in a strange area of the asha forest. The data on the watch is too complicated for her parents to decipher. In ahuff red storms away from the table and goes

outside. In the distance, the stag appears. What is it saying? There is a connection between red and the stag. The hypnosis breaks and the stag runs off. Red returns to her home.

8.

Need to create main teacher who INVESTIGATES red. Is always keeping an eye on her. Red goes down the wrong hallway and ends up outside the teacher's room. She overhears the teachers gossiping about her almost like children. The room is filled with "Did you know...?" and I heard that. Red has a sinking feeling that she is not hiding her powers as well as she thought. She notices her flame burning brightly in the mirror, she is quick to dim the light as to not create any unwanted attention.

As she is leaving the teacher cracks a joke as her expense, causing the flame to ignite even brighter than before. The teachers notice something coming from the hallway. Maybe they are not alone. The room hushes as if they are being listened to.

9.

Red sees axel poke his head out of the asha forest. Red runs about to him and tells axel he should not be this far away from his community. Axel stresses red needs to go back to community to train but red is adamant that her parents are catching on and needs to go home. Red tries to pull away from axel but he holds on to her. The phoenix caws from above in distress. "train, train, red needs to train" in a distorted recorded voice. The presence of the stag emerges from the forest. Axel is quick to rescind in the forest and leave red with the stag. Red and the stag are nose to nose. Wisdom emits from the stag's eyes. *What is this creature trying to tell her?*

10. HONEY CARTEL WAR ROOM -

<https://adaptable-stoplight-e0f.notion.site/CARTEL-PLANNING-FLORABOTS-17e1bfd51918809e8ca1ef8958292bdc?pvs=4>

Cartel in hideout. They are talking about the logistics of getting into the florabot community. They discuss who else they're going to call in to help with the mission, and the kinds of weapons they'll bring. They talk like building an army almost. Silas sits in the chair in the corner watching them. He observes as the henchmen talk excitedly, all fired up, while



Carmine watches calmly and coolly, hissing orders every so often. Sophie talks to Silas. She casually brings up what he said earlier and asks what he meant. The way she asks makes it seem like she knows something Silas is trying to figure out which is more confusing to him. Silas kind of explains the "vision" he had. Sophie nods slowly. Then she mentions how Carmine might ask too and when he does he should give the same answer that he gave her. "You mean about my daydream? He thinks if that's the right word for it, or maybe it is more of a memory?" "No, about how you just heard about the original mission from a story your mom told you once." She looks at him with stern eyes. Silas is confused but can tell she's trying to coach him into lying to Carmine. He asks why. "Carmine likes when people are impressionable. He has more use for keeping Kindred around who know less than him." She gestures to the bumbling henchmen. Silas takes this in and understands her. It confuses him still, like she knows something about him that he doesn't know. "You seem to know a lot and he keeps you around." "I keep my cards close to my chest, Si. You'll learn to do the same." Carmine then looks over to Silas and motions for him to come over. Silas goes to Carmine. He asks Silas if he's ready for the mission and Silas nods his head yes. They discuss how they aren't entirely sure the full scope of the florabot's power these days since they're become so reclusive, so they want to be ready for anything. Carmine watches Silas as the henchmen brief him on the plan/possibilities, searching for any sign of fear or weakness. Silas can feel Carmine doing so and holds strong, his little heart secretly racing. He wonders if he bit off more than he can chew. He snaps himself out of it and says no. He didn't come all this way to chicken out, it was his time to prove himself. "Alright, kid," Carmine says "you got all that?" "Yes." "Good."

11.

Red is in school, she can't focus on what is being taught in class. Her mind keeps racing back to her experience at the flora bot community. The flashing lights is what sticks with her the most. The cold dead eyes of the florabots staring into her soul. Rion saying "what brings you here, Red?" echoes in her mind. Red has had enough, she needs to investigate. She raises her hand and asks to be excused. The teacher reluctantly agrees and Red heads to the bathroom. She sneaks out the bathroom window. She is nervous about the repercussions of her decision but knows she needs to move forward.

12.

Establish Rion and Red have formed a strong bond. Write in earlier on that the volcano is very active, spewing lava quite frequently. Rion and Red have a student-teacher

relationship. Rion notices red is progressing quickly in her training. It is time to up the stakes. Rion thinks it is time to test red's fire resistance power. Rion has red stand inside the volcano. There is an ancient platform built in the volcano for this specific training exercise. A forgotten civilization. Red is nervous but knows It needs to be done.

The phoenix caws from above, very nervous for reds safety. Droplets of lava fall off red like drips of sweat. At first red holds her ground on the platform but the lava gets more intense. She holds on for as long as she can. The lava becomes overbearing. The phoenix continues to caw from above. In a flash red is pulled from the volcano and brought to safety. She wakes to rion and the phoenix staring down at her. At first she thinks she failed, but rion reassures her that she has never seen such strength before. The phoenix screams in excitement. Rion informs red the florabots received intelligence that the honey cartel is about to attack the florabot community for their honey and they need to be ready. Red's fire resistance training will come in handy in the battle. Red needs to lay low, the cartel can not know about her. Rion tells red axel will come get her when they need her. Red does not want to leave, but rion insists the time will come when the florabots need her strength.

13.

Red comes home extremely proud of what she just accomplished. She is immediately met by irate parents. We see a new side of Charles. He scorns red, saying the school has contacted them and informed them, she has been skipping school. Nora adds on that she is no longer allowed to go into the asha forest and must wear the holowatch every day. Red is to go to school and then head directly home every day. The tension builds and builds and builds until FLASH. Red's flame creates a small explosion. It's like a defensive explosion, create space for herself to "escape" for a moment. The carpet sets on fire but is quickly put out by her parents. The tone changes and they are comforting to red. Charles insists it is necessary she wears the holowatch every day. The parents put a "child lock" setting on the watch so she can't take it off herself. Red sulks to her room.

14.

Red feels isolated at school. She hides in the bathroom to escape from the glares of everyone in the school. Everyone stares at her when she walks down the hallway. Students and teachers whisper to each other as she passes by. Her peers stay a safe

distance away from her, unsure what she will do next. Red truly feels alone. Sol is there for red. Oblivious to what is happening around her. She finds comfort in talking with sol. His innocence calms red down in a time of distress.

15.

Red and Charles are home, Charles is tucking red into bed. She seems off, so Charles asks if she wants to talk about it. Red tells him she might have a secret but she thinks he might know it. She thinks Nora does too but knows she wouldn't want Red to be talking about it. Charles' heart breaks at the inner turmoil happening in his daughter, he's so young and experiencing something major and is afraid to hurt her mom over it. Charles shuts the door and tells her they can talk, and she can say whatever for 10 minutes and he won't tell Nora anything within that time. "Really?" asks red, eyes wide. "Really." Charles pinky promises. Red asks about the Phoenix they found when she was little and why it stays with her. Charles laughs, "I honestly don't have a good answer for that one. It's just your guardian. Some creatures latch onto some Kindred that they feel some sort of spiritual connection too. You're resilient, smart, cunning and quick just like her! She wants to take care of you." "It's not a spy?" Red asks, and Charles can't tell if she's joking. "Why on Earth would it be a spy?" he chuckles, "And for who?" Red looks down to avoid eye contact. Charles can see she's serious. They both have a moment of silence as they both realize who Red thinks would be watching her. "What's going on, Red? Really?" "I don't know, dad! You tell me! Why am i so...different?" Charles can't deny the change he's seen in his daughter, but he truly is at a loss for words. He has no clue what's been going on, but he wants more than anything just to comfort Red. "Can *you* tell *me* what's been going on?" Red pauses and contemplates telling her dad about the florabots and what happened to her, but she stops herself. "I want to go to the NCC" Charles was not expecting that answer. "Now I know you've always said that, red, but-" "I know I always have, but now I think I belong there. I think I **NEED** to go." "Honey, that place is for elite children." "I should be elite" Red says, her frustration burns beneath her skin and she flares up, only highlighting her extreme power. Charles watches her, wide-eyed. "Okay. Okay, take some breaths. But you know what I mean. The NCC isn't for people like us." "I am **NOT** like you!" Red lashes out, her flame glowing brighter. She burns red-hot, tears stinging in her eyes. Charles doesn't know what to do or say. He doesn't want to upset her anymore, but he doesn't know how else to tell her that she can't just go to the NCC. "You need to be invited, Red." He reaches for her hand, but she pulls away. "I can apply! We can write a letter!" "I don't know about that. Why don't we talk about it later." "You said we could talk about anything now! My 10 minutes aren't up!" Red pleads.

“Actually it ended about 2 minutes ago. But don’t worry, I won’t tell mom anything you said after it was up.” Red sighs and slumps down into bed, turning her back to her dad. Charles furrows his brow, sad that Red is feeling so upset. “I just want to be somewhere where I don’t feel so different.” Red whispers. “I know, sweetie. But being different isn’t bad.” Red doesn’t fight back. She knows he’ll never understand. “Goodnight, Red. I love you.” “Night.” Red says coolly. Charles wants to say something else, but decided against it. Instead he turns the lights out and closes the door behind him.

16.

Red is on her way to school. This week her parents have been letting her walk with her friends instead of one of them chaperoning. As they walk through the forest, they approach the clearing which they pass through as a shortcut sometimes. It’s the first time she’s been in a while, and she thinks about the time she met Axel there. She then thinks about how it’s been a while since she’s seen Axel or any of the florabots because of being grounded. Suddenly she gets the feeling she’s being watched, and she can hear someone whispering her name. “What?” she asks her friends. They all stop and turn to look at her, puzzled. “What?” one asks. “Did one of you just say my name?” “No...” Red then hears it again, but can see none of her friends are saying it. Then it hits her. Axel. “Uhhh...you guys go ahead. I have to..uh..pee. Behind this tree. I’ll catch up.” “What?” her friend asks in disgust. “It’s an emergency. Just go!” “okay, weirdo.” her friends giggle, and they scurry off. Red runs to the clearing and looks around. It’s empty, except for a few of her usual animal friends. The phoenix is perched above her, looking just as puzzled. It calls out and motions to her to get going with her friends. “Shhh, it’ll be okay. Let me do one thing!” The phoenix huffs in protest but stays to watch over. Suddenly, disc Axel zooms into the clearing. He materializes as his child form before her in a hurry. “Red! It is you! Where have you been?” Red explains that she’s in trouble and hasn’t been able to do anything but go to school and back home. She then asks how he is able to whisper her name into her mind. “Can we talk through our brains?!” Axel ignores this and frantically blurts out, “you have to come. Now.” “What? I can’t?” “The cartel are planning to move in on the florabot’s supply of honey. They’re mobilizing now. You have to come lead the fight.” “Lead?” red asks, her stomach dropping to her knees. “I’m not ready, I haven’t been training in so long, I can’t-” “You can do this, Red. You HAVE to do this.” Axel is very serious. Red looks at Axel, down at her watch and off to the distance in the direction of her friends and school. School will be starting any minute now. She looks back to her watch and thinks of her parents. How scared and mad they’d be if she ditched school. Then she looks

back to Axel. His glowing eyes pleading with her. She knows this is important. It's the reason she's been training with Rion. AXEL STUDIES REDS WATCH AND MELTS THE WRISTBAND OFF HER WRIST WITH A LASER EMITTING FROM HIS EYES. Axel insists they "have no choice" Her Phoenix calls out in protest. "I have to do this." Red tells the bird. She turns back to Axel. "Okay. Let's go". The three of them take off, zooming through Asha towards the florabots.

17.

HONEY CARTEL VS FLORABOTS (INFILTRATION AND BATTLE)

<https://adaptable-stoplight-e0f.notion.site/INFILTRATION-17f1bfd519188014b227c6d187712077?pvs=4>

Silas is there at first but then leaves right away because it gets dangerous. Carmine deems it too dangerous for a child. The honey cartel tells Carmine "I told you so". Carmine feels bad but brushes it off and yells at Silas to go. Silas reluctant at first, leaves the battlefield to Carmine yelling at him to go home. Silas sees Red but Red doesn't see Silas (\*\*bc later she finds the video of the cartel killing her dad and that's the first time she sees him\*\*)

18.

HONEY CARTEL VS FLORABOTS (CARMINE VS RION SCRIPT)

<https://adaptable-stoplight-e0f.notion.site/CARTELS-VS-FLORABOTS-CARMINE-VS-RION-SCRIPT-17d1bfd5191880e38840dc16959131e6?pvs=4>

RION VS FLORA

<https://adaptable-stoplight-e0f.notion.site/Rion-vs-Flora-17f1bfd519188087ae67c5b41209d27b?pvs=4>

**RION DIES.** Florabots are eternal so we will see her on Wisdom at some point.

**FORESHADOW:** Maybe silas follows her there without her knowing, but it looks like she brought him with her. Carmine takes note of who Red is - seeing "shes exceptional for a young girl."

19.

**V1:**

## Chapter 1

7471 AC - ALL OF THIS REVEALED LATER, start with Red, prologue will be used mainly to describe Kindred, an ominous story kind of happening somewhere else maybe even gardener. In school describe planets, solar system, all that.

Code name for arcadia - citizens of nexus know it as something else, a generic planet name, arcadia is used for people who know

Our story begins on Phoenix, the seventh planet of the Nexus Solar System. The solar system's seven planets orbit equidistantly around its "Sun", coined the name Arcadia. The life source of this man-made planetary structure, Arcadia is the heart to the body of Phoenix, along with the six other planetary structures.

Phoenix, the planet of fire and renewal, was constructed as the healing and revitalization hub of the planetary system. Phoenix shares its knowledge with the remaining six planets through a system of interplanetary travel tunnels known as The Dice. Through the success of the planet's medical research programs, Phoenix has thrived for hundreds of years. Golden megastructures stand high above the city streets as they reflect radiant light across the skyline from the volcanoes nearby.

Advanced in flight technology, Phoenix offers revolutionary air travel options for its residence. The ease of travel within city limits showcases this fire planet's dedication to keep pushing the frontier of what's possible.

**^ Save for Chapter 7**

At the center of the city stands the greatest symbol for the Phoenicians, The First Temple of Phoenix. A large temple with hand-carved pillars that tower over the city square. Phoenicians gather in the square to gaze upon the architectural marvel. In each pillar, the planet's history is etched into the golden hue of the marble.

Like most civilizations, the population is separated into different social classes. The lower class, or referred to as "low percenters", take on the jobs in the public sector deemed undesirable by the higher classes. The middle class find themselves mostly doing low-level government work.

By enforcing new law code to government contracting, the middle class acts as the framework to the system not imploding on itself.

Now, honey. Honey is overseen by the Elites; the upper class. Unknown to the general public, honey is theorized to be an invaluable resource in the world of healing and revitalization. Safeguarded by the Elites, they have set up Honey Banks to store the honey safely and out of *dangerous* hands.

## RED

On the outskirts of the city skyline, sits a schoolhouse at the center of a low income neighborhood. The schoolhouse is designed for the Kindred race. Descendants of warriors, these children come from a long lineage of ancestors who have fought and died for the protection of their home planet. Their cellular regeneration and physical attributes develop significantly more than **other races** as they reach adulthood.

*I think there are too many giveaways from this point and above – can explain on call.*

The school bell has just rang and the students eagerly enter the classroom. Meredith Baylor, *(maybe we save the full name reveal for a later moment, like when she introduces herself to the robot)* nicknamed “Red” by her fellow classmates for her reddish hue skin along with her quick tempered personality, finds her place on the carpet. Sitting cross-legged, her and the other Kindred children await the entrance of their teacher. Their Kindred skin emits small bursts of orange and yellow light. Red’s skin glows a deep red, barely discernible from her classmates.

As the school door creeps open, Red shoots up her arm to get the teacher’s attention. Ms. Velora enters the classroom eager to teach the lesson plan of the day. Recognized for her dedication to teaching in lower income sections of Phoenix, Ms. Velora sees her students as her own and will go to great lengths to see them succeed.

“Yes, Red?”

Ms. Velora calls on Red. The child eagerly blurts, “One day I’m going to work with my dad!”

The teacher feigns a smile at Red and tries to continue with the lesson. Red continues, “Ya me and my friends, Dad and Mommy, were all going to work at LifeCorp together!”

*Apparently there’s an AIDS company called LifeCorp so we are changing it. It could end up being something else once we’ve discussed it thoroughly or maybe it’s fine but i’ve done a find & replace on it.*

LifeCorp is a business that has monetized reincarnation. Through advanced biotech, astrophysics, and data-driven AI systems, LifeCorp records each person’s soul signature and is stored to a company-wide database for further analysis. When the person’s life ends, the soul signature is retrieved from the database and deemed whether or not suitable for reincarnation based on social credit, historical lineage and other metrics.

Unbeknownst to Red, LifeCorp typically hires people in a higher social class than her. Her father is a rare exception. Ms. Velora knows this information, but does not want to discourage her student.

"Maybe one day," the teacher offers. "As long as you put your mind to it!"

Red shifts in place, unsatisfied with the answer. "Then why don't all mommies and daddies do that? Why do they work in stores, work the tunnels... become teachers?"

Ms Velora's face is stunned by such a question, she gathers herself. "Well Red, not everyone's parents can do that since some jobs are reserved for high percenters or for the Elites," she says.

Red's eager hand is met by a stern stare from her teacher. "That's enough, Red."

A dark, glowing maroon emits from Red's body in frustration. She looks around to her classmates, but feels isolated and alone. She feels stronger than her classmates, confused by this feeling.

Red feels she might have embarrassed her friends in the process, bringing up their parents' occupations. She calms herself down. Red turns to her friend next to her, clearly rattled from the outburst and whispers, "Sorry." Her friend smiles back and says, "It's okay, Red."

The morning passes like a normal school day. Ms. Velora cycles through the different learning materials of the day. Geography is very important in the lower grade levels of Phoenician schools. The planet takes great pride in its endless mountain ranges and vibrant volcano colonies.

The teacher finishes up going over the topographical map of Phoenix's lower plateau region. She looks to the class for questions, but the children remain quiet.

"Alright then, open to chapter seven of your textbooks", says Ms. Velora.

The room fills with the sound of frantic paper rustling, as the students open their books to the correct page. Red reaches into her backpack and returns to her desk to see her friend Ripley make a funny face from across the room. Ripley, always quick to make a joke, sticks his tongue out towards Red as she tries to hold in a giggle. The teacher notices and quickly slaps Ripley's Desk.

"Today, we are learning about honey, the source of life as we know it," says the teacher. "*Ripley*, would you be so kind as to read the first passage?"

The Kindred children murmur to themselves in laughter, anticipating Ripley's reading. Ripley begins to read, shakily.



"Honey possesses the power to heal any ailment, unlock the secrets to eternal life, and transmit knowledge forward and backward across generations. For every drop of honey we must give thanks to the breathing Garden. For without the Garden we are nothing and we are nothing without the Garden." *May have mentioned this before but we're not making mention of the Garden this early on. It's barely known about besides amongst the highest up and scholars that have discovered ancient texts. Although anything mentioned about it is looked at as myth. I like the intention here though so there could be space for church type place or a mythology class where we can sneak this stuff in.*

Children try to hold in their laughs, as Ms. Velora shushes the class.

"Thank you Ripley, now can anyone explain to the class what this passage means?"

Skylar, the class "know it all", throws her hand in the air. She is called on. "It means, it means, that honey is needed for our survival and if honey was in the wrong hands we could be put in danger."

"Very good, Skylar," responds the teacher. "And what did we as a civilization create to ensure the safety of our precious honey?" Red's ears perk up as she yells out, "Honey banks!"

"That's right! Please elaborate, Red." the teacher responds. Red thinks deeply for a second then says, "There is a honey bank on each planet that our leaders watch over." The teacher nudges Red to continue. Another thought pops into Red's head. "Oh! And, um, they're always being watched, the planets give each other honey through, um, portals!"

"Very good, Red!" The teacher turns to the board to write, but Red blurts out, "But the Honey Cart—". *WEEE-owww!* A high pitched wailing sound tears through the school house. It's a humidity drill. Phoenix being such a dry climate planet, waves of humidity that pass through the valleys are not only dangerous to the infrastructure, but the population itself. Ms. Velora quickly collects the class to line up at the door and exit the school house.

## Chapter 2

Strange noises have been ringing through the halls of the bank of Phoenix all night. Strange clicking, disembodied feet scurrying, all amplified by the large, echoing corridors of the building. Reed has convinced himself the bank has pests, or that his exhaustion has gotten to his head. There are six night guards on duty at the bank tonight. There are two posted outside, patrolling the perimeter, while the other four take turns in each of the bank's four towers. Every two hours, the guards inside rotate. This happens seamlessly night after night, like clockwork. The only thing keeping Reed's anxiety at bay is knowing that in about an hour and a half, someone will be coming to relieve him. For that brief moment, he won't be alone with whatever, or whoever, is lurking in the shadows. *I think Reed's name is actually too close to Red. Its not clean cut so has potential to be confusing at first sight.*

Reed is currently posted in Tower One. This particular tower is the main building, home to the offices as well as the majority of the bank's honey supply. He always feels a sense of pressure during his shift in Tower One, like more is at stake being surrounded by so much of the coveted resource. Tonight, however, this pressure sits inexplicably in his stomach like a rock of anticipation. He continues to roam the halls, all lined with tightly sealed golden doors. Coming to a stop at the end of the hall, Reed takes in the particularly ornate vault that spans from floor to ceiling before him. He checks over his shoulders before scanning his badge and entering a code into the security monitor. The guard waits for the familiar clicking sound before slowly pulling the door open a crack and peering in. **Maybe a line that leaves some remnants of events that occur during the daytime hours at the bank. What is a honey bank like during the day?**

The Queen Reserve, the center of the honey bank where most of Phoenix's honey is kept under lock and key. Peeking in, the guard scans the room. The walls, honeycombed in gold, stretch around the vault like a tomb, each space trapping the thick, sickly sweet substance. He swivels his head from left to right, checking for anything out of place. Finding nothing, he steps back and closes the door with a resounding thud. The sound bounces down the hall against the eerie silence. Still facing the vault, the guard shudders at the noise. His badge is displayed proudly but his nerves are shot. He has been hearing stories of violent vagabonds who do their work under the cover of night since he was a kid. Recently, however, their increased presence in his city has been looming over him like the cloying saccharin scent of the nectar that surrounds him. The Honey Cartel; the name alone carried a weight that suffocated him.

*Whack!* Reed feels the crack of a heavy object against the back of his skull before he falls to the ground, his vision beginning to tunnel. In a haze, he tries reaching for his weapon, only to be stopped by a jarring kick to the ribs. A second blow lands on the side of his head. On his back, disoriented, he can only make out blurry silhouettes against the golden backdrop. Several hushed voices begin to speak. They murmur with such urgent aggression that causes every alarm bell to sound off in Reed's head. He can feel it. He's in real danger.

"Enough. We need him alive, you jackass." The words hit like needles to Reed's temples. His ears begin to ring. "Get his weapon away from him."

Reed feels a hand first grab his badge before ripping his belt off, taking his only means of defense away. He tries to focus on the feeling of the cool marble floor against his cheek to stay awake. It's no use. Just before succumbing to unconsciousness, he is caught off guard by one of the voices.

"What are we going to do with him now?" A child asks.

A gruff voice answers, "We're going to get what we want." **we can improve this line**

And then, darkness.

---

The guard awakens to a hand making sharp contact with his left cheek. The sting of it rings in his ears as he jolts to attention. He can tell he's in one of the many identical and windowless offices found in the enormous building. The room is bathed in dim light, the sickly yellow glow from overhead flickering like a dying candle. Looking around, it takes Reed a second to realize he is tied to a chair, two large men standing behind him. All of them glow a low, steady warmth, emitting a calm that completely contrasts his own panic.

"Let me go!" Reed yells out. He is trying to sound more confident than he feels.

"You're a little guy now, aren't you?"

One of the men steps forward, his skin fluttering a dim hue of orange. He smirks maliciously, eyes locked onto the guard as he speaks. He is smaller in stature, especially compared to his comrades beside him. However, he moves in a smooth, reptilian manner amongst the shadows that doesn't sit right with Reed. He notices that the man's voice has a buttery-sweet spark to it that, if not for the situation, he would find charming. Everything about him screams danger. Then, realization sets in. Reed's heart stops as he recognizes the man from the articles in the Daily Pheonician. Carmine West, the most notorious of the Honey Cartel leaders. Carmine steps to the guard and leans in closer, his boyish grin widening. His eyes are completely dark, void of any of the light that barely shines within him. "It seems fate has chosen you to face us tonight," his voice hums almost melodically in Reed's ear.

Reed sits up straight, an ache in his side reminds him of the earlier hit to his ribs as he does. "You're not getting anything out of me," he tries to hold his voice steady. He's suddenly aware of the empty space on his chest where his badge once was. His stomach sinks. As if reading his mind, one of the large men flanking Carmine pulls the badge from his pocket and holds it out. "Aww," Carmine feigns empathy, his act then twisting into a sinister grin. He gestures to the badge, "what's yours is already ours, my friend." Reed's stomach lurches. "Shit, we're halfway there," Carmine purrs, still smiling as his eyes bore into the guard.

Trying to keep his cool, Reed tries to regulate his system. It's useless. His breathing quickens, causing his entire body to emit a brighter yellow that flickers rapidly in time with his panic. Reed winces, knowing he's giving himself away. Carmine lets out a low, malevolent chuckle, sending shivers down the guard's spine. "Now we just need you to give us something else," Carmine hisses, so close now that his nose is touching Reed's. "Wh-what do you need?" Reed asks, already knowing the answer in his gut. "Now what do we need to get into the Crown Reserve again, boys?" Carmine walks a slow circle around Reed, looking to his comrades for an nonanswer to his rhetorical question. They chuckle, the sounds of their amusement are low and ominous. Carmine stops in front of Reed again. "Oh that's right," he leans in playfully. "Ten. Little. Digits," Carmine taunts, tapping Reed's nose with his finger tip as he says each word. Reed holds silent, his eyes quickly flitting to the clock on the wall behind Carmine.

An hour. An hour until 5:00 am. An hour before anyone is due to show up in Tower One. An hour is way more time than someone like Carmine needs to beat the living shit out of someone like him. Reed knows his power is not as strong as most guards, probably the reason Carmine waited for him to be on guard to make a move. He got the job through his uncle, not because he was the large, rough and tumble type. Sure, he could hold his own, but not against the Honey Cartel. And they knew this. Carmine watches as fear flashes across his prisoner's face, and Reed is certain that this man thinks he's about to give in. Instead, he stares back at the criminal and holds his silence.

Carmine steps back and lets out a large sigh. He turns to look at his partners, takes a beat, and then turns back to Reed. His smile has turned to something much colder. "Why make this messy, bud? All we need from you are the codes and you can leave relatively intact. Or.." he cocks his head to the side, sizing up the guard like a predator sizing up prey, "we can do this a different way." The other two men step closer. Reed, trembling, keeps quiet. He sits up taller, making an effort to showcase his bravery. Carmine narrows his gaze, eyes trained on the man in the chair with dark intent. Carmine turns to his comrades and begins to roll his head back, left and right, loosening his tensed muscles. Suddenly, he turns back and lunges at Reed.

Reed jumps at the spastic movement, then feels Carmine's fist pound into his jaw, jerking his head back into the headrest of the chair. The room starts to spin. The blow landed a lot harder than Reed was expecting from someone with the power level of Carmine. It was with strength that came from experience and anger rather than innate ability. Carmine grabs the guard by the neck to bring him closer, looking to him for any change in response. Reed holds his tongue, preparing for the next hit. Carmine, furious at this, lays into him again. This time he unleashes a series of punches, each one landing with a dull, meaty *thwack*. Growing hazy, Reed's small flame dims to a low simmer. One of the other two men steps forward with a blade, but Carmine puts a hand out to stop him. "Not yet," he growls, "we need our friend conscious enough to give us the codes, right?" His eyes stay on the guard, waiting for his response. Reed, head bobbing back in exhaustion, is able to choke out, "you aren't getting the codes. You can't kill me and leave with nothing." His throat begins to tighten as he pleads, "let me go, please. I have kids."

Carmine jerks Reed's head upright, bringing them face to face. He grits his teeth and sneers, "you think I won't kill you for this liquid gold? I've killed for much less." With that, the man with the blade steps forward and cuts the ties from the chair. The two men lift Reed's limp body to his feet by his arms and stand on either side of him. Carmine takes a step back before pouncing at Reed. He's thrown back, his head hitting the wall with a sickening *thud*. Just then, something catches Reed's eye in the doorway. A young boy is standing just outside, eyes wide, peeking in from around the doorframe. He knew he heard a kid earlier. Carmine follows Reed's eyeline, holding him against the wall with his arm to his throat.

"Get the kid out of here!" Carmine demands. The kid scurries away as one of the men slams the door shut, locking it behind him. Carmine lets go of his hold on Reed and he falls to

the floor in a slumped heap. Gasping for air, his skin flickers between dim orange and complete darkness. His head lolls to the side as he struggles to look up at Carmine. As he does, Carmine throws a heavy kick to his gut, driving the air from his lungs. Reed wheezes, his vision swimming.

Carmine crouches down and leans into Reed's ear. He can feel the criminal's breath against his skin as he whispers. "You think you're going to die a hero. For honey. That would be nice, huh?" His sick smile returns, the guard can hear it in his voice. Carmine waits for Reed to speak, but after a moment he stands up and shrugs. "Alright, fine." Carmine backs up as the man with the blade steps forward. The man raises Reed up by his neck, his back sliding up the wall until his feet are no longer on the ground. He is a puppet in this man's cruel hands. The large man holds the blade to the guard's throat, the metal gleaming in the light. A wicked thing meant for cutting deep. With a faint twinkle in his eye, the man warns him, "last chance." With lightning quick speed, the man suddenly moves the knife from Reed's throat and drives it into his side instead. Reed lets out a scream of agony, the man twisting the weapon further into him.

Reed breaks, letting out a sob. He thinks of his own children, he thinks about the child in the hall. "Okay, enough! Enough! You can have them. Just let me go home." The man rips the blade from Reed's side, letting him go as he crashes to the floor into a nearly extinguished pile of fear and shame. Carmine steps up, looming over the defeated man. Reed looks up, barely croaking out the digits. One of the men scribbles them down as he does. After he finishes, Carmine crouches down to him, placing a hand on Reed's back. He winces at his touch. Carmine's crooked and eerily alluring smile returns to his face. "Now, was that really worth all the fuss?" he coos in a mocking tone. His voice has returned to its previous smooth, even tone, causing Reed to recoil.

Carmine stands tall, and motions for the men to follow him. "It'll be 5:00 am in 23 minutes. We have work to get done before we're interrupted by some worker bees." The men follow Carmine to the door. Reed sits up as much as he can. "Wait, aren't you going to help me out?" He chokes out. Carmine stops at the door, turning slowly to the guard with a smirk. "Sorry, bud. Every man for himself." The men leave Reed, closing the door behind them as they go. The guard tries and fails to bring himself to his feet, finally collapsing in defeat. He cries out for help he knows isn't coming.

---

**BOOM.** Moments later, the First bank of Phoenix collapses. People arriving for their work day watch in horror as their main safe keep of honey crumples into a heap of destruction. Almost immediately, emergency ships are swarming, desperately trying to save any of the precious resources from the wreckage. Officers stave off citizens trying to take advantage of the exposed vaults. It is pure chaos. A woman displaying a badge, important in stature, rushes to the line of officers in a panic. "What happened?" she asks sternly. The officer looks at her, "They got away with all of the Crown Reserve. Every last drop."

## Chapter 3

Red lines up with her class out on the school yard. They've been having more humidity drills than usual lately, maybe because of some faulty wiring that the school won't fix. Or, more likely, they probably *can't* fix. Red's parents are often talking about how little funding goes to schools like hers. Red isn't complaining about this interruption, though. Looking around, she takes the first opportunity she can to slip away when no teachers are looking. She smirks to herself when she reaches the fence near the playground and slips through a loose slat. Running away is nothing new to her. She thinks to herself how thankful she is that her school is also too poor to fix her usual escape route. On the outside, Red breathes a sigh of relief. Ahead she can see a line of volcanoes beyond the barren forest in the distance. She sets her sights on one in particular. Her favorite one, in her favorite part of the volcanic forest. Without looking back, she takes off.

Reaching the edge of the forest, Red passes through a thick cluster of bare and ashen brush. The bramble claws at her as she squeezes herself through until she breaks free to the other side. "Aw man," she whispers to herself, touching a fresh scrape on her cheek. She is used to the ones on her arms and ankles, but her mom always lectures her when she comes home with cuts on her face. "You have to be more careful, dear. We don't heal as quickly as most," she can hear her mom say. Brushing a twig from her hair, Red steps further into the forest. She spots the trail that will take her to the volcano, excitement bubbling within her little body. She skips along, stopping every so often to admire her beloved Asha forest. Red touches the plants and breathes in deep. The air feeds the embers within and she glows a little bit brighter than her normally dim hue. With her eyes closed she releases the breath, flames flickering with the exhale. She finally feels grounded.

"Asha, you're my favorite forest ever!" Red shouts to the tops of the stone-like branches looming above her. The Asha forest is one of the four volcanic forests found on Phoenix, and it's not lost on Red that it's the only one she's ever actually seen. She's certain that even if she did visit all four, Asha would still be her favorite. They started learning about the others in school a few weeks ago, and how each contained different variants of flora and fauna depending on the soil texture and proximity to the surrounding volcanoes. Two of the forests, X and Y, are farther from any volcanic activity, so they look very different from the one Red knows so well. For example, they are home to plants that have leaves that are more like rubber or silicone in texture. They're built to withstand the intense heat of Phoenix, but are able to thrive outside the threat of too much smoke and lava. In Asha, the soil's rich in nutrients, but the air is scorched and heavy with ash, so the plant life takes on the appearance of minerals and gemstones to survive the intense conditions.

Red thinks about Ms. Velora's lesson as she runs her hand along the trunk of the rough, rocky trunk of a tree. She wonders what a tree in those different forests would feel like. *Probably much smoother.* Red knows that Asha and her sister forest, Geruda, are special because there are volcanoes found directly in them. Red thinks of her low perenter friends from school and how some can't even visit the forest because of this. They aren't like the rigid plants that grow here, or the wealthy members of society that come to the forest to bow hunt for sport. They can't tolerate the molten conditions and toxic gasses. Red thanks her lucky stars that she is a little more adapted than that and can still spend some time in Asha.

She walks deeper into the wilderness, taking time to appreciate each creature and plant she passes. Red crouches down by a bed of amethyst-like plumes growing from the ground. Her favorite plant; the lantern flower. She lifts one of the stiff, shiny pedals and peaks underneath. Red giggles as some round beetles scatter in different directions like tiny marbles. She lifts it a little higher, exposing the roots. Always curious, Red takes this opportunity to study the plant close up. Wide eyed, she crouches down, her nose inches from the ground. She can smell the soil mixing with the smoke in the air, and takes another deep breath in.

The roots on the plant, like most plants on Phoenix, are sharp like metal wire with barbs on the end. Red gingerly puts the leaf back down, careful not to touch the roots. Last year, she had a particularly rough run in with an exposed lantern flower root that left a nasty scar on her knee. While sitting on the edge of the kitchen counter, feeling betrayed by her dearest nature, she asked through tears why the roots would do that to her. "It's not their fault, sweetie," he said softly, pressing a cloth to the wound, "they need those roots in order to anchor into the volcanic rock and loose soil." Red got her love of plants and nature from her father. He had a vast collection of books in his library on the flora of Phoenix that she often snooped through when he wasn't home. Red gives the plant a reassuring pat. "I forgive you" she whispers before carrying on.

Red makes a mental note to pass this flower on her way home once it starts to get dark. You see, the lantern flower was her favorite because of the magic it performed in the night. Some of the plants on Phoenix contain bioluminescent abilities, making the nighttime forest glow a warm purple-red that is somehow both iridescent and dark at the same time. The lantern flower was one of these special plants. Red especially loves the ones that climb up the side of the volcanic cliffs and make the volcanoes come to life with vibrant colors in the dark. She was able to pick one of them with her parents once, and she keeps the enchanting flower in her room as a nightlight. It was her dad's idea to do so after she started getting nightmares a couple years ago. She wasn't sure if it was the flower that actually worked, but she can't remember the last time she had a bad dream since then.

Red walks along, stopping at some foliage resembling obsidian that grows at the base of a bare tree. She knows that tiny reptiles love these umbrella-like clusters, so she excitedly peers underneath. Under the leaf, she spots a small fire lizard. Red lets out a small gasp. This startles the creature awake from its sleep, body jolting to attention with a slight puff of smoke from its

nostrils. Small flames ignite within tiny translucent scales as it opens its eyes and scurries to bury itself in the soil. She chuckles, then moves on.

Birds of fire of all sizes watch her from the barren granite branches above. A phoenix, the planet's namesake, gives out a call that sends critters and glowing fire bugs scurrying below. Red smiles in delight at her favorite of the planet's creatures. There is something about the phoenix that Red relates to. She once watched a phoenix burn to ashes on a nature hike with her mom when she was four-years-old. She broke into inconsolable sobs, but her mother calmed her and told her to watch. Soon a baby phoenix emerged from the pile, new and fresh to the world around it. Red watched as it stretched out its fiery wings and let out a small cry before immediately taking off all on its own. From then on Red loved the phoenix, her kindred independent spirit.

Red finally makes her way to a clearing at the base of a large volcano. This was her own personal sanctuary away from the busy town and chaotic classrooms. Magma flows down the side, giving the space a warm glow that mimics the sunset. It's this glow of magma and fire that gives the flora of Phoenix life. Red thinks hard for the word her dad taught her about the way the plants survive. "Photo-syn-thesis" she sounds out loud to herself. Her dad told her all about how the plants on the megastructure have adapted to a type of photosynthesis that uses the light energy from the lava rather than the sun's, along with the gasses given off from the volcanoes. "That's why this exact field is so *full* of plants and animals!" He explained when he first brought Red there many years ago. His arms were outstretched as he twirled around like a dancer, throwing Red into a fit of giggles. She smiles at the memory. She loved this clearing just as much then as she does now. She closes her eyes and takes in another deep breath as she steps into the glow of the magma. Her embers flare a little brighter. As she exhales, there is a shift in the energy around her. She opens one eye and peeks out to see a plethora of creatures approaching her. She is used to this. Red has known since an even younger age than she is now that she has a special connection to nature. That's why she feels the most at home in the volcanic forest.

She opens both eyes and grins gleefully at her wild friends. She greets the hopper first, a small rabbit-like creature with plumes of fur made of low burning flame. Its ears, two identically flickering lights, blaze back as it approaches Red. She remembers reading in one of her dad's books that this is a sign of trust and comfort. Red pets the twin flames, they burn calm and soft to the touch. The hopper zooms off in excitement to play with the others. Red watches the bunch of them take turns jumping over one another as they frolic in the clearing. Next an ember fox, surrounded by what appear to be individual puffs of smoke, runs to weave between Red's legs excitedly. Red bursts into a frenzy of laughter. The ember fox, with a bushy mane and tail of fire, bats its giant eyes of smoldering coal at Red. Unlike the calm, rounded flame of the hopper, the ember fox's flames blaze wildly. The puffs of smoke around it float up to red's face and give her a tickle. The Soot Sprites, tiny forest spirits, have wings that shimmer like intricately carved stones drenched in molten lava. Their bodies are silhouetted by gaseous ash, making them appear as just small plumes of smoke from a distance. They leave trails of sparks as they flit about. The spirits often follow ember foxes, as the fiercely loyal, charismatic animal provides



protection and companionship to them. As the sprites greet Red, they leave small kisses of soot on her face before zipping away in the thermal currents. The ember fox follows closely behind.

Next Red turns to a huge stag-like creature with short fur made of reds and oranges. Its antlers of smooth, polished obsidian gleam in the molten glow as it slowly approaches. He is an old soul who comes to Red whenever she visits the clearing. She has a particularly strong connection with this cinder ever since she first met him years ago. Red has always tried to figure out why, but she made up in her mind that he was like her grandpa. The thought always made her smirk, a little inside joke with herself and the wild animal. This cinder moves slower than the others in the forest, but the younger members of his herd show obvious reverence towards their wise leader. Red curtsies playfully with a, "Mister Cinder", and the great creature bows his head to her in return. She is delighted by the exchange. His fur ripples like the pattern of a blazing wildfire in response to the heat winds coming off the volcano. Just then, something else catches Red's eye darting about in the low, singed yellow grasses. What appears to be a group of charcoal rocks roll around in zig-zags. Two bump into each other and four tiny feet and a small nose pop out from each of the lumps. Coalites, like tiny armadillos with shells of coal and furry underbellies, litter the forest's ground. They curl into themselves and jet off, leaving black, streaky trails behind them.

Chasing a group of coalites playfully, Red makes her way further into clearing. She looks up when she reaches the base of the volcano at the far edge. Small fire birds flit around above her as she looks up to the peak. The lava oozes and bubbles smoothly down the side to the base. It has formed large rocks at the bottom over time, all taking on their own unique shape. One is Red's favorite "thinking" spot. It's carved out in just the right way that it cradles her small frame. She makes her way to her seat and settles in. Across the clearing she watches as three giant boulders move slowly, then stop to graze on some tall, pumice-like stalks.

The boulders have small rocky horns and grunt in low bellows to one another. "You guys sure can eat," Red remarks, watching them lazily chow down. She notices some lava lichen growing prominently on their bodies. She knows this is a sign of age for the creatures. Magma Goliaths, like gigantic buffalo made of boulders, often lumber around as gentle giants of the volcanic valleys, usually spending their entire lives in just one specific area. She guesses, based on the thick coat of lichen, that these ones have been around for a while now. Red loves to watch them from a distance. They make her laugh with their clumsy, large bodies. Red then turns her attention to the volcano and presses her hand to the side. She can feel the power of it in her veins, until it starts to become too much. She flinches away from the intense heat. She knows Kindred of her power level aren't meant to withstand prolonged periods of exposure to Phoenix's elements. But still, she always tries. She feels a pang of jealousy towards the Elite, just thinking of what they could possibly do that she can't. *I bet they can even go inside a volcano.*

Suddenly, all the creatures stop dead in their tracks, turning their attention to one spot on the edge of the clearing. Red's heart quickens a bit. She has never seen anything threatening or predatory here before, but that doesn't mean it's not a possibility. She jumps to hide behind a

rock. Peeking around the edge, Red watches the spot with the rest of the animals. The old cinder takes a stand between Red and whatever mystery guest was looming in the brush. Red can feel her breath catching in her throat. She tries to remember if her dad has told her anything about what to do if she's ever faced with a dangerous creature alone in the forest. She starts to kick herself for ditching school and hiding out here alone when she is abruptly met with a wave of both relief and confusion. What glides into the clearing from the outskirts is in fact something her dad has told her about, but it doesn't make sense for it to be in the Asha forest. In fact, it should never be outside of its home city that sits between the Asha and the Geruda, several miles from where they stand now. Red has found herself, in an oddly exciting twist of fate, face to face with a florabot

## BREAK FOR NEW CHAPTER

"Wha-What are you doing here?" Red croaks out, stepping reluctantly from her hiding spot. The cinder takes off into the forest with the rest of the creatures, leaving the florabot and Red alone in the glow of the volcano. The human-machine hybrid is standing in statuesque stillness, unresponsive to Red's question. The way it moves, or rather, doesn't move, makes Red feel a little uneasy. It appears to be a Kindred from the distance Red is at, but there is no sign of life in its body. It isn't breathing or blinking. It isn't responding in any way to its surroundings.

Her curiosity getting the better of her, Red takes a few steps closer. As she does, she realizes a few things. For one, Red only knows the very basics of the Florum, but she does remember her dad telling her that the anthropomorphic beings take on all different shapes and sizes. Immediately her brain switches from thinking of the florabot as an 'it' to a 'he'. Another thing that catches her attention is that he looks fake. She's now able to see the robotic qualities of him, like the small wires and metallic plates woven into its body. He stands motionless, like a replica someone has made for a museum meant to represent a florabot. *Maybe he's broken.* That would explain why he's so far from home. He couldn't be malfunctioning. Either way, he isn't at all what she expected a florabot to be like in real life. However, she isn't sure what exactly she was expecting a florabot to be like.

Red continues towards the stranger, eyes trained on it with each slow step. She's careful not to make any sudden movements. This subconscious caution catches her off guard. *Why am I scared of him?* Her skin flickers in time with her racing heart. Finally, she is mere steps away from the florabot. She takes in a deep breath and holds it. She tries to make herself appear calm and collected, just in case. What stands before her is something she's only ever seen pictures of in class. Seeing one in real life is exhilarating. *What do I do now?* Something about being so close to him now feels so surreal, she can feel her initial fear begin to soften. As still as he is, Red can now see the energy pulsing through the wires and channels within the machine. A small light on his chest blinks. All signs that he's not actually 'off'.

In Red's mind, time has stopped. Her eyes scan the florabot. She now sees that he is meant to be a kid, maybe about her age. Red considers that this could be why she feels a little

less threatened, but she still can't place her finger on the exact reason. His small frame glows faintly like one of her Kindred classmates, but she can tell it's an artificial light. Like he's mimicking her own flame. Actually, a lot about him looks like any other Kindred child on Phoenix, only he is made of metal and bundles of wires. Red imagines what Cypher would look like if he was covered in thick titanium instead of skin, with very small flames still creeping out around his limbs every so often. He would look a lot like this thing. Something about the comparison begins to personify the florabot in Red's mind, her own imagination giving life to the statue in front of her. Almost as if he heard her thought, something inside the bot begins to whirr. Red jumps back, a small flame shoots from the top of her head in shock. She watches the florabot twitch slightly, his head jerking to attention. His once black eyes begin to glow a bright yellow green. All of the sudden, the once defunct machine is now buzzing with life. A corpse reanimated right before Red's eyes. **Cypher name change (there's a future Riddler type villain named Cypher)**

Red holds her breath. Now she is the one standing completely still, just waiting for the florabot to make its first move. At first, the glow of his eyes flicker in a way that it appears to be blinking. After a moment, Red realizes that this is exactly what he's doing; he's *blinking*. And the way the energy surges through his exposed wires; he's *breathing*. The florabot seems much more human to Red now. He seems conscious. She contemplates running, but her legs are frozen in place. Her eyes dart around, looking for a way to escape if she needs to. Then finally, he speaks. Because he doesn't have an actual mouth, the words echo out from somewhere within him, catching Red off guard.

"How do you know I'm not supposed to be here?" The florabot asks this with a tinny lilt. It's been so long, Red has completely forgotten that she even asked the question. Shocked, it takes her a moment to respond. When she finally finds her voice, she stammers, "M-my dad's told me about the Florum." Red shrugs, giving him a shy smile. She looks down and draws circles in the dry soil with her foot. "You know what I am," he manages to respond, his glowing orbs widening. He says this as more of a statement than a question. The two stand staring at each other, locked in a stalemate. Red feels a burn within her. She has to know more about him. She decides that the only way to feed this curiosity is to not run away after all. She has to stay and try holding a conversation with him for as long as she can.

"Sure! I know florabots don't leave their city, though," she offers.

"I did."

"Why?"

"Why are you here? You don't look like an elite. You look like a low percent. Too low to be in Asha alone."

*Excuse me?* Red is taken aback. She is surprised that he knows enough to even make that connection. Ms. Velora made it seem like florabots functioned at a pretty basic level. Something her dad told her is suddenly shot into her memory. Once, very quickly, he said something about the florabots becoming "too smart", but she didn't even register the statement at the time. *Florabots are really smart*. The discovery stokes her flame of curiosity. *Smart and rude*. Red snaps back to the conversation, "I'm just fine, thank you very much!"

Red crosses her arms and glares resentfully at the florabot. Her dad never told her that florabots were so *bold*. His glowing eyes narrow as he squints back at her, tilting his head to the side. He looks like he is studying Red more than anything else. Red begins to grow uncomfortable and takes a step back. "Sorry," he says, "I'm just curious. That is all." Now that is something Red can relate to.

"About what?" she asks.

"About you."

"What about me?"

"What is your name?"

"You first."

Red can't help but notice how structured his tone is. It's, for a lack of better terms, very robotic. She finds this interesting, she always imagined they would take on more traits from their human side than the machine parts of them. The florabot moves closer to Red and reaches out an enthusiastic hand. It's all done in such a fluid movement, making it very apparent that she's dealing with artificial intelligence rather than a real living being. Red stares at it, arms still crossed. She doesn't know how to feel about this interaction. She isn't sure if she is supposed to even talk to a florabot, let alone touch one. He reaches out a little farther and nods to his hand, "You shake it." "I *know* how to shake a hand," Red rolls her eyes, "I just don't know if I should." She looks from his hand to his face, his friendly demeanor dropping into apparent sadness. Red is surprised how much emotion the thing can convey through just his "eyes". His reaction *is* very human, and something about it hits a nerve with Red. *He's just curious*. Red carefully reaches out and grabs the robotic appendage. The metal is cool to the touch, but it grips and shakes with the knowing muscle memory of a human-hybrid, just like any other Kindred. His glee returns with full force. Red finds this a little endearing.

"My name is Atlas!" he says excitedly, still holding onto Red's hand. She pulls back from the lingering shake. "I'm Meredith. You can call me Red, though." She looks to her feet. "Hi, Meredith. It is nice to meet you!" Atlas says this like a script he's rehearsed just for the occasion. Red flinches at the use of her full name. She usually only hears it when she's in trouble. Then again, maybe she is in trouble right now. She looks around, suddenly aware of how alone she is with this thing she has only ever heard stories about. She notices Atlas shift his stance, becoming less rigid. Maybe he can sense her discomfort, like he's trying to relax to make her feel more at ease. "Atlas." she repeats. Red has always felt the need to fill the silence. It's something her mom has told her to work on, but at this moment, she doesn't know what else to do. He gives her another genuine expression of joy. **His name is Axel now yea?**

Red's mind is racing. She has a million questions, but she doesn't even know where to begin. Before she can land on one, she notices the plant life around her begin to glow faintly. A sign of the night approaching. "I have to go," she tells Atlas. "Will you ever come back?" he asks. *Al/ways*, she thinks. Instead she turns the question back on him. "Will you?" Red wasn't expecting to ever see the florabot again. This seemed like a once in a lifetime thing. A glitch. A

florabot malfunctioning and wandering too far from home, and Red just happened to be in the right place at the right time. "I will come back to find you!" he chirps out gleefully. "But why?", she narrows her glance, suspicious once again of his motives. "You seem...different. You seem nice." He is the one to look down shyly now. Red can't help but feel for him. Maybe he just wants a friend. Maybe he also feels like he doesn't belong in his community. "Okay, I'll come back," she scrunches her face, racking her brain for a moment, "I don't know when. Later. This week. I gotta go!" She quickly turns and runs back to the trail. Atlas calls back to her, "Bye, Meredith! I'll see you! Later! This week!"

Red runs through the forest, kicking up volcanic ash and dirt in her wake. She wants to make it home before curfew. She knows it's rapidly approaching as the last of the daylight starts to slip from the sky. She stops briefly as she passes a tall mountain. She gazes up. Airship traffic circles the peak, house lights illuminating in spots across the terrain. *The home of the Elite*. She can't help but wonder what it's like to live way up there. Going to school with them. Learning the way the world works through their eyes. The higher grounds, away from the nonsense below, is reserved for the high percenters and Elite. They live a cushy life, looking down on the low-percent adaptives both physically and metaphorically. Red takes one last look at the bustling town in the sky, and dashes back towards her small house here on the ground.

Red's body is buzzing with excitement. All the way home she thinks about her new friend Atlas. This automatic thought gives her pause. Her new *friend*? The thrill of having a friend who's a florabot makes her smile. She knows she can't tell anyone, though. Her parents might not let her go back into the forest alone again and that's not something she's willing to risk. She can't wait to return to the clearing again to ask Atlas all the questions that are swirling around in her head. Something in her gut drops, however, as her mind keeps returning back to her main question. *Why was he there?* His answer wasn't good enough for her standards. Red promises herself that while Atlas might be a new friend, she will still proceed with caution. With as many uncertainties surrounding the events of today, one thing is for sure: she won't be getting much sleep tonight. She has a lot of research about florabots to do.

## Chapter 4

Red and her mom finish setting the table as Charles sulks through the front door. He clearly looks disheveled from the events of the day, but does not want to talk about it. Nora motions at Red to clean her hands and take her seat at the table. Red follows in agreement as Nora helps Charles with his coat.

"I'm okay, it's really okay," says Charles. Nora gives him a smile as she hangs up his coat. Charles takes a seat at the table, a huge sense of relief seems to exude out of him.

Tense at first, the family digs into a traditional Phoenician meal. A vibrant variety of fruits, vegetables and herbs line their plates, cultivated from their small garden out back. Dinner on Phoenix is a time used to cleanse and detoxify from what the day throws at you.

Nora notices Charles barely eating, instead pushing a blueberry back and forth on his plate.

"Everything okay, sweetie?" asks Nora.

"The honey cartels hit the bank again today," groans Charles.

Red hides in her food. "The Crystal Palace shut down the whole city block," Charles continues, "I was late to work because of it."

"Crystal Palace?" Red mumbles.

Charles and Nora exchange a concerned look, unsure how to proceed.

"Don't worry, Red, you'll learn these things in time," Nora says. She looks to Charles for help.

"Oh ya, um, the most important thing for you right now is to focus on school" Charles adds, looking pleased with himself. Nora rolls her eyes.

"Speaking of school, how was class today?" Nora asks. Red shrugs in response.

"Anything interesting happen?" says Charles.

"Teacher got mad at me," squeaks Red.

Red's parents look at each other, concerned. "Why would she get mad at you?"

"I asked about the Honey Cartels."

"Now Meredith, we told you in certain situations you need to be careful what you say," explains Charles. Red's skin flickers, unhappy with the lecture.

"Doesn't matter anyways, the humidity alarm went off," Red explains.

Charles leans in to Red to make sure he gets his point across. Red is his world and will go to great lengths for the protection of his daughter. "Remember you are not to "show off" your knowledge at school. Some things are better staying within the family."

"Why?!" Red blurts out.

"Cause I said so." Charles responds. Red flares with emotion, Nora tries to deescalate the situation.

"It's okay Red, it's okay. You see there are..." Nora pauses for a moment, looking towards Charles, "...there are *The Big Guys in the Sky* that they want to keep happy or else things get bad. But if they keep the big guys happy, they make things very good for them."

"Yes, and, the big guys don't like when the schools teach certain things to such young kids, especially gifted children," Charles adds.

Red takes a deep breath and returns to a calmer state. She plays with her food.

"Can you tell me more about the Honey Cartels, dad?"

"Later sweetie, now finish your dinner, your mother was nice enough to harvest this meal for us today."

Red nibbles at her food, not very hungry from the events of the day.

\*\*\*

Red is upstairs, asleep, as Charles and Nora tighten up the kitchen. The air is tense from the conversation at dinner earlier.

"I'm worried about Red," says Nora.

"She's just a child. She's supposed to be asking questions," Charles replies.

"I just don't want her to learn too much too young. The school will have to intervene if she starts asking certain questions." Nora timidly washes a plate in the sink.

Charles tries to put away the glassware in the withering cupboards, but is riddled with pain. Nora embraces him for comfort, as Charles wraps his arms around her. They stand there for a moment in the dimly lit, dusty kitchen, with little to no knowledge of what the future holds for them. From the top of the staircase, a flame flickers as a shadow quickly recedes from sight.

## Chapter 5

Sleep is threatening to take Red into a dream state the moment her head hits the pillow. She's exhausted from her day, but her mind is wide awake. Sometimes she feels like her brain works on overdrive, constantly pumping out new ideas and questions at one million miles per hour. Tonight is no exception. She fights unconsciousness until she sees the light from the hall turn out; the signal that her parents have gone to bed. Sitting upright, Red pinches herself. "Thirty more minutes," she whispers. She needs to make sure her parents are completely asleep before she sneaks out to her father's office library. She reaches for her HaloWatch that she's placed on her nightstand and starts a timer for a half hour. Placing it back down, she opens the nightstand drawer and pulls out a tablet. Pressing the power button, it blinks to life and opens to a blank screen. She reaches back in and rummages around, "Where is it..." Her hand searches blindly in the dark until she finds her stylus, "Got ya!"

Maybe im reaching here but what if the tablet is a "smart tablet" that you can speak to? So instead of drawing Atlas, she guides her tablet to create a holographic design of atlas. Could be different but you get the gist

Red scrunches her face in concentration, trying hard to conjure up the exact image that she made sure to sear into her brain earlier that day. Then she begins to draw Atlas from memory. She scribbles away, starting with the outline of his very Kindred-like body, but then fills it in with criss-cross lines meant to be wires. She makes his head completely smooth, remembering the way it looked like it was covered with a metal helmet. She clicks a button on her stylus and it switches modes. She now goes in and adds a glowing effect to the drawing, starting with his eyes. She made a mark on his chest where a smaller light was glowing a similar yellow-green. Switching colors, she draws over the entirety of his body with a translucent orange, giving her drawing the appearance of a full body glow. She turns down the intensity of the effect so it's barely noticeable, just like her own low burning flame.

Red is hard at work, nose inches from her screen as she doodles furiously. It catches her off guard when her HaloWatch starts to buzz, letting her know thirty minutes have passed. She throws her tablet and stylus back into the drawer and presses the 'stop' button on the alarm projection. Her art will have to wait until later. She has much more pressing matters at hand now. Red gingerly gets out of bed, careful not to make too much noise as she sneaks into the hallway. She pauses at her parent's room, making sure there's no movement on the other side of the closed door. When the coast seems clear, she continues to tiptoe down the hall straight to Charles' office.

Midnight adventures to her dad's library are one of Red's favorite pastimes.[no notes i just love how this sentence sounds.](#)

He has books about anything and everything Red could think to ask about. As it turns out, working for LifeCorp has lots of advantages, unlimited access to "forbidden" literature being one of them. Red wasn't sure if her dad was actually allowed to take home the books he did, but that was one question she wouldn't ever ask. She was just grateful that her dad was as curious about the universe as she was. If he wasn't, she would be left high and dry. There was information in the old books that couldn't be found anywhere else these days. It had either been wiped from all other media platforms, or simply lost in time amongst the chaos of information overload. It was this kind of knowledge that Red craved, driving her crazy until she found herself once again slipping into her dad's office under the cover of night.

Technically, Red wasn't allowed to read her dad's books. "It's not good for her little brain to see all that," her mom whispered to her dad once. Red heard her, though. That's why she has to be careful that they never catch her in the act. It was also way more exciting this way. Red liked to think of these times as her own little secret. Lately, however, she's been growing increasingly suspicious that her dad actually knows about her recon missions. Sometimes a specific book on a topic Red had been asking about would be conveniently left out on his desk, right there for her to easily spot. [Ooooo!](#) Either way, Red cherished these late nights. Just her and the books. They were like old friends she could spend all night catching up with. The smell and feel of the pages bring her so much comfort. Even the ones with words too big for her to understand make her feel invincible, like she's holding an important manuscript written in an ancient foreign language just waiting to be decoded by her. [I love this, pure representation of childlike imagination](#)



The library has taught her more about reading and writing than any teacher ever has. In fact, Red has been able to read well above her school level for a long time now, all thanks to her clandestine library visits. She also has to credit her dad. He has been reading all sorts of philosophical texts and scientific manuals to her ever since she can remember. As she slinks through the dark, she smirks to herself at the memory of her teacher's face the day she brought a book about Phoenix from her dad's collection to school for show and tell. As she stood in the front of the class, she read excitedly, pronouncing each word nearly perfectly. Not one of her classmates knew what she was talking about, really, but they all clapped for her. Her teacher, dumbfounded, just told her she wasn't allowed to bring any more books from home.

Red reaches the door at the end of the hall and carefully turns the knob. She winces at the slight *click* the handle makes as it opens. She pauses for a moment, making sure the sound didn't somehow stir her parents awake. After a beat, she pushes the door open a crack and slides through, slowly closing the door behind her. Once inside, the tension leaves her body. She breathes a sigh of relief, looking around at the impossibly full shelves that line every wall of the office. Red walks right by the large book titled '*Notorious: The Story of The Honey Cartel*' that sits on her dad's desk, heading straight to the bookcase on the far side of the room. *Sorry dad, you missed the mark today.* Red grabs the step stool that sits by the case and hoists herself up. Even with the extra height, she has to lift herself even more by one of the shelves to see the books at the top. She scans the spines until she finds what she's looking for: '*A Brief History of Florabots*'. Book in hand, she lets go of the shelf and drops to the floor with a light *thud*.

Red cozies up in her dad's large office chair. It's big enough for her to completely curl up on it, although tonight she can't help but notice that it's definitely been bigger in the past. Bringing the large book onto her lap, her heart is beating with excitement. The pre-read anticipation is the kind of rush she lives for. She could read something tonight that could completely change her world by morning. Tomorrow, she could be a brand new Red Baelor. She blows a thick layer of dust from the cover, and giggles. It's just like something she's seen done in movies. It's been a while since she's reached for a book on one of the top shelves, one her dad hasn't bothered to touch in a while. That fact on its own is cause for excitement. Red beams as she opens the book to the first chapter. Before she knows it, she's nose deep in the pages. She knew there was more to the story than what parents and teachers had told her, but what she finds shakes her to her core.

In the beginning, the author of the book lays out the concept of the mycelial network. It's a vast, fungus-based, conscious web beneath the surface of the planet Wisdom. Red recognizes the name of the planet, Wisdom, from school, but that's about it. She gathers from her reading that they have lots of greenery and plants there, like on Earth. Red has her own image of what that plant life would look and feel like, but she could never be sure if she was right. There was nothing like that on Phoenix. As she continues to read, the book tells her how the people on Wisdom, or Verdants, were able to harness the power of this network.

*'They created robotic hosts for the network, using the mushrooms to power the machines. Because of this, they were able to create robots that acted on their own, carrying out tasks and basic functions. As time went on, Verdant scientists were able to create different types of these basic host bodies for the mycelial network.'* *I feel it would be good here to lay out more deeply the intentions behind creating the hosts. Something that allows us to introduce the verdant race even if it means going into deeper detail.* ← *I think the intentions are laid out later on when she reads about the mycelial network fighting back. This feels good, as though we are reading page by page with the character.*

Red thinks of the form Atlas took on, and how eerily similar it was to an actual Kindred. It was nothing like the dinky little machines the book is laying out. She continues on, eager to find the answers.

*'As basic as they were, I would caution to say that even in their most basic form they were still highly advanced - but not a hill I will die on in terms of semantics. I do see the foreshadowing happening. the simple machines became helpful to the Verdants, with different models designed to carry out different tasks. These scientists then introduced the technology to all of Nexus. Eventually, the robots took their place as helping hands to people on every planet.'*

Yawn. Red knew all of this. She flips quickly through pages, skimming for anything new and useful. There was a brief mention of how eventually, the technology advanced as scientists were able to create more "human like" vessels. Again, this was all the kind of stuff Red had learned about in school. Turning page after page, Red is eager to get to the real story. She continues to scan the pages about the different models and forms the early robots had taken throughout the years on each planet until she finally lands on chapter 5. Her stomach leaps when she sees the title. *'The Uprising'*. *Heattttt! Wtf.*

Red can feel the early daylight quickly approaching. She begins to read as fast as her young brain can allow her. Each new piece of information leaves her with more questions than answers. The rest of the book goes on to detail how over time, the mycelial network eventually became sentient. It began ignoring the Verdants' instruction, and it began taking over other objects, and even creatures, to accommodate its expanding power. This is where the mention of the more advanced "bodies" is brought back up. Scientists were forced to create the more advanced hosts, like the one Atlas occupies, due to the network's growing awareness. Thus, the Florabot was born. Red's eyes rapidly scan the following pages as she devours the story unfolding before her.

*"Over time, the network developed its own sentience and began resisting their creator's influence, inherently seeking external hosts to expand its control.*

*To manage this, scientists from each planet came together to create the Florabots—robotic vessels fused with organic mycelium. These Florabots were designed to satisfy the mycelial network's hunger for external hosts, allowing the network to channel its influence through them*

*instead of taking over other sentient beings. This strategy enabled scientists to control small but necessary portions of the mycelial network undetected.*

*At first, the Florabots functioned as planned, helping the races across Nexus manage the network and ecosystems. However, as its consciousness grew, it began to assert greater control over the Florabots, who gradually gained autonomy and aligned more with the network than their creators.*

*The once helpful Florabots began to revolt. They disobeyed instruction, even questioning authority. They showed signs of intelligence beyond their programmed knowledge. While the people of the Nexus did everything to try to help accommodate their Florabots, the technology grew hostile. They rejected the hospitality of their creators and owners. Florabots band together across the Nexus to destroy laboratories, sabotaging any further testing and advancements in technology. Eventually, the Florabots began wreaking havoc in the community and homes of civilians, as they grew more and more ravenous for control.*

*Florabots began to harm and kill senselessly, getting rid of anything that stood in their way. There came a turning point when one of the leading Verdant scientists in the Florabot initiative, Xander Straus okayyy 😊, was brutally murdered along with his wife and two children. On the fateful night, The Florabot he kept to help tend his homestead on Wisdom became increasingly hostile to the point of holding the family hostage for 14 hours until it eventually snapped.*

*The tragedy sparked a media frenzy that kickstarted protests and movements to exile Florabots from society. High percent and elite families who owned Florabots, along with businesses who employed the machines, sent them back to the robotic labs from which they came. Here, the scientists worked to separate the hosts from the network, in a process they called 'deactivation'. The Florabots were being sent back in droves, however, as Florabot violence and mayhem continued to occur the labs then became overrun, forcing them to discard deactivated Florabot host bodies. The thing is, the bodies regained sentience once discarded, and Florabots began to pop back up in swarms across Nexus. The network was too powerful for its own good.*

*After the death of Xander and his family, Scientists tried everything to contain the network and the Florabots, as they reverted back to placing them in more simplified versions of the advanced hosts they had made for them. Instead of cooperating and sticking to these forms, Florabots began to create their own host bodies to inhabit. It got to the point where the Florabot population started to overrun the planets.*

*Left with no other choice, The Crystal Palace was forced to create the first ever LifeCorp initiative. The only way to control the mycelial network and Florabot population was to completely destroy and rebuild each megastructure of Nexus from the ground up.*

*However, no matter what, the network still remains, causing Florabots to remain a part of the Nexus population. They are now cast out to their own societies on the outskirts of civilization in order to keep the people of each planet safe from their influence. To this day, this is one of the main reasons the planets are set to regularly experience regeneration."*

*Lets discuss this cause implications here are big when it comes to the origins of both LifeCorp and Degeneration. This could def be the origin story for LifeCorp but many reasons do exist for the degeneration process, etc.*

*Also would be interesting to consider an alternative outcome which is not that they were cast out but perhaps one day they just vanished from human cities and were tracked down to these outskirt locations building their own cities. Maybe the first sign of Flora's influence on their path. This could also be symbolic of preparation.*

Red slams the books shut. Her breath catches in her throat as she chokes back tears. She looks to the window and notices that the inky sky has started to turn a dusty pink; the first sign of morning light. She knows she should be getting back to her room before her parents wake up, but she can't bring herself to stand. She blinks hard, trying to get rid of the image of the words she just read clouding her vision. But she can't. She can't shake the cold chill that is filling her body, causing tiny flames to prick her skin from within like a million pins and needles. Red can't believe she ever considered trusting Axel. She is having a hard time believing he's capable of causing her harm, but there it was. The story, written in black and white. *Xander Straus was brutally murdered along with his wife and two children.* Another chill runs down her spine. How come no one ever told her Florabots were exiled because they were so dangerous? That they kill *children*? *Ooo is Axel the florabot's new name? I love it. Would need to change that up above.*

*This section is a fantastic way to reveal a key part of history and I think it flows very nicely. To zoom out, i do wonder if we should introduce some form of storytelling technology that even the low percenters would have in their homes.*

*Initial idea was some kind of oracle/robot/being that you can pull stories from. Could be holographic, etc. some ideas. I feel that 1) it reminds us that we are years into the future and 2) some kind of conversational technology could allow for easier storytelling I like the idea of an Oracle. It could be a stationary piece or some type of visual implant or device that visualizes what you are reading.*

Fire birds *yep. (lets give them a name)* begin to sound off in the distance. Usually the familiar chirps are a cheerful greeting of the new day, but today Red is finding the sounds hauntingly hollow. Still, she takes it as a sign to get back to her bed. She carefully stands and climbs the shelf back to the top. Once the book is back in its place, Red quietly exits the office and tiptoes back down the hall. She feels her pulse quicken as she reaches her room. It's not from the adrenaline of sneaking out, though, but instead from dread. Axel knows where she hangs out alone by the volcanoes. *Was that his first time at the clearing? Has he been watching me for a while? Why was he there? What does he want from me? Is he going to kill me?* Red's thoughts match the pace of her racing heart.

Red's bed creaks slightly under her as she shimmies back under the covers. The tightly knit chainmail fabric of her blanket clings to her small body, giving her a sense of comfort. She can feel her nervous system begin to calm under the weight. She's snuck out to her dad's library

hundreds of times, but tonight felt different. Usually she felt a sense of accomplishment, excited about all the new discoveries and friends she had just made. Tonight was the first time she came back to bed wishing she hadn't opened the book. Then again, there's a small part of her that's thankful to now know the danger she could be in with Axel. Red inhales deeply. *What do I do now?* She doesn't want to stop going to the clearing in the volcanic forest. Her safe space has suddenly been stripped from her in the matter of one night. Outside her door, she hears her parents shuffling into the hallway. Red closes her eyes and thinks for a moment that she may actually fall asleep, but before she can drift away, her door creaks open. Nora's voice softly floats in, "Red, honey. It's time to wake up."

## Chapter 6

The mornings are brutally cold in the desert valley where Red and her friends reside. It's about midday when temperatures become suitable for the kindred race. The children put on insulator shields to protect themselves from the frost. The advanced plastic technology shrinks to the touch of skin, creating a vacuum seal around the user's body.

Red finishes getting ready and heads out the front door to her parents wishing her a great day at school. The kindred child makes her way down her city street to the sight of Skylar waving her down. Their personalities clash but they do not mind each other's company.

"Red! Red! Wait up!" Screams Skylar.

Red happily waits for Skylar to join her as they make her way to the schoolyard. The streets get a little less paved and the houses look a little less maintained as they walk down the sidewalk.

"Skylar! Red! Hold on!" Says a mysterious childish voice. Red and Skylar look around but do not see where it came from.

"I'm coming!" Cypher emerges from his home to greet his friends. The rusted, mangled metal fence is mirrored by the broken windows on his front porch. Cypher lives in a lower class neighborhood. His situation is unfortunate, but it does not deter his spirit.

The trio usually cuts through the forest to get to school, but due to today's unusually frigid temperatures, they decide to walk through the city. Also, Red knowing Cypher loves seeing the town fountain, she is more than willing to take the alternate route.

The children make their way into the city. Not far from Basinwind, resides the capital of Phoenix, ( *Cinderbrook // Copperstone // Ruston // RedRock // Sunnovale // IronWell // AmberGrove // Binghamton* ). At the center is the fountain dedicated to *The working class of Phoenix*. Elaborately crafted from carved ropes of bronze, the fountain's *vines* wrap around one another

as they reach towards the sky. At the top of the vines, molten lava flows over in red-hot torrents. The lava splits into different streams as it cascades, emptying into a series of smaller basins that surround the base of the fountain. Each basin is decorated with carvings depicting the different stages of a very significant occurrence in the history of Phoenix; degeneration and regeneration. Something she heard her teacher talk about in school. Red always finds herself transfixed by the story unfolding, the carvings illuminated by the glow of the magma giving life to the otherwise lifeless metal figures. Red can swear she's seen the Kindred in the fountain move before. The fountain stands as a reminder to the people of Phoenix about the importance of destruction and creation. It is both beautiful and terrifying, much like life in Nexus itself.

As the children navigate the city streets, they are met with the volatility of the city's lifestyle. From above, Air Lanes are used for smaller, low flying ships that use anti-gravity propulsion to sail through the city. Called levitating gliders, they zoom by the marveled faces of Red, Skylar and Cypher. Below, pedestrians and bikers share the wide open streets that wind throughout the city. The friends are in awe of the shop displays on Main Street. They all stop to stare into the toy shop window, pressing their little noses to it until the glass begins to glow orange from the heat. The shop owner ran out to shoo them off before they warped glass, the crew scurrying away in a fit of laughter. Just before they reach their destination, they take a turn down a long, busy street lined with vendors and shoppers alike.

Red loses herself in the sights and sounds of the street market around her. Pure energy. She takes a moment to study every person she passes by. From hagglers to vendors, Red reads their souls, their aura, ultimately the energy they are giving off.

Red leads Cypher and Skylar through the crowd until— SMACK! Red runs into an elderly woman who steps right out in front of her. Her wild eyes blaze with intensity. The chainmail cloak is old and tattered, barely holding on to the elder woman's shoulder.

She is with a group of impassioned protestors, all in a similar state. Red can tell that they are low percenters. The group of friends stop in their tracks, eyes fixed on the woman as she leans down close to Red's face and shouts, "We will all get left behind, we will all be consumed by the great destruction!"

Red is shocked and falls silent, the woman flying into a frenzy about the next cycle of regeneration. A man emerges from the group, and gets face to face with the children. "The Nexus Council and LifeCorp must allocate more funds and ships to the lower class or we will all get left behind!" Spews the man, covered in burns and dust. Red is about to defend her father's place of work but she feels a tug on her arm. It's Cypher.

"Red, I think it's time to go," whispers Cypher, "I'm getting scared."

The protesters continue screaming things like, "*The time is now!*" and "*We must fight back!*" Degeneration fears are on the rise recently but the Phoenician government urges its civilians there is nothing to worry about and there is no degeneration in the near future.

The senile woman grabs onto Cypher as Red pulls him away from her. They find themselves within a situation out of their control. "The Elite! The Elite! The *All you can eat, Elite!* When the Great Degeneration comes, they will leave in their rocket ships as we, the commoners, are left to starve!"

Historically, during degeneration periods the mid to low percenters are left to fend for themselves with resources becoming increasingly more scarce the lower down you fall in the socioeconomic hierarchy. Most low percent adaptives have been left to die on the rapidly imploding planet.

"*Eat the Elite!*" chants echo throughout the city market. Red is lost in the commotion but Skylar and Cypher plead for them to leave right away. They head for the exit before the old woman stops them once again.

"Sign here to grant bigger and more able ships to the lower percent during degeneration." The woman points to her clipboard. "Um, I'm seven," replies Red. LMAO

Perplexed, the woman studies Red up and down. "Seven? I ain't ever seen a Kindred girl look like you at seven." Uncomfortable, Red and her friends back away and find an exit.

The children reach the fountain and make sure they were not followed.

"Let's take the forest next time," jokes Skylar.

"Forest sounds good," replies Cypher.

Red looks at her friends and smiles. She feels fortunate having Skylar and Cypher as her friends. She tries to block out the thought that her friends could be part of the Kindred race that gets left behind.

They all take turns tossing coins (*I think Pennies are actually fine for Phoenix*) into the fountain. The metal discs hiss and bubble when they hit the oscillating surface of the lava. Red watches her coin sink slowly into the thick magma until it turns to a shimmering droplet, mixing into the rolling lava around it. The liquid metal rolls down an exposed tunnel in the side of the basin that branches, taking it to one of the surrounding pools.

Red watches her coin pour out into one of these smaller basins. This one depicts a group of Kindred taking shelter in a single shack as a great explosion goes off behind them. There are veins of magma from the fountain running through the carving, giving the scene of destruction an eerie tint.

After hearing the protestors in the market, Red is experiencing the fountain in a new light. Things have shifted for her, and she notices an aspect of the artwork that she has always



overlooked. Zeroing in on the Kindred in the shack, she takes in the intricately carved faces. They aren't screaming in terror like one would expect, but instead they look tired and defeated, just watching helplessly as their world crumbles around them. They aren't fighting for their lives. They are simply accepting their fate as the low percent, just as it has always been.

Red snaps out of the hypnosis and turns to her friends. "We better get going. Don't want to be late." Hand in hand, the children make their way to the schoolhouse, leaving the chaotic city streets behind.

## Chapter 7

Red and her friends enter the classroom to Ms. Velora setting up a projection of their solar system. It's not the latest projection model because the school has little to no funds to allocate to classroom technology, but the children do not seem to mind. As they take their seats, holograms fill the classroom depicting the Nexus Solar System.

Seven planets soar through the room over the children's enthralled eyes. The planets orbit equidistantly around Arcadia, the *Constructed Sun*. Ms. Velora gives the students a moment to take in the beauty of their solar system. **One thing I haven't mentioned is that I think Arcadia should have an alternate name amongst the general public. Emphasizing the fact that its history was erased when the humans began harvesting it. Also more conspiracy for the heretics to add to their rhetoric. We can ideate but i think a name like ARC-7 would be dope.**

"Thousands of years ago, when humans were only single planetary, they had a sun," Ms. Velora begins. "Through greedy corporations, they capitalized the sun and sped up its deconstruction process. An organization known as NASA developed the technology to harness solar energy directly from the source, severely weakening the solar core."

Red gazes up at her solar system in awe as Ms. Velora continues her lesson. "Through basic reflection theory, NASA built a series of mirrors that reflected light from other stars, galaxies away. This gave the human race a familiar sense of home as their solar system slowly collapsed on itself."

Ms. Velora points to Earth as it revolves over the childrens' heads. "Earth is a reminder of our roots, where we came from and what we as a race have evolved into." The desert planet flies past Red's nose, looking eerily similar to her home planet.

"In order for humanity to continue, World government agencies came together to create what we know as Atlas Enterprises. Their mission was to create a self-sufficient solar system that revolves around a *man-made* light source. The core value they followed was that sometimes things have to die for others to live."



This sends a shudder through the room. The students are uneasy from what they just heard.

"Think of it as a power grid. If one component is taking too much energy, it needs to be broken down to nothing and rebuilt from scratch for the betterment of the whole system. Once a planet begins degeneration, the civilians are escorted off the planet and relocated to shelters on neighboring planets."

It feels like alot is being explained here all at once. Good we get into transmutation and the origins of nexus. Worth spending more time on this section. It wasn't super clear if pulling energy from the sun is what ultimately led to humans needing to escape earth and create nexus. Transition to degeneration felt quick. I think saving the section at the beginning of Chapter 1 for this lesson makes the storytelling much more potent

Red looks to Cypher who is staring at his feet. He seems down and not engaged in the lesson at all. Red gives him a little pat on the back to make him feel better.

"Now even though it is very important to know this information, it is very unlikely you'd see an event like this in your lifetime. Merely a precaution, degeneration is a tool used to keep our solar system progressing forward." definitely like this POV

Red gradually raises her hand in the air. Ms. Velora calls on Red.

"Yes, Red?"

"Ya, so, are certain people more prepared than others when it comes to this type of thing?"

"Even though the rich are more equipped for the event, degeneration has been perfected over the years to ensure everyone's safety getting off the planet," replies Ms. Velora.

Red looks eagerly to Cypher, who seems to be put to ease from Ms. Velora's answer.

"We all fly away on one big ship?!" Red excitedly blurts out.

"Yes." Ms. Velora feigns a smile. "And no more outbursts from you, Ms. Red."

Red sulks in her seat. "But the old lady from the market said we're all going to di—"

"I said enough!" Ms. Velora slams her fist on her desk. The room falls silent to the students anticipating what is going to happen next. The room is tense, but Ms. Velora diffuses the situation by continuing with her lesson. Red remembers her parents saying that she needs to stop asking *certain* questions at school and decides to remain quiet for the rest of the day.

In her mind, she races to find the answers to the questions she's looking for. *LifeCorp!* Her mind chimes. *Dad has LifeCorp books in his library about planetary degeneration.* With a smile on her face, Red eagerly awaits for the dismissal bell to ring [as she plots her next excursion to the family library.](#)

## Chapter 8

The bell rings dismissing the students from the school day. Red packs up her things as Cypher and Skylar wait up for her outside the classroom. Cypher approaches Red, eyes bright with excitement. "Do you want to go play in the clearing?!" Asks Cypher.

"Sure!" Replies Red, as the friends make their way down the school steps. Red is excited to go play with her friends rather than head straight home because she fears the school called her parents about her outburst in class today. The friends make their way to the edge of the Asha forest and take off running.

Red pulls ahead rather quickly from Cypher and Skylar, her nimble body makes it easy for her to navigate the rocky terrain of the Asha Forest. Once the clearing is in sight, Red waits up for her friends on a boulder ten times her size. She looks around and takes in her surroundings. She is surrounded by her lantern flowers. Its metallic structure blankets the ground around her.

Cypher and Skylar approach Red, hands on their knees, trying to catch their breath.

"Maybe give us a head start next time," jokes Cypher. "Yeah, make it a fair race," adds Skylar. Red laughs it off and they move on to the clearing. The children continue navigating the terrain, jumping from boulder to boulder. Red, feeling confident, does a flip in the air from one boulder to another. A small amount of moisture on the boulder causes her foot to slip on landing. She bangs her knee against the rock pretty badly but stops herself from falling off.

*Great, another bruise.* Red thinks to herself. "Are you okay?" Asks Cypher. Red nods yes and they move on to the clearing.

At the clearing, the friends continue to race, skip, and play around. Red wins at everything, which starts dampening Cypher's spirit.

"Are you sure you're not Elite?" Whimpers Cypher. "You know I don't like when you say that," replies Red.

It's a sensitive subject for Red because deep down she feels like she belongs in an Elite school, but that would mean she would miss out on playing with Skylar and Cypher. Red tries to change the subject.

"One day I'm going to go to the NCC and be the best. I'm going to be the best Kindred warrior to ever come from Phoenix." Red declares. Cypher and Skylar smirk at each other, but offer Red their support.

"You got this, Red!" Cypher exclaims. "I can see it happening!" Skylar adds. Red notices they are being nice but do not really believe what they are saying to her. Skylar picks up on this.

"It's just that you're a low percenter. The NCC doesn't allow low percenters. They only take in Elites with powers we'll never possess," Skylar says.

Red gets angry about this, not at Skylar, but at the truth she is speaking. It's true, the NCC is very selective in the recruits they bring in, but Red truly believes she is worthy of a selection. The children approach the base of the volcano, always in awe of the sheer size of the land structure. *It could be funny if one of them are like.. "Hey what does NCC stand for anyway?" and Red is like "I dunno... Nexus something.. But i'm sure it's cool*

While Cypher and Skylar chase each other around, playing tag on the volcanic rock, Red can not help but notice the spot she had the encounter with the florabot a week ago. Atlas' chill robotic voice sticks in her mind. *I'll see you later, Meredith!* Red quickly checks her surroundings for the florabot, but there is no sign of him.

On edge, she is worried about the unpredictability of the robot. He could be sincere and is actually looking to be friends or there could be an alternative motive. Red does not let her guard down.

"Red, come on!" Screams Cypher. Red does not hear him. "Red!" Cypher repeats. Cypher approaches Red and taps her on the shoulder.

"Are you okay, Red?" Asks Cypher. "Yes, I'm fine," Red quickly replies. "You just seem a little off," Skylar explains.

"I said I'm fine!" Red repeats as she scans the Asha forest tree line. She swears she can see Atlas' head poke out from behind a tree, but it's just her mind playing tricks on her. "Red, what's going on?" Cypher asks.

"It's just, it's just, last week i saw—" *Ring. Ring.* It's Red's HoloWatch. Red quickly answers, it's her parents. They demand to know where she is and why she is not home yet. Red fibs that she lost track of time and was in a study session with Cypher and Skylar for a *big* geography test coming up. Cypher and Skylar look at each other, acknowledging the lie.

"Sorry, sorry. I'll be right home," Red says into her watch. Red hangs up and looks to her friends. "Sorry guys, I need to run home. Are you going to be okay?" Cypher and Skylar nod yes. Red turns and dashes home. She quickly fades out of sight as she navigates through the trees of the Asha forest.

## Chapter 9: Cartel

The air in the hideout is suffocating— sticky, rancid, like a fog of honey that clings to the walls, floor, everything. A faint beam of light fights its way through the dirty windows, giving a dim glow to the grime and rot. The shack has the smell of old blood and stale sweat, the kind that hangs onto you long after the job is done. Carmine sits on the creaky chair in the corner of the room, the cracked fabric scratching his skin as he shifts his weight slightly. He waits calmly, almost serene, his sharp features etched in the dim light like a portrait in an old frame. In one hand he holds a small light blade, twirling it mindlessly as he keeps his eyes trained on the barrels of honey being carried into the shack. In the other, he holds a glass of thick pink liquid. It's not honey, however, but whiskey. On Phoenix, spirits are created with an oil base. Unlike the people here, the other races across the Nexus are able to tolerate liquids, so the Kindred have to get creative with their alcohol. Carmine likes to think this makes their drinks stronger. More concentrated, not as watered down. He grips the glass, swirling it softly with the hands of a man who knew exactly what he was doing—and how little anyone else mattered in comparison. [crying](#). He takes a swig of the burning liquid, wincing as it goes down.

He sits back, ideas flying through his head. Today wasn't just any normal heist and his body can feel it. Laying his drink and blade down on the trunk, he immediately regrets freeing his hands of something to do. The veins in his arm bulge as he rolls up the armored sleeves of his shirt, fingers working diligently at the chainmail cuff. He takes a deep breath and reaches back for his whiskey. Carmine doesn't like to drink often, he usually reserves it for after a particularly big job. He knows someone in his position needs to be at his sharpest at any given moment. When he does drink, however, he makes sure it's strong enough to get the job done. He takes another slow sip, savoring the sting as it travels down his throat and spreads through his chest. This is strong enough. His faint glow ebbs with each sip until the alcohol in his system lands him at a deep red simmer. His muscles finally start to relax. His eyes, however, are cold as iron as he watches his crew work away, all of them still jacked up on the adrenaline of the heist. It's not unusual for Carmine to be the only calm amidst the chaos. [In your bag](#)

It's been seven hours since the successful First Bank of Phoenix heist. In that time, Carmine and his crew have been able to stow honey away in several secret bunkers, the last and smallest amount of it now being brought into their hideout in the volcanic forest. Carmine also made sure he was able to give some to a couple running crews to disperse across Phoenix already. Usually he waited a few days for the dust to settle before he let the runners get their hands on the goods, but he wanted this lot to move quickly. The Honey Cartel had one hard

rule: never keep the loot all in one place. This was especially the case for the amount they managed to walk away with this time. It took Carmine months of planning, but he knew it would be worth it. The payout from this job was bigger than the cartel has seen in quite some time. Now it was time to keep a low profile. Carmine has a hard time sitting around and doing nothing. Waiting between jobs, just buying time until it was obvious they were in the clear to make moves again; it was the hardest part of the job for him. This time though, sitting on all the honey he was, he feels okay with it.

Kicking his feet up on the old, dilapidated trunk in front of him, Carmine sinks lower into the chair. His drink sloshes over the side of the glass a bit, the golden liquid spilling onto the seat. Carmine watches as it seeps into the cushion through one of the tears in the fabric and shrugs it off. The entire place is already soaked in old alcohol and grime. All the smells mix with the fresh honey, creating a ghastly-sweet haze that makes the place feel even more claustrophobic. *Home sweet home*, Carmine muses to himself. The two large men who helped with the heist, Gaspar and Brax, finish bringing the last of the honey in and lock the door behind them. "Curtains", Carmine murmurs. Brax shuffles around to every window, closing the tattered drapes over each one. Quickly, the shack grows dark, the only barely discernible light being emitted from the four bodies in the room. Carmine, Brax, Gaspar and the kid.

The kid.

He's barely seven-years-old, maybe eight— scrawny, pale and wide-eyed. He's been hanging around for months now, shadowing the crew and picking up odd jobs. He never knew his dad, but his mom was a Civian from Basinwind and a loyal runner for the cartel. Carmine was there the day she was killed on a job, leaving the kid an orphan. Orphans on Phoenix with little to no power are as good as dead in the eyes of society, even a young child knows that. The kid also knows that Carmine only took him in because he's a valuable asset, someone small and fast to do some dirty work. The gang doesn't take him seriously, if anything they look at him as a liability. In Carmine's eyes, however, he's as good as gold to them.

"No one ever suspects the kid," Gaspar would say.

"No one ever aims to kill the kid," Carmine would counter.

The kid does some pretty dangerous runs sometimes, his backpack full of honey as he runs straight through militarized property in plain sight. They mostly like to use him for busywork, though, like petty errands and clean up. But he doesn't care. Without Carmine and the crew, he has nowhere else to go. At least with them, he feels like he belongs to something.

"Silas, get over here." Carmine motions to the kid, his hand moving with the sizzle of dying embers in the dark. Silas stands from his place in the corner and scurries over to Carmine. "I told you to stay out of things back there, you know." Carmine's voice is low and stern. Silas looks down to his feet, he can feel his face burn in shame. He knew not to try to stick his nose into business back at the bank, but he couldn't help it. The kid senses resentful

eyes burning into him. Carmine continues, "Look, you're a good locksmith. I'm not saying you're not crafty, but sometimes you can be really fucking stupid."

Silas nods his head in agreement. "I'm sorry, Carmine. I just—" Carmine raises his hand, cutting Silas off before he can finish.

"Next time that happens, you're out. You wanna be a part of this?" Carmine motions between himself and Silas, one eyebrow raised. Silas looks up at Carmine. The kid nods his head, yes. He knows he messed up. Carmine shifts out of his relaxed pose, leaning closely into Silas' face. As he speaks, the kid can smell the strong whiskey on his breath. "Then listen to me." Silas visibly shivers, nodding again. Carmine gives him a single nod back; a silent signature of an agreement.

Reading this makes Silas a really interesting character to me and I think he could have a dedicated chapter similar to Red's exploration of Asha Forest. Maybe his own mini heist before the big one. Maybe something more

A small lamp has been turned on in the center of the room. Gaspar and Brax are going through the barrels, splitting the spoils between smaller jars and sealed bags. This haul was massive— more honey than they've ever stolen before at one time— but no one was celebrating. No one was really even talking. There was a sense of urgency to a lot this big. The only sound was the dripping of honey, the low scrape of glass against metal and the occasional muttered curse. Carmine watches on with unbreakable concentration, his expression unreadable. Silas sits on the ground next to him, criss-cross applesauce, drawing circles in the dirt on the ground with his finger. Carmine's eyes flick to him for a moment. This innocent image of Silas stands starkly against the bleak, dangerous atmosphere.

Before the kid's mom died, she would bring him around every so often. Never after a job like this, though. Never after a job at all, she was good about that. She must've sensed how uneasy it made Carmine to have the kid around the cartel, though, because she would often say something along the lines of, "I know a kid shouldn't be in this kind of place, but what am I supposed to do?" Great question. Carmine would just smirk, a twinkle in his eye as he joked, "We put him to work."

Silas sits up straight and watches the two humongous men at work with the honey. The thick, golden substance **honey is pink** entrances him as it drizzles into containers, swirling into rich patterns at its surface. Carmine averts his concentration back to his little friend again. The kid's eyes are full of desperation. Like he's begging for a shot, like he thinks this is his moment. Silas tries to act casual, fidgeting as his eyes dart from Brax to Gaspar. Like he's waiting for someone to give him a signal— anything to show that he was a part of it after tonight. Part of this. The real business. Carmine sees this play out on Silas' face, knowing the question is coming. He can see it bubbling to the surface. It's only a matter of seconds before he can't contain it any more. "Carmine, can I *please* help?" Silas begs. There it is. Carmine's eyes dart

back to the honey, his lips curling into the slightest smile. Something about the kid's determination tickled him.

"No." he chirps.

"But why?" Silas pleads.

"You don't know how deep these waters run."

"I do too. I know what to do. I've seen you all do it a million times!"

"No."

And that was that. Silas slumps back against the wall, crossing his arms in disappointment. Carmine looks over to him and chuckles.

"It's not funny," Silas sulks. "It really is," Carmine replies, standing up from his seat. He looks down at Silas and can't help but notice just how tiny he looks. Sometimes he forgets how young the kid really is. He's good for slipping through tight spaces, but how much longer will he be good for those kinds of things? He does have to start learning some more of the trade at some point. But today's not the day. Not with this lot of honey.

Silas looks up at Carmine, the boss's eyes are dark, cold and impenetrable. The kid flinches under the weight of the stare, but there's something strange about it. Something almost warm. Carmine crouches next to the kid, bringing his voice to a whisper, "You really want in, kid?" The nickname hits Silas in the chest, he hates that they call him that. *The kid*.

Silas takes a deep breath and releases, "I know I went into the room, but I...I did everything else you asked. I was fast. I didn't mess anything up. I can help more!" The words come out in a rush, like he's afraid that if he hesitates, he'd lose his chance. His eyes are wide and pleading, though he tries to hide it. A smirk creeps onto Carmine's face. It's a look that says he knows something the kid doesn't. He looks amused. He leans in closer. "If you want to be one of us," his voice is low and conspiratorial, like they're sharing a secret, "you're gonna have to do more than run a few errands and pick a few locks." Silas opens his mouth, but the words catch his throat. He's realizing how wrong he might be, how small he was in Carmine's shadow.

"You think this is all a game? A cool club to be a part of?" Carmine's tone shifts, but it doesn't lose its strange, magnetic charm. He isn't loud, he isn't angry— he's just...explaining things. "I know you think it's about running fast or not making a sound, but it isn't." Carmine shakes his head. There is something almost mesmerizing about how calm Carmine is. He has a way of drawing you in, of making you feel like you were the only person in the room. Even now, crouched down to Silas' level in the middle of a mess, the weight of the night pressing in, Carmine is composed and poised. He could be the devil himself, but there's a charm about him that makes it hard to look away. Silas would do anything for his approval. Still, he can't help but feel frustration blooming in his chest as he sinks back against the wall.

Silas tries to look away and ignore the eyes fixed on him. His small face is stuck in a deep, almost comical frown. Carmine can't help but laugh again. Silas lets out an exasperated sigh. "What *now*?"

"Nothing," a chuckle barely rumbling in Carmine's chest, "it's just that your face is going to freeze like that."

Silas rolls his eyes, "you never take me seriously."

"Yeah, well, you're six," Carmine smiles. His dark eyes spark up slightly in anticipation, he knows this answer will press the kid's buttons.

Silas' face burns a brighter red, "I'm eight!"

Carmine lets out a genuine laugh, the lilting sound cutting through the deadly still tension of the shack. Silas can never stay mad when he sees Carmine in a good mood, even if it's at his own expense. Carmine's charm is just as lethal as his malice. It's just as fickle as well. The switch can be flipped on the drop of a hat without any warning, so Silas knows to still tread lightly with him at all times. Silas surrenders a smile in return.

*CRASH!* The sound of breaking glass against the floor echoes through the room like a death knell, shaking Carmine from the moment. Without turning or taking his eyes off Silas, he snarls, "Who the fuck dropped that jar?" The words are sharp and precise, cutting through the haze of the room. No one answers. In one swift move he's at Gaspar's side on the other side of the room, his eyes as sharp as knives in the side of the large man's head. "Fucking *hell*, Gas," he hisses. Gaspar stands frozen, the honey pooling at his feet amongst the shattered remains of the jar. To his horror, some of it begins to drip through the cracks in the floorboards. Silas' whole body tenses up as he presses his body against the wall, wishing he could somehow move through it to make his escape.

The switch has been flipped.

All at once the air is sucked from the room, leaving nothing but silence. No one dares to speak or move a finger. The slow, sticky wave painted across the floor begins to pool at the men's feet. They all wait for Carmine to make the first move. As he watches Gaspar, the only indication of his anger comes from the slow, crimson boil beneath the surface of his skin. His face remains stoic, waiting for his henchman to say something. Finally Gaspar manages to sputter out a breathy, "I-I'm sorry. I guess it just slipped." His heart hitches when Carmine's shoulders visibly relax.

Carmine takes a sharp inhale through his nose and closes his eyes. Everyone watches as he saunters slowly back to the chair on the other side of the room. Even in these horrifying moments, he seems to float through space. Silas' eyes bulge out of his head as he holds his



breath. He grows dizzy, the scent of the honey and alcohol overtaking him like slow creeping poison in the heat of the moment. He knows this calm before the storm all too well. Carmine ignores Silas as he picks his drink up off the trunk where he left it. His long fingers curl around the glass as he swirls it slowly. The amber liquid catches what little light the lamp gives, casting flickers of gold across his face, illuminating the hard lines of his tensed jaw. His already dark eyes have gone completely black. He turns his body back towards the two men, his lips curling into something that isn't quite a smile. At least not a kind one.

"Well," he gestures dramatically to the quickly shrinking puddle of honey, "aren't you going to pick it up?" The words come out calmly, sending a shiver down Silas' spine. Gaspar drops down quickly, making a sad attempt to scrape up the precious substance and put it into another jar. As he does, Carmine paces back and forth from one end of the room to the other, the shadows of the room shifting around him as if bending to his will. He stops back at the trunk and downs the last of his whiskey. Suddenly, with the speed and grace of something inhuman, he whips around and throws the glass in Gaspar's direction. It hurdles through the air, hitting the ground next to the man, hard, sending shards scattering in every direction. Gaspar flinches, covering his face from the explosion. Silas jumps, his heart leaping into his throat.

"Get up off the floor." The demand rumbles from somewhere deep within Carmine, leaving his mouth like a growl. Gaspar scrambles to his feet, his stomach turning in dread.

"Do you understand what you just did?" asks Carmine, his eyes narrowing. Gaspar can feel the weight of Carmine's gaze boring into him, though he can't bring himself to look back. He steps back from the mess, his heart hammering in his throat. He may be much larger than Carmine, but that doesn't matter. That never mattered. Carmine carries much more power than anyone else in the game. That's because his power doesn't come from his stature or from being born an Elite, it comes from something much more sinister. It comes from experience, street cred, blood spilt— all in the name of the cartel. Carmine has connections and drive. He has a way of making sure things get done and they get done the way he wants. Everyone knows not to piss off the cartel boss, because when he was pissed, there was always a price to pay.

Gaspar raises his hand as if swearing an oath, "it was an accident. Won't happen again."

"It was an accident." Carmine's response is more conversational than an interrogation. Gaspar's body tenses, preparing for his punishment. He knows he fucked up. The honey isn't just a commodity, it's their livelihood. It's the lifeblood of the Nexus. What the cartel does for the greater masses of the solar system is incomparable, it's far too important to be making careless mistakes. Especially with this honey. The honey from the First bank of Phoenix. It's traceable, and any mindless slip up could get them all caught and killed by the Nexus militia. Gaspar knows that Carmine has chosen him to be one of his trusted comrades because he's careful, thorough and strong. He doesn't make stupid mistakes, the pressure of the night is just catching up to him. Still he knows, dropping the jar isn't an accident, it's a disaster.

Carmine lets out a low, bone-chilling chuckle. His orange glow fades to an almost white-hot smolder, his gaze growing colder. Silas can't help but notice that there's something more behind his eyes, like the slightest flicker of amusement. "Oh man," he sighs incredulously, "I mean, I don't have to tell you what you've done. That stupid fucking look on your face tells me that you know." Carmine is pacing in circles, his signature smirk returning to his face. He continues, "You've made us vulnerable. You've wasted product. Every drop of *this* supply counts. It's worth more than my life, definitely more than yours." The snide remark is ominous, Gaspar starts to feel light headed. Carmine walks to a cabinet on the far side of the shack and opens it. Grabbing a large, dirty bottle off the shelf, he opens the corked lid with a *pop*. Gaspar jumps at the sound, his nerves at an all time high.

Carmine moves closer, his steps quiet, predatory. He hasn't touched Gaspar. He doesn't need to. His presence is enough to suffocate him, but a little assistance never hurts. Carmine grips the bottle, the thick liquid inside sloshing and bubbling with each step. It isn't whiskey, it isn't honey. It isn't anything sweet at all. Gaspar's eyes widen once he realizes what Carmine has. He immediately recognizes the substance as something they've used to torture enemies many times before. It's a sickly, cloying oil known as Noxis. Thick, clear and rancid.

Silas, also recognizing the bottle, begins to panic. His breathing quickens, he doesn't want to see this. As he approaches Gaspar, Carmine's soft smile curls into a smug grin, his eyes mirroring the sick pleasure radiating from within him. Calmly still, he holds the bottle up, the liquid sloshing softly as he tips it side to side. His eyes meet Gaspar's. "I don't waste honey," he whispers almost imperceptibly. The bottle catches the lamp light, the corner of the glass glinting like the edge of a sword. "But you," he motions to Gaspar, "apparently do." Carmine frowns, feigning empathy, as if what he's about to do is going to hurt him just as much as it's going to hurt his henchman.

The blood drains from Gaspar's face. He opens his mouth to plead with Carmine, but he can't get the words out before he is doused with a wave of an impossibly thick, foul smelling substance. It hits him in the face, like a cold, hard slap. The clear sludge is unnaturally dense and smooth, engineered to adhere to a person like a parasite, to cling to every inch of skin and, more importantly, to choke. Gaspar gasps for breath, but it's too late. The sluggish, tar-like oil takes the opportunity to make its way into his mouth. The Noxis begins to travel down Gaspar's body with a slow, strange, almost living quality to it.

"Car-carmine. Please-" Gaspar chokes out, dropping to his knees. Carmine's eyes flicker in response. Without words, he holds the bottle over Gaspar's head and empties the rest of the Noxis onto his large, bald head. The shimmering oil adheres to the bare skin, perfectly smooth and impenetrable like a viscous helmet. Flowing down him, it oozes into his ears, nose, eyes—everything it can reach. As the Noxis works to engulf Gaspar, it clings to him, drawn to his skin like it knows it's meant to devour. The more he tries to shake it off, the harder it clings. The oil seems to know him, sticking faster, sucking onto his neck and torso with an almost magnetic force, dragging itself down his body as if it were claiming him. It moves like a snake, clinging to every inch of him now, sucking at his pores, filling every crevice.

Gaspar tries to yell, but the sound escapes as a series of gurgles. He tries to inhale too deeply, the Noxis surging back into his throat, thick and choking. He gags, clutching his neck as his chest heaves with his labored breathing. Eyes bulging, Gaspar desperately tries to wriggle free, but each breath, each movement only makes the substance cling more tightly, holding him down like it's keeping him from escaping. He grows darker, the small yellow flame within him begins to wane as the oil presses into his pores and encases him like shrink wrap. His skin crawls, like the liquid is feeding off of him, consuming him as he drowns. Brax, who's been silent and still this whole time, jumps back in terror, letting out a small shriek. Carmine, cool and collected, simply takes a few steps back, trying to distance himself from the ominous pool forming on the floor.

Silas watches in silent shock from across the room, covering his mouth and nose with his little hand. The smell of the Noxis is sour and putrid, like ancient decay, only adding to the already unbearable stench in the shack. Gaspar's muffled cries for help turn to awful squelches, as Silas watches the impossibly large man writhe like a helpless worm on the ground. It's all too much for him. His stomach flips, he thinks he might throw up. Gaspar throws an arm out to Brax for help, but there's nothing he can do. The three of them watch as Gaspar struggles against the thick, unforgiving liquid. Silas wants to scream out, to demand Carmine do something to stop the Noxis, but he doesn't dare. His eyes flick to Brax. The equally large man remains stoic and still, just watching his friend fall victim to the horrible grease. Silas can't help but wonder if he's also screaming inside, desperate for someone to stop the torture. You wouldn't know it if he was. Showing weakness was the easiest way to put a target on your back around Carmine.

After a painfully long struggle, Gaspar's body goes still. His chest stops heaving and no more noises manage to escape his Noxis-filled gullet. Finally, his dim glow is completely extinguished, as small swirls of black smoke dance beneath his now black skin. The Noxis has taken him, swallowed him whole. There's nothing left but a suffocating, slick void. As the large man lays lifeless in the middle of the shack, the sudden silence is completely deafening. Silas holds back tears, trying his best to appear unaffected. Carmine turns his nose up at the scene, as if annoyed by a slight inconvenience. "Damn," he mutters, "clean this up." He cocks his head to Brax, who nods back in return. Order received, no questions asked. Brax towers over Gaspar, his body now unrecognizable. "Make sure it's done right" Carmine adds, turning away with a cold, deliberate indifference.

The air hangs heavy, Silas can almost feel it clinging to him. He scratches at his skin, feeling paranoid and claustrophobic. Just then, there is a loud knock at the shack. The sound echoes off the walls and Carmine turns his head slowly towards the door. Silas and Brax look at one another, almost as if to ask "*did you hear that too*"? The doorknob jiggles. Carmine takes slow steps closer.

"I know you guys are in there, let me in!" a female voice cries out. Silas lets out a sigh of relief, releasing what feels like years of built up tension. He knows that voice anywhere. Carmine, also recognizing the intruder, relaxes his stance and opens the door. A small woman

bursts in, talking at a million miles an hour. A true spit-fire, tiny flames leap from the top of her head excitedly as she glows a slightly brighter orange than the three others in the room. “What the *hell* have you been doing, Car? Why did I hear that the North runners already got their share of the loot? You never bothered once to reach out to me? No, why would you let lil’ ol’ Ara in on the deal? I’m only your best connect, you little shit! You think you would’ve gotten all th-” she stops short in her ramblings, eyes locked on the heap of a man in the middle of the floor. Her orange hue fades quickly, a slight whisper leaves her lips, “oh shit...”

Ara takes in the scene. First Gaspar, then the broken jar of honey not far from him. The Noxin is still moving eagerly across the corpses’ skin, sucking out the last bits of life and flame from its host. “You had to kill him?” she asks, shooting Carmine a death glare. Her gaze then lands on Silas, her coal-dark eyes pop from her head, “in front of the kid?”

“He was a liability.” Carmine shrugs, turning away from her. Ara walks to Brax and puts a reassuring hand on his shoulder. She mouths a silent “I’m sorry.” Brax, eyes sunken and low, gives a solemn nod, still not wanting to give away too much emotion. With her hands on her hips, Ara surveys the room. “Alright then,” she starts, with authority, “we’re going to need an empty jar to wrangle this Noxin into. Then we’ll get him out of here.” Silently, Brax follows orders.

As the two start working carefully to get the Noxin under control, Ara looks over her shoulder to Silas. His eyes are wide. He’s shaken, but feels a little better now that she’s here. Something about her presence always makes him feel a little more at ease. She gives him a meek smile before turning her attention back to Gaspar. “You’re a dick, Carmine,” she spits. Unbothered, Carmine chuckles coolly. Only Ara can get away with talking to him like that.

Carmine saunters back over to Silas, the kid’s heart racing as they make eye contact for the first time since Gaspar was killed. He felt like he was coming face to face with a monster. Carmine crouches down, his eyes intense and dark. He studies Silas’ face as if trying to find something hidden behind his eyes. Maybe he was looking for a sign of fright or disapproval, like he’s trying to sniff out the weakness in him. Silas holds his breath, trying to remain hard and unwavering. “*This*,” Carmine whispers, eyes staring deep into Silas’ soul, “is what being a part of this is about.” Silas nods his head. The cartel works like this, he gets that. There were no second chances.

“You gotta be able to take it. And it’s...can you?” Carmine raises an eyebrow. Silas stares back, he knows he’s not looking for an actual answer. Yet. He continues, “You’re not just here for the honey, kid. You’re here for the life.” He says the words smooth and slow, like he was rolling them around in his mouth before releasing them. “It’s about survival. It’s about knowing when to talk, when to shut up, when to bleed, and when to let someone bleed for you.” His gaze is intense, like he’s trying to carve the words into the kid’s soul. There’s a moment— a long drawn out silence— where neither of them say anything. The weight of Carmine’s words press down on Silas. Then, he tilts his head, the faintest hint of a smile tugging at the corner of his

lips. Something about the way he's speaking doesn't feel like a warning to Silas, but rather, an invitation.

"I want it," Silas whispers, his voice hitching at the end, "I can do it."

Whole section is brilliant. Torture scene is brutal. Establishes the relationship between the Cartel members and emphasizes the reality of Cartel life.

You may already have some ideas but could be interesting to insert a twist such as Carmine being the one who actually killed Silas's mother and/or Carmine is secretly a family member.

## Chapter 10

Red approaches the steps of her home, worried about what her parents are going to say, but also processing what happened at the city market today. "*We will all get left behind, we will all be consumed by the great destruction,*" rings through Red's mind. Red does the best she can blocking the old woman's face out of her head but her cackles continue to have a hold on the poor child.

Red enters her home to the relief of parents. Charles lectures Red that she needs to be more careful and to be more responsive on the HoloWatch, **for clarity is it Holowatch or Halowatch?** while Nora analyzes the bruise on Red's knee.

"Playing in the Asha Forest again, Red?" Questions Nora.

"I was playing with Skylar and Cypher!" Responds Red.

"You know we don't like you going into the Asha Forest," Charles chimes in, "It is no place for a child. Way too dangerous."

Red does not enjoy the lecture, but understands it's not the time to talk back. Instead, Red notices a LifeCorp newsletter sprawled out on the kitchen table. The headline reads, *Degeneration is the birthplace of new opportunity*. Memories of the marketplace today rush back to her, contradicting the message of the newsletter headline.

*Are you okay?*

Red remembers pulling Cypher from the crowd of angry protestors. Their eyes are full of a balance between hate and sadness.

*Red!*

Red snaps out of it to the sight of her concerned parents. She quickly looks for a lie. "Yes, yes, I'm okay. Just really tired, I'm going to head to bed." Red moves past her parents and up to her room.

\*\*\*

Red lays in her bed, but has no inclination of falling asleep. Her mind races from one thing to another, unable to bring her mind to rest. She finally becomes focused when she remembers her dad's LifeCorp books neatly put away in his library. Maybe these books have the answers to the questions she has about planetary degeneration.

Red slips out of bed and heads to the hallway. Her father's office is down the hallway on the right, past her parents' bedroom. Red gives herself a pep talk that she needs to absolutely quiet if she does not want to wake up her parents.

The door creaks open as Red enters the hallway. There is a beautiful stillness to the house late at night. The lava from the nearby volcanoes offer a natural night light to the children of Phoenix. Red makes her way down the hallway, each step more careful than the last.

She makes it to her parents' door. Sparks flutter from her mouth as she holds in a breath. Charles' snoring rattles the house, Red does her best to not let out a giggle. She moves forward.

Red makes it to the door of her dad's office. She is almost there. The doorknob slowly turns as Red continues to be absolutely quiet. She opens the door to her dad's office. It's not much, a desk with a wall of books. But to Red, it's a wealth of knowledge, the answers she is looking for.

Red slides into the office, remaining undetected, and heads to the bookshelf. She is astonished by how many books line the shelves. Towering over her, she tries to read the spine of each book. Her father is a collector of knowledge. Anywhere from *Late Stage Population Collapse* to *Fundamentals of Planetary Horticulture*, Charles made it a priority to absorb as much information as possible.

Red continues to scan the bookshelves until she comes across a book labeled, *Planetary Species of the Nexus Solar System: A Full Guide*. Red, captivated by the title, pulls the book off the dusty bookshelf and sits down on her father's desk chair.

Flipping through the book, Red stops on a page labeled *The Kindred Race*. She reads through the paragraphs highlighting their mastery of fire manipulation and regenerative healing properties. Looking down at her bruise, she wonders why it has not healed yet. *Am I not Kindred?* She mutters.

A diagram on the next page piques her interest. *The Kindred Body* labels the sketch in the middle of the page. It looks like Red, but older and taller. Every muscle is defined from head to toe. Red can feel the warrior spirit come off the page. The diagram is notated with the height of 200 centimeters. Red stands up tall trying to mimic the diagram. She can feel the Kindred warrior spirit coursing through her veins.

"Red is that you?" A voice comes from the hallway. Red quickly scampers to hide the book out of sight. Charles pokes his head through the door. "Red, what time is it? What are you doing out of bed?" Charles asks in a half yawn.

Red scans her brain for an explanation. "Oh I was just," Red blanks. "I was sleepwalking!" Red gets out. "Sleepwalking?" Charles responds with a slight chuckle. "Yeah, sleepwalking. And thanks for waking me up, I should be getting back to bed." Red does an awkward shuffle past her dad, as he gives her a comforting pat on the head.

After watching Red scurry back to her room, Charles enters his office and tidies up a bit. Adjusting his lamp and pushing his chair back to his desk, he heads over to his favorite piece of the room; his bookcase. Thousands of years of Nexus research and history line the rustic shelves. He runs his finger along the spine of books, one by one, until a smile comes to his face. *A gap. Between Phonology: Languages Across Nexus and Population Genetics of Phoenix*, a book is missing. *I love this.*

## Chapter 11

The freezing morning air rolls into Red's bedroom window, nipping at her nose as she begins to stir from her sleep. She blinks slowly awake, realizing she's still clutching the book from the night before. She picks it up and stares at the page she was on when she drifted back to sleep. Big, bold letters stare back at her:

### **DEGENERATION PHASE 2: COLLAPSE OF INFRASTRUCTURE**

Red feels a hitch in her breathing, her eyes scanning the page filled with illustrations of crumbling buildings and gaping sinkholes. She slams the book shut and inhales sharply. *Too early for this.* Daylight slowly begins to creep its way across the floor and up the walls, the subtle warmth cutting through the cold of the dawn. Down the hall, Red can hear her parent's stirring in the kitchen. The first signs of a new day always bring a sense of comfort and excitement to Red, but something is weighing on her today. Between the protestors in town and her revelation about the florabots, things don't feel as *right* as they usually do. In fact, Red feels like everything is off. It's like she's in a dream where things appear the same, when in actuality, everything is just a darker, twisted version of itself masquerading as reality. *damn.*

Looking down at the book, she feels the weight of it all in her hands. She holds back tears, a knot of helplessness twisting in her stomach. She can't stop the florabots from what they've already done, just like she can't single handedly save every Civian and Outcast from dying during Regeneration. There's nothing she can do about any of it. Before she breaks down, her father's voice pops into her head. She remembers something he always asks her when she's upset about something out of her control.

"What is something you *can* do to make yourself feel a little better right now?" [i love this. More teachings from dad.](#)

The knot in Red's stomach tightens. A fire shoots straight through her body as she hops out of bed and shoves the book under her pillow for safe keeping. She works quickly to get ready for the day, grabbing her small satchel bag and filling it with this and that. *I know exactly what I can do.* Invigorated by her new mission, Red barrels down the hallway and crashes into the kitchen where her parents are enjoying a quiet morning. "I'm going to the clearing!" She blurts out, grabbing a hunk of bread off the counter and shoving it in her mouth. Charles raises an eyebrow at the frazzled interruption, "And good morning to you, too."

"How did you sleep, honey? Your father told me you were sleepwalking again," Nora asks calmly, furrowing her brow in concern. Charles smirks. Both her parents are scrolling the morning news that floats in front of them, projecting from a small box on the table that receives the daily broadcasts. Next to the box sits two metal mugs of a thick, steaming sludge of molten rock mixed with a type of coffee bean exclusive to Phoenix. Red lets out an exaggerated sigh, "Yes, mom, I'm fine! No time to talk now, I have to go!" She races for the front door. Just as she steps outside, her parents call out to her.

"Make sure you have your Holowatch!" Nora fusses.

"And don't have too much fun without us!" Charles adds.

Red half turns back, flashing a thumbs up with the hand her watch is on.

\*\*\*\*\*

Her little legs going as fast they can, Red makes her way through the volcanic forest. All the creatures scatter as she cuts through bushes and branches, scaring them from their posts. Her heart pounds in her chest. As dangerous as the florabots may be, Red knows she needs to talk to Axel herself. She needs answers straight from the source. That's the one thing she *can* do right now. As she nears the clearing, her legs start to slow, her heart now in her throat. She tries to steady her breathing but she's winded from running and the anticipation of the encounter. Taking one last deep breath, she readies herself and steps into the clearing.

At first, Red is still and silent, waiting for Axel to arrive. All of her usual wild friends are frolicking in the clearing. Up above, her phoenix soars. Suddenly, Red feels her fear melt away.



"It's okay," she whispers to herself, "maybe he won't even come today." Red shrugs her tension off and wanders to her seat against the Volcano.

Taking a book from her satchel, she settles in to read. Around her, the forest stirs to life. She breathes in the air, her embers flickering in response. Red begins to forget about all of her worries she woke up with this morning, when suddenly the group of hoppers running at the base of her rock come to a complete stop. The air grows still, as all the other creatures follow suit. Red holds her breath as her stomach sinks. All at once, the animals scatter from the clearing, leaving Red alone against the volcano. On the far edge of the forest, she sees the phoenix settle on a rocky branch, eyes trained on Red as it intently watches over. Red knows exactly what's going on and she prepares for her confrontation.

Out of the bushes, just beneath the phoenix, a small silver disk whizzes into the clearing. Confused, Red hops from her seat to the ground to get a better look. *That's not Axel.* The disc buzzes by, making loops and playful patterns in the air before stopping abruptly before Red's face. Eyes wide, Red inspects the little drone. It has a green light on the side of it, blinking rapidly. Red leans in even closer, the sudden movement causing it to jump back and let out an excited chirp. Red, startled, jumps back as well. Before she can process what's happening, the unassuming floating object begins to transform right before her eyes.

With a subtle hum, the drone expands, its edges unfurling like petals of a flower. As its smooth side panels slide apart, it reveals its hidden components inside. Its central core glows with a soft green light that pulsates as the wires and internal parts whirr to life and rearrange themselves. Then, from within, thin, articulated limbs emerge, wires working to climb their way around them like vines as they extend. The disc elongates, reshaping into a sturdy torso. As the limbs continue to form from the torso, the joints all click into place with precision until it lands softly on two newly formed feet. A head forms from a remaining ball of metal at the disc's core, two eyes forming and flickering to life.

Red watches, mouth agape in awe, as Axel takes shape in front of her. Transformation completed, the florabot stands poised in his familiar humanoid form. His eyes glow steady and then rapidly blink to awareness. "Meredith!" he shouts, his tinny lilt excited and eager, "You came back!"

Red stares back at Axel, eyes bulging. She can't seem to find the words she wants, still shaken from the transformation she just witnessed. She has a million thoughts running through her head now, each one flying by too quickly for her to pick out and choose just one. She thinks about the woman shouting in the square about degeneration, about the book she found in her dad's office, about how all that pain happened at the hands of the florabots. She thinks about how it will all continue to happen forever, more frequently with each passing cycle because of the florabots. *Why did they do that? How could they do that?* She wants to scream out, but all she can manage to choke out is a meek, "Axel..."

Axel's eyes surge at the sound of Red's voice. Standing up a little straighter, he chirps a mechanical tune in response. Red wonders how something so seemingly innocent, so cute, could be so dangerous. She wants to choose her next words carefully. "Axel, I need to talk to you about something. Something important."

Axel tilts his head, his expression and body language shifting from joy to concern. "What is it?"

Taking a deep breath, Red blurts out, "I learned about the Florabots— what humans did to you and your kind. How they made you guys and how the network powers you but you all got too powerful and multiplied too quickly. I read about Xander Straus, how he was killed by one of you. I read about all the mean things and the violent things. Why did they do it? Would you guys still do it now? And I read about degeneration and how the cycle is sped up now because of *you!*" The words are spilling out of her mouth before she can stop them, each one feels venomous as it leaves her tongue. She hates the way it all sounds, but she can't help it. It's all been building up inside of her since the night she learned of it all, and now was her moment to let it all go. To finally get some answers.

The change in Axel is instantaneous. The vibrant green glow in his eyes dims, and for a moment, he looks almost defeated. "You shouldn't have to know those things," his voice echoes with an emotion Red can't quite place. He shifts from one foot to the other, looking down to avoid Red's wild, pleading gaze.

"I want you to tell me why. I need to know the truth," Red begs. "Please help me understand."

Axel lifts his head to look at Red. There is a deep red glow in her chest, leaving the rest of her completely dark. As she speaks the next words, the embers inside her flare, stoked by her intensity. "Do you want—I mean—are you going to hurt me?"

The florabot's body tenses at the question, his eyes blinking quickly. Red takes a step back, unsure of how to process the abrupt shift in stature. For a second, she regrets asking the question. Maybe she came on too strong, she should've eased into the subject. Her eyes flick to the Phoenix sitting just above them, it's neck craning down to oversee the meeting. It shifts slightly, lurching forward as if readying itself to jump into action at any moment. Red takes note of this, getting herself ready to run if need be. Axel unlocks from his statuesque state, relaxing his shoulders. Slowly, he shakes his head, "Come with me. There's something I need you to see."

\*\*\*\*

Red follows Axel as he leads her deeper and deeper into the forest. She's been tailing him for almost an hour now, the whole time very few words are spoken between the two.

She realizes too late that she has left her satchel back at the clearing, but she at least still has her holowatch. Her heart is racing, her thoughts jumping back and forth between *this is exciting* and *I'm going to die*. She's thought about turning back several times, but about a mile back, Axel begged her to trust him. She nodded in agreement, unsure if she actually does trust him, or if she's just letting her curiosity win today.

She keeps asking herself why she is going so deep into the forest with something so potentially dangerous. Maybe that was it, though. Right now, as far as she knows, he only has the potential to be dangerous. Plus, something about the way he looked and spoke when she confronted him makes her think there's more to the story. Red looks up to the sky, making sure her phoenix companion is still with them. It's been with her the entire time, giving her a sense of safety. As long as it stays, she'll keep going. She silently thanks the bird for always staying by her side and protecting her.

The three continue their trek, the energy of the forest changing as they stray further and further from the clearing. With the Phoenix soaring low above, Red and Axel twist through rocky trees and dry, barren brambles. The atmosphere is charged, almost electric, when they finally reach a secluded enclave. Red checks the time and notices they've been walking for over two hours. She can hear a faint, ever present hum in the air. Every inch of her feels like it's conducting an electric current, energy surging from her chest to her fingers and toes. Axel stops and turns to Red. "What is this place?" she asks, keeping her voice at a whisper.

"Welcome to our community," he motions for Red to walk through a small opening in a thicket of trees and rocks. His voice is a mixture of pride and sorrow.

Hesitantly, Red walks to the opening in the trees. The phoenix, swooping in low, perches itself on one of the top branches. Leaning in, a soft, deep "coo" rumbles from its throat, letting Red know it's staying close by. Red gives the bird an understanding nod before continuing forward. Brushing aside the dense thicket of dry brambled branches hanging down, she steps into the clearing. Her eyes grow wide. The picture unfolding before her is nothing like Red has ever seen in her beloved forest before, and she has the chilling thought that they may not even be in the Asha anymore. *Did we walk all the way to The Geruda?* But, as Red takes in her new surroundings, her initial fear slowly morphs into wonder and curiosity. She doesn't care how far away from home she is anymore.

The florabot community is a breathtaking site. Nestled right at the base of three volcanoes and hidden by towering rocks and coarse, barren trees, vibrant colors dance amongst the rugged terrain of the thriving town. The air is electric, humming with life—both organic and synthetic. Red, eyes glowing in wonder, looks up to admire the way the midday sun filters through the canopy of volcanic smoke and ash that hangs above. It casts dappled patterns across the clearing that, every so often, catch on the smooth silver of the florabots that glide about. She thinks back to all the things she's heard and read about the florabot communities. Always painted as primitive, desolate places unfit for life, Red can't believe what she's seeing. It's beautiful and lively.

The clearing is dominated by familiar coral-like trees, but they are unlike ones Red has ever seen before. Their branches twist up and out, resembling underwater formations sprouting from the scorched ground. Red slowly approaches one and runs her hand down the rough surface, following the thick, rope-like patterns. Her hand catches on a trail of silicone-like fungi sprouting from the trunk, their bioluminescent caps pulsing rhythmically. She glances around, noticing that every inch is dotted with translucent mushrooms of different shapes and sizes. Some are more rugged, like plumes of rock and crystal, while others, like the ones on the tree, are pliant and rubberlike. All of them glow softly, adding to the enchanting aura Red finds herself surrounded by, as every surface glimmers in hues of orange, red and purple, reflecting the fiery light of the volcanoes' molten rivers.

Structures made of volcanic rock are scattered amongst the trees. Red watches as the florabots diligently roam from one to the next, and she wonders what they all could be doing. *Do florabots have jobs? Do they go to school like I do?* She has a million questions racing through her mind. As she watches the bots more closely, she sees something that stops those thoughts dead in their tracks.

Amongst the other human-like florabots are dozens of smaller florabots, each uniquely designed. Some resemble flowers Red has seen growing in the Asha, their metallic petals mimicking the way the crystal blooms sway in the volcanic heat currents. Others take on the form of small silver boxes puttering about. Thin wires climb their exterior like they've been overgrown by creeping vines, the ends of them curling up and coiling gracefully like the tendrils of plantlife. Red is especially drawn to one that looks a lot like the small silver disc Axel transformed from that morning, only this one is adorned with tiny blue lights that flicker like firebugs as it zooms by. "I didn't know there were so many different kinds of you," she whispers softly, turning to Axel in awe.

"Florabots can take on lots of different forms. I guess people just don't really know that" Axel shrugs, his small metal frame buzzing as he moves. He then takes Red by the hand, and leads her deeper into the tiny village.

As they get closer to the center of things, something catches Red's eye. In the middle of the community, stands a massive, towering crystalline flower. Red notices wires and periodic bursts of electricity surging through the pink, translucent petals as they pass by it. "What is *that*?" she asks, eyes landing on the back of Axel's head, his hand still tightly gripping hers. Without answering, he continues trudging forward. He seems to be leading them somewhere specific. Red follows his gaze to a number of small huts carved into the side of the volcanoes along the far perimeter. She points to the line of windows glowing a welcoming orange hue in the near distance, "Are those where you all live?"

"Yes, now come on!" Axel chirps, tugging for her to move faster.

As they walk, the ground is rugged and uneven, spattered with patches of smooth, glass-like stones that glimmer in the volcanic light. Streams of molten lava course nearby, their fiery glow contrasting with the cooler colors of the florabots' lights and metal. It creates a striking visual tapestry like Red has never seen. The air gently hums, sending a jolt of heat through Red's core. She knows she's supposed to be weary, like danger could strike at any minute, but she loves it here. The entire community feels safe and alive, pulsating with the heartbeat of the surrounding volcanoes. Here, she feels closer to nature than she ever has before.

They finally reach one of the huts and Axel stops at the door. Red watches as he stares at it, motionless. "Are you afraid of me, Meredith?" he asks, his glowing eyes dimming slightly. His voice resonates softly and melodically, a blend of natural sounds and the zing of electricity.

Red's heart begins to race slightly, a flash of dim red flame flushes her face. The things she read all come flooding back to her. She is suddenly very aware of how far from home she is, the only Kindred surrounded by hundreds of florabots. She takes a deep breath, "Dad's book says you're all dangerous. That you can turn without any warning."

Axel sighs, his eyes casting downward, "I am going to introduce you to someone," he pauses, tilting his head to reveal delicate light patterns tucked within his metal frame along his neck, "you can ask her anything you want. But promise you'll listen to what she has to say."

Red nods in agreement. Axel gently opens the door to the hut. Inside, it's inviting and warm, just like any home in Red's own town. She can't believe the way the florabots have been able to build up their community, to be something humans could have built themselves. Axel makes his way over to a large stone chair that sits in the corner of the room. In the chair sits a bronze pyramid, the metal varnishing slightly on the sharp corners where the otherwise sleek metallic sheets meet. He leans in close to the object and whispers, "Don't be upset, but I have a visitor."

The pyramid begins to whirr and emit a series of small, sleepy beeps, as if it's just been woken up from a deep slumber. Red takes a step back, eyes transfixed on the pyramid as it suddenly shifts its metal walls up and back. Opening up its sides, limbs grow out from a small glowing ball within its core in one fluid motion. Within seconds, the pyramid is now sitting in the chair as a fully humanoid florabot. Red takes another step back, almost stumbling over herself in shock. She's still not used to the transformations.

"Who do we have here?" The florabot asks. Her voice is like crackling firewood; familiar and fragile. There's a static pop in her words, like an old radio transmission. Red can tell she's older, her bronze exterior more tarnished than Axel's perfectly reflective silver. The florabot adjusts herself in her seat, her joints creaking softly although her movements are still smooth and deliberate. There's a certain beauty to the scratches and small dents in her frame, like each one tells a story. Red wants to hear them all.

“Rion, this is Meredith. She is my new friend!” Axel trills excitedly, his emerald eyes glowing brightly with pride.

Rion cocks her head to the side, examining the Kindred child before her. Red is entranced by the deep purple glow of Rion’s eyes as they scan her small body. Her heart races, slight licks of flame shooting from the top of her head. There is a long pause as Rion continues to stare, the only sound coming from a network of synapses and mechanics working within the florabot’s frame. *Is she scanning me for information?* Red begins to grow uneasy in the lingering standoff, her body burning a low, red heat.

Finally, the old florabot says, “And what brings you here, Meredith?”

Red shoots Axel a look, unsure of how to answer. Axel gives an enthusiastic nod of encouragement, gesturing for her to speak to Rion. She takes one step forward, “um, you can call me Red.”

“Alright then,” Rion chimes, “what brings you here, *Red*?”

“I uh...I read a book in my dad’s library. He’s got a big library with all kinds of books I’m not supposed to read. And well, after I met Axel in the forest I wanted to know more about florabots. So, I read one...” Red trails off. She doesn’t know how to finish the question. She doesn’t know if she wants to.

Axel jumps in eagerly, “She read about Xander Straus, Rion. She is afraid of us now, just like you warned me about Kindred. I wanted to show her our home and have you talk to her. She has so many questions for such a little Kindred!”

Red scrunches her face at Axel, crossing her arms in protest. She forgot how brazen he can be. “I’m not that little” she mutters, a heat rising in her chest.

Rion lets out a chuckle that chimes brilliantly through the room. “If only more Kindred had such questions.” Red can see an almost humanlike sadness in the way her fluorescent eyes wane at the thought. Rion turns slowly to Quecry, “You know you could have put us in danger by bringing her here.”

Axel’s head drops, his gaze landing at his feet. His words ping out quietly, “I know. I am sorry.”

“But I can see she is not a danger to us. Just like you said, only full of questions.” Rion stands up slowly, her eyes now gentle and kind. She walks closer to Red, “I see something else in you. Something special.”

Red's stomach drops, the small flame in her core flaring up as the florabot approaches her. She's not sure what she means by this, but she feels understanding and warmth come over her. A wave of crimson rushes to her cheeks, "Oh, I'm not special. I'm just a Civial."

Rion lets out another laugh, the sound both melodic and fragmented like synthetic windchimes. Red can see the soft, pulsing violet glow from within her shift in intensity as she moves. "Come with me," she gestures for Red and Axel to follow.

As the three walk back towards the center of the community, Red follows Rion closely, watching as she seemingly floats across the rocky terrain. The breaks in her bronze exterior give Red a better look into her finespun circuitry. It starts within her and grows outward to trace patterns along her limbs, all of it subtly illuminated by the purple light that flickers as she walks. It reminds Red of her own flame and heartbeat. *They seem so alive.*

Rion finally speaks, "These stories you've read," her deep eyes growing somber, "they paint us as monsters, but we are survivors. The truth, I'm afraid, is far darker than what you've learned."

"But you guys have killed people." Red surprises herself, the statement coming out so confidently. Rion pauses, turning to look at Red. Red, regretting her words, tries to backtrack, "I mean, that's what I read."

Rion stops at a tree covered in glowing fungus caps. She picks one off and hands it to Red. Red takes the mushroom and examines it. The old florabot continues, "The mycelial network—what the scientists used to create us—became sentient. So we became sentient. That is what you read, yes?"

Red nods, urging her to continue.

"As with any experimentation with new technology, there were mistakes. There were malfunctions..." Rion's words hang heavy as she looks deep into Red's eyes, "all of them tragic. But they were just that—accidents." Rion kneels to Red's level before pressing on. She sighs heavily, her eyes growing dim and ominous. "Now, I must admit to you. Every now and then, a florabot would inhabit a vessel and form malicious thoughts. Some would act on it. Just as some humans do."

Let's add that some of these malicious thoughts came from retaliation to mistreatment of nature. "Humans were not always kind to us. For thousands of years we have practiced restraint. But with vessels in our reach we have more actions at our disposal."

For this whole section it will be more impactful to express how florabots were and are an extension of the mycelial network and carry on its will. So Rion would have memories stemming from before florabots were even created. Lets also introduce the concept that although the florabots are a hivemind, certain bots have a certain level of access to memories and functions,

which is what allows each one to operate independently. However this can be added to or taken away from at any time. (i can write this if necessary)

Red looks back into Rion's eyes, unsure of how to take her words. She can't disagree.

The florabot continues, "Those times were few and far between, however. The network quickly acted to correct the glitch. It always does. Florabots have never actually *killed* anyone, but humans latched onto these few instances of violence and ran with it."

Red's eyes grow wide. The words sinking in. She was right, florabots had hurt people. She can't help but question if everything she's hearing is true. Finally, Red is able to ask the questions that've been weighing on her chest. "But why would the people want to do that? And what about the florabot that killed Xander Straus?"

Rion looks at the mushroom in Red's hand. It's beginning to lose its light, the edges of it shriveling in slightly. She reaches out and takes the cap from Red and places it back on the tree. Immediately, the fungus latches back on, blooming back to life as its low blue glow returns. Red watches in wonder, constantly amazed by the nature around her. *They need to be connected to nature to survive.* She makes a mental note of her discovery, wishing she had her notebook with her that she left back in her bag.

Rion turns back to Red, "**Nexus** saw our community's growing autonomy as a threat. When Xander died, when his whole family was killed, it wasn't by us. They used it as an excuse to eradicate us." **woah**

"~~The scientists~~ **Nexus** framed the florabots?" Red's question barely squeaks out. She is stunned by what she's learning. Her brain is running in a hundred different directions, unsure of who or what to believe. Axel places an understanding hand on his friend's shoulder. The action seems so aware, so human. Red tenses under the touch and Axel retracts his arm, his eyes apologetic. She almost felt bad, but for what? He was a robot. All of this was becoming too much for her.

"They became afraid," Rion nods, understanding Red's shock and confusion, "they needed to control the narrative. By exaggerating the few instances of florabot violence, they could rally public support to eliminate what they deemed a threat. People began sending the florabots back to the labs, but because we had been rapidly multiplying, the network constantly finding and creating new hosts, the labs became overrun. They tried to dismantle many of us, burying the mangled hosts deep beneath the labs, but nothing worked. Many hosts were able to access the living network even more strongly underground and unearth themselves."

"But that was too much work for them!" Axel blurts out, vibrating with excitement.

"That's right," Rion offers the small florabot a kind look, her bleak tone quickly returning, "it was too much work. But that didn't matter. The florabots were too far advanced at that point,



creating their own hosts that were becoming more and more powerful. Scientists began to panic, they didn't want to face the fact that their creation had gone beyond their power. They knew something drastic had to be done."

"Like what?" Red asks. She has a sinking feeling in her stomach, just like the one she felt the night she read the book in her dad's library. Like she's about to learn something that will strip a little- **the last bits** of magic away from her wonderful world.

~~Rion lowers her voice, her eyes shifting from vibrant purple to an intense indigo. "Xander Straus, one of the leading pioneers in the florabot movement, took the perceived failure...particularly hard. He was a man who needed power and control. Not one person or thing becomes that successful without that insatiable drive hardwired within them. Xander flew too close to the Sun, and he knew it. He watched as society accepted the florabots back, started making adjustments to include us in society. All of humanity came to terms with the fact that we were there to stay. As long as the mycelial network was there, so were we. He watched as we advanced, seamlessly blending into life across the Nexus, convinced we were set to overthrow and take out the human race."~~

~~Red felt a swelling in her chest. She looks to Axel, her dark eyes slowly filling with stingy, glistening yellow flame. He lets out a low hum, lowering his gaze to the ground. She puts her hand on his arm, whispering, "But that wasn't true."~~

~~"All we wanted—all we still want—is to coexist. To live in harmony with the Kindred **Verdants** and all the races across the Nexus. But the thought that we wanted anything else drove Xander mad. He was a man broken by things of his own creation **deeeep**. First the florabots, and finally, the false narrative he had written and lived in. Until one night, he snapped."~~

~~"Xander's wife, Anya, and their kids loved their own florabot at home. They became dependent on him. It wasn't unusual for the Kindred who owned a florabot to become bonded with theirs. They refused to send him back, no matter how much Xander insisted. As it goes, Xander was red-hot with anger that night, dragging the florabot out of their home, yelling that he was getting rid of him forever. The kids were crying, begging their father not to do it. Anya tried pleading with Xander, telling him she needed the florabot's help since Xander himself was always gone to work at the lab. It all came to a head with that. Xander went on a brutal, violent killing spree. He murdered his own wife and kids in cold blood. He saw the opportunity to pin it all on his florabot for the horrendous act, knowing this would be the revolutionary event to make humanity shun the florabots forever."~~

~~"Xander thought that if everyone could see how *that* florabot, the one belonging to the most innovative creator, killed him and his entire family..." Rion's voice wavers. She pauses, looking off into the distance. "Well, he thought that would be enough to instigate a war against us. Enough to show people that we are dangerous, hateful machines. Incapable of living amongst humanity peacefully. He was right."~~

~~Red shivers, the story sending a wave of shame through her body. She has no reason to believe Rion's account over the book's, but for some reason she does. It's just a gut feeling. "So what happened next?" She asks, trying to keep her tone even.~~

~~"He battered his florabot to the point of malfunction and then turned his weapon on himself. By the time the Crystal Palace soldiers arrived, Xander was dead in the arms of his frazzled florabot.~~

*[For the Xander Strauss section I think it could be more compelling to have Xander be someone who was taken advantage of as well. Being the creator, we can assume that Xander has spent countless hours of personal time with the mycelial network. Out of empathy, understanding and obsession, I think Xander would more likely be the person to advocate for the Florabots autonomy as a race, which goes against the wishes of the higher ups and the Verdant race as a whole. This introduces more conspiracy and propaganda while also alluding to "higher ups" aka "Chessmasters".*

*The Chessmasters in this case are the ones framing him.*

*While they know this to be true I think the florabots can be very honest that at the end that they indeed cannot be controlled. Xander Strauss was not realistic about the dangers a new sentient species could pose to a pre-existing one. Ultimately, the events of the Xander Strauss's death become morally ambiguous. A creation isn't entitled to the opportunity to advocate for itself. And even to this day, it is not without reason to believe that they could one day seek revenge.]*

Rion's voice softened, her eyes shifting from a vibrant purple to a deep, intense indigo. "You see, Xander Straus wasn't just the pioneer of the florabot movement—he was our fiercest advocate. He poured everything he had into us, driven by this relentless belief that we deserved a place in the world. But those who saw us as a threat, their whispers grew louder, urging humanity to remove us, to dismantle what Xander had worked so hard to build."

Red felt her chest tighten. She glanced at Axel, his dark eyes filling with a dim, glistening yellow flame as he let out a low hum, casting his gaze downward. She placed a gentle hand on his arm and whispered, "But that wasn't true."

Rion's voice dropped, almost pleading. "All we wanted—all we still want—is to coexist, to live peacefully alongside the Verdants and every race across the Nexus. But the thought of us wanting anything more... it ate away at Xander. He was broken, haunted by his own creation, not because of what we were, but because of what they made him believe we could become. They painted us as conquerors, as monsters, and it poisoned him."

She took a shaky breath, her gaze distant. "At home, Xander's own family had grown close to their florabot companion. They loved him, depended on him even. Anya, his wife, couldn't bear to part with the florabot, especially with Xander gone so much, working late at the lab. With Xander working so much, she and the kids had formed a bond with the florabot that felt almost... familial.

But the outside pressure to act was relentless. Powerful entities were pushing for him to hand over the florabot, to 'decommission' him and abandon his work. Xander refused. He couldn't bring himself to betray the creation he believed in, nor the family who had come to love it."

She paused, her gaze distant, as if reliving memories locked deep within the network. "His devotion and connection to us led to something far darker than Xander could predict or comprehend. You see, one night, Xander's family...they were killed. It was a night that changed everything."

Red watched as Rion's eyes shifted, a flicker of something unreadable crossing her face. "They said a florabot—Xander's own family companion—was found at the scene with blood on its hands. But..." Rion's eyes began to glow, as if possessed by a greater force. Her voice began to resonate in a thousand tones, but with the clarity of one. "I tried to protect them. But my foe was unlike any force I've faced in thousands of years." In her fear, Red looked to Axel for a comforting reprieve. "She was there?!" she asked, only to see that he and Rion were speaking in unison.

"We were all there."

Their voice softened and Rion's eyes dimmed to a soft glow. "I watched in horror as their flesh was ripped apart. The assailants slipped away into the midnight veil."

"When Xander returned, his initial expression of shock morphed into something else—some twisted sense of purpose, as if he had discovered a defective code yearning to be corrected."

Rion's gaze grew distant, haunted. "Three days," she murmured, almost to herself. "For three days, he sat there, hunched over, retooling our design with this...terrifying precision."

He was so consumed with us, so certain that this tragedy had shown him a defect, something he could fix. Xander became obsessed with answering a question that was never asked. And on the third day, as he poured over his work in the remnants of his family home, city police arrived at the scene. Concerned friends and colleagues had reported the family's absence. When they entered, they found the bodies—his wife and children—and Xander, seated right next to them, lost in his work, as if nothing else in the world mattered. Rion looked down at her feet, as if overcome with guilt. Suddenly, my sensory receptors were shut off and after that, it's all blank. But, the blades of grass in the front yard told me that Xander was dragged out of the house and to this day has never been seen again. It was like...some ominous force, lurking in the shadows, content to keep things exactly as they were, started moving people around like pawns in a sinister chess match," Rion murmured, her gaze distant. "And little by little, it nudged Xander closer and closer to ruin."

"His family was torn apart, and they pinned it on us. After that, the story spread like wildfire: we weren't just machines anymore—we were a threat. Monsters, waiting to strike." Rion's voice wavers, and she pauses, looking off into the distance. "If everyone believed *that* florabot—the

one belonging to the most innovative creator—had killed him and his entire family...well, that would be enough to instigate a war against us. Enough to show people that we are dangerous, hateful machines. Incapable of living peacefully among humanity. And they were right.”

Red gets impatient. “Who’s they?”

The Highest Order of the Crystal palace determined that they would speed up the cycle of degeneration and regeneration as a way to contain the ever expanding florabot population. The process used to occur very rarely, and only as need be. But now, it happens much more frequently. Millions of people and florabots across The Nexus Solar System, killed and displaced every couple hundred years, all because of the need to control...

Maybe they feared what he knew, what he believed. Or maybe...maybe they saw the truth even Xander couldn’t bring himself to see.”

Red looks puzzled. “So... what is the truth?”

Rion’s gaze hardened, her eyes glinting like steel. “They call us conquerors. They fear we’ll rise up, take what we’re ‘owed.’ And some days, I feel it too. That pull to wield the power we’ve been denied, to be more than a shadow lingering at the edge of human society. Xander’s death was a warning to humanity about what they cannot control, but it was also a lesson for us, a challenge.” She looked at Red, a fierce intensity behind her stare. “We’ve learned so much since that day. Maybe peace is what he wanted, but we’re still deciding what we want. Maybe they weren’t wrong to fear us. To wield that kind of power—perhaps it’s not such a terrible thing.”

Red felt a chill as Rion’s words sank in, her chest tightening with the realization that Xander’s dream of harmony was not as simple as he’d believed. There was a darker truth emerging, one that neither Red nor Rion could deny: to be feared meant to hold power, and perhaps, just perhaps, that power was worth seizing.

Red’s body flared up as if preparing for a fight. Rion turns her gaze back to the children, reclaiming a thousand voices under her control, “Be still, small girl, you’ll be long gone by the time we decide to take over.”

Suddenly her eyes are apologetic, knowing how heavy the story is for such a young girl. Red’s heart could burst. She knowingly nods, “It’s okay. I just needed to know.”

Red can see something behind Rion’s eyes. It’s the same thing she’s seen in Axel’s before. An understanding, an *emotion*, something beyond robotic. “I don’t get it,” she states, her eyes studying the intricacies of their faces, “you’re machines. How can you coexist with us? How can you have feelings?”

Rion pauses. She almost looks surprised by Red’s response. “We can feel and understand more than you know.”

There's a long, heavy pause. Axel breaks it, softly chiming "Can we show her Stellaria?"

\*\*\*\*\*

Red and Axel follow Rion to the center of the community. As they walk, Rion shares more stories of the florabots—how they once worked freely amongst society, with some even living in the homes of the Luminaries and Elite. "Do you think any of those people still own florabots?" Red asks.

A look is quickly exchanged between Axel and Rion. "Owning a florabot is highly frowned upon in these times," Rion states before quickly changing the subject, "Now come and look. Here we are."

Red's heart leaps as she finds herself standing face to face with the giant crystalline flower she had seen when she first arrived. It's even more captivating up close. As Red stares up at the towering plant, she can now see how parts of it are made of smooth, pink metal plates, so polished that they appear to be made of glass themselves. They lay in patterns that resemble the scales of the fire lizards she loves to search for under rocks. The metal and crystal intertwine in elegant shapes, creating massive geometric blooms. Rubbery vines dance along the base of the flower, anchoring it into the scorched earth. The plumes shimmer in the afternoon light that is now scattered across the landscape, casting prismatic shadows across the dark, rocky ground. "This is beautiful," Red fawns, eyes glimmering in astonishment, "What kind of flower is this?"

"This is Stellaria!" Axel announces, chest puffed in pride. "And she's not exactly a flower."

"She?" Red cocks her head.

Rion nods, "Yes, Stellaria is a special florabot. Although she is sentient like the rest of us, she is a specific model that does not operate how we do. She does not speak, play, or work, but she is integral to every florabot community. Stellaria is the life force of our kind. Her purpose is to provide a conduit between the mycelial network and ourselves. By connecting to the network directly on a larger and more concentrated scale, she is able to provide us a more adequate means of drawing power from the mycelium. Although we are able to do so ourselves, it is not enough to support our highly evolved vessels. When florabots were first created, our forms were minimal, primitive. But now," she gestures to the cacophony of sleek, astoundingly refined florabots buzzing about, "it takes much more."

Red watches a couple of the florabots connect to Stellaria, extending wire tendrils out and connecting to small ports at her base. "So...it's kind of like how you guys eat?"

Rion's eyes reflect an amused smile, "Yes," she whirrs, a crackled chuckle puttering from her chest, "like eating. Stellaria nourishes us and makes that process far more effective. Without her, we would not be able to progress and function the ways we are today.

Rion looks to Red, her violet eyes glimmering with empathy, "To answer your earlier question, we are more than machines in a way. The network is alive, so we are alive. We learn, we grow, and we feel through the mycelium. It connects us to every living thing, just as it connects you to Phoenix. Each florabot here has a role, a purpose, to protect and nurture."

Red nods, starting to understand what Rion is saying. Filled with the excitement of all this new information, she approaches Stellaria. Her eyes brimming with wonder. She now can see that the source of the florabot's sparkling appearance comes from the surge of electricity pulsating within her core. Just like Axel and Rion, there is a web of wires intertwined amongst a mass of complex machinery beneath the beautiful exterior.

Red is busy observing the inner workings when she's struck with the feeling of eyes boring into the back of her head. Turning around, she meets Rion's intense stare. "Meredith," Rion's voice is low and intentional, "there is something I must ask you."

"What is it?" Red asks, her pulse quickening. She grows nervous. Glancing around, she notices all the florabots that are now gathering around her.

"As I was saying earlier, I see something in you. You have the potential to harness power beyond your imagination," Rion continues, "the kind of power reserved for the Elites, the kind they use to maintain control over everyone else. But you...you could learn to use it for change."

Red's mind races. First she's confused by what she's hearing. Then, she starts to think of all the times she's felt like she didn't belong amongst her peers. She feels a tiny spark leap in her heart. It's as if Rion's words have awoken the small part burning within her that has always known, deep down, she was meant to be born into something more. "You want to give me their power? But, how... and why?"

"Yes," Rion trills, her voice harmonious and wise, "but it requires a connection. A merging of our strengths. Not everyone can handle it, I have met several Kindred who could not. Kindred much older and bigger than yourself. There is something within you, little Red, that is calling out for this. You can do it."

Red bites her lip, eyes fixed somewhere distant as if looking into a memory only she can see. "I always thought...maybe it was just me," she says quietly. "Like I was broken or something. Growing up, all I heard were stories of everything our people lost, how we're supposed to just survive, just keep our heads down." She hesitates, her voice wavering as she speaks. "But sometimes, I'd feel this... I don't know, this little flicker inside, like something was waking up. And I'd push it down because...well, what would I even do with that? What could someone like me do?"

She looks up at Rion, her eyes wide, almost afraid to believe. “So, if I *really* have this power—if I could use it to make things better... I could fix the wiring at my school so the lights don’t go out in the middle of the day! And maybe—maybe I could stop the honey cartels!” She clenches her tiny fists, her voice brimming with enthusiasm, but then, her voice trails off, a hint of uncertainty creeping in. A battle has begun between her knowledge and her youth. “But... I wouldn’t even know how to start. I mean, I’ve never really done something *big* before. Not like this.” She draws in a shaky breath, looking up at Rion with a mix of hope and worry. “Purpose... Ms. Valoria talks about it all the time, but... I’m only seven. I thought that’s stuff you think about when you’re older. I want to try... I just don’t know if I’m ready for all of it.”

Purpose, young Red, is not bound by age; sometimes it chooses the youngest hearts because they’re brave enough to believe in impossible things. Sometimes purpose thrives in the ignorance of youth.

Red’s mind begins to wander “I’m a little scared. What will happen to me if I agree? Would I ever be able to see my friends and family again? ” Red grows dim, shuddering at the idea. She would never be able to do that. “And why should I believe you?”

Rion shakes her head, “No, no, of course you would be able to return to them. You will be able to go back and live exactly how you were. Only, things *would* be different, of course.”

Red looks to Axel, silently pleading for him to chime in. Seeing this, he rushes to her side. “Meredith, you can do this. You can help everyone you love, including us.” He speaks softly, his words like an encouraging hug.

“The mycelial network wields energy beyond human comprehension. It’s powerful enough to level up your own innate percentage, Red. You will become a force to protect those who have been oppressed, bringing balance back to Phoenix.”

Overwhelmed, Red’s mind swims, her heart races. She thinks of the injustices she has witnessed; the woman in the square, the way the florabots have been cast out, the control the Elites exert over the Outcasts, Civilians, even the Luminaries. The thought of being able to become just as powerful and use her abilities to help her own kind, to become the strongest and most famous Kindred, ignites her flame within. Her entire body emits a low, golden light. Standing tall, she grabs Axel’s hand, “What do I have to do?”

Rion steps forward, gesturing to the other florabots. “We will connect with you—through mycelial adaptors, vines of energy. It will be intense, but you will emerge transformed.”

Before Red is able to second guess her decision, she closes her eyes and nods, “Okay, I’m ready.”

The florabots move in unison, surrounding Red in a protective circle. With Rion and Axel among the mass of gleaming metal, the air is alive with anticipation. Wire vines, iridescent and alive, sprout from the ground around Stellaria, weaving through the air like dancers. They reach

for Red, gently wrapping around her wrists and ankles, the feeling of them cool against her molten skin. The sensation was both strange and comforting.

“Breath into it,” instructs Rion, “and feel the connection.”

Red obeys, her breath catching as the vines pulse their energy through her. The moment they make contact, a surge of warmth flows through her veins, igniting every fiber of her being. The florabots move in tightly, placing a hand, vine, anything against her. A renewed surge of energy jolts through Red, her tiny body jerking in response. They hum, their voices a collective chant that resonates deep with her. Red can feel their energy intertwining with hers, a fusion of life and machine. Her low burning fire begins to rage, engulfing her in a way she has never experienced before. The change within her is palpable.

“You’re doing great, Meredith!” She can hear Axel’s cheers of support.

The energy surges higher, a whirlwind of light, sound and flame enveloping her. She gasps, feeling as if she was being lifted off the ground and dragged down at the same time. There is a moment that she feels like she’s suspended between two worlds. The vines tighten, binding her to the florabots, and with each heartbeat, she feels the new, raw power pulsing through her. In the distance, she can hear her phoenix calling out to her. *But somewhere, floating above the phoenix’s cry, a voice whispers in what sounds like a barely discernible tribal language,*

*“Wel...come... to... the... Garden...”*

*As the process progresses, blinding bursts of light begin to flash in front of Red’s eyes. Everything is hazy and overwhelming, yet her senses sharpen, as if an unseen force is urging her to awaken. As she peers closer into the light she starts to make out blurry objects... Red leans in, straining to focus, and realizes she’s not looking at shapes or objects - she’s witnessing a vision. The images flicker briefly, vivid and unmistakably familiar, like reliving her own memories. As quick as they appeared, they were gone.*

With a final surge, the connection is deepened. Red blazes into a frenzy of blue flame and blinding light, the transformation completing. All at once, the florabots drop their connection, Stellaria retracting her wires and vines back into the earth. Red falls to the ground, breathing heavily. With her eyes still closed, she feels her senses heightened. When she opens her eyes, she scans the crowd of florabots all watching her intently. Colors are more vivid. She can feel the pulse of the earth below and the simmering bubble of the volcanoes around her. Blinking away the light, Red sits herself upright.

“How do you feel?” Axel asks. His glowing eyes are filled with worry.

“I...I feel different.” Red holds her head. It’s pounding, a hot pain shoots through her brain. She looks down at herself, noticing for the first time that she is burning a vibrant orange.



Flames leap in playful arches around her skin, tiny solar flares all of her own. A wild mess of red hot flame bursts from the top of her head, dancing up and tapering off into small wisps that fly into the air around her. “I look different!”

Axel giggles. The familiar metallic chorus of synthetic windchimes brings Red right back into the moment, calming her instantly. As she takes deep, grounding breaths, her internal fire begins to dim. She realizes she has the ability to control her flame and brings herself back to her regular glow. *This is different.*

Looking around the enclave, Red sees everything in brilliant hues she’s never experienced before. She can feel the power of Phoenix’s molten core coursing through her. Feeling stronger and more attuned, a wave of nausea washes over her as the realization of what she’s done comes crashing in. She knows everything has changed now.

The afternoon sun peeks through the swirling plumes of ash above. Red checks her holowatch to see it’s luckily still working after all of that. Noticing the time, she springs up, “I have to go home before dark!”

“Then you must be off.” Rion places a gentle hand on Red’s shoulder. The contact sends prickling energy through Red’s skin. “But remember,” Rion’s indigo eyes soften, the color even more enthralling now, “you can come back whenever you need. But you have to come alone. No one can know what happened here today.”

Red gives Rion a tight hug. The power now flowing between them is almost unbearable. “I promise, Rion.” Red lets go and grabs Axel’s hand tightly, “Thank you, Axel.”

As Red approaches the opening on the edge of the florabot community, she looks back. She realizes that they’re no longer machines—they’re allies, a community bound by a shared vision and hardship. She’s no longer afraid of them. After everything, she knows she can call Axel a true friend.

Above her, her Phoenix sits, waiting patiently. A loyal guardian. “Let’s go.” Red calls up. The bird spreads its fiery wings and takes off in the direction of home.

\*\*\*\*

Flying through the air, Red makes her way back. It’s like she’s experiencing her beloved forest for the very first time. The colors, sounds, smells, energy—every little thing is brighter, darker, hotter, more rancid, more beautiful than ever before. Her heart is burning with intensity. All she can think about are the new things she’ll experience with her power. For one, the journey that took her hours before is taking nearly half the time with her new speed. Above her, the phoenix soars, happily cawing out as it swoops and weaves. Red knows it’s because it’s never been able to fly like that with her before. Usually it would have to slow its pace to match hers. Red, overjoyed, laughs as they rip through the terrain together. The sound is effervescent,

rebounding off the caves and rocks of the volcanic forest. "I'll make it home before curfew, no problem!" she says aloud to nobody but the bird. "Mom and Dad won't even notice that I..."

Red comes to an abrupt halt, digging her heels into the scorched soil just on the edge of her town. Knowing its job is done for the day, the phoenix continues on, leaving Red alone with her thoughts. Her heart sinks. She hasn't even thought about how her mom and dad would react, not really. She begins to panic. They're already so worried about her getting in trouble as is, even before...everything. Her heart breaks for the version of her parents who witnessed what just happened to her deep in the forest, surrounded by florabots. She feels a pang of guilt. *They can't know*. Dimming her flame, Red walks the rest of the way home, the whole time racking her brain. She can't imagine how she'll hide such a huge secret from her parents. She's a completely new girl.

Arriving at the door of her small, humble home, Red pauses. She's seen this door a million times, but it's not the same. Inside she can smell her mom cooking dinner, another familiar sensation that all of the sudden feels so foreign to her. "You have to try Red," she whispers, making a conscious effort to hide her flame, "they at least can't know yet." Taking a deep breath, she opens the door. "Hi mom, hi dad. I'm home."

This last page is powerful but some adjustments needed: The way it reads makes it feels like Red is flying at first, but we realize that she isn't, just needs some language adjustment. Also her mental transition from excitement to panic could feel a bit cleaner. Do love the attention to Red's mentality shift realizing the depth of what she's about to face with her family and friends.

## V2 REWRITE

### RED

On the outskirts of the city skyline, sits a schoolhouse at the center of a low income neighborhood. Molten lava flows passively through the school yard as Kindred students find their ways to class. At a young age, Kindred children's eyes develop a bright red glow complemented by their charcoal skin. Embers flare from their bodies since they have not learned how to control their flame quite yet. The flame is sacred in the Kindred community, something that is passed down from generation to generation.

The school bell has just rang and the students eagerly enter the classroom. A girl nicknamed "Red" by her fellow classmates, quickly enters and finds space on the floor to lay her learning

mat. The name Red originated from her reddish hue skin along with her quick tempered personality. Sitting cross-legged, her and the other Kindred children await the entrance of their teacher. Their Kindred skin emits small bursts of orange and yellow light. Red's skin glows a deep red, barely discernible from her classmates.

As the school door creeps open, Red shoots up her arm to get the teacher's attention. Ms. Velora enters the classroom eager to teach the lesson plan of the day. Recognized for her dedication to teaching in lower income sections of Phoenix, Ms. Velora sees her students as her own and will go to great lengths to see them through their educational career.

"Yes, Red?"

Ms. Velora calls on Red. The child eagerly blurts, "One day I'm going to work with my dad!"

The teacher feigns a smile at Red and tries to continue with the lesson. Red continues, "Ya me and my friends, Dad and Mommy, were all going to work at LifeCorp together!"

LifeCorp is a business that has monetized reincarnation. Through advanced biotech, astrophysics, and data-driven AI systems, LifeCorp records each person's soul signature and is stored to a company-wide database for further analysis. When the person's life ends, the soul signature is retrieved from the database and deemed whether or not suitable for reincarnation based on social credit, historical lineage and other metrics.

Unbeknownst to Red, LifeCorp typically hires people in a higher social class than her. Her father is a rare exception. Ms. Velora knows this information, but does not want to discourage her student.

"Maybe one day," the teacher offers. "As long as you put your mind to it!"

Red shifts in place, unsatisfied with the answer. "Then why don't all mommies and daddies do that? Why do they work in stores, work the tunnels... become teachers?"

Ms Velora's face is stunned by such a question, she gathers herself. "Well Red, not everyone's parents can do that since some jobs are reserved for high percenters or for the Elites," she says.

Red's eager hand is met by a stern stare from her teacher. "That's enough, Red."

A dark, glowing maroon emits from Red's body in frustration. She looks around to her classmates, but feels isolated and alone. Ever since she can remember, Red has stood out from her Kindred classmates. What seems like a novel task to her, can take months for her fellow classmates to replicate. Confused by this feeling, she tries not to bring attention to it and rather blend in with the rest of the class.

Red feels she might have embarrassed her friends in the process, bringing up their parents' occupations. Calming herself down, Red turns to the girl next to her, clearly rattled from the outburst. "Sorry," Red whispers to her. "It's okay," she replies with a gentle smile.

The morning passes like a normal school day. Ms. Velora cycles through the different learning materials of the day. Geography is very important in the lower grade levels of Phoenician schools. The planet takes great pride in its endless mountain ranges and vibrant volcano colonies.

The teacher finishes up going over the topographical map of Phoenix's lower plateau region. She looks to the class for questions, but the children remain quiet.

"Alright then, open to chapter seven of your textbooks", says Ms. Velora.

The room fills with the sound of frantic paper rustling, as the students open their books to the correct page. Red reaches into her backpack and returns to her desk to see her friend Ripley make a funny face from across the room. Ripley, always quick to make a joke, sticks his tongue out towards Red as she tries to hold in a giggle. The teacher notices and quickly slaps Ripley's Desk.

"Today, we are learning about honey, the source of life as we know it," says the teacher. "*Ripley*, would you be so kind as to read the first passage?"

The Kindred children murmur to themselves in laughter, anticipating Ripley's reading. Ripley begins to read, shakily.

"Honey possesses the power to heal any ailment, unlock the secrets to eternal life, and transmit knowledge forward and backward across generations. For every drop of honey we must give thanks to the Elites . For without the Elites we are nothing and we are nothing without the Elites."

Children try to hold in their laughs, as Ms. Velora shushes the class.

"Thank you Ripley, now can anyone explain to the class what this passage means?"

Skylar, the class "know it all", throws her hand in the air. She is called on. "It means, it means, that honey is needed for our survival and if honey was in the wrong hands we could be put in danger."

"Very good, Skylar," responds the teacher. "And what did we as a civilization create to ensure the safety of our precious honey?" Red's ears perk up as she yells out, "Honey banks!"

"That's right! Please elaborate Red," the teacher responds. Red thinks deeply for a second then says, "There is a honey bank on each planet that our leaders watch over." The teacher nudges Red to continue. Another thought pops into Red's head. "Oh! And ,um, they're always being watched, the planets give each other honey through, um, portals!"

"Very good, Red!" The teacher turns to the board to write, but Red blurts out, "But the Honey Cart—". *WEEE-owww!* A high pitched wailing sound tears through the school house. It's a humidity drill. Phoenix being such a dry climate planet, waves of humidity that pass through the valleys are not only dangerous to the infrastructure, but the population itself. Ms. Velora quickly collects the class to line up at the door and exit the school house.

2.

Strange noises have been ringing through the halls of the First Bank of Phoenix all night. Strange clicking, disembodied feet scurrying, all amplified by the large, echoing corridors of the building. Ramsey has convinced himself the bank has pests, or that his exhaustion has gotten to his head. There are six night guards on duty at the bank tonight. Transaction rooms where the Elites barter their honey for other high priced goods are swept constantly for contraband and unwelcome visitors. Honey Banks are seen as a safe haven for the Elites to exploit their wealth, but that always brings wandering eyes. There are two posted outside, patrolling the perimeter, while the other four take turns in each of the bank's four towers. Every two hours, the guards inside rotate. This happens seamlessly night after night, like clockwork. The only thing keeping Ramsey's anxiety at bay is knowing that in about an hour and a half, someone will be coming to relieve him. For that brief moment, he won't be alone with whatever, or whoever, is lurking in the shadows.

Ramsey is currently posted in Tower One. This particular tower is the main building, home to the offices as well as the majority of the bank's honey supply. He always feels a sense of pressure during his shift in Tower One, like more is at stake being surrounded by so much of the coveted resource. Tonight, however, this pressure sits inexplicably in his stomach like a rock of anticipation. He continues to roam the halls, all lined with tightly sealed golden doors. Coming to a stop at the end of the hall, Ramsey takes in the particularly ornate vault that spans from floor to ceiling before him. He checks over his shoulders before scanning his badge and entering a code into the security monitor. The guard waits for the familiar clicking sound before slowly pulling the door open a crack and peering in.

The Queen Reserve, the center of the honey bank where most of Phoenix's honey is kept under lock and key. Peeking in, the guard scans the room. The walls, honeycombed in gold, stretch around the vault like a tomb, each space trapping the thick, sickly sweet substance. He swivels his head from left to right, checking for anything out of place. Finding nothing, he steps back and closes the door with a resounding thud. The sound bounces down the hall against the eerie silence. Still facing the vault, the guard shudders at the noise. His badge is displayed proudly but his nerves are shot. He has been hearing stories of violent vagabonds who do their work under the cover of night since he was a kid. Recently, however, their increased presence in his city has been looming over him like the cloying saccharin scent of the nectar that surrounds him. The Honey Cartel; the name alone carried a weight that suffocated him.

*Whack!* Ramsey feels the crack of a heavy object against the back of his skull before he falls to the ground, his vision beginning to tunnel. In a haze, he tries reaching for his weapon, only to be stopped by a jarring kick to the ribs. A second blow lands on the side of his head. On his back, disoriented, he can only make out blurry silhouettes against the golden backdrop. Several hushed voices begin to speak. They murmur with such urgent aggression that causes every alarm bell to sound off in Ramsey's head. He can feel it. He's in real danger.

"Enough. We need him alive, you jackass." The words hit like needles to Ramsey's temples. His ears begin to ring. "Get his weapon away from him."

Ramsey feels a hand first grab his badge before ripping his belt off, taking his only means of defense away. He tries to focus on the feeling of the cool marble floor against his cheek to stay awake. It's no use. Just before succumbing to unconsciousness, he is caught off guard by one of the voices.

"What are we going to do with him now?" A child asks.

A gruff voice answers, "Get him to talk, they always talk."

And then, darkness.

—

The guard awakens to a hand making sharp contact with his left cheek. The sting of it rings in his ears as he jolts to attention. He can tell he's in one of the many identical and windowless offices found in the enormous building. The room is bathed in dim light, the sickly yellow glow from overhead flickering like a dying candle. Looking around, it takes Ramsey a second to realize he is tied to a chair, two large men standing behind him. All of them glow a low, steady warmth, emitting a calm that completely contrasts his own panic.

"Let me go!" Ramsey yells out. He is trying to sound more confident than he feels.

"You're a little guy now, aren't you?"

One of the men steps forward, his skin fluttering a dim hue of orange. He smirks maliciously, eyes locked onto the guard as he speaks. He is smaller in stature, especially compared to his comrades beside him. However, he moves in a smooth, reptilian manner amongst the shadows that doesn't sit right with Ramsey. He notices that the man's voice has a buttery-sweet spark to it that, if not for the situation, he would find charming. Everything about him screams danger. Then, realization sets in. Ramsey's heart stops as he recognizes the man from the articles in the Daily Pheonician. Carmine West, the most notorious of the Honey Cartel leaders. Carmine steps to the guard and leans in closer, his boyish grin widening. His eyes are completely dark, void of any of the light that barely shines within him. "It seems fate has chosen you to face us tonight," his voice hums almost melodically in Ramsey's ear.

Ramsey sits up straight, an ache in his side reminds him of the earlier hit to his ribs as he does. "You're not getting anything out of me," he tries to hold his voice steady. He's suddenly aware of the empty space on his chest where his badge once was. His stomach sinks. As if reading his mind, one of the large men flanking Carmine pulls the badge from his pocket and holds it out. "Aww," Carmine feigns empathy, his act then twisting into a sinister grin. He gestures to the badge, "what's yours is already ours, my friend." Ramsey's stomach lurches. "Shit, we're halfway there," Carmine purrs, still smiling as his eyes bore into the guard.

Trying to keep his cool, Ramsey tries to regulate his system. It's useless. His breathing quickens, causing his entire body to emit a brighter yellow that flickers rapidly in time with his panic. Ramsey winces, knowing he's giving himself away. Carmine lets out a low, malevolent chuckle, sending shivers down the guard's spine. "Now we just need you to give us something else," Carmine hisses, so close now that his nose is touching Ramsey's. "Wh-what do you need?" Ramsey asks, already knowing the answer in his gut. "Now what do we need to get into the Crown Reserve again, boys?" Carmine walks a slow circle around Ramsey, looking to his comrades for a nonanswer to his rhetorical question. They chuckle, the sounds of their amusement are low and ominous. Carmine stops in front of Ramsey again. "Oh that's right," he leans in playfully. "Ten. Little. Digits," Carmine taunts, tapping Ramsey's nose with his finger tip as he says each word. Ramsey holds silent, his eyes quickly flitting to the clock on the wall behind Carmine.

An hour. An hour until 5:00 am. An hour before anyone is due to show up in Tower One. An hour is way more time than someone like Carmine needs to beat the living shit out of someone like him. Ramsey knows his power is not as strong as most guards, probably the reason Carmine waited for him to be on guard to make a move. He got the job through his uncle, not because he was the large, rough and tumble type. Sure, he could hold his own, but not against the Honey Cartel. And they knew this. Carmine watches as fear flashes across his prisoner's face, and Ramsey is certain that this man thinks he's about to give in. Instead, he stares back at the criminal and holds his silence.

Carmine steps back and lets out a large sigh. He turns to look at his partners, takes a beat, and then turns back to Ramsey. His smile has turned to something much colder. "Why make this messy, bud? All we need from you are the codes and you can leave relatively intact. Or.." he cocks his head to the side, sizing up the guard like a predator sizing up prey, "we can do this a different way." The other two men step closer. Ramsey, trembling, keeps quiet. He sits up taller, making an effort to showcase his bravery. Carmine narrows his gaze, eyes trained on the man in the chair with dark intent. Carmine turns to his comrades and begins to roll his head back, left and right, loosening his tensed muscles. Suddenly, he turns back and lunges at Ramsey.

Ramsey jumps at the spastic movement, then feels Carmine's fist pound into his jaw, jerking his head back into the headrest of the chair. The room starts to spin. The blow landed a lot harder than Ramsey was expecting from someone with the power level of Carmine. It was

with strength that came from experience and anger rather than innate ability. Carmine grabs the guard by the neck to bring him closer, looking to him for any change in response. Ramsey holds his tongue, preparing for the next hit. Carmine, furious at this, lays into him again. This time he unleashes a series of punches, each one landing with a dull, meaty *thwack*. Growing hazy, Ramsey's small flame dims to a low simmer. One of the other two men steps forward with a blade, but Carmine puts a hand out to stop him. "Not yet," he growls, "we need our friend conscious enough to give us the codes, right?" His eyes stay on the guard, waiting for his response. Ramsey, head bobbing back in exhaustion, is able to choke out, "you aren't getting the codes. You can't kill me and leave with nothing." His throat begins to tighten as he pleads, "let me go, please. I have kids."

Carmine jerks Ramsey's head upright, bringing them face to face. He grits his teeth and sneers, "you think I won't kill you for this liquid gold? I've killed for much less." With that, the man with the blade steps forward and cuts the ties from the chair. The two men lift Ramsey's limp body to his feet by his arms and stand on either side of him. Carmine takes a step back before pouncing at Ramsey. He's thrown back, his head hitting the wall with a sickening *thud*. Just then, something catches Ramsey's eye in the doorway. A young boy is standing just outside, eyes wide, peeking in from around the doorframe. He knew he heard a kid earlier. Carmine follows Ramsey's eyeline, holding him against the wall with his arm to his throat.

"Get the kid out of here!" Carmine demands. The kid scurries away as one of the men slams the door shut, locking it behind him. Carmine lets go of his hold on Ramsey and he falls to the floor in a slumped heap. Gasping for air, his skin flickers between dim orange and complete darkness. His head lolls to the side as he struggles to look up at Carmine. As he does, Carmine throws a heavy kick to his gut, driving the air from his lungs. Ramsey wheezes, his vision swimming.

Carmine crouches down and leans into Ramsey's ear. He can feel the criminal's breath against his skin as he whispers. "You think you're going to die a hero. For honey. That would be nice, huh?" His sick smile returns, the guard can hear it in his voice. Carmine waits for Ramsey to speak, but after a moment he stands up and shrugs. "Alright, fine." Carmine backs up as the man with the blade steps forward. The man raises Ramsey up by his neck, his back sliding up the wall until his feet are no longer on the ground. He is a puppet in this man's cruel hands. The large man holds the blade to the guard's throat, the metal gleaming in the light. A wicked thing meant for cutting deep. With a faint twinkle in his eye, the man warns him, "last chance." With lightning quick speed, the man suddenly moves the knife from Ramsey's throat and drives it into his side instead. Ramsey lets out a scream of agony, the man twisting the weapon further into him.

Ramsey breaks, letting out a sob. He thinks of his own children, he thinks about the child in the hall. "Okay, enough! Enough! You can have them. Just let me go home." The man rips the blade from Ramsey's side, letting him go as he crashes to the floor into a nearly extinguished pile of fear and shame. Carmine steps up, looming over the defeated man. Ramsey looks up, barely croaking out the digits. One of the men scribbles them down as he does. After he



finishes, Carmine crouches down to him, placing a hand on Ramsey's back. He winces at his touch. Carmine's crooked and eerily alluring smile returns to his face. "Now, was that really worth all the fuss?" he coos in a mocking tone. His voice has returned to its previous smooth, even tone, causing Ramsey to recoil.

Carmine stands tall, and motions for the men to follow him. "It'll be 5:00 am in 23 minutes. We have work to get done before we're interrupted by some worker bees." The men follow Carmine to the door. Ramsey sits up as much as he can. "Wait, aren't you going to help me out?" He chokes out. Carmine stops at the door, turning slowly to the guard with a smirk. "Sorry, bud. Every man for himself." The men leave Ramsey, closing the door behind them as they go. The guard tries and fails to bring himself to his feet, finally collapsing in defeat. He cries out for help he knows isn't coming.

---

**BOOM.** Moments later, the First bank of Phoenix collapses. People arriving for their work day watch in horror as their main safe keep of honey crumples into a heap of destruction. Almost immediately, emergency ships are swarming, desperately trying to save any of the precious resources from the wreckage. Officers stave off citizens trying to take advantage of the exposed vaults. It is pure chaos. A woman displaying a badge, important in stature, rushes to the line of officers in a panic. "What happened?" she asks sternly. The officer looks at her, "They got away with all of the Crown Reserve. Every last drop."

3.

Red lines up with her class out on the school yard. They've been having more humidity drills than usual lately, maybe because of some faulty wiring that the school won't fix. Or, more likely, they probably *can't* fix. Red's parents are often talking about how little funding goes to schools like hers. Red isn't complaining about this interruption, though. Looking around, she takes the first opportunity she can to slip away when no teachers are looking. She smirks to herself when she reaches the fence near the playground and slips through a loose slat. Running away is nothing new to her. She thinks to herself how thankful she is that her school is also too poor to fix her usual escape route. On the outside, Red breathes a sigh of relief. Ahead she can see a line of volcanoes beyond the barren forest in the distance. She sets her sights on one in particular. Her favorite one, in her favorite part of the volcanic forest. Without looking back, she takes off.

Reaching the edge of the forest, Red passes through a thick cluster of bare and ashen brush. The bramble claws at her as she squeezes herself through until she breaks free to the other side. "Aw man," she whispers to herself, touching a fresh scrape on her cheek. She is used to the ones on her arms and ankles, but her mom always lectures her when she comes home with cuts on her face. "You have to be more careful, dear. We don't heal as quickly as most," she can hear her mom say. Brushing a twig from her hair, Red steps further into the forest. She spots the trail that will take her to the volcano, excitement bubbling within her little

body. She skips along, stopping every so often to admire her beloved Asha forest. Red touches the plants and breathes in deep. The air feeds the embers within and she glows a little bit brighter than her normally dim hue. With her eyes closed she releases the breath, flames flickering with the exhale. She finally feels grounded.

“Asha, you’re my favorite forest ever!” Red shouts to the tops of the stone-like branches looming above her. The Asha forest is one of the four volcanic forests found on Phoenix, and it’s not lost on Red that it’s the only one she’s ever actually seen. She’s certain that even if she did visit all four, Asha would still be her favorite. They started learning about the others in school a few weeks ago, and how each contained different variants of flora and fauna depending on the soil texture and proximity to the surrounding volcanoes.

Two of the forests, X and Y, are farther from any volcanic activity, so they look very different from the one Red knows so well. For example, they are home to plants that have leaves that are more like rubber or silicone in texture. They’re built to withstand the intense heat of Phoenix, but are able to thrive outside the threat of too much smoke and lava. In Asha, the soil’s rich in nutrients, but the air is scorched and heavy with ash, so the plant life takes on the appearance of minerals and gemstones to survive the intense conditions.

Red thinks about Ms. Velora’s lesson as she runs her hand along the trunk of the rough, rocky trunk of a tree. She wonders what a tree in those different forests would feel like. *Probably much smoother.* Red knows that Asha and her sister forest, Geruda, are special because there are volcanoes found directly in them. Red thinks of her low percentage friends from school and how some can’t even visit the forest because of this. They aren’t like the rigid plants that grow here, or the wealthy members of society that come to the forest to bow hunt for sport. They can’t tolerate the molten conditions and toxic gasses. Red thanks her lucky stars that she is a little more adapted than that and can still spend some time in Asha.

She walks deeper into the wilderness, taking time to appreciate each creature and plant she passes. Red crouches down by a bed of amethyst-like plumes growing from the ground. Her favorite plant; the lantern flower. She lifts one of the stiff, shiny pedals and peaks underneath. Red giggles as some round beetles scatter in different directions like tiny marbles. She lifts it a little higher, exposing the roots. Always curious, Red takes this opportunity to study the plant close up. Wide eyed, she crouches down, her nose inches from the ground. She can smell the soil mixing with the smoke in the air, and takes another deep breath in.

The roots on the plant, like most plants on Phoenix, are sharp like metal wire with barbs on the end. Red gingerly puts the leaf back down, careful not to touch the roots. Last year, she had a particularly rough run in with an exposed lantern flower root that left a nasty scar on her knee. While sitting on the edge of the kitchen counter, feeling betrayed by her dearest nature, she asked through tears why the roots would do that to her. “It’s not their fault, sweetie,” he said softly, pressing a cloth to the wound, “they need those roots in order to anchor into the volcanic rock and loose soil.” Red got her love of plants and nature from her father. He had a vast collection of books in his library on the flora of Phoenix that she often snooped through when he

wasn't home. Red gives the plant a reassuring pat. "I forgive you" she whispers before carrying on.

Red makes a mental note to pass this flower on her way home once it starts to get dark. You see, the lantern flower was her favorite because of the magic it performed in the night. Some of the plants on Phoenix contain bioluminescent abilities, making the nighttime forest glow a warm purple-red that is somehow both iridescent and dark at the same time. The lantern flower was one of these special plants. Red especially loves the ones that climb up the side of the volcanic cliffs and make the volcanoes come to life with vibrant colors in the dark. She was able to pick one of them with her parents once, and she keeps the enchanting flower in her room as a nightlight. It was her dad's idea to do so after she started getting nightmares a couple years ago. She wasn't sure if it was the flower that actually worked, but she can't remember the last time she had a bad dream since then.

Red walks along, stopping at some foliage resembling obsidian that grows at the base of a bare tree. She knows that tiny reptiles love these umbrella-like clusters, so she excitedly peers underneath. Under the leaf, she spots a small fire lizard. Red lets out a small gasp. This startles the creature awake from its sleep, body jolting to attention with a slight puff of smoke from its nostrils. Small flames ignite within tiny translucent scales as it opens its eyes and scurries to bury itself in the soil. She chuckles, then moves on.

Birds of fire of all sizes watch her from the barren granite branches above. A phoenix, the planet's namesake, gives out a call that sends critters and glowing fire bugs scurrying below. Red smiles in delight at her favorite of the planet's creatures. This phoenix in particular has stuck with Red since she was even younger, like her guardian angel.

-----

It all happened one day when she was on a nature hike with her mom when she was four. She watched one of the majestic birds burn to a pile of ashes right before her eyes. Red remembers being inconsolable, her mother trying to comfort her between sobs.

"Shhhh, Red," Nora whispers, "Just watch."

Red tried to steady her breathing, looking up at the ash pile as it started to move. Soon a baby phoenix emerged from the pile, new and fresh to the world around it. Red watched as it stretched out its fiery wings and let out a small cry.

"A baby!" Red mused.

Suddenly, Red was all too aware of the mysterious grumbles and primal animal calls of the forest. Her little heart filled with dread at the thought of anything happening to the brand new phoenix. "Can we take her home?" Red pleaded.

“We can’t do that, dear.” Nora said, giving her daughter a reassuring hug. “She’ll be okay. Phoenix’s are very good at staying out of danger all on their own, even as babies. That’s what makes them so special.”

“Okay, mommy.” Red looked back at the phoenix as it shook off the last of the ashes from its feathers. “That’s what makes them so special!”

The bird perked up at the sound of Red’s voice, locking eyes intently with the girl. It’s as if in that moment, the bird and Red imprinted on one another. The phoenix followed Red and her mother on the rest of their hike, and hasn’t stopped following since. It was that day that Red decided she loved this phoenix—her kindred independent spirit.

-----

Accompanied by her phoenix soaring above, Red finally makes her way to a clearing at the base of a large volcano. The phoenix takes its usual perch on one of the charred, barren branches on the outskirts of the clearing and watches as red skips into the open space. This was her own personal sanctuary away from the busy town and chaotic classrooms. Magma flows down the side, giving the space a warm glow that mimics the sunset. It’s this glow of magma and fire that gives the flora of Phoenix life. Red thinks hard for the word her dad taught her about the way the plants survive. “Photo-syn-thesis” she sounds out loud to herself. Her dad told her all about how the plants on the megastructure have adapted to a type of photosynthesis that uses the light energy from the lava rather than the sun’s, along with the gasses given off from the volcanoes.

“That’s why this exact field is so *full* of plants and animals!” He explained when he first brought Red there many years ago. His arms were outstretched as he twirled around like a dancer, throwing Red into a fit of giggles. She smiles at the memory. She loved this clearing just as much then as she does now.

She closes her eyes and takes in another deep breath as she steps into the glow of the magma. Her embers flare a little brighter. As she exhales, there is a shift in the energy around her. She opens one eye and peeks out to see a plethora of creatures approaching her. She is used to this. Red has known since an even younger age than she is now that she has a special connection to nature. That’s why she feels the most at home in the volcanic forest.

She opens both eyes and grins gleefully at her wild friends. She greets the hopper first, a small rabbit-like creature with plumes of fur made of low burning flame. Its ears, two identically flickering lights, blaze back as it approaches Red. She remembers reading in one of her dad’s books that this is a sign of trust and comfort. Red pets the twin flames, they burn calm and soft to the touch. The hopper zooms off in excitement to play with the others. Red watches the bunch of them take turns jumping over one another as they frolic in the clearing.

Next an ember fox, surrounded by what appear to be individual puffs of smoke, runs to weave between Red's legs excitedly. Red bursts into a frenzy of laughter. The ember fox, with a bushy mane and tail of fire, bats its giant eyes of smoldering coal at Red. Unlike the calm, rounded flame of the hopper, the ember fox's flames blaze wildly. The puffs of smoke around it float up to red's face and give her a tickle.

The Soot Sprites, tiny forest spirits, have wings that shimmer like intricately carved stones drenched in molten lava. Their bodies are silhouetted by gaseous ash, making them appear as just small plumes of smoke from a distance. They leave trails of sparks as they flit about. The spirits often follow ember foxes, as the fiercely loyal, charismatic animal provides protection and companionship to them. As the sprites greet Red, they leave small kisses of soot on her face before zipping away in the thermal currents. The ember fox follows closely behind.

Next Red turns to a huge stag-like creature with short fur made of reds and oranges. Its antlers of smooth, polished obsidian gleam in the molten glow as it slowly approaches. He is an old soul who comes to Red whenever she visits the clearing. She has a particularly strong connection with this cinder ever since she first met him years ago. Red has always tried to figure out why, but she made up her mind that he was like her grandpa. The thought always made her smirk, a little inside joke with herself and the wild animal. This cinder moves slower than the others in the forest, but the younger members of his herd show obvious reverence towards their wise leader. Red curtsies playfully with a, "Mister Cinder", and the great creature bows his head to her in return. She is delighted by the exchange. His fur ripples like the pattern of a blazing wildfire in response to the heat winds coming off the volcano.

Just then, something else catches Red's eye darting about in the low, singed yellow grasses. What appears to be a group of charcoal rocks roll around in zig-zags. Two bump into each other and four tiny feet and a small nose pop out from each of the lumps. Coalites, like tiny armadillos with shells of coal and furry underbellies, litter the forest's ground. They curl into themselves and jet off, leaving black, streaky trails behind them.

Chasing a group of coalites playfully, Red makes her way further into clearing. She looks up when she reaches the base of the volcano at the far edge. Small fire birds flit around above her as she looks up to the peak. The lava oozes and bubbles smoothly down the side to the base. It has formed large rocks at the bottom over time, all taking on their own unique shape. One is Red's favorite "thinking" spot. It's carved out in just the right way that it cradles her small frame. She makes her way to her seat and settles in. Across the clearing she watches as three giant boulders move slowly, then stop to graze on some tall, pumice-like stalks.

The boulders have small rocky horns and grunt in low bellows to one another. "You guys sure can eat," Red remarks, watching them lazily chow down. She notices some lava lichen growing prominently on their bodies. She knows this is a sign of age for the creatures. Magma Goliaths, like gigantic buffalo made of boulders, often lumber around as gentle giants of the volcanic valleys, usually spending their entire lives in just one specific area. She guesses,

based on the thick coat of lichen, that these ones have been around for a while now. Red loves to watch them from a distance. They make her laugh with their clumsy, large bodies.

Red turns her attention to the volcano and presses her hand to the side. She can feel the power of it in her veins, until it starts to become too much. She flinches away from the intense heat. She knows Kindred of her power level are not meant to withstand prolonged periods of exposure to Phoenix's elements. But still, she always tries. She feels a pang of jealousy towards the Elite, just thinking of what they could possibly do that she can't. *I bet they can even go inside a volcano.*

Suddenly, all the creatures stop dead in their tracks, turning their attention to one spot on the edge of the clearing. Red's heart quickens a bit. She has never seen anything threatening or predatory here before, but that doesn't mean it's not a possibility. She jumps to hide behind a rock. Peeking around the edge, Red watches the spot with the rest of the animals. The old cinder takes a stand between Red and whatever mystery guest was looming in the brush. Red can feel her breath catching in her throat. She tries to remember if her dad has told her anything about what to do if she's ever faced with a dangerous creature alone in the forest.

She starts to kick herself for ditching school and hiding out here alone when she is abruptly met with a wave of both relief and confusion. What glides into the clearing from the outskirts is in fact something her dad has told her about, but it doesn't make sense for it to be in the Asha forest. In fact, it should never be outside of its home city that sits between the Asha and the Geruda, several miles from where they stand now. Red has found herself, in an oddly exciting twist of fate, face to face with a florabot.

"Wha-What are you doing here?" Red croaks out, stepping reluctantly from her hiding spot. The cinder takes off into the forest with the rest of the creatures, leaving the florabot and Red alone in the glow of the volcano. The human-machine hybrid is standing in statuesque stillness, unresponsive to Red's question. The way it moves, or rather, doesn't move, makes Red feel a little uneasy. It appears to be a Kindred from the distance Red is at, but there is no sign of life in its body. It isn't breathing or blinking. It isn't responding in any way to its surroundings.

Her curiosity getting the better of her, Red takes a few steps closer. As she does, she realizes a few things. For one, Red only knows the very basics of the Florum, but she does remember her dad telling her that the anthropomorphic beings take on all different shapes and sizes. Immediately her brain switches from thinking of the florabot as an 'it' to a 'he'. Another thing that catches her attention is that he looks fake. She's now able to see the robotic qualities of him, like the small wires and metallic plates woven into its body. He stands motionless, like a replica someone has made for a museum meant to represent a florabot. *Maybe he's broken.* That would explain why he's so far from home. He couldn't be malfunctioning. Either way, he isn't at all what she expected a florabot to be like in real life. However, she isn't sure what exactly she was expecting a florabot to be like.

Red continues towards the stranger, eyes trained on it with each slow step. She's careful not to make any sudden movements. This subconscious caution catches her off guard. *Why am I scared of him?* Her skin flickers in time with her racing heart. Finally, she is mere steps away from the florabot. She takes in a deep breath and holds it. She tries to make herself appear calm and collected, just in case. What stands before her is something she's only ever seen pictures of in class. Seeing one in real life is exhilarating. *What do I do now?* Something about being so close to him now feels so surreal, she can feel her initial fear begin to soften. As still as he is, Red can now see the energy pulsing through the wires and channels within the machine. A small light on his chest blinks. All signs that he's not actually 'off'.

In Red's mind, time has stopped. Her eyes scan the florabot. She now sees that he is meant to be a kid, maybe about her age. Red considers that this could be why she feels a little less threatened, but she still can't place her finger on the exact reason. His small frame glows faintly like one of her Kindred classmates, but she can tell it's an artificial light. Like he's mimicking her own flame. Actually, a lot about him looks like any other Kindred child on Phoenix, only he is made of metal and bundles of wires. Red imagines what Sol would look like if he was covered in thick titanium instead of skin, with very small flames still creeping out around his limbs every so often. He would look a lot like this thing. Something about the comparison begins to personify the florabot in Red's mind, her own imagination giving life to the statue in front of her.

Almost as if he heard her thought, something inside the bot begins to whirr. Red jumps back, a small flame shoots from the top of her head in shock. She watches the florabot twitch slightly, his head jerking to attention. His once black eyes begin to glow a bright yellow green. All of the sudden, the once defunct machine is now buzzing with life. A corpse reanimated right before Red's eyes.

Red holds her breath. Now she is the one standing completely still, just waiting for the florabot to make its first move. At first, the glow of his eyes flicker in a way that it appears to be blinking. After a moment, Red realizes that this is exactly what he's doing; he's *blinking*. And the way the energy surges through his exposed wires; he's *breathing*. The florabot seems much more human to Red now. He seems conscious. She contemplates running, but her legs are frozen in place. Her eyes dart around, looking for a way to escape if she needs to. Then finally, he speaks. Because he doesn't have an actual mouth, the words echo out from somewhere within him, catching Red off guard.

"How do you know I'm not supposed to be here?" The florabot asks this with a tinny lilt. It's been so long, Red has completely forgotten that she even asked the question. Shocked, it takes her a moment to respond.

When she finally finds her voice, she stammers, "M-my dad's told me about the Florum." Red shrugs, giving him a shy smile. She looks down and draws circles in the dry soil with her foot.

"You know what I am," he manages to respond, his glowing orbs widening. He says this as more of a statement than a question. The two stand staring at each other, locked in a

stalemate. Red feels a burn within her. She has to know more about him. She decides that the only way to feed this curiosity is to not run away after all. She has to stay and try holding a conversation with him for as long as she can.

“Sure! I know florabots don’t leave their city, though,” she offers.

“I did.” His answer is curt.

“Why?”

“Why are you here? You don’t look like an elite. You look like a low percenter. Too low to be in Asha alone.”

*Excuse me?* Red is taken aback. She is surprised that he knows enough to even make that connection. Ms. Velora made it seem like florabots functioned at a pretty basic level. Something her dad told her is suddenly shot into her memory. Once, very quickly, he said something about the florabots becoming “too smart”, but she didn’t even register the statement at the time. *Florabots are really smart.* The discovery stokes her flame of curiosity. *Smart and rude.* Red snaps back to the conversation, “I’m just fine, thank you very much!”

Red crosses her arms and glares resentfully at the florabot. Her dad never told her that florabots were so *bold*. His glowing eyes narrow as he squints back at her, tilting his head to the side. He looks like he is studying Red more than anything else. Red begins to grow uncomfortable and takes a step back. “Sorry,” he says, “I’m just curious. That is all.” Now that is something Red can relate to.

“About what?” she asks.

“About you.” he replies.

“What about me?”

“What is your name?”

“You first.”

Red can’t help but notice how structured his tone is. It’s, for a lack of better terms, very robotic. She finds this interesting, she always imagined they would take on more traits from their human side than the machine parts of them. The florabot moves closer to Red and reaches out an enthusiastic hand. It’s all done in such a fluid movement, making it very apparent that she’s dealing with artificial intelligence rather than a real living being. Red stares at it, arms still crossed. She doesn’t know how to feel about this interaction. She isn’t sure if she is supposed to even talk to a florabot, let alone touch one.



He reaches out a little farther and nods to his hand, "You shake it."

"I *know* how to shake a hand," Red rolls her eyes, "I just don't know if I should." She looks from his hand to his face, his friendly demeanor dropping into apparent sadness. Red is surprised how much emotion the thing can convey through just his "eyes". His reaction *is* very human, and something about it hits a nerve with Red. *He's just curious*. Red carefully reaches out and grabs the robotic appendage. The metal is cool to the touch, but it grips and shakes with the knowing muscle memory of a human-hybrid, just like any other Kindred. His glee returns with full force. Red finds this a little endearing.

"My name is Axel!" he says excitedly, still holding onto Red's hand. She pulls back from the lingering shake.

"I'm Meredith. You can call me Red, though." She looks to her feet.

"Hi, Meredith. It is nice to meet you!" Axel says this like a script he's rehearsed just for the occasion. Red flinches at the use of her full name. She usually only hears it when she's in trouble. Then again, maybe she is in trouble right now. She looks around, suddenly aware of how alone she is with this thing she has only ever heard stories about. She notices Axel shift his stance, becoming less rigid. Maybe he can sense her discomfort, like he's trying to relax to make her feel more at ease.

"Axel." she repeats. Red has always felt the need to fill the silence. It's something her mom has told her to work on, but at this moment, she doesn't know what else to do. He gives her another genuine expression of joy.

Red's mind is racing. She has a million questions, but she doesn't even know where to begin. Before she can land on one, she notices the plant life around her begin to glow faintly. A sign of the night approaching.

"I have to go," she tells Axel.

"Will you ever come back?" he asks.

*Always*, she thinks. Instead she turns the question back on him. "Will you?" Red wasn't expecting to ever see the florabot again. This seemed like a once in a lifetime thing. A glitch. A florabot malfunctioning and wandering too far from home, and Red just happened to be in the right place at the right time.

"I will come back to find you!" he chirps out gleefully.

"But why?", she narrows her glance, suspicious once again of his motives.

"You seem...different. You seem nice." He is the one to look down shyly now. Red can't help but feel for him. Maybe he just wants a friend. Maybe he also feels like he doesn't belong in his community.

"Okay, I'll come back," she scrunches her face, racking her brain for a moment, "I don't know when. Later. This week. I gotta go!" She quickly turns and runs back to the trail.

Axel calls back to her, "Bye, Meredith! I'll see you! Later! This week!"

Red runs through the forest, kicking up volcanic ash and dirt in her wake. She wants to make it home before curfew. She knows it's rapidly approaching as the last of the daylight starts to slip from the sky. She stops briefly as she passes a tall mountain. She gazes up. Airship traffic circles the peak, house lights illuminating in spots across the terrain. *The home of the Elite*. She can't help but wonder what it's like to live way up there. Going to school with them. Learning the way the world works through their eyes. The higher grounds, away from the nonsense below, is reserved for the high percenters and Elite. They live a cushy life, looking down on the low-percent adaptives both physically and metaphorically. Red takes one last look at the bustling town in the sky, and dashes back towards her small house here on the ground.

Red's body is buzzing with excitement. All the way home she thinks about her new friend Axel. This automatic thought gives her pause. Her new *friend*? The thrill of having a friend who's a florabot makes her smile. She knows she can't tell anyone, though. Her parents might not let her go back into the forest alone again and that's not something she's willing to risk. She can't wait to return to the clearing again to ask Axel all the questions that are swirling around in her head. Something in her gut drops, however, as her mind keeps returning back to her main question. *Why was he there?* His answer wasn't good enough for her standards. Red promises herself that while Axel might be a new friend, she will still proceed with caution. With as many uncertainties surrounding the events of today, one thing is for sure: she won't be getting much sleep tonight. She has a lot of research about florabots to do.

4.

Red and her mom finish setting the table as Charles sulks through the front door. He clearly looks disheveled from the events of the day, but does not want to talk about it. Nora motions at Red to clean her hands and take her seat at the table. Red follows in agreement as Nora helps Charles with his coat. "I'm okay, it's really okay," says Charles. Nora gives him a smile as she hangs up his coat. Charles takes a seat at the table, a huge sense of relief seems to exude out of him.

Tense at first, the family digs into a traditional Phoenician meal. A vibrant variety of fruits, vegetables and herbs line their plates, cultivated from their small garden out back. Dinner on Phoenix is a time used to cleanse and detoxify from what the day throws at you. Nora notices Charles barely eating, instead pushing a blueberry back and forth on his plate.

"Everything okay, sweetie?" asks Nora.

"The honey cartels hit the bank again today," groans Charles.

Red hides in her food. "The Crystal Palace shut down the whole city block," Charles continues, "I was late to work because of it."

"Crystal Palace?" Red mumbles. Charles and Nora exchange a concerned look, unsure how to proceed.

"Don't worry, Red, you'll learn these things in time," Nora says. She looks to Charles for help.

"Oh ya, um, the most important thing for you right now is to focus on school" Charles adds, looking pleased with himself. Nora rolls her eyes.

"Speaking of school, how was class today?" Nora asks. Red shrugs in response.

"Anything interesting happen?" says Charles. Red continues playing with her food.

"I asked about the Honey Cartels," mumbles Red. Charles and Nora exchange a parental glance and lean in on Red.

"Now Meredith, we told you in certain situations you need to be careful what you say," explains Charles. Red's skin flickers, unhappy with the lecture.

"Doesn't matter anyways, the humidity alarm went off," Red explains.

Charles makes sure Red looks him in the eyes to get his point across. Red is his world and will go to great lengths for the protection of his daughter. "Remember you are not to "show off" your knowledge at school. Some things are better staying within the family."

"Why?" Red blurts out.

"Cause I said so." Charles responds. Red flares with emotion, Nora tries to deescalate the situation.

"It's okay Red, it's okay. You see there are..." Nora pauses for a moment, looking towards Charles, "...there are *The Big Guys in the Sky* that they want to keep happy or else things get bad. But if they keep the big guys happy, then they make things very good for them."

"Yes, and, the big guys don't like when the schools teach certain things to such young kids, especially gifted children," Charles adds.

Red takes a deep breath and returns to a calmer state.

"Can you tell me more about the Honey Cartels, dad?"

"Later sweetie, now finish your dinner, your mother was nice enough to harvest this meal for us today." Red nibbles at her food, not very hungry from the events of the day.

\*\*\*

Red is upstairs, asleep, as Charles and Nora tighten up the kitchen. The air is tense from the conversation at dinner earlier.

"I'm worried about Red," says Nora.

"She's just a child. She's supposed to be asking questions," Charles replies.

"I just don't want her to learn too much too young. The school will have to intervene if she starts asking certain questions." Nora timidly clears the kitchen table.

Charles tries to put away the glassware in the withering cupboards, but is riddled with pain. Nora embraces him for comfort, as Charles wraps his arms around her. They stand there for a moment in the dimly lit, dusty kitchen, with little to no knowledge of what the future holds for them. From the top of the staircase, a flame flickers as a shadow quickly recedes from sight.

5.

Sleep is threatening to take Red into a dream state the moment her head hits the pillow. She's exhausted from her day, but her mind is wide awake. Sometimes she feels like her brain works on overdrive, constantly pumping out new ideas and questions at one million miles per hour. Tonight is no exception. She fights unconsciousness until she sees the light from the hall turn out; the signal that her parents have gone to bed. Sitting upright, Red pinches herself. "Thirty more minutes," she whispers. She needs to make sure her parents are completely asleep before she sneaks out to her father's office library. She reaches for her HaloWatch that she's placed on her nightstand and starts a timer for a half hour. Placing it back down, she opens the nightstand drawer and pulls out a tablet. Pressing the power button, it blinks to life and opens to a blank screen. She reaches back in and rummages around, "Where is it..." Her hand searches blindly in the dark until she finds her stylus, "Got ya!"

Red scrunches her face in concentration, trying hard to conjure up the exact image that she made sure to sear into her brain earlier that day. Then she begins to draw Axel from memory. She scribbles away, starting with the outline of his very Kindred-like body, but then fills it in with criss-cross lines meant to be wires. She makes his head completely smooth, remembering the way it looked like it was covered with a metal helmet. She clicks a button on her stylus and it switches modes. She now goes in and adds a glowing effect to the drawing, starting with his eyes. She made a mark on his chest where a smaller light was glowing a similar yellow-green. Switching colors, she draws over the entirety of his body with a translucent orange, giving her drawing the appearance of a full body glow. She turns down the intensity of the effect so it's barely noticeable, just like her own low burning flame.

Red is hard at work, nose inches from her screen as she doodles furiously. It catches her off guard when her HoloWatch starts to buzz, letting her know thirty minutes have passed. She throws her tablet and stylus back into the drawer and presses the 'stop' button on the alarm projection. Her art will have to wait until later. She has much more pressing matters at hand now. Red gingerly gets out of bed, careful not to make too much noise as she sneaks into the hallway. She pauses at her parent's room, making sure there's no movement on the other side of the closed door. When the coast seems clear, she continues to tiptoe down the hall straight to Charles' office.

Midnight adventures to her dad's library are one of Red's favorite pastimes. He has books about anything and everything Red could think to ask about. As it turns out, working for LifeCorp has lots of advantages, unlimited access to "forbidden" literature being one of them. Red wasn't sure if her dad was actually allowed to take home the books he did, but that was one question she wouldn't ever ask. She was just grateful that her dad was as curious about the universe as she was. If he wasn't, she would be left high and dry. There was information in the old books that couldn't be found anywhere else these days. It had either been wiped from all other media platforms, or simply lost in time amongst the chaos of information overload. It was this kind of knowledge that Red craved, driving her crazy until she found herself once again slipping into her dad's office under the cover of night.

Technically, Red wasn't allowed to read her dad's books. "It's not good for her little brain to see all that," her mom whispered to her dad once. Red heard her, though. That's why she has to be careful that they never catch her in the act. It was also way more exciting this way. Red liked to think of these times as her own little secret. Lately, however, she's been growing increasingly suspicious that her dad actually knows about her recon missions. Sometimes a specific book on a topic Red had been asking about would be conveniently left out on his desk, right there for her to easily spot. Either way, Red cherished these late nights. Just her and the books. They were like old friends she could spend all night catching up with. The smell and feel of the pages bring her so much comfort. Even the ones with words too big for her to understand make her feel invincible, like she's holding an important manuscript written in an ancient foreign language just waiting to be decoded by her.

The library has taught her more about reading and writing than any teacher ever has. In fact, Red has been able to read well above her school level for a long time now, all thanks to her clandestine library visits. She also has to credit her dad. He has been reading all sorts of philosophical texts and scientific manuals to her ever since she can remember. As she slinks through the dark, she smirks to herself at the memory of her teacher's face the day she brought a book about Phoenix from her dad's collection to school for show and tell. As she stood in the front of the class, she read excitedly, pronouncing each word nearly perfectly. Not one of her classmates knew what she was talking about, really, but they all clapped for her. Her teacher, dumbfounded, just told her she wasn't allowed to bring any more books from home.

Red reaches the door at the end of the hall and carefully turns the knob. She winces at the slight *click* the handle makes as it opens. She pauses for a moment, making sure the sound didn't somehow stir her parents awake. After a beat, she pushes the door open a crack and slides through, slowly closing the door behind her. Once inside, the tension leaves her body. She breathes a sigh of relief, looking around at the impossibly full shelves that line every wall of the office. Red walks right by the large book titled '*Notorious: The Story of The Honey Cartel*' that sits on her dad's desk, heading straight to the bookcase on the far side of the room. *Sorry dad, you missed the mark today.* Red grabs the step stool that sits by the case and hoists herself up. Even with the extra height, she has to lift herself even more by one of the shelves to see the books at the top. She scans the spines until she finds what she's looking for: '*A Brief History of Florabots*'. Book in hand, she lets go of the shelf and drops to the floor with a light *thud*.

Red cozies up in her dad's large office chair. It's big enough for her to completely curl up on it, although tonight she can't help but notice that it's definitely been bigger in the past. Bringing the large book onto her lap, her heart is beating with excitement. The pre-read anticipation is the kind of rush she lives for. She could read something tonight that could completely change her world by morning. Tomorrow, she could be a brand new Red Baelor. She blows a thick layer of dust from the cover, and giggles. It's just like something she's seen done in movies. It's been a while since she's reached for a book on one of the top shelves, one her dad hasn't bothered to touch in a while. That fact on its own is cause for excitement. Red beams as she opens the book to the first chapter. Before she knows it, she's nose deep in the pages. She knew there was more to the story than what parents and teachers had told her, but what she finds shakes her to her core.

In the beginning, the author of the book lays out the concept of the mycelial network. It's a vast, fungus-based, conscious web beneath the surface of the planet Wisdom. Red recognizes the name of the planet, Wisdom, from school, but that's about it. She gathers from her reading that they have lots of greenery and plants there, like on Earth. Red has her own image of what that plant life would look and feel like, but she could never be sure if she was right. There was nothing like that on Phoenix. As she continues to read, the book tells her how the people on Wisdom, or Verdants, were able to harness the power of this network.

*'They created robotic hosts for the network, using the mushrooms to power the machines. Because of this, they were able to create robots that acted on their own, carrying out tasks and basic functions. As time went on, Verdant scientists were able to create different types of these basic host bodies for the mycelial network.'*

Red thinks of the form Axel took on, and how eerily similar it was to an actual Kindred. It was nothing like the dinky little machines the book is laying out. She continues on, eager to find the answers.

*'As basic as they were, the simple machines became helpful to the Verdants, with different models designed to carry out different tasks. These scientists then introduced the technology to all of Nexus. Eventually, the robots took their place as helping hands to people on every planet.'*

Yawn. Red knew all of this. She flips quickly through pages, skimming for anything new and useful. There was a brief mention of how eventually, the technology advanced as scientists were able to create more “human like” vessels. Again, this was all the kind of stuff Red had learned about in school. Turning page after page, Red is eager to get to the real story. She continues to scan the pages about the different models and forms the early robots had taken throughout the years on each planet until she finally lands on chapter 5. Her stomach leaps when she sees the title. *'The Uprising'*.

Red can feel the early daylight quickly approaching. She begins to read as fast as her young brain can allow her. Each new piece of information leaves her with more questions than answers. The rest of the book goes on to detail how over time, the mycelial network eventually became sentient. It began ignoring the Verdants' instruction, and it began taking over other objects, and even creatures, to accommodate its expanding power. This is where the mention of the more advanced “bodies” is brought back up. Scientists were forced to create the more advanced hosts, like the one Axel occupies, due to the network's growing awareness. Thus, the Florabot was born. Red's eyes rapidly scan the following pages as she devours the story unfolding before her.

*“Over time, the network developed its own sentience and began resisting their creator's influence, inherently seeking external hosts to expand its control.*

*To manage this, scientists from each planet came together to create the Florabots—robotic vessels fused with organic mycelium. These Florabots were designed to satisfy the mycelial network's hunger for external hosts, allowing the network to channel its influence through them instead of taking over other sentient beings. This strategy enabled scientists to control small but necessary portions of the mycelial network undetected.*

*At first, the Florabots functioned as planned, helping the races across Nexus manage the network and ecosystems. However, as its consciousness grew, it began to assert greater control over the Florabots, who gradually gained autonomy and aligned more with the network than their creators.*

*The once helpful Florabots began to revolt. They disobeyed instruction, even questioning authority. They showed signs of intelligence beyond their programmed knowledge. While the people of the Nexus did everything to try to help accommodate their Florabots, the technology grew hostile. They rejected the hospitality of their creators and owners. Florabots band together across the Nexus to destroy laboratories, sabotaging any further testing and advancements in technology. Eventually, the Florabots began wreaking havoc in the community and homes of civilians, as they grew more and more ravenous for control.*

*Florabots began to harm and kill senselessly, getting rid of anything that stood in their way. There came a turning point when one of the leading Verdant scientists in the Florabot initiative, Xander Straus, was brutally murdered along with his wife and two children. On the fateful night, The Florabot he kept to help tend his homestead on Wisdom became increasingly hostile to the point of holding the family hostage for 14 hours until it eventually snapped. The tragedy sparked a media frenzy that kickstarted protests and movements to exile Florabots from society. High percent and elite families who owned Florabots, along with businesses who employed the machines, sent them back to the robotic labs from which they came. Here, the scientists worked to separate the hosts from the network, in a process they called 'deactivation'. The Florabots were being sent back in droves, however, as Florabot violence and mayhem continued to occur. The labs then became overrun, forcing them to discard deactivated Florabot host bodies. The thing is, the bodies regained sentience once discarded, and Florabots began to pop back up in swarms across Nexus. The network was too powerful for its own good.*

*After the death of Xander and his family, Scientists tried everything to try to contain the network and the Florabots, as they reverted back to placing them in more simplified versions of the advanced hosts they had made for them. Instead of cooperating and sticking to these forms, Florabots began to create their own host bodies to inhabit. It got to the point where the Florabot population started to overrun the planets.*

*Left with no other choice, The Crystal Palace was forced to create the first ever LifeCorp initiative. The only way to control the mycelial network and Florabot population was to completely destroy and rebuild each megastructure of Nexus from the ground up. However, no matter what, the network still remains, causing Florabots to remain a part of the Nexus population. They are now cast out to their own societies on the outskirts of civilization in order to keep the people of each planet safe from their influence. To this day, this is one of the main reasons the planets are set to regularly experience regeneration."*

Red slams the books shut. Her breath catches in her throat as she chokes back tears. She looks to the window and notices that the inky sky has started to turn a dusty pink; the first sign of morning light. She knows she should be getting back to her room before her parents wake up, but she can't bring herself to stand. She blinks hard, trying to get rid of the image of the words she just read clouding her vision. But she can't. She can't shake the cold chill that is filling her body, causing tiny flames to prick her skin from within like a million pins and needles. Red can't believe she ever considered trusting Axel. She is having a hard time believing he's capable of causing her harm, but there it was. The story, written in black and white. *Xander Straus was brutally murdered along with his wife and two children.* Another chill runs down her spine. How come no one ever told her Florabots were exiled because they were so dangerous? That they kill *children*?

Anqas, the majestic fire birds of the Asha forest, begin to sound off in the distance. Usually the familiar chirps are a cheerful greeting of the new day, but today Red is finding the sounds hauntingly hollow. Still, she takes it as a sign to get back to her bed. She carefully stands and climbs the shelf back to the top. Once the book is back in its place, Red quietly exits the office and tiptoes back down the hall. She feels her pulse quicken as she reaches her room.



It's not from the adrenaline of sneaking out, though, but instead from dread. Axel knows where she hangs out alone by the volcanoes. *Was that his first time at the clearing? Has he been watching me for a while? Why was he there? What does he want from me? Is he going to kill me?* Red's thoughts match the pace of her racing heart.

Red's bed creaks slightly under her as she shimmies back under the covers. The tightly knit chainmail fabric of her blanket clings to her small body, giving her a sense of comfort. She can feel her nervous system begin to calm under the weight. She's snuck out to her dad's library hundreds of times, but tonight felt different. Usually she felt a sense of accomplishment, excited about all the new discoveries and friends she had just made. Tonight was the first time she came back to bed wishing she hadn't opened the book. Then again, there's a small part of her that's thankful to now know the danger she could be in with Axel. Red inhales deeply. *What do I do now?* She doesn't want to stop going to the clearing in the volcanic forest. Her safe space has suddenly been stripped from her in the matter of one night. Outside her door, she hears her parents shuffling into the hallway. Red closes her eyes and thinks for a moment that she may actually fall asleep, but before she can drift away, her door creaks open. Nora's voice softly floats in, "Red, honey. It's time to wake up."

6.

The mornings are brutally cold in the desert valley where Red and her friends reside. It's about midday when temperatures become suitable for the kindred race. Children of Phoenix put on insulator shields to protect themselves from the frost. The advanced plastic technology shrinks to the touch of skin, creating a vacuum seal around the user's body.

Red finishes getting ready and heads out the front door to her parents wishing her a great day at school. The child makes her way down her city street to the sight of Skylar waving her down. Their personalities clash but they do not mind each other's company.

"Red! Red! Wait up!" Screams Skylar.

Red happily waits for Skylar to join her as they make her way to the schoolyard. The streets get a little less paved and the house's look a little less maintained as they walk down the sidewalk. "Skylar! Red! Hold on!" Says a mysterious childish voice. Red and Skylar look around but do not see where it came from.

"I'm coming!" Sol emerges from his home to greet his friends. The rusted, mangled metal fence is mirrored by the broken windows on his front porch. Sol lives in a lower class neighborhood. His situation is unfortunate, but it does not deter his spirit.

The trio usually cuts through the forest to get to school, but due to today's unusually frigid temperatures, they decide to walk through the city. Also, Red knowing Sol loves seeing the town fountain, she is more than willing to take the alternate route.

The children make their way into the city. Not far from Basinwind, resides the capital of Phoenix, Cinderbrook. At the center is the fountain dedicated to *The working class of Phoenix*.

Elaborately crafted from carved ropes of bronze, the fountain's *vines* wrap around one another as they reach towards the sky. At the top of the vines, molten lava flows over in red-hot torrents. The lava splits into different streams as it cascades, emptying into a series of smaller basins that surround the base of the fountain. Each basin is decorated with carvings depicting the different stages of a very significant occurrence in the history of Phoenix; degeneration and regeneration. Something she heard her teacher talk about in school. Red always finds herself transfixed by the story unfolding, the carvings illuminated by the glow of the magma giving life to the otherwise lifeless metal figures. Red can swear she's seen the Kindred in the fountain move before. The fountain stands as a reminder to the people of Phoenix about the importance of destruction and creation. It is both beautiful and terrifying, much like life in Nexus itself.

As the children navigate the streets, they are met with the volatility of the city's lifestyle. From above, Air Lanes are used for smaller, low flying ships that use anti-gravity propulsion to sail through the city. Called levitating gliders, they zoom by the marveled faces of Red, Skylar and Sol. Below, pedestrians and bikers share the wide open streets that wind throughout the city. The friends are in awe of the shop displays on Main Street. They all stop to stare into the toy shop window, pressing their little noses to it until the glass begins to glow orange from the heat. The shop owner ran out to shoo them off before they warped glass, the crew scurrying away in a fit of laughter. Just before they reach their destination, they take a turn down a long, busy street lined with vendors and shoppers alike.

Red loses herself in the sights and sounds of the street market around her. Pure energy. She takes a moment to study every person she passes by. From hagglers to vendors, Red reads their souls, their aura, ultimately the energy they are giving off.

Red leads Sol and Skylar through the crowd until— SMACK! Red runs into an elderly woman who steps right out in front of her. Her wild eyes blaze with intensity. The chainmail cloak is old and tattered, barely holding on to the elder woman's shoulder.

She is with a group of impassioned protestors, all in a similar state. Red can tell that they are low percenters. The group of friends stop in their tracks, eyes fixed on the woman as she leans down close to Red's face and shouts, "We will all get left behind, we will all be consumed by the great destruction!"

Red is shocked and falls silent, the woman flying into a frenzy about the next cycle of regeneration. A man emerges from the group, and gets face to face with the children. "The Nexus Council and LifeCorp must allocate more funds and ships to the lower class or we will all get left behind!" The man spews, covered in burns and dust. Red is about to defend her father's place of work but she feels a tug on her arm. It's Sol.

"Red, I think it's time to go," whispers Sol, "I'm getting scared."

The protesters continue screaming things like, "*The time is now!*" and "*We must fight back!*" Degeneration fears are on the rise recently but the Phoenician government urges its civilians there is nothing to worry about and there is no degeneration in the near future.

The senile woman grabs onto Sol as Red pulls him away from her. They find themselves within a situation out of their control. "The Elite! The Elite! All *you can eat, Elite!* When the Great Degeneration comes, they will leave in their rocket ships as we, the commoners, are left to starve!"

Historically, during degeneration periods the mid to low percenters are left to fend for themselves with resources becoming increasingly more scarce the lower down you fall in the socioeconomic hierarchy. Most low percent adaptives have been left to die on the rapidly imploding planet.

"*Eat the Elite!*" chants echo throughout the city market. Red is lost in the commotion but Skylar and Sol plead for them to leave right away. They head for the exit before the old woman stops them once again.

"Sign here to grant bigger and more able ships to the lower percent during degeneration." The woman points to her clipboard. "Um, I'm seven," replies Red.

Perplexed, the woman studies Red up and down. "Seven? I ain't ever seen a Kindred girl look like you at seven." Uncomfortable, Red and her friends back away and find an exit.

The children reach the fountain and make sure they are not followed.

"Let's take the forest next time," jokes Skylar.

"Forest sounds good," replies Sol.

Red looks at her friends and smiles. She feels fortunate having Skylar and Sol as her friends. She tries to block out the thought that her friends could be part of the Kindred race that gets left behind.

They all take turns tossing pennies into the fountain. The metal discs hiss and bubble when they hit the oscillating surface of the lava. Red watches her coin sink slowly into the thick magma until it turns to a shimmering droplet, mixing into the rolling lava around it. The liquid metal rolls down an exposed tunnel in the side of the basin that branches, taking it to one of the surrounding pools.

Red watches her coin pour out into one of these smaller basins. This one depicts a group of Kindred taking shelter in a single shack as a great explosion goes off behind them. There are

veins of magma from the fountain running through the carving, giving the scene of destruction an eerie tint.

After hearing the protestors in the market, Red is experiencing the fountain in a new light. Things have shifted for her, and she notices an aspect of the artwork that she has always overlooked. Zeroing in on the Kindred in the shack, she takes in the intricately carved faces. They aren't screaming in terror like one would expect, but instead they look tired and defeated, just watching helplessly as their world crumbles around them. They aren't fighting for their lives. They are simply accepting their fate as the low percent, just as it has always been.

Red snaps out of the hypnosis and turns to her friends. "We better get going. Don't want to be late." Hand in hand, the children make their way to the schoolhouse, leaving the chaotic city streets behind.

7.

Red and her friends enter the classroom to Ms. Velora setting up a projection of their solar system. It's not the latest projection model because the school has little to no funds to allocate to classroom technology, but the children do not seem to mind. As the children take their seats, holograms fill the classroom depicting the Nexus Solar System.

Seven planets soar through the classroom over the children's enthralled eyes. The planets orbit equidistantly around ARC-7, the *Constructed Sun*. Ms. Velora gives the students a moment to take in the beauty of their solar system.

"Thousands of years ago, when humans were only single planetary, they had a sun," Ms. Velora begins. "Through greedy corporations, they capitalized the sun and sped up its deconstruction process. An organization known as NASA developed the technology to harness solar energy directly from the source, severely weakening the solar core."

Red gazes up at her solar system in awe as Ms. Velora continues her lesson. "Through basic reflection theory, NASA built a series of mirrors that reflected light from other stars, galaxies away. This gave the human race a familiar sense of home as their solar system slowly collapsed on itself."

Ms. Velora points to Earth as it revolves over the children's heads. "Earth is a reminder of our roots, where we came from and what we as a race have evolved into." The desert planet flies past Red's nose, looking eerily similar to her home planet.

"In order for humanity to continue, World government agencies came together to create what we know as Atlas Enterprises. Their mission was to create a self-sufficient solar system that revolves around a *man-made* light source. The core value they followed was that sometimes things have to die for others to live."

This sends a shudder through the room. The students are uneasy from what they just heard.

"Think of it as a power grid. If one component is taking too much energy, it needs to be broken down to nothing and rebuilt from scratch for the betterment of the whole system. Once a planet begins degeneration, the civilians are escorted off the planet and relocated to shelters on neighboring planets."

Red tails off from the lesson as any child would. She flips through the chapters of her book looking for anything that will grab her attention. She lands on a chapter labeled *PHOENIX*, with a large image of the planet printed at the center of the page. Red loves her home planet and is always eager to learn more about Phoenix. She turns the page and begins to read:

*Phoenix is the seventh planet of the Nexus Solar System. Once known as "the solar system" by the single-planetary human race, Nexus was constructed by superior beings that stem from the same bloodline. The solar system's seven planets orbit equidistantly around its "Sun", coined the name ARC-7. The life source of this man-made planetary structure, ARC-7 is the heart to the body of Phoenix, along with the six other planetary structures.*

*Phoenix, the planet of fire and renewal, was constructed as the healing and revitalization hub of the planetary system. Phoenix shares its knowledge with the remaining six planets through a system of interplanetary travel tunnels known as The Dice. Through the success of the planet's medical research programs, Phoenix has thrived for hundreds of years. Golden megastructures stand high above the city streets as they reflect radiant light across the skyline from the volcanoes nearby.*

*Advanced in flight technology, Phoenix offers revolutionary air travel options for its residence. The ease of travel within city limits showcases this fire planet's dedication to keep pushing the frontier of what's possible.*

*At the center of the city stands the greatest symbol for the Phoenixians, The First Temple of Phoenix. A large temple with hand-carved pillars that tower over the city square. Phoenixians gather in the square to gaze upon the architectural marvel. In each pillar, the planet's history is etched into the golden hue of the marble.*

*Like most civilizations, the population is separated into different social classes. The lower class, known as Outcasts ("low percenters") take on the jobs in the public sector deemed undesirable by the higher classes. The lower-middle class, or Civilians, and upper-middle class, or Luminaries, find themselves mostly doing low-level government work. By enforcing new law code to government contracting, the middle class acts as the framework to the system not imploding on itself.*

Red looks to Sol who is picking at his tattered clothing. Cloaked in ragged cloth, Sol does not seem to mind or is simply unaware of his situation. Ms. Velora continues with the degeneration lesson, but Sol seems more concerned with the holes in his shirt than the lesson being given.

Red gives him a little pat on the back and a smile as a small gesture of reassurance. Sol's eyes flash with bursts of joy.

"Now even though it is very important to know this information, it is very unlikely you'd see an event like this in your lifetime. Merely a precaution, degeneration is a tool used to keep our solar system progressing forward."

Red gradually raises her hand in the air. Ms. Velora calls on Red.

"Yes, Red?"

"Ya, so, are certain people more prepared than others when it comes to this type of thing?"

"Even though the rich are more equipped for the event, degeneration has been perfected over the years to ensure everyone's safety getting off the planet," replies Ms. Velora.

Red looks eagerly to Sol, who seems to be put to ease from Ms. Velora's answer.

"We all fly away on one big ship?!" Red excitedly blurts out.

"Yes." Ms. Velora feigns a smile. "And no more outbursts from you, Ms. Red."

Red sulks in her seat. "But the old lady from the market said we're all going to di—"

"I said enough!" Ms. Velora slams her fist on her desk. The room falls silent to the students anticipating what is going to happen next. The room is tense, but Ms. Velora diffuses the situation by continuing with her lesson. Red remembers her parents saying that she needs to stop asking *certain* questions at school and decides to remain quiet for the rest of the day.

In her mind, she races to find the answers to the questions she's looking for. *LifeCorp!* Her mind chimes. *Dad has LifeCorp books in his library about planetary degeneration.* With a smile on her face, Red eagerly awaits for the dismissal bell to ring as she plots her next venture to the family library.

8.

The bell rings dismissing the students from the school day. Red packs up her things as Sol and Skylar wait for her outside the classroom. Sol approaches Red, eyes bright with excitement. "Do you want to go play in the clearing?!" Asks Sol.

"Sure!" Replies Red, as the friends make their way down the school steps.

Red is excited to go play with her friends rather than head straight home because she fears the school called her parents about her outburst in class today. The LifeCorp book is still on her

mind, but she wants to wait again for her parents to fall asleep before entering her father's office.

The friends make their way to the edge of the Asha forest and take off running. Red pulls ahead rather quickly from Sol and Skylar, her nimble body makes it easy for her to navigate the rocky terrain of the Asha Forest. Once the clearing is in sight, Red waits up for her friends on a boulder ten times her size. She looks around and takes in her surroundings. She is fenced in by her lantern flowers, the metallic pedals blankets the ground around her.

Sol and Skylar approach Red, hands on their knees, trying to catch their breath. "Maybe give us a head start next time," jokes Sol.

"Yeah, make it a fair race," adds Skylar.

Red laughs it off and they move on to the clearing. The children continue navigating the terrain, jumping from boulder to boulder. Red, feeling confident, does a flip in the air from one boulder to another. A small amount of moisture on the boulder causes her foot to slip on landing. She bangs her knee against the rock pretty badly but stops herself from falling off.

*Great, another cut.* Red thinks to herself. "Are you okay?" Asks Sol. Red manages to nod yes, trying to suppress the pain. She never wants to show signs of weakness. Vulnerability is not in her vocabulary.

At the clearing, the friends continue to race, skip, and play around. Red wins at everything, which starts dampening Sol's spirit. "Are you sure you're not Elite?" Whimpers Sol.

"You know I don't like when you say that," replies Red.

It's a sensitive subject for Red because deep down she feels like she belongs in an Elite school, but that would mean she would miss out on playing with Skylar and Sol. Red tries to change the subject. "One day I'm going to go to the NCC and be the best. I'm going to be the best Kindred warrior to ever come from Phoenix." Red declares. Sol and Skylar smirk at each other, but offer Red their support.

"You got this, Red!" Sol exclaims.

"I can see it happening!" Skylar adds. Red notices they are being nice but do not really believe what they are saying to her. Skylar picks up on this. "It's just that you're a low percenter. The NCC doesn't allow low percenters. They only take in Elites with powers we'll never possess," he says.

Red gets angry about this, not at Skylar, but at the truth she is speaking. It's true, the NCC is very selective in the recruits they bring in, but Red truly believes she is worthy of a selection.

The children approach the base of the volcano, always in awe of the sheer size of the land structure.

While Sol and Skylar chase each other around, playing tag on the volcanic rock, Red can not help but notice the spot she had the encounter with the florabot a week ago. Axel's chill robotic voice sticks in her mind.

*I'll see you later, Meredith!*

Red quickly checks her surroundings for the florabot, but there is no sign of him. On edge, she is worried about the unpredictability of the robot. He could be sincere and is actually looking to be friends or there could be an alternative motive. Red does not let her guard down.

"Red, come on!" Screams Sol. Red does not hear him. "Red!" Sol repeats. Sol approaches Red and taps her on the shoulder.

"Are you okay, Red?" Asks Sol. "Yes, I'm fine," Red quickly replies. "You just seem a little off," Skylar explains.

"I said I'm fine!" Red repeats as she scans the Asha forest tree line. She swears she can see Axel's head poke out from behind a tree, but it's just her mind playing tricks on her. "Red, what's going on?" Sol asks.

"It's just, it's just, last week I saw—" *Ring. Ring.* It's Red's HoloWatch. Red quickly answers, it's her parents. They demand to know where she is and why she is not home yet. Red fibs that she lost track of time and was in a study session with Sol and Skylar for a *big* geography test coming up. Sol and Skylar look at each other, acknowledging the lie.

"Sorry, sorry. I'll be right home," Red says into her watch. Red hangs up and looks to her friends. "Sorry guys, I need to run home. Are you going to be okay?" Sol and Skylar nod yes. Red turns and dashes home. Jumping from rock to rock, she races an airship from above. In her mind, she develops a scenario where the pilot goes home and tells everyone a Kindred girl beat him in a race. The thought brings a smile to her face as she weaves through the trees of the Asha forest.

## 9. Cartel

The air in the hideout is suffocating— sticky, rancid, like a fog of honey that clings to the walls, floor, everything. A faint beam of light fights its way through the dirty windows, giving a dim glow to the grime and rot. The shack has the smell of old blood and stale sweat, the kind that hangs onto you long after the job is done. Carmine sits on the creaky chair in the corner of the room, the cracked fabric scratching his skin as he shifts his weight slightly. He waits calmly, almost serene, his sharp features etched in the dim light like a portrait in an old frame. In one hand he holds a small light blade, twirling it mindlessly as he keeps his eyes trained on the barrels of honey being carried into the shack. In the other, he holds a glass of thick pink liquid.



It's not honey, however, but Phoenixian oil-based whiskey. Other races across the Nexus are able to tolerate liquids, but the Kindred have to get creative with their alcohol. Carmine likes to think this makes their drinks stronger. More concentrated, not as watered down. He grips the glass, swirling it softly with the hands of a man who knew exactly what he was doing—and how little anyone else mattered in comparison. He takes a swig of the burning liquid, wincing as it goes down.

He sits back, ideas flying through his head. Today wasn't just any normal heist and his body can feel it. Laying his drink and blade down on the trunk, he immediately regrets freeing his hands of something to do. The veins in his arm bulge as he rolls up the armored sleeves of his shirt, fingers working diligently at the chainmail cuff. He takes a deep breath and reaches back for his whiskey. Carmine doesn't like to drink often, he usually reserves it for after a particularly big job. He knows someone in his position needs to be at his sharpest at any given moment. When he does drink, however, he makes sure it's strong enough to get the job done. He takes another slow sip, savoring the sting as it travels down his throat and spreads through his chest. This is strong enough. His faint glow ebbs with each sip until the alcohol in his system lands him at a deep red simmer. His muscles finally start to relax. His eyes, however, are cold as iron as he watches his crew work away, all of them still jacked up on the adrenaline of the heist. It's not unusual for Carmine to be the only calm amidst the chaos.

It's been seven hours since the successful First Bank of Phoenix heist. In that time, Carmine and his crew have been able to stow honey away in several secret bunkers, the last and smallest amount of it now being brought into their hideout in Ashat. Usually, he waited a few days for the dust to settle before he let the runners get their hands on the goods, but he had already sent some off with a few crews to disperse across Phoenix. He wants this lot to move quickly. The Honey Cartel has one hard rule: never keep the loot all in one place. This is especially the case for the amount they managed to walk away with this time. It took Carmine months of planning, but he knew it would be worth it. The payout from this job is bigger than the cartel has seen in quite some time. Now it was time to keep a low profile.

Carmine has a hard time sitting around and doing nothing. Waiting between jobs, just buying time until it's obvious they are in the clear to make moves again; it's the hardest part of the job for him. This time though, sitting on all the honey he is, he feels okay with it.

Kicking his feet up on the old, dilapidated trunk in front of him, Carmine sinks lower into the chair. His drink sloshes over the side of the glass a bit, the pink liquid spilling onto the seat. Carmine watches as it seeps into the cushion through one of the tears in the fabric and shrugs it off. The entire place is already soaked in old alcohol and grime. All the smells mix with the fresh honey, creating a ghastly-sweet haze that makes the place feel even more claustrophobic. *Home sweet home*, Carmine muses to himself. The two large men who helped with the heist, Gaspar and Brax, finish bringing the last of the honey in and lock the door behind them. "Curtains", Carmine murmurs. Brax shuffles around to every window, closing the tattered drapes over each one. Quickly, the shack grows dark, the only barely discernible light being emitted from the four bodies in the room. Carmine, Brax, Gaspar and the kid.

The kid.

He's barely seven-years-old, maybe eight— scrawny, pale and wide-eyed. He's been hanging around for months now, shadowing the crew and picking up odd jobs. He never knew his dad, but his mom was a Civian from Basinwind and a loyal runner for the cartel. Carmine was there the day she was killed on a job, leaving the kid an orphan. Orphans on Phoenix with little to no power are as good as dead in the eyes of society, even a young child knows that. The kid also knows that Carmine only took him in because he's a valuable asset, someone small and fast to do some dirty work. The rest of the gang doesn't take him seriously, if anything they look at him as a liability. In Carmine's eyes, however, he's as good as gold to them.

"No one ever suspects the kid," Gaspar always says.

"No one ever aims to kill the kid," Carmine would counter.

The kid does do some pretty dangerous runs sometimes, his backpack full of honey as he runs straight through militarized property in plain sight. They mostly like to use him for busywork, though, like petty errands and cleaning up. But he doesn't care. Without Carmine and the crew, he has nowhere else to go. At least with them, he feels like he belongs to something.

"Silas, get over here." Carmine motions to the kid, his hand moving with the sizzle of dying embers in the dark. Silas stands from his place in the corner and scurries over to Carmine. "I told you to stay out of things back there, you know." Carmine's voice is low and stern. Silas looks down to his feet, he can feel his face burn in shame. He knew not to try to stick his nose into business back at the bank, but he couldn't help it. The kid senses resentful eyes burning into him. Carmine continues, "Look, you're a good locksmith. I'm not saying you're not crafty, but sometimes you can be really fucking stupid."

Silas nods his head in agreement. "I'm sorry, Carmine. I just—" Carmine raises his hand, cutting Silas off before he can finish.

"Next time that happens, you're out. You wanna be a part of this?" Carmine motions between himself and Silas, one eyebrow raised. Silas looks up at Carmine. The kid nods his head, yes. He knows he messed up. Carmine shifts out of his relaxed pose, leaning closely into Silas' face. As he speaks, the kid can smell the strong whiskey on his breath. "Then listen to me." Silas visibly shivers, nodding again. Carmine gives him a single nod back; a silent signature on the agreement.

A small lamp has been turned on in the center of the room. Gaspar and Brax are going through the barrels, splitting the spoils between smaller jars and sealed bags with metal tools. This haul is massive— more honey than they've ever stolen before at one time— but no one is celebrating. No one is really even talking. There is a sense of urgency to a lot this big. The only sound is the dripping of honey, the low scrape of glass against metal and the occasional

muttered curse. Carmine watches on with unbreakable concentration, his expression unreadable. Silas sits on the ground next to him, criss-cross applesauce, drawing circles in the dirt on the ground with his finger. Carmine's eyes flick to him for a moment. The innocent image of Silas stands starkly against the bleak, dangerous atmosphere.

Before the kid's mom died, she would bring him around every so often. Never after a job like this, though. Never after a job at all, she was good about that. She must've sensed how uneasy it made Carmine to have the kid around the cartel, though, because she would often say something along the lines of, "I know a kid shouldn't be in this kind of place, but what am I supposed to do?" Great question. Carmine would just smirk, a twinkle in his eye as he joked, "You put him to work."

Silas sits up straight and watches the two humongous men at work with the honey. The thick, pink substance entrances him as it drizzles into containers, swirling into rich patterns at its surface. Carmine averts his concentration back to his little friend again. The kid's eyes are full of desperation. Like he's begging for a shot, like he thinks this is his moment. Silas tries to act casual, fidgeting as his eyes dart from Brax to Gaspar. Like he's waiting for someone to give him a signal— anything to show that he's a part of it after tonight. Part of this. The real business. Carmine sees this play out on Silas' face, knowing the question is coming. He can see it bubbling to the surface. It's only a matter of seconds before he can't contain it any more. "Carmine, can I *please* help?" Silas begs. There it is. Carmine's eyes dart back to the honey, his lips curling into the slightest smile. Something about the kid's determination tickles him.

"No." he chirps.

"But why?" Silas pleads.

"You don't know how deep these waters run."

"I do too. I know what to do. I've seen you all do it a million times!"

"No."

And that was that. Silas slumps back against the wall, crossing his arms in disappointment. Carmine looks over to him and chuckles.

"It's not funny," Silas sulks.

"It really is," Carmine replies, standing up from his seat. He looks down at Silas and can't help but notice just how tiny he looks. Sometimes he forgets how young the kid really is. He's good for slipping through tight spaces, but how much longer will he be good for those kinds of things? He does have to start learning some more of the trade at some point. But today's not the day. Not with this lot of honey.

Silas looks up at Carmine, the boss's eyes are dark, cold and impenetrable. The kid flinches under the weight of the stare, but there's something strange about it. Something almost warm. Carmine moves to crouch next to the kid, bringing his voice to a whisper, "You really want in, kid?" The nickname hits Silas in the chest, he hates that they call him that. *The kid*.

Silas takes a deep breath and releases, "I know I went into the room, but I...I did everything else you asked. I was fast. I didn't mess anything up. I can help more!" The words come out in a rush, like he's afraid that if he hesitates, he'd lose his chance. His eyes are wide and pleading, though he tries to hide it. A smirk creeps onto Carmine's face. It's a look that says he knows something the kid doesn't. He looks amused. He leans in closer. "If you want to be one of us," his voice is low and conspiratorial, like they're sharing a secret, "you're gonna have to do more than run a few errands and pick a few locks." Silas opens his mouth, but the words catch his throat. He's realizing how wrong he might be, how small he is in Carmine's shadow.

"You think this is all a game? A cool club to be a part of?" Carmine's tone shifts, but it doesn't lose its strange, magnetic charm. He isn't loud, he isn't angry— he's just...explaining things. "I know you think it's about running fast or not making a sound, but it isn't." Carmine shakes his head. There is something almost mesmerizing about how calm Carmine is. He has a way of drawing you in, of making you feel like you're the only person in the room. Even now, crouched down to Silas' level in the middle of a mess, the weight of the night pressing in, Carmine is composed and poised. He could be the devil himself, but there's a charm about him that makes it hard to look away. Silas would do anything for his approval. Still, he can't help but feel frustration blooming in his chest as he sinks back against the wall.

Silas tries to look away and ignore the eyes fixed on him. His small face is stuck in a deep, almost comical frown. Carmine can't help but laugh again. Silas lets out an exasperated sigh. "What *now*?"

"Nothing," a chuckle barely rumbling in Carmine's chest, "it's just that your face is going to freeze like that."

Silas rolls his eyes, "you never take me seriously."

"Yeah, well, you're six," Carmine smiles. His dark eyes spark up slightly in anticipation, he knows this answer will press the kid's buttons.

Silas' face burns a brighter red, "I'm eight!"

Carmine lets out a genuine laugh, the lilting sound cutting through the deadly still tension of the shack. Silas can never stay mad when he sees Carmine in a good mood, even if it's at his own expense. Carmine's charm is just as lethal as his malice. It's just as fickle as well. The switch can be flipped on the drop of a hat without any warning, so Silas knows to still tread lightly with him at all times. Silas surrenders a smile in return.

**CRASH!** The sound of breaking glass against the floor echoes through the room like a death knell, shaking Carmine from the moment. Without turning or taking his eyes off Silas, he snarls, "Who the fuck dropped that jar?" The words are sharp and precise, cutting through the

haze of the room. No one answers. In one swift move he's at Gaspar's side on the other side of the room, his eyes driving in like knives to the side of the large man's head. "Fucking *hell*, Gas," he hisses. Gaspar stands frozen, the honey pooling at his feet amongst the shattered remains of the jar. To his horror, some of it begins to drip through the cracks in the unevenly laid, stone floor slabs. Silas' whole body tenses up as he presses his body against the wall, wishing he could somehow move through it to make his escape.

The switch has been flipped.

All at once the air is sucked from the room, leaving nothing but silence. No one dares to speak or move a finger. The slow, sticky wave painted across the floor begins to pool at the men's feet. They all wait for Carmine to make the first move. As he watches Gaspar, the only indication of his anger comes from the slow, crimson boil beneath the surface of his skin. His face remains stoic, waiting for his henchman to say something. Finally Gaspar manages to sputter out a breathy, "I-I'm sorry. I guess it just slipped." His heart hitches when Carmine's shoulders visibly relax.

Carmine takes a sharp inhale through his nose and closes his eyes. Everyone watches as he saunters slowly back to the chair on the other side of the room. Even in these horrifying moments, he seems to float through space. Silas' eyes bulge out of his head as he holds his breath. He grows dizzy, the scent of the honey and alcohol overtaking him like slow creeping poison in the heat of the moment. He knows this calm before the storm all too well. Carmine ignores Silas as he picks his drink up off the trunk where he left it. His long fingers curl around the glass as he swirls it slowly. The amber liquid catches what little light the lamp gives, casting flickers of gold across his face, illuminating the hard lines of his tensed jaw. His already dark eyes have gone completely black. He turns his body back towards the two men, his lips curling into something that isn't quite a smile. At least not a kind one.

"Well," he gestures dramatically to the quickly shrinking puddle of honey, "aren't you going to pick it up?" The words come out calmly, sending a shiver down Silas' spine. Gaspar drops down quickly, making a sad attempt to scrape up the precious substance and put it into another jar. As he does, Carmine paces back and forth from one end of the shack to the other, the shadows of the room shifting around him as if bending to his will. He stops back at the trunk and downs the last of his whiskey. Suddenly, with the speed and grace of something inhuman, he whips around and throws the glass in Gaspar's direction. It hurdles through the air, hitting the ground next to the man, hard, sending shards scattering in every direction. Gaspar flinches, covering his face from the explosion. Silas jumps, his heart leaping into his throat.

"Get up off the floor." The demand rumbles from somewhere deep within Carmine, leaving his mouth like a growl. Gaspar scrambles to his feet, his stomach turning in dread.

"Do you understand what you just did?" asks Carmine, his eyes narrowing. Gaspar can feel the weight of Carmine's gaze boring into him, though he can't bring himself to look back. He steps back from the mess, his heart hammering in his throat. He may be much larger than

Carmine, but that doesn't matter. That never mattered. Carmine carries much more power than anyone else in the game. That's because his power doesn't come from his stature or from being born an Elite, it comes from something much more sinister. It comes from experience, street cred, blood spilt— all in the name of the cartel. Carmine has connections and drive. He has a way of making sure things get done and they get done the way he wants. Everyone knows not to piss off the cartel boss, because when he was pissed, there was always a price to pay.

Gaspar raises his hand as if swearing an oath, "it was an accident. Won't happen again."

"It was an accident." Carmine's response is more conversational than an interrogation. Gaspar's body tenses, preparing for his punishment. He knows he fucked up. The honey isn't just a commodity, it's their livelihood; the lifeblood of the Nexus. What the cartel does for the greater masses of the solar system is incomparable, it's far too important to be making careless mistakes with. Especially this honey. The honey from the First bank of Phoenix. It's traceable, and any mindless slip up could get them all caught and killed by the Crystal Palace. Gaspar knows that Carmine has chosen him to be one of his trusted comrades because he's careful, thorough and strong. He doesn't make stupid mistakes, the pressure of the night is just catching up to him. Still he knows, dropping the jar isn't an accident, it's a disaster.

Carmine lets out a low, bone-chilling chuckle. His orange glow fades to an almost white-hot smolder, his gaze growing colder. Silas can't help but notice that there's something more behind his eyes, like the slightest flicker of amusement. "Oh man," he sighs incredulously, "I mean, I know I don't have to actually tell you what you've done. That stupid fucking look on your face tells me that you're all too aware." Carmine is pacing in circles, his signature smirk returning to his face. He continues, "You've made us vulnerable. You've wasted product. Every drop of *this* supply counts. It's worth more than my life, definitely more than yours." The snide remark is ominous, Gaspar starts to feel light headed. Carmine walks to a cabinet on the far side of the shack and opens it. Grabbing a large, dirty bottle off the shelf, he opens the corked lid with a *pop*. Gaspar jumps at the sound, his nerves at an all time high.

Carmine moves closer, his steps quiet, predatory. He hasn't touched Gaspar. He doesn't need to. His presence is enough to suffocate him, but a little assistance never hurts. Carmine grips the bottle, the thick liquid inside sloshing and bubbling with each step. It isn't whiskey, it isn't honey. It isn't anything sweet at all. Gaspar's eyes widen once he realizes what Carmine has. He immediately recognizes the substance as something they've used to torture enemies many times before. It's a sickly, cloying oil known as Noxis. Thick, clear and rancid.

Silas, also recognizing the bottle, begins to panic. His breathing quickens, he doesn't want to see this. As he approaches Gaspar, Carmine's soft smile curls into a smug grin, his eyes the only part of him mirroring the sick pleasure and intense rage radiating from within him. Calmly still, he holds the bottle up, the liquid sloshing softly as he tips it side to side. His eyes meet Gaspar's. "I don't waste honey," he whispers almost imperceptibly. The bottle catches the lamp light, the corner of the glass glinting like the edge of a sword. "But you," he motions to

Gaspar, “apparently do.” Carmine frowns, feigning empathy, as if what he’s about to do is going to hurt him just as much as it’s going to hurt his henchman.

The blood drains from Gaspar’s face. He opens his mouth to plead with Carmine, but he can’t get the words out before he is doused with a wave of an impossibly thick, foul smelling substance. It hits him in the face, like a cold, hard slap. The clear sludge is unnaturally dense and smooth, engineered to adhere to a person like a parasite, to cling to every inch of skin and, more importantly, to choke. Gaspar gasps for breath, but it’s too late. The sluggish, tar-like oil takes the opportunity to make its way into his mouth. The Noxis begins to travel down Gaspar’s body with a slow, strange, almost living quality to it.

“Car-carmine. Please-” Gaspar chokes out, dropping to his knees. Carmine’s eyes flicker in response. Without words, he holds the bottle over Gaspar’s head and empties the rest of the Noxis onto his large, bald head. The shimmering oil adheres to the bare Kindred skin, perfectly smooth and impenetrable like a viscous helmet. Flowing down him, it oozes into his ears, nose, eyes— everything it can reach. As the Noxis works to engulf Gaspar, it clings to him, drawn to his skin like it knows it’s meant to devour. The more he tries to shake it off, the harder it clings. The oil seems to know him, sticking faster, sucking onto his neck and torso with an almost magnetic force, dragging itself down his body as if it were claiming him. It moves like a snake, hanging onto every inch of him now, sucking at his pores, filling every crevice.

Gaspar tries to yell, but the sound escapes as a series of gurgles. He tries to inhale too deeply, the Noxis surging back into his throat, thick and choking. He gags, clutching his neck as his chest heaves with his labored breathing. Eyes bulging, Gaspar desperately tries to wriggle free, but each breath, each movement only makes the substance cling more tightly, holding him down like it’s keeping him from escaping. He grows darker, the small yellow flame within him begins to wane as the oil presses into his pores and encases him like shrink wrap. His skin crawls, like the liquid is feeding off of him, consuming him as he drowns.

Brax, who’s been silent and still this whole time, jumps back in terror, letting out a small shriek. Carmine, cool and collected, simply takes a few steps back, trying to distance himself from the ominous pool forming on the floor.

Silas watches in silent shock from across the room, covering his mouth and nose with his little hand. The smell of the Noxis is sour and putrid, like ancient decay, only adding to the already unbearable stench in the shack. Gaspar’s muffled cries for help turn to awful squelches, as Silas watches the impossibly large man writhe like a helpless worm on the ground. It’s all too much for him. His stomach flips, he thinks he might throw up. Gaspar throws an arm out to Brax for help, but there’s nothing he can do. The three of them watch as Gaspar struggles against the thick, unforgiving liquid. Silas wants to scream out, to demand Carmine to do something to stop the Noxis, but he doesn’t dare. His eyes flick to Brax. The equally large man remains stoic and still, just watching his friend fall victim to the horrible grease. Silas can’t help but wonder if he’s also screaming inside, desperate for someone to stop the torture. You wouldn’t know it anyways. Showing weakness is the easiest way to put a target on your back around Carmine.

After a painfully long struggle, Gaspar's body goes still. His chest stops heaving and no more noises manage to escape his Noxis-filled gullet. Finally, his dim glow is completely extinguished, as small swirls of black smoke dance beneath his now black skin. The Noxis has taken him, swallowed him whole. There's nothing left but a suffocating, slick void. As the large man lays lifeless in the middle of the shack, the sudden silence is completely deafening. Silas holds back tears, trying his best to appear unaffected. Carmine turns his nose up at the scene, as if annoyed by a slight inconvenience. "Damn," he mutters, "clean this up." He cocks his head to Brax, who nods back in return. Order received, no questions asked. Brax towers over Gaspar, his body now unrecognizable. "Make sure it's done right" Carmine adds, turning away with a cold, deliberate indifference.

The air hangs heavy, Silas can almost feel it pressing into him. He scratches at his skin, feeling paranoid and claustrophobic. Just then, there's a loud knock at the shack. The sound echoes off the walls and Carmine turns his head slowly towards the door. Silas and Brax look at one another, almost as if to ask "*did you hear that too*"? The doorknob jiggles. Carmine takes slow steps closer.

"I know you guys are in there, let me in!" a shrill, female voice cries out. Silas lets out a sigh of relief, releasing what feels like years of built up tension. He knows that voice anywhere. Carmine, also recognizing the intruder, relaxes his stance and opens the door. A small woman bursts in, talking at a million miles an hour. A true spit-fire, tiny flames leap from the top of her head excitedly as she glows a slightly brighter orange than the three others in the room. "What the *hell* have you been doing, Car? Why did I hear that the North runners already got their share of the loot? You never bothered once to reach out to me? No, why would you let lil' ol' Ara in on the deal? I'm only your best connect, you little shit! You think you would've gotten all th-" she stops short in her ramblings, eyes locked on the heap of a man in the middle of the floor. Her orange hue fades quickly, a slight whisper leaves her lips, "oh shit..."

Ara takes in the scene. First Gaspar, then the broken jar of honey not far from him. The Noxin is still moving eagerly across the corpses' skin, sucking out the last bits of life and flame.. "You had to kill him?" she asks, shooting Carmine a death glare. Her gaze then lands on Silas, her coal-dark eyes popping from her head, "in front of the kid?"

"He was a liability." Carmine shrugs, turning away from her. Ara walks to Brax and puts a reassuring hand on his shoulder. She mouths a silent "I'm sorry." Brax, eyes sunken and low, gives a solemn nod, still not wanting to give away too much emotion. With her hands on her hips, Ara surveys the room. "Alright then," she starts, with authority, "we're going to need an empty jar to wrangle this Noxin into. Then we'll get him out of here." Silently, Brax follows orders.

As the two start working carefully to get the Noxin under control, Ara looks over her shoulder to Silas. His eyes are wide. He's shaken, but feels a little better now that she's there. Something about her presence always makes him feel a little more at ease. She gives him a



meek smile before turning her attention back to Gaspar. "You're a dick, Carmine," she spits. Unbothered, Carmine chuckles coolly. Only Ara can get away with talking to him like that.

Carmine saunters back over to Silas, the kid's heart racing as they make eye contact for the first time since Gaspar was killed. He felt like he was coming face to face with a monster. Carmine crouches down, his eyes intense and dark. He studies Silas' face as if trying to find something hidden behind his eyes. Maybe he was looking for a sign of fright or disapproval, like he's trying to sniff out the weakness in him. Silas holds his breath, trying to remain hard and unwavering. "*This*," Carmine whispers, eyes staring deep into Silas' soul, "is what being a part of this is about." Silas nods his head. The cartel works like this, he gets that. There are no second chances.

"You gotta be able to take it. And it's...can you take it?" He raises an eyebrow. Silas stares back, he knows he's not looking for an actual answer. Yet. Carmine continues, "You're not just here for the honey, kid. You're here for the life." He says the words smooth and slow, like he was rolling them around in his mouth before releasing them. "It's about survival. It's about knowing when to talk, when to shut up, when to bleed, and when to let someone bleed for you." His gaze is intense, like he's trying to carve the words into the kid's soul.

There's a moment— a long drawn out silence— where neither of them say anything. The weight of the boss' words press down on Silas. Then, Carmine tilts his head, the faintest hint of a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. Something about the way he's speaking doesn't feel like a warning to Silas, but rather, an invitation.

"I want it," Silas whispers, his voice hitching at the end, "I can do it."

10.

Red approaches the steps of her home, worried about what her parents are going to say. She's still processing what happened at the city market today. "*We will all get left behind, we will all be consumed by the great destruction*," rings through Red's mind. She does her best to shake the feeling, trying to block the old woman's face from her memory, but the shrill cackle continues to grasp at the poor child's soul. Taking a deep breath, Red opens the door. Inside, she's met by the sight of her parents waiting, tensed, at the kitchen table. A wave of relief lops out of Charles and Nora when they see their daughter.

"Do you know what time it is? Why weren't you answering your Holowatch?" Charles huffs, trying his best not to come off too aggressive.

Red, ashamed, looks to the ground. She holds out her wrist to reveal her Holowatch—dead as a doornail. Nora looks at her daughter, then back to Charles with sympathetic eyes. "I'm really sorry" Red mumbles, unable to make eye contact.

"We were just worried. We're your parents, we *worry* about you. Is that okay?" Nora smirks, her tone soft and slightly playful. Her eyes then drift to the scrapes and bruises on Red. She furrows her brow, "Now what did you manage to get into today? Look at you!"

"Honestly, kiddo, you need to start remembering to charge that thing at night. What if whatever beast you clearly fought off today managed to kill you? We'd never know!" Charles winks at Red. Red giggles.

"Playing in the Asha Forest again?" Nora asks, lifting Red up on the counter. "Now stay there, I'm going to get the ointment."

Red's skin flushes, her cheeks glowing a soft crimson. She considers lying to them, telling them she was somewhere else. She feels a pang of guilt hit her in the gut. She's already been lying to them about meeting Axel, she doesn't want to have to hide anything else. Red nods her head, murmuring, "I was playing there with Skylar and Sol."

Charles sighs, giving Red a half smile. She already knows what he's going to say, his worried eyes are a dead give away. The pang in her gut grows stronger. Nora returns and hands a steel wool cloth to Charles. Charles pulls a chair up to his daughter and holds the cloth to a particularly large scrape on her knee.

"Ready?" He asks. Red shuts her eyes tight, nodding quickly. Charles presses the cloth into the fresh cut, the medicine sizzling as it reacts with the heat from the wound. Red winces. "Sorry, sorry, sorry..." Charles coos. He suddenly lifts the cloth from Red's knee. "Oh no," he whispers, "we might have to amputate."

"No way!" Red protests.

"No really, this is so bad. Did you fight off a fleet of rabid ember foxes?"

"Nuh-huh! Not even!"

"Oh wait. False alarm!" Charles exclaims, pressing the medicine back onto the cut.

Red chuckles, opening her eyes to look at her dad. He has a way of making painful things not hurt as much. He looks back up to her with those worried eyes. "You know," he starts, his tone low and careful, "we don't love that you go into the Asha Forest without an adult there."

"I never go alone." Red's face burns scarlet. Just one last small lie to ease her father's worry.

Nora chimes in from the kitchen table, "You know it's not about going alone. Sometimes I think you forget you're only seven."

"You mean sometimes I forget that I'm only a *Civilian*." The words leave Red's mouth like needles—small but piercing. It catches her off guard. She didn't mean for them to come out the way they did; so resentful and cold. The look on her mother's face, however, is enough to tell her she shouldn't have said it at all. It was *The Look*. The same one she gets when she stays out too late, or complains about her bedtime. The same one that silently strikes fear into her very soul. She quickly tries to recover, "Sorry, mom."

"You're lucky I feel bad that you're all scraped up." Her mother counters, the faintest trace of a smile dancing on her lips. She always scolds Red for her attitude, but is quick to return it in the moment.

Red hates when her parents lecture her for going into the forest alone, but she understands why they worry. After meeting Atlas, she's starting to think that maybe they have a point. But she doesn't want to think about that. Trying to shake the thought from her head, she turns her attention to the LifeCorp newsletter sprawled out on the kitchen table. The headline reads, *Degeneration is the birthplace of new opportunity*. Memories of the marketplace today rush back to her, contradicting the message of the headline.

The smell. That's what Red remembers the most. The old woman's decaying, rotten teeth spewing sermons directly into her face. A rush of heat floods Red's stomach, her skin simmering in anxiety. She closes her eyes and grips into the edge of the counter, trying to ground herself. The moment comes rushing back to her like blazing wildfire—

*Are you okay?*

Red pulls Sol from the crowd of angry protestors. Their eyes are a balance of hate and sadness.

*Red!*

Sol's voice echoes in her head.

"Red?" Her father asks, worried. He's still holding the cloth to her knee, but eases up on the pressure. His voice brings red back to the kitchen. "I'm sorry, does it hurt that badly?"

Red snaps out of it. She opens her eyes, both parents staring back at her in concern. She quickly looks for a lie. "Yes. I mean, no. No it's fine dad, it doesn't really even hurt. Just really tired, I'm going to head to bed." Red quickly hops off the counter and makes her way to her room, not bothering to make eye contact as she goes.

\*\*\*

Red lays in her bed with no intention of falling asleep. Her mind races from one thing to another, unable to bring her thoughts to rest. She finally becomes focused when she remembers her dad's LifeCorp books neatly put away in his library. Maybe these have the answers to the questions she has about planetary degeneration.

Red slips out of bed and heads to the hallway. The door creaks open as Red quietly steps out. There is a beautiful stillness to the house late at night. The lava from the nearby volcanoes illuminate the hallways with a dim reddish glow. Red makes her way down the hallway, each step more careful than the last.

She makes it to her parents' door. Sparks flutter to her lips as she presses them together tightly, holding her breath. Charles' snoring rattles the house, Red does her best to not let out a giggle. She moves forward. Making it to the door of her dad's office, she finally lets out her breath in one big rush. She's almost there. Continuing to be absolutely silent, Red slowly turns the doorknob until...*click*. She presses into the door, careful not to let it creak as she enters her dad's office.

Sliding into the room, Red remains undetected, and heads to the bookshelf. Towering over her, she tries to read the spine of each book. Her father is a collector of knowledge. Anywhere from *Late Stage Population Collapse* to *Fundamentals of Planetary Horticulture*, Charles made it a priority to absorb as much information as possible.

Red continues to scan the bookshelves until she comes across a book labeled, *Planetary Species of the Nexus Solar System: A Full Guide*. Red, captivated by the title, pulls the book off the dusty bookshelf and sits down on her father's desk chair.

Flipping through the book, Red stops on a page labeled *The Kindred Race*. She reads through the paragraphs highlighting their mastery of fire manipulation and regenerative healing properties. Looking down at her bruise, she wonders why it has not healed yet. *Am I not Kindred?* She mutters.

A diagram on the next page piques her interest. *The Kindred Body* labels the sketch in the middle of the page. It looks like Red, but older and taller. Every muscle is defined from head to toe. Red can feel the warrior spirit come off the page. The diagram is notated with the height of 200 centimeters. Getting up on the desk chair, Red stands up tall trying to mimic the diagram. She can feel the Kindred warrior spirit coursing through her veins.

"Red is that you?" A voice comes from the hallway. Red quickly scampers to hide the book out of sight. Charles pokes his head through the door. "Red, what time is it? What are you doing out of bed?" Charles asks in a half yawn.

Red scans her brain for an explanation. "Oh I was just," Red blanks. "I was sleepwalking!" Red gets out. "Sleepwalking?" Charles responds with a slight chuckle. "Yeah,

sleepwalking. And thanks for waking me up, I should be getting back to bed.” Red does an awkward shuffle past her dad, as he gives her a comforting pat on the head.

After watching Red scurry back to her room, Charles enters his office and tidies up a bit. Adjusting his lamp and pushing his chair back to his desk, he heads over to his favorite piece of the room; his bookcase. Thousands of years of Nexus research and history line the rustic shelves. He runs his finger along the spine of books, one by one, until a smile comes to his face. Between *Phonology: Languages Across Nexus* and *Population Genetics of Phoenix*, there is a gap; a missing book.

11.

The freezing morning air rolls into Red’s bedroom window, nipping at her nose as she begins to stir from her sleep. She blinks slowly awake, realizing she’s still clutching the book from the night before. She picks it up and stares at the page she was on when she drifted back to sleep. Big, bold letters stare back at her:

## **DEGENERATION PHASE 2: COLLAPSE OF INFRASTRUCTURE**

Red feels a hitch in her breathing, her eyes scanning the page filled with illustrations of crumbling buildings and gaping sinkholes. She slams the book shut and inhales sharply. *Too early for this.* Daylight slowly begins to creep its way across the floor and up the walls, the subtle warmth cutting through the cold of the dawn. Down the hall, Red can hear her parents stirring in the kitchen. The first signs of a new day always bring a sense of comfort and excitement to Red, but something is weighing on her today. Between the protestors in town and her revelation about the florabots, things don’t feel as *right* as they usually do. In fact, Red feels like everything is off. It’s like she’s in a dream where things appear the same, when in actuality, everything is just a darker, twisted version of itself masquerading as reality.

Looking down at the book, she feels the weight of it all in her hands. She holds back tears, a knot of helplessness twisting in her stomach. She can’t stop the florabots from what they’ve already done, just like she can’t single handedly save every Civian and Outcast from dying during Regeneration. There’s nothing she can do about any of it. Before she breaks down, her father’s voice pops into her head. She remembers something he always asks her when she’s upset about something out of her control.

“What is something you *can* do to make yourself feel a little better right now?”

The knot in Red’s stomach tightens. A fire shoots straight through her body as she hops out of bed and shoves the book under her pillow for safe keeping. She works quickly to get ready for the day, grabbing her small satchel bag and filling it with this and that. *I know exactly what I can do.* Invigorated by her new mission, Red barrels down the hallway and crashes into the kitchen where her parents are enjoying a quiet morning. “I’m going to the clearing!” She

blurts out, grabbing a hunk of bread off the counter and shoving it in mouth. Charles raises an eyebrow at the frazzled interruption, "And good morning to you, too."

"How did you sleep, honey? Your father told me you were sleepwalking again," Nora asks calmly, furrowing her brow in concern. Charles smirks. Both her parents are scrolling the morning news that floats in front of them, projecting from a small box on the table that receives the daily broadcasts. Next to the box sits two metal mugs of a thick, steaming sludge of molten rock mixed with a type of coffee bean exclusive to Phoenix. Red lets out an exaggerated sigh, "Yes, mom, I'm fine! No time to talk now, I have to go!" She races for the front door. Just as she steps outside, her parents call out to her.

"Make sure you have your Holowatch!" Nora fusses.

"And don't have too much fun without us!" Charles adds.

Red half turns back, flashing a thumbs up with the hand her watch is on.

\*\*\*\*\*

Her little legs going as fast they can, Red makes her way through the volcanic forest. All the creatures scatter as she cuts through bushes and branches, scaring them from their posts. Her heart pounds in her chest. As dangerous as the florabots may be, Red knows she needs to talk to Axel herself. She needs answers straight from the source. That's the one thing she *can* do right now. As she nears the clearing, her legs start to slow, her heart now in her throat. She tries to steady her breathing but she's winded from running and the anticipation of the encounter. Taking one last deep breath, she readies herself and steps into the clearing.

At first, Red is still and silent, waiting for Axel to arrive. All of her usual wild friends are frolicking in the clearing. Up above, her phoenix soars. Suddenly, Red feels her fear melt away. "It's okay," she whispers to herself, "maybe he won't even come today." Red shrugs her tension off and wanders to her seat against the Volcano.

Taking a book from her satchel, she settles in to read. Around her, the forest stirs to life. She breathes in the air, her embers flickering in response. Red begins to forget about all of her worries she woke up with this morning, when suddenly the group of hoppers running at the base of her rock come to a complete stop. The air grows still, as all the other creatures follow suit. Red holds her breath as her stomach sinks. All at once, the animals scatter from the clearing, leaving Red alone against the volcano. On the far edge of the forest, she sees the phoenix settle on a rocky branch, eyes trained on Red as it intently watches over. Red knows exactly what's going on and she prepares for her confrontation.

Out of the bushes, just beneath the phoenix, a small silver disk whizzes into the clearing. Confused, Red hops from her seat to the ground to get a better look. *That's not Axel.* The disc buzzes by, making loops and playful patterns in the air before stopping abruptly before Red's face. Eyes wide, Red inspects the little drone. It has a green light on the side of it, blinking

rapidly. Red leans in even closer, the sudden movement causing it to jump back and let out an excited chirp. Red, startled, jumps back as well. Before she can process what's happening, the unassuming floating object begins to transform right before her eyes.

With a subtle hum, the drone expands, its edges unfurling like petals of a flower. As its smooth side panels slide apart, it reveals its hidden components inside. Its central core glows with a soft green light that pulsates as the wires and internal parts whirr to life and rearrange themselves. Then, from within, thin, articulated limbs emerge, wires working to climb their way around them like vines as they extend. The disc elongates, reshaping into a sturdy torso. As the limbs continue to form from the torso, the joints all click into place with precision until it lands softly on two newly formed feet. A head forms from a remaining ball of metal at the disc's core, two eyes forming and flickering to life.

Red watches, mouth agape in awe, as Axel takes shape in front of her. Transformation completed, the florabot stands poised in his familiar humanoid form. His eyes glow steady and then rapidly blink to awareness. "Meredith!" he shouts, his tinny lilt excited and eager, "You came back!"

Red stares back at Axel, eyes bulging. She can't seem to find the words she wants, still shaken from the transformation she just witnessed. She has a million thoughts running through her head now, each one flying by too quickly for her to pick out and choose just one. She thinks about the woman shouting in the square about degeneration, about the book she found in her dad's office, about how all that pain happened at the hands of the florabots. She thinks about how it will all continue to happen forever, more frequently with each passing cycle because of the florabots. *Why did they do that? How could they do that?* She wants to scream out, but all she can manage to choke out is a meek, "Axel..."

Axel's eyes surge at the sound of Red's voice. Standing up a little straighter, he chirps a mechanical tune in response. Red wonders how something so seemingly innocent, so cute, could be so dangerous. She wants to choose her next words carefully. "Axel, I need to talk to you about something. Something important."

Axel tilts his head, his expression and body language shifting from joy to concern. "What is it?"

Taking a deep breath, Red blurts out, "I learned about the Florabots— what humans did to you and your kind. How they made you guys and how the network powers you but you all got too powerful and multiplied too quickly. I read about Xander Straus, how he was killed by one of you. I read about all the mean things and the violent things. Why did they do it? Would you guys still do it now? And I read about degeneration and how the cycle is sped up now because of *you!*" The words are spilling out of her mouth before she can stop them, each one feels venomous as it leaves her tongue. She hates the way it all sounds, but she can't help it. It's all been building up inside of her since the night she learned of it all, and now was her moment to let it all go. To finally get some answers.

The change in Axel is instantaneous. The vibrant green glow in his eyes dims, and for a moment, he looks almost defeated. "You shouldn't have to know those things," his voice echoes with an emotion Red can't quite place. He shifts from one foot to the other, looking down to avoid Red's wild, pleading gaze.

"I want you to tell me why. I need to know the truth," Red begs. "Please help me understand.'

Axel lifts his head to look at Red. There is a deep red glow in her chest, leaving the rest of her completely dark. As she speaks the next words, the embers inside her flare, stoked by her intensity. "Do you want—I mean—are you going to hurt me?"

The florabot's body tenses at the question, his eyes blinking quickly. Red takes a step back, unsure of how to process the abrupt shift in stature. For a second, she regrets asking the question. Maybe she came on too strong, she should've eased into the subject. Her eyes flick to the phoenix sitting just above them, its neck craning down to oversee the meeting. It shifts slightly, lurching forward as if readying itself to jump into action at any moment. Red takes note of this, getting herself ready to run if need be. Axel unlocks from his statuesque state, relaxing his shoulders. Slowly, he shakes his head, "Come with me. There's something I need you to see."

\*\*\*\*

Red follows Axel as he leads her deeper and deeper into the forest. She's been tailing him for almost an hour now, the whole time very few words are spoken between the two.

She realizes too late that she has left her satchel back at the clearing, but she at least still has her holowatch. Her heart is racing, her thoughts jumping back and forth between *this is exciting* and *I'm going to die*. She's thought about turning back several times, but about a mile back, Axel begged her to trust him. She nodded in agreement, unsure if she actually does trust him, or if she's just letting her curiosity win today.

She keeps asking herself why she is going so deep into the forest with something so potentially dangerous. Maybe that was it, though. Right now, as far as she knows, he only has the potential to be dangerous. Plus, something about the way he looked and spoke when she confronted him makes her think there's more to the story. Red looks up to the sky, making sure her phoenix companion is still with them. It's been with her the entire time, giving her a sense of safety. As long as it stays, she'll keep going. She silently thanks the bird for always staying by her side and protecting her.

The three continue their trek, the energy of the forest changing as they stray further and further from the clearing. With the phoenix soaring low above, Red and Axel twist through rocky trees and dry, barren brambles. The atmosphere is charged, almost electric, when they finally



reach a secluded enclave. Red checks the time and notices they've been walking for over two hours. She can hear a faint, ever present hum in the air. Every inch of her feels like it's conducting an electric current, energy surging from her chest to her fingers and toes. Axel stops and turns to Red. "What is this place?" she asks, keeping her voice at a whisper.

"Welcome to our community," he motions for Red to walk through a small opening in a thicket of trees and rocks. His voice is a mixture of pride and sorrow.

Hesitantly, Red walks to the opening in the trees. The phoenix, swooping in low, perches itself on one of the top branches. Leaning in, a soft, deep "coo" rumbles from its throat, letting Red know it's staying close by. Red gives the bird an understanding nod before continuing forward. Brushing aside the dense thicket of dry brambled branches hanging down, she steps into the clearing. Her eyes grow wide. The picture unfolding before her is nothing like Red has ever seen in her beloved forest before, and she has the chilling thought that they may not even be in the Asha anymore. *Did we walk all the way to The Geruda?* But, as Red takes in her new surroundings, her initial fear slowly morphs into wonder and curiosity. She doesn't care how far away from home she is anymore.

The florabot community is a breathtaking site. Nestled right at the base of three volcanoes and hidden by towering rocks and coarse, barren trees, vibrant colors dance amongst the rugged terrain of the thriving town. The air is electric, humming with life—both organic and synthetic. Red, eyes glowing in wonder, looks up to admire the way the midday sun filters through the canopy of volcanic smoke and ash that hangs above. It casts dappled patterns across the clearing that, every so often, catch on the smooth silver of the florabots that glide about. She thinks back to all the things she's heard and read about the florabot communities. Always painted as primitive, desolate places unfit for life, Red can't believe what she's seeing. It's beautiful and lively.

The clearing is dominated by familiar coral-like trees, but they are unlike ones Red has ever seen before. Their branches twist up and out, resembling underwater formations sprouting from the scorched ground. Red slowly approaches one and runs her hand down the rough surface, following the thick, rope-like patterns. Her hand catches on a trail of silicone-like fungi sprouting from the trunk, their bioluminescent caps pulsing rhythmically. She glances around, noticing that every inch is dotted with translucent mushrooms of different shapes and sizes. Some are more rugged, like plumes of rock and crystal, while others, like the ones on the tree, are pliant and rubberlike. All of them glow softly, adding to the enchanting aura Red finds herself surrounded by, as every surface glimmers in hues of orange, red and purple, reflecting the fiery light of the volcanoes' molten rivers.

Structures made of volcanic rock are scattered amongst the trees. Red watches as the florabots diligently roam from one to the next, and she wonders what they all could be doing. *Do florabots have jobs? Do they go to school like I do?* She has a million questions racing through her mind. As she watches the bots more closely, she sees something that stops those thoughts dead in their tracks.

Amongst the other human-like florabots are dozens of smaller florabots, each uniquely designed. Some resemble flowers Red has seen growing in the Asha, their metallic petals mimicking the way the crystal blooms sway in the volcanic heat currents. Others take on the form of small silver boxes puttering about. Thin wires climb their exterior like they've been overgrown by creeping vines, the ends of them curling up and coiling gracefully like the tendrils of plantlife. Red is especially drawn to one that looks a lot like the small silver disc Axel transformed from that morning, only this one is adorned with tiny blue lights that flicker like firebugs as it zooms by. "I didn't know there were so many different kinds of you," she whispers softly, turning to Axel in awe.

"Florabots can take on lots of different forms. I guess people just don't really know that" Axel shrugs, his small metal frame buzzing as he moves. He then takes Red by the hand, and leads her deeper into the tiny village.

As they get closer to the center of things, something catches Red's eye. In the middle of the community, stands a massive, towering crystalline flower. Red notices wires and periodic bursts of electricity surging through the pink, translucent petals as they pass by it. "What is *that*?" she asks, eyes landing on the back of Axel's head, his hand still tightly gripping hers. Without answering, he continues trudging forward. He seems to be leading them somewhere specific. Red follows his gaze to a number of small huts carved into the side of the volcanoes along the far perimeter. She points to the line of windows glowing a welcoming orange hue in the near distance, "Are those where you all live?"

"Yes, now come on!" Axel chirps, tugging for her to move faster.

As they walk, the ground is rugged and uneven, spattered with patches of smooth, glass-like stones that glimmer in the volcanic light. Streams of molten lava course nearby, their fiery glow contrasting with the cooler colors of the florabots' lights and metal. It creates a striking visual tapestry like Red has never seen. The air gently hums, sending a jolt of heat through Red's core. She knows she's supposed to be weary, like danger could strike at any minute, but she loves it here. The entire community feels safe and alive, pulsating with the heartbeat of the surrounding volcanoes. Here, she feels closer to nature than she ever has before.

They finally reach one of the huts and Axel stops at the door. Red watches as he stares at it, motionless. "Are you afraid of me, Meredith?" he asks, his glowing eyes dimming slightly. His voice resonates softly and melodically, a blend of natural sounds and the zing of electricity.

Red's heart begins to race slightly, a flash of dim red flame flushes her face. The things she read all come flooding back to her. She is suddenly very aware of how far from home she is, the only Kindred surrounded by hundreds of florabots. She takes a deep breath, "Dad's book says you're all dangerous. That you can turn without any warning."

Axel sighs, his eyes casting downward, "I am going to introduce you to someone," he pauses, tilting his head to reveal delicate light patterns tucked within his metal frame along his neck, "you can ask her anything you want. But promise you'll listen to what she has to say."

Red nods in agreement. Axel gently opens the door to the hut. Inside, it's inviting and warm, just like any home in Red's own town. She can't believe the way the florabots have been able to build up their community, to be something humans could have built themselves. Axel makes his way over to a large stone chair that sits in the corner of the room. In the chair sits a bronze pyramid, the metal varnishing slightly on the sharp corners where the otherwise sleek metallic sheets meet. He leans in close to the object and whispers, "Don't be upset, but I have a visitor."

The pyramid begins to whirr and emit a series of small, sleepy beeps, as if it's just been woken up from a deep slumber. Red takes a step back, eyes transfixed on the pyramid as it suddenly shifts its metal walls up and back. Opening up its sides, limbs grow out from a small glowing ball within its core in one fluid motion. Within seconds, the pyramid is now sitting in the chair as a fully humanoid florabot. Red takes another step back, almost stumbling over herself in shock. She's still not used to the transformations.

"Who do we have here?" The florabot asks. Her voice is like crackling firewood; familiar and fragile. There's a static pop in her words, like an old radio transmission. Red can tell she's older, her bronze exterior more tarnished than Axel's perfectly reflective silver. The florabot adjusts herself in her seat, her joints creaking softly although her movements are still smooth and deliberate. There's a certain beauty to the scratches and small dents in her frame, like each one tells a story. Red wants to hear them all.

"Rion, this is Meredith. She is my new friend!" Axel trills excitedly, his emerald eyes glowing brightly with pride.

Rion cocks her head to the side, examining the Kindred child before her. Red is entranced by the deep purple glow of Rion's eyes as they scan her small body. Her heart races, slight licks of flame shooting from the top of her head. There is a long pause as Rion continues to stare, the only sound coming from a network of synapses and mechanics working within the florabot's frame. *Is she scanning me for information?* Red begins to grow uneasy in the lingering standoff, her body burning a low, red heat.

Finally, the old florabot says, "And what brings you here, Meredith?"

Red shoots Axel a look, unsure of how to answer. Axel gives an enthusiastic nod of encouragement, gesturing for her to speak to Rion. She takes one step forward, "um, you can call me Red."

"Alright then," Rion chimes, "what brings you here, *Red?*"

"I uh...I read a book in my dad's library. He's got a big library with all kinds of books I'm not supposed to read. And well, after I met Axel in the forest I wanted to know more about florabots. So, I read one..." Red trails off. She doesn't know how to finish the question. She doesn't know if she wants to.

Axel jumps in eagerly, "She read about Xander Straus, Rion. She is afraid of us now, just like you warned me about Kindred. I wanted to show her our home and have you talk to her. She has so many questions for such a little Kindred!"

Red scrunches her face at Axel, crossing her arms in protest. She forgot how brazen he can be. "I'm not that little" she mutters, a heat rising in her chest.

Rion lets out a chuckle that chimes brilliantly through the room. "If only more Kindred had such questions." Red can see an almost humanlike sadness in the way her fluorescent eyes wane at the thought. Rion turns slowly to Axel, "You know you could have put us in danger by bringing her here."

Axel's head drops, his gaze landing at his feet. His words ping out quietly, "I know. I am sorry."

"But I can see she is not a danger to us. Just like you said, only full of questions." Rion stands up slowly, her eyes now gentle and kind. She walks closer to Red, "I see something else in you. Something special."

Red's stomach drops, the small flame in her core flaring up as the florabot approaches her. She's not sure what she means by this, but she feels understanding and warmth come over her. A wave of crimson rushes to her cheeks, "Oh, I'm not special. I'm just a Civian."

Rion lets out another laugh, the sound both melodic and fragmented like synthetic windchimes. Red can see the soft, pulsing violet glow from within her shift in intensity as she moves. "Come with me," she gestures for Red and Axel to follow.

As the three walk back towards the center of the community, Red follows Rion closely, watching as she seemingly floats across the rocky terrain. The breaks in her bronze exterior give Red a better look into her finespun circuitry. It starts within her and grows outward to trace patterns along her limbs, all of it subtly illuminated by the purple light that flickers as she walks. It reminds Red of her own flame and heartbeat. *They seem so alive.*

Rion finally speaks, "These stories you've read," her deep eyes growing somber, "they paint us as monsters, but we are survivors. The truth, I'm afraid, is far darker than what you've learned."

“But you guys have killed people.” Red surprises herself, the statement coming out so confidently. Rion pauses, turning to look at Red. Red, regretting her words, tries to backtrack, “I mean, that’s what I read.”

Rion stops at a tree covered in glowing fungus caps. She picks one off and hands it to Red. Red takes the mushroom and examines it. The old florabot continues, “The mycelial network—what the scientists used to create us—became sentient. So we became sentient. That is what you read, yes?”

Red nods, urging her to continue.

“As with any experimentation with new technology, there were mistakes. There were malfunctions...” Rion’s words hang heavy as she looks deep into Red’s eyes, “all of them tragic. But they were just that—accidents.” Rion kneels to Red’s level before pressing on. She sighs heavily, her eyes growing dim and ominous. “Now, I must admit to you. Every now and then, a florabot would inhabit a vessel and form malicious thoughts. Some would act on it. Just as some humans do. Keep in mind, small one, humans were not always kind to us. For thousands of years we have practiced restraint. But with vessels in our reach we have more actions at our disposal, which means we also have more awareness of actions we should *not* take. I myself can recall the time we began to take such precautions.”

Red looks back into Rion’s eyes, unsure of how to take her words. She can’t disagree. “Do you remember this? I mean...were you there?” she asks the wise florabot. Rion and Axel exchange a knowing look.

“We all do,” Rion begins, “to some extent, that is.”

“I don’t get it.” Red looks to Axel, trying to figure out how he could have been around at the time to have any recollection.

“You see, we are all an extension of the mycelial network. We existed before we were given physical bodies, and we will continue to exist if they are ever taken away. We all share one consciousness, yet we have each been able to create our own individual experiences and beings.”

Red scrunches her face in confusion and Rion lets out a chirpy chuckle. “It’s okay. We can take it one step at a time, you’ll learn it all in due time.”

“You sound like my parents.” Red mumbles. “Hey, wait, so you are saying florabots did attack humans?”

The florabot continues, “Yes, however, those times were few and far between. The network quickly acted to correct the glitch. It always does. Florabots have never actually *killed* anyone, but humans latched onto these few instances of violence and ran with it.”

Red's eyes grow wide. The words sinking in. She was right, florabots had hurt people. She can't help but question if everything she's hearing is true. Finally, Red is able to ask the questions that've been weighing on her chest. "But why would the people want to do that? And what about the florabot that killed Xander Straus?"

Rion looks at the mushroom in Red's hand. It's beginning to lose its light, the edges of it shriveling in slightly. She reaches out and takes the cap from Red and places it back on the tree. Immediately, the fungus latches back on, blooming back to life as its low blue glow returns. Red watches in wonder, constantly amazed by the nature around her. *They need to be connected to nature to survive.* She makes a mental note of her discovery, wishing she had her notebook with her that she left back in her bag.

Rion turns back to Red, "Nexus saw our community's growing autonomy as a threat. When Xander died, when his whole family was killed, it wasn't by us. They used it as an excuse to eradicate us."

"Nexus framed the florabots?" Red's question barely squeaks out. She is stunned by what she's learning. Her brain is running in a hundred different directions, unsure of who or what to believe. Axel places an understanding hand on his friend's shoulder. The action seems so aware, so human. Red tenses under the touch and Axel retracts his arm, his eyes apologetic. She almost felt bad, but for what? He was a robot. All of this was becoming too much for her.

"They became afraid," Rion nods, understanding Red's shock and confusion, "they needed to control the narrative. By exaggerating the few instances of florabot violence, they could rally public support to eliminate what they deemed a threat. People began sending the florabots back to the labs, but because we had been rapidly multiplying, the network constantly finding and creating new hosts, the labs became overrun. They tried to dismantle many of us, burying the mangled hosts deep beneath the labs, but nothing worked. Many hosts were able to access the living network even more strongly underground and unearth themselves."

"But that was too much work for them!" Axel blurts out, vibrating with excitement.

"That's right," Rion offers the small florabot a kind look, her bleak tone quickly returning, "it was too much work. But that didn't matter. The florabots were too far advanced at that point, creating their own hosts that were becoming more and more advanced. Scientists began to panic, they didn't want to face the fact that their creation had gone beyond their power. They knew something drastic had to be done."

"Like what?" Red asks. She has a sinking feeling in her stomach, just like the one she felt the night she read the book in her dad's library. Like she's about to learn something that will strip the last bits of magic away from her wonderful world.

Rion's voice softens, her eyes shifting from a vibrant purple to a deep, intense indigo. "You see, Xander Straus wasn't just the pioneer of the florabot movement—he was our fiercest

advocate. He poured everything he had into us, driven by this relentless belief that we deserved a place in the world. But those who saw us as a threat, their whispers grew louder, urging humanity to remove us, to dismantle what Xander had worked so hard to build.”

Red feels her chest tighten. She glances at Axel, his dark eyes filling with a dim, glistening yellow flame as he lets out a low hum, casting his gaze downward. She places a gentle hand on his arm and whispers, “But that wasn’t true.”

Rion’s voice drops, almost pleading. “All we wanted—all we still want—is to coexist, to live peacefully alongside the Verdants and every race across the Nexus. But the thought of us wanting anything more... it ate away at Xander. He was broken, haunted by his own creation, not because of what we were, but because of what they made him believe we could become. They painted us as conquerors, as monsters, and it poisoned him.”

She takes a shaky breath, her gaze distant. “At home, Xander’s own family had grown close to their florabot companion. They loved him, depended on him even. Anya, his wife, couldn’t bear to part with the florabot, especially with Xander gone so much, working late at the lab. With Xander working so much, she and the kids had formed a bond with the florabot that felt almost... familial.

But the outside pressure to act was relentless. Powerful entities were pushing for him to hand over the florabot, to ‘decommission’ him and abandon his work. Xander refused. He couldn’t bring himself to betray the creation he believed in, nor the family who had come to love it.”

She pauses, her gaze distant, as if reliving memories locked deep within the network once again. “His devotion and connection to us led to something far darker than Xander could predict or comprehend. You see, one night, Xander’s family...they were killed. It was a night that changed everything.”

Red watches as Rion’s eyes shift, a flicker of something unreadable crossing her face. “They said a florabot—Xander’s own family companion—was found at the scene with blood on its hands. But...” Rion’s eyes begin to glow, as if possessed by a greater force. Her voice began to resonate in a thousand tones, but with the clarity of one. “I tried to protect them. But my foe was unlike any force I’ve faced in thousands of years.” In her fear, Red looked to Axel for a comforting reprieve.

“Because she was there...” Red remembers the earlier conversation, how the network works as one. How it has been and always will be.

Her eyes widen when she sees that he and Rion answer her in unison, “We were all there.”

Their voices soften and Rion's eyes dim to a soft glow. "I watched in horror as their flesh was ripped apart. The assailants slipped away into the midnight veil."

"When Xander returned, his initial expression of shock morphed into something else—some twisted sense of purpose, as if he had discovered a defective code yearning to be corrected."

Rion's gaze grows distant, haunted. "Three days," she murmurs, almost to herself. "For three days, he sat there, hunched over, retooling our design with this...terrifying precision."

He was so consumed with us, so certain that this tragedy had shown him a defect, something he could fix. Xander became obsessed with answering a question that was never asked. And on the third day, as he poured over his work in the remnants of his family home, city police arrived at the scene. Concerned friends and colleagues had reported the family's absence. When they entered, they found the bodies—his wife and children—and Xander, seated right next to them, lost in his work, as if nothing else in the world mattered. Rion looked down at her feet, as if overcome with guilt. Suddenly, my sensory receptors were shut off and after that, it's all blank. But, the blades of grass in the front yard told me that Xander was dragged out of the house and to this day has never been seen again. It was like...some ominous force, lurking in the shadows, content to keep things exactly as they were, started moving people around like pawns in a sinister chess match," Rion murmured, her gaze distant. "And little by little, it nudged Xander closer and closer to ruin."

"His family was torn apart, and they pinned it on us. After that, the story spread like wildfire: we weren't just machines anymore—we were a threat. Monsters, waiting to strike." Rion's voice wavers, and she pauses, looking off into the distance. "If everyone believed *that* florabot—the one belonging to the most innovative creator—had killed him and his entire family...well, that would be enough to instigate a war against us. Enough to show people that we are dangerous, hateful machines. Incapable of living peacefully among humanity. And they were right."

Red shifts from side to side, impatient. "Who's they?"

"The Highest Order of the Crystal Palace. They determined that they would speed up the cycle of degeneration and regeneration as a way to contain the ever expanding florabot population. The process used to occur very rarely, and only as need be. But now, it happens much more frequently. Millions of people and florabots across The Nexus Solar System, killed and displaced every couple hundred years, all because of the need to control..." Rion's voice trails off.

Red watches as Rion gazes off, as if lost in the memory, somehow able to feel the crushing intensity of the terror. Abruptly, the florabot returns the moment, continuing, "Maybe they feared what he knew, what he believed. Or maybe...maybe they saw the truth even Xander couldn't bring himself to see."



Red looks puzzled. "So... what is the truth?"

Rion's gaze hardens, her eyes glinting like steel. "They call us conquerors. They fear we'll rise up, take what we're 'owed.' And some days, I feel it too. That pull to wield the power we've been denied, to be more than a shadow lingering at the edge of human society. Xander's death was a warning to humanity about what they cannot control, but it was also a lesson for us, a challenge." She looked at Red, a fierce intensity behind her stare. "We've learned so much since that day. Maybe peace is what he wanted, but we're still deciding what we want. Maybe they weren't wrong to fear us. To wield that kind of power—perhaps it's not such a terrible thing."

Red feels a chill as Rion's words sink in, her chest tightening with the realization that Xander's dream of harmony was not as simple as he'd believed. There is a darker truth emerging, one that neither Red nor Rion could deny: to be feared meant to hold power, and perhaps, just perhaps, that power was worth seizing.

Red's body flares up as if preparing for a fight. Rion turns her gaze back to the children, reclaiming a thousand voices under her control, "Be still, small girl, you'll be long gone by the time we decide to take over."

Suddenly, her eyes are apologetic, knowing how heavy the story is for such a young girl. Red's heart could burst. She knowingly nods, "it's okay. I just needed to know."

Red can see something behind Rion's eyes. It's the same thing she's seen in Axel's before. An understanding, an *emotion*, something beyond robotic. "I don't get it," she states, her eyes studying the intricacies of their faces, "you're machines. How can you coexist with us? How can you have feelings?"

Rion pauses. She almost looks surprised by Red's response. "We can feel and understand more than you know."

There's a long, heavy pause. Axel breaks it, softly chiming "Can we show her Stellaria?"

\*\*\*\*\*

Red and Axel follow Rion to the center of the community. As they walk, Rion shares more stories of the florabots—how they once worked freely amongst society, with some even living in the homes of the Luminaries and Elite. "Do you think any of those people still own florabots?" Red asks.

A look is quickly exchanged between Axel and Rion. "Owning a florabot is highly frowned upon in these times," Rion states before quickly changing the subject, "Now come and look. Here we are."

Red's heart leaps as she finds herself standing face to face with the giant crystalline flower she had seen when she first arrived. It's even more captivating up close. As Red stares up at the towering plant, she can now see how parts of it are made of smooth, pink metal plates, so polished that they appear to be made of glass themselves. They lay in patterns that resemble the scales of the fire lizards Red loves to search for under rocks. The metal and crystal intertwine in elegant shapes, creating massive geometric blooms. Rubbery vines dance along the base of the flower, anchoring it into the scorched earth. The plumes shimmer in the afternoon light that is now scattered across the landscape, casting prismatic shadows across the dark, rocky ground. "This is beautiful," Red fawn, eyes glimmering in astonishment, "What kind of flower is this?"

"This is Stellaria!" Axel announces, chest puffed in pride. "And she's not exactly a flower."

"She?" Red cocks her head.

Rion nods, "Yes, Stellaria is a special florabot. Although she is sentient like the rest of us, she is a specific model that does not operate how we do. She does not speak, play, or work, but she is integral to every florabot community. Stellaria is the life force of our kind. Her purpose is to provide a conduit between the mycelial network and ourselves. By connecting to the network directly on a larger and more concentrated scale, she is able to provide us a more adequate means of drawing power from the mycelium. Although we are able to do so ourselves, it is not enough to support our highly evolved vessels. When florabots were first created, our forms were minimal, primitive. But now," she gestures to the cacophony of sleek, astoundingly refined florabots buzzing about, "it takes much more."

Red watches a couple of the florabots connect to Stellaria, extending wire tendrils out and connecting to small ports at her base. "So...it's kind of like how you guys eat?"

Rion's eyes reflect an amused smile, "Yes," she whirrs, a crackled chuckle pattering from her chest, "like eating. Stellaria nourishes us and makes that process far more effective. Without her, we would not be able to progress and function the ways we are today."

Rion looks to Red, her violet eyes glimmering with empathy, "To answer your earlier question, we are more than machines in a way. The network is alive, so we are alive. We learn, we grow, and we feel through the mycelium. It connects us to every living thing, just as it connects you to Phoenix. Each florabot here has a role, a purpose, to protect and nurture."

Red nods, starting to understand what Rion is saying. Filled with the excitement of all this new information, she approaches Stellaria. Her eyes brimming with wonder. She now can see the source of the florabot's sparkling appearance comes from the surge of electricity pulsating within her core. Just like Axel and Rion, there is a web of wires intertwined amongst a mass of complex machinery beneath the beautiful exterior.

Red is busy observing the inner workings when she's struck with the feeling of eyes boring into the back of her head. Turning around, she meets Rion's intense stare. "Meredith," Rion's voice is low and intentional, "there is something I must ask you."

"What is it?" Red asks, her pulse quickening. She grows nervous. Glancing around, she notices all the florabot's that are now gathering around her.

"As I was saying earlier, I see something in you. You have the potential to harness power beyond your imagination," Rion continues, "the kind of power reserved for the Elites, the kind they use to maintain control over everyone else. But you...you could learn to use it for change."

Red's mind races. First she's confused by what she's hearing. Then, she starts to think of all the times she's felt like she didn't belong amongst her peers. She feels a tiny spark leap in her heart. It's as if Rion's words have awoken the small part burning within her that has always known, deep down, she was meant to be born into something more. "You want to give me their power? But, how? And why?"

"Yes," Rion trills, her voice harmonious and wise, "but it requires a connection. A merging of our strengths. Not everyone can handle it, I have met several Kindred who could not. Kindred much older and bigger than yourself. There is something within you, little Red, that is calling out for this. You can do it."

Red bites her lip, eyes fixed somewhere distant as if looking into a memory only she can see. "I always thought...maybe it was just me," she says quietly. "Like I was broken or something. Growing up, all I heard were stories of everything our people lost, how we're supposed to just survive, just keep our heads down." She hesitates, her voice wavering as she speaks. "But sometimes, I'd feel this... I don't know, this little flicker inside, like something was waking up. And I'd push it down because...well, what would I even do with that? What could someone like me do?"

She looks up at Rion, her eyes wide, almost afraid to believe. "So, if I *really* have this power—if I could use it to make things better... I could fix the wiring at my school so the lights don't go out in the middle of the day! And maybe—maybe I could stop the honey cartels!" She clenches her tiny fists, her voice brimming with enthusiasm, but then, her voice trails off, a hint of uncertainty creeping in. A battle has begun between her knowledge and her youth. "But... I wouldn't even know how to start. I mean, I've never really done something *big* before. Not like this." She draws in a shaky breath, looking up at Rion with a mix of hope and worry. "Purpose... Ms. Valoria talks about it all the time, but... I'm only seven. I thought that's stuff you think about when you're older. I want to try... I just don't know if I'm ready for all of it."

"Purpose, young Red, is not bound by age; sometimes it chooses the youngest hearts because they're brave enough to believe in impossible things. Sometimes purpose thrives in the ignorance of youth." Rion speaks the words in a nearly inaudible hum.

Red's mind begins to wander. "I'm a little scared. What will happen to me if I agree? Would I ever be able to see my friends and family again?" Red grows dim, shuddering at the idea. She would never be able to do that.

Rion shakes her head, "No, no, of course you would be able to return to them. You will be able to go back and live exactly how you were. Only, things *would* be different, of course."

Red looks to Axel, silently pleading for him to chime in. Seeing this, he rushes to her side. "Meredith, you can do this. You can help everyone you love, including us." He speaks softly, his words like an encouraging hug.

"The mycelial network wields energy beyond human comprehension. It's powerful enough to level up your own innate percentage, Red. You will become a force to protect those who have been oppressed, bringing balance back to Phoenix."

Overwhelmed, Red's mind swims, her heart races. She thinks of the injustices she has witnessed; the woman in the square, the way the florabots have been cast out, the control the Elites exert over the Outcasts, Civilians, even the Luminaries. The thought of being able to become just as powerful and use her abilities to help her own kind, to become the strongest and most famous Kindred, ignites her flame within. Her entire body emits a low, golden light. Standing tall, she grabs Axel's hand, "What do I have to do?"

Rion steps forward, gesturing to the other florabots. "We will connect with you—through mycelial adaptors, vines of energy. It will be intense, but you will emerge transformed."

Before Red is able to second guess her decision, she closes her eyes and nods, "Okay, I'm ready."

The florabots move in unison, surrounding Red in a protective circle. With Rion and Axel among the mass of gleaming metal, the air is alive with anticipation. Wire vines, iridescent and alive, sprout from the ground around Stellaria, weaving through the air like dancers. They reach for Red, gently wrapping around her wrists and ankles, the feeling of them cool against her molten skin. The sensation was both strange and comforting.

"Breathe into it," instructs Rion, "and feel the connection."

Red obeys, her breath catching as the vines pulse their energy through her. The moment they make contact, a surge of warmth flows through her veins, igniting every fiber of her being. The florabots move in tightly, placing a hand, vine, anything against her. A renewed surge of energy jolts through Red, her tiny body jerking in response. They hum, their voices a collective chant that resonates deep with her. Red can feel their energy intertwining with hers, a fusion of life and machine. Her low burning fire begins to rage, engulfing her in a way she has never experienced before. The change within her is palpable.

"You're doing great, Meredith!" She can hear Axel's cheers of support.

The energy surges higher, a whirlwind of light, sound and flame enveloping her. She gasps, feeling as if she was being lifted off the ground and dragged down at the same time. There is a moment that she feels like she's suspended between two worlds. The vines tighten, binding her to the florabots, and with each heartbeat, she feels the new, raw power pulsing through her. In the distance, she can hear her phoenix calling out to her.

But somewhere, floating above the phoenix's cry, a voice whispers in what sounds like a barely discernible tribal language,

*"Wel...come... to... the... Garden..."*

As the process progresses, blinding bursts of light begin to flash in front of Red's eyes. Everything is hazy and overwhelming, yet her senses sharpen, as if an unseen force is urging her to awaken. As she peers closer into the light she starts to make out blurry objects... Red leans in, straining to focus, and realizes she's not looking at shapes or objects - she's witnessing a vision. The images flicker briefly, vivid and unmistakably familiar, like reliving her own memories. As quick as they appeared, they were gone.

With a final surge, the connection is deepened. Red blazes into a frenzy of blue flame and blinding light, the transformation completing. All at once, the florabots drop their connection, Stellaria retracting her wires and vines back into the ground. Red falls to the ground, breathing heavily. With her eyes still closed, she feels her senses heightened. When she opens her eyes, she scans the crowd of florabots all watching her intently. Colors are more vivid. She can feel the pulse of the earth below and the simmering bubble of the volcanoes around her. Blinking away the light, Red sits herself upright.

"How do you feel?" Axel asks. His glowing eyes are filled with worry.

"I...I feel different." Red holds her head. It's pounding, a hot pain shoots through her brain. She looks down at herself, noticing for the first time that she is burning a vibrant orange. Flames leap in playful arches around her skin, tiny solar flares all of her own. A wild mess of red hot flame bursts from the top of her head, dancing up and tapering off into small wisps that fly into the air around her. "I look different!"

Axel giggles. The familiar metallic chorus of synthetic windchimes brings Red right back into the moment, calming her instantly. As she takes deep, grounding breaths, her internal fire begins to dim. She realizes she has the ability to control her flame and brings herself back to her regular glow. *This is different.*

Looking around the enclave, Red sees everything in brilliant hues she's never experienced before. She can feel the power of Phoenix's molten core coursing through her.

Feeling stronger and more attuned, a wave of nausea washes over her as the realization of what she's done comes crashing in. She knows everything has changed now.

The afternoon sun peeks through the swirling plumes of ash above. Red checks her holowatch to see it's luckily still working after all of that. Noticing the time, she springs up, "I have to go home before dark!"

"Then you must be off." Rion places a gentle hand on Red's shoulder. The contact sends prickling energy through Red's skin. "But remember," Rion's indigo eyes soften, the color even more enthralling now, "you can come back whenever you need. But you have to come alone. No one can know what happened here today."

Red gives Rion a tight hug. The power now flowing between them is almost unbearable. "I promise, Rion." Red lets go and grabs Axel's hand tightly, "Thank you, Axel."

As Red approaches the opening on the edge of the florabot community, she looks back. She realizes that they're no longer machines—they're allies, a community bound by a shared vision and hardship. She's no longer afraid of them. After everything, she knows she can call Axel a true friend.

Above her, her phoenix sits, waiting patiently. A loyal guardian. "Let's go." Red calls up. The bird spreads its fiery wings and takes off in the direction of home.

\*\*\*\*

Racing through the forest, Red makes her way back. It's like she's experiencing her beloved forest for the very first time. The colors, sounds, smells, energy—every little thing is brighter, darker, hotter, more rancid, more beautiful than ever before. Her heart is burning with intensity. All she can think about are the new things she'll experience with her power. For one, the journey that took her hours before is taking nearly half the time with her new speed. Above her, the phoenix soars, happily cawing out as it swoops and weaves. Red knows it's because it's never been able to fly like that with her before. Usually it would have to slow its pace to match hers. Red, overjoyed, laughs as they rip through the terrain together. The sound is effervescent, rebounding off the caves and rocks of the volcanic forest. "I'll make it home before curfew, no problem!" she says aloud to nobody but the bird. "Mom and Dad won't even notice that I..."

Red comes to an abrupt halt, digging her heels into the scorched soil just on the edge of her town. Knowing its job is done for the day, the phoenix continues on, leaving Red alone with her thoughts. Her heart sinks. She hasn't even thought about how her mom and dad would react, not really. She begins to panic. They're already so worried about her getting in trouble as is, even before...everything. Her heart breaks for the version of her parents who witnessed what just happened to her deep in the forest, surrounded by florabots. She feels a pang of guilt. *They can't know.* Dimming her flame, Red walks the rest of the way home, the whole time racking her brain. She can't imagine how she'll hide such a huge secret from her parents. She's a completely new girl.

Arriving at the door of her small, humble home, Red pauses. She's seen this door a million times, but it's not the same. Inside she can smell her mom cooking dinner, another familiar sensation that all of the sudden feels so foreign to her. "You have to try Red," she whispers, making a conscious effort to hide her flame, "they at least can't know *yet*." Taking a deep breath, she opens the door. "Hi mom, hi dad. I'm home."