“Its another squeeze” Alex said, hurriedly entering the room. Cory looked up with a start.

“Truly?” Cory looked worried.

“And at night too!” Cory hissed, rising quickly from the small cot.

“Cory, what should we do?” Alex asked nervously, pacing. “I don't remember the last squeeze”

“Perhaps that is a good thing.” Cory replied, putting on shoes. “Although last time, the North End, went comparatively well, at the very least the fires will start soon. And if its anything like the time before...” Cory trailed off, now turning away from Alex.

The room was small, holding only the cot and a wardrobe. These were illuminated dually from Alex's torch and the small amount of light from the tiny window.

Alex watched Cory trace his eyes and fingers over his name, carved repeatedly into the stone and the furniture.

“Some are fading.” Cory commented, looking back at Alex. “I will have to re-engrave when we return. But we must be quick!” Cory added, straightening and motioning towards the door.

The two strode out quickly, passing Alex's smaller chamber. They secured the massive stone door behind them with a bit of effort.

“Is it a squeeze?” A person yelled from above them. Alex shot a glance up the twisted stone alleyway to a balcony far above them. Amid the carvings, Alex made out the speaker.

“It is! I saw part of the West End go, right before my eyes!” Alex responded. But they had no time to talk and started walking away.

“Carve your name!” The speaker parted as they began to move beyond eyesight. “Carve your name!” Alex similarly intoned.

The two frail bodies ran quickly through the tunnel like mess of streets that was the Central. As they went, they were joined by many more people who sternly greeted them. Some held weapons. All held carving knives or chisels.

Beneath their feet, the stone was black with names. Names underfoot, names on the doors, names on the walls. Names on top of names, converging into frantic scribbled gauges. Every surface, was covered until the walls of the alley got too high to carve. And even then there were some.

As it should be. Alex even saw “Alex” written a couple of times, although the memory of carving them was long gone.

“Cory, what will happen? Do you remember?”

“Yes. I remember the fire and the screams and of course the Void. A squeeze brings out the worst in everyone. Remember, whatever happens, we must be united. We can't allow them into the Central. A person must have space for their own name. The font and the rooftops are already stretched to their limit. A few more people and we all suffer… worse than we are already.”

“Why does this happen? Isn't the City small enough as it is?” Alex asked, clearly unhappy with Cory's answer.

“I wish I could tell you. Every year it gets smaller and smaller. Sometimes a squeeze.” They were now running with a stream of people, pouring in from every side into the alley.

“I wish there were some way to change it...” Alex said mournfully. The glow of fires threatened up ahead.

“Thoughts for different times. You should probably stay back if you want to be safe.” Cory said.

They were now fully submerged within the crowd and they had to shout to be overheard. Cory started shoving his way to the front.

“Cory, what will you do?” Alex asked, suddenly grabbing Cory's hand. There was fear in Alex's eyes.

“What I must.” Cory replied and attempted to shake the hand loose/ Alex reluctantly relinquished control. Cory was lost among the people of the Central.

Alex push until the looming structures of the Central ended. A small road, uncluttered by overhead construction separated the Central from West End, as it did from the other two quarters and as it had from the North End.

There was a surge of voices from the dividing line. The West Enders were there. Alex pushed to the side until the wall houses on the edge were in reach. Suddenly, someone yelled from one of the balconies.

“Alex!”

“Who is it?” Alex responded, searching the many faces of the towering complex for the speaker.

“Its Jaime!” The voice responded. “Down here!”

Alex traced the sound to a raised doorway. Steps festooned with names led to the second floor entrance.

“You can see from here.” Jaime yelled again.

As the entrance grew closer though, Alex could see Jaime arguing with someone, eventually pushing them off the stairs. The shabbily dressed person fell backwards, and only barely stopped themselves.

“I wasn't talking to you!” Jaime yelled at the person, brandishing a chisel.

“Fuck off. I just wanted to see!”

Alex slipped by quickly, not wanting to further enrage the person. Fortunately they did not raise any more of a problem and disappeared into the crowd.

“You have to be careful when you live on the edge. People have been taking to sleeping in the streets.”

Alex's eyebrows raised. “Truly? How do they live? No quarter will supply them with food or water.” A more horrifying thought came to mind. “Where do they have their names?” Alex asked, aghast.

“I suppose they chance it. I have seen one or two vanish right before me. That is what happens when you only have your name on the street where anyone can get to it.” Jaime said, head shaking.

“But it is good to see you. I know your name Alex.” Jaime said, reaching a hand out.

“And I yours, Jaime” Alex replied, accepting the outstretched hand.

“Let us watch. It seems that the West Enders have chosen a spokesperson.”

The two peered off over the Central crowd to see an opposing one, emerging with a person leading them from the West End.

“Do you know them?” Alex asked of the tall, imposing spokesperson.

“No.” Jaime replied, with a hint of fear in the response. “I do not know their name.” Jaime paused.

“Will Cory speak for us?” Jaime asked.

“I do no know. The people chose Cory last time apparently, when the North End was squeezed. Perhaps they will again.”

Jaime nodded. “Are you afraid for Cory?” Jaime asked.

Alex didn't answer for a moment. “Let us see what happens. I have been told the North Squeeze was solved without too much chaos. Let us hope this one can be as well.”

They had chosen Cory again. Cory stepped forward and the two crowds silenced so that Alex and Jaime could hear what was said between the two.

“Did everyone make it out ok? The crowd is… bigger than last time.” Cory started, concerned.

“No.” The other spokesperson stated grimly. “They did not.”

Cory seemed caught off guard. “A squeeze is hard on everyone. I'm sure we can all work together to help as many people as we can. Just like last time.”

The other spokesperson shook their head. “This isn't like last time. I know what this looks hard to handle, but we need to get into the Central now.”

Cory was silent for a moment. “I'm sorry, I can't just allow that. A person needs space for their name. Everyone of us certainly understands that?”

“You listen here. What you need to understand is that we are people as well. We all can't be so fortunate to live in the Central, free from the fears of the Void.” The person took a threatening step towards Cory.

“I apologize.” Alex heard Cory say. “I came off wrong. We will help to the utmost of our abilities. We have expanded our quarrying, we can help you build what is left twice as tall, even higher if need be.” He stepped forward in a more conciliatory manner and extended an arm. But the other person didn't take it.

“Look, I don't mean to be rude, but you are not understanding me at all. This isn't like last time where you had weeks to build. This is happening now! Tonight! We've already lost both the font and the farms. All of it. We need to move now!”

That caught people's attention. “That's more than two thirds of the entire West End!” Alex said to Jaime, shocked.

But Cory was firm. “Look yourself at your situation. We don't need to do anything for you.” Cory glared at the other person. “What is your name anyway?” I don't know you. I am Cory and I speak for the people of the Central.”

“I don't give a shit who you are, and I'm sure as hell not going to tell you my name. Now these people need to carve their names!”

In fact many were already doing just that on the stones of the street, panicked.

“Are you seriously going to stop us?” The other person threatened.

Cory didn't blink. “I will do whatever is in my power to make sure that we retain what little civilization we have left.”

But the other spokesperson shook their head violently.

“The Void is coming. This isn't about civilization. This is about survival!” the spokesperson cried.

There was silence as the two stared each other down. Then suddenly screams came from the back of the West End group, and some of the group even vanished, even as Alex watched.

What ever semblance of order there once was evaporated almost instantly as the crowd started to panic. The West Enders pushed forward.

The spokesperson spun around and yelled for them to stop, but the group was beyond words at this point. The chisels came out and the knives as well, on both sides. Everything became chaos as Cory and the other spokesperson disappeared into the melee.

Alex watched for a moment in horror as the two sides collided. Alex saw people being stabbed, dragged down to the floor and beaten. The feeling came that things were going to only get worse.

Jaime and another unknown person grabbed Alex by the hands and started pulling towards the safety of the open door.

“No!” Alex protested, “we have to get Cory!” Jaime and the other person ignored the cries, now dragging Alex forcibly into the dark doorway.

“There’s nothing we can do at this point.” Jaime countered. “Sam, help me with the door!”

For a few moments Alex feebly tried to struggle to burst from their grasp, but living on the edge had apparently toughened the two, there was no stopping them.

The door closed before Alex's eyes and tears began to appear.

“Oh Cory… how could this happen?” Alex touched the unfamiliar, unforgiving, cold stone of the doorway and ran hands over the names carved on its solidness.

“I am sorry about Cory, but what will happen will happen.” Jaime said from beside Alex. “There is a small peephole over here.” Jaime pointed to a small sliver of light coming through from the outside. Through it they could hear and partially see the carnage going on outside.

“Sam and I are going to go carve our names. They say the squeeze causes them to become loose.” Jaime warned. “You can as well if you can find a clear area.” Jaime wanted to say more, or at least looked like it, but something caused restraint and the other two retreated to the single room of the place.

Alex wiped the tears away and with a large amount of mental effort, crouched to peer out the small hole.

Fires blazed on both sides. Unnamed bodies churned just below the vantage point. The sides were unknowable at this point. Alex scanned the mess for Cory but there was no sign.

Alex saw a person stab another with a chisel in the throat repeatedly, blood dark in the torchlight until the opponent went limp. Alex felt nauseous as the person began to carve their name into the body over and over again.

Suddenly a sicken exhilaration ran over Alex when Cory reappeared, wounded but alive with a group of presumed Centralers.

“The Void is coming! The squeeze will take the whole West End!” Cory cried. “But it will not take us. Let us drive them into the Void, that is the only place for names like these!” Cory yelled. “Who are we?”

The group following him massed larger now, the Centralers cried out for blood, each calling their own name in response.

The opposing side faltered. Behind them, and to Alex's indescribable horror was the Void. A wretched fear stirred. “So close! So close!” Alex said softly. No amount of name carving is going to save them, Alex realized. Alex sprang up to run but quickly realized that of course there was no where to go. So the watching and the dread continued.

Most of the West End was completely gone. Disappeared into the gray unknowable Void. Just a few block remained. Their citizens had ceased to function together. Its forces broke when stuck between the Void and the wrathful Centralers.

Some fell to the ground weeping for mercy. Some did so to frantically carve their names one last time. Others tried to run down the street away from the two inexorable deaths. Perhaps these were the smartest. Fixated with blood, the Centralers ignored them focusing on the hapless individuals in front of them. These they fell on with knife and chisel until all were still on the ground or hurled mercilessly into the void.

Watching this happen, a new horror overcame Alex. Seeing all this made Alex feel detached. With every stabbing, every flailing body tossed into that greyness, the feeling grew until it threatened to overwhelm.

Alex struggled to stay Alex, feeling increasingly like a body in a corner, peering sickeningly transfixed at the atrocities being committed mere feet away. The body found solace in one act, the only one that somehow made sense. A voice came from it.

“My name is Alex… My name is Alex” it repeated. Over and over. Over and over.

Alex, who was still Alex, walked from the building apparently having said something to Sam and Jaime. Stepping silently over the bodies and ignoring those still moving, Alex looked. Ales didn't truly see the blood stained stones beneath tatters of old shirts or see when footsteps landed on the face down back of some poor West Ender. Alex looked for Cory.

And after an indeterminate time, Alex found Cory. But Cory had lost the fight that Alex had won. Cory was just a body on the ground. So Alex simply left: started walking.

There wasn't much of a consciousness to the path, but perhaps something under the surface was working overtime, since as the world warped around Alex, the footsteps found their way back to the place Cory and Alex had so recently called home.

Somehow the door was closed. Somehow the torches were lit. A chisel was found and then a hammer. But after this Alex stopped.

The hand in front of Alex held the chisel. All around the section of the wall the chisel was aimed at were “Cory”s, carved purposely into the stone.

But a grim determination came over Alex. And with every hammer and chisel blow, and every tear that fell, Cory was replaced by Alex.