Praise

for Dog Day Sunrise

DOGS OF CREATION: BOOK 1



“Just what I look for in a good story - enough graphic horror to make your hair stand on end, some mild humour to quench it, and a decent storyline that winds it way throughout. I particularly enjoyed the quandaries surrounding the genetics question - is it morally right what we are doing? The ‘Butcher’ don’t think so! Great pace on this one, and it’s not a massive opus, making for an enjoyable read. Will definitely pick up any sequel.”

— C. A. Deegan

“An exhilarating adventure that is well worth the ride! This novel, written by Dionisios Efkarpidis, combines science fiction with extreme horror. What an imagination! The story is based in a town called Freedom Basin where the main protagonist, Cosmos, lives. Hell breaks loose, and everyone is on the move.”

— Steven Barr

“This was a little gem, a relatively short but vivid and action-packed horror rollercoaster. Like a good zombie movie, it made me smile ear-to-ear in some scenes. Yes, it’s gory, brutal, immature, but brilliant and funny.”

— Mikhail

“The author deftly delves into the moral implications of manipulating genetics, inviting readers to ponder the boundaries of scientific innovation and its potential consequences. This is a captivating and thought-provoking start to a promising science fiction series. Dionisios Efkarpidis’ ability to blend speculative science with gripping storytelling makes for an engaging read that will resonate with fans of both futuristic technology and human drama.”

— Francis Falconer

“It’s a quick read that kept me on the seat of my pants—I could hardly breathe! One thing after the other after the other. It builds up, explaining the creatures, what they look like, the havoc they’re wreaking, and why they’re after our hero, Cosmos, who is a hapless twenty-year-old kid who can’t seem to do anything right. I immediately went to look for the next installment only to realize the next two books haven’t been published yet. Aaaaugh! I hate waiting.”

— thewalkingfool

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Books by

Dionisios Efkarpidis

*— Dogs of Creation —*

*Book 1: Dog Day Sunrise*

*Book 2: Who Let The Dogs Out?*

*Book 3: Every Dog Has Its Day*

*— Short Story & Poem Collections —*

*The Darkened Light: Poems & Prose*

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DOGS OF CREATION: BOOK 2

Dionisios  
Efkarpidis

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[www.DogsofCreation.com](http://www.DogsofCreation.com)

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*From so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been and are being evolved.*

— Charles Darwin

*Designing genomes will be a personal thing, a new art form as creative as painting   
or sculpture.*

— Physicist Freeman Dyson

*Be rational, sure…   
I’m a fucking werewolf for Christ’s Sake!*

— the film, *An American Werewolf in London*

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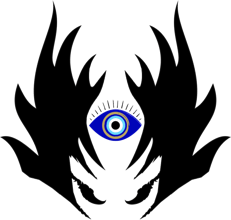
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# Prologue: Macrocosmos



THE DARKNESS, THE SILENCE, the stillness… Cosmos floated in the soothing trifecta. It was an unfamiliar peace, free of the anxious jitters and abnormalities that normally fueled his waking life. “Melt away,” a honeyed voice teased from within, but the tranquility was shattered by a sharp *pop*. The mati, the evil-eye ward—a symbolic anti-curse—blinked into existence. The celestial sphere peered at Cosmos, crowding his sanity, an unnatural pairing of mote and mountain. Lightning coursed through the layers of the eye, crawling out of the pupil’s center as if to escape the horrors that fermented in that vacuous pit. The streaks of electricity forked through the three iris layers, one of ice blue followed by white, finally bolting across the curved, oceanic dark blue of the sclera. There was movement beneath the cornea, dark blobs skittering like roaches, illuminated by the pulsing branches of light. Cosmos began to drift closer. His hair threatened to rip out as it pulled Cosmos into the mati’s orbit. He tried to resist but his hair dragged him past the event horizon, and he was flushed into the vastness of the dark blue.

Cosmos stood on the battered curb of a sidewalk, surrounded by dilapidated brownstones tattooed with graffiti on a one-way street. In the distance stood the Empire State Building, the limestone blond structure barely contrasting with the muted, flat gray of the sky. The air was filled with shouts, honks, and sirens, and smelled of gas and garbage, a concrete Dutch oven. Cars sped down the street, tightroping mindlessly against time and trepidation.

At Cosmos’ feet, just beyond the curb, lay a pigeon. It was alive but badly injured, one wing flapping wildly while the other lay limp, a shredded tangle of cartilage, like gnawed cocktail straws. The lower half of the bird had been ground into the asphalt. The organs oozed out in clumps of pulpy red and white. It made no noise as it inhaled its final breath. They stared at each other, its yellow and orange eye boring into Cosmos’ dark brown eyes. He felt nothing as he watched it die. Hollow. Dispassionate. Free.

And he liked it.

# Chapter 1: Microcosmos

A black and white drawing of a blue eye and flames

Description automatically generated

ANOTHER *POP* SNAPPED Cosmos out of the dreamlike trance. Immediate paralysis replaced weightlessness, and the deep exhale of serenity was replaced with pressure. He was mummified, trapped in a cold, hardened shell. *I’m in a coffin*, he thought, *buried alive, left for dead like that bird on the street.* He heard muffled barking as Plato, his golden retriever, pawed at the shell, fracturing the surface. The crack spread, allowing Cosmos some movement. He wiggled like a worm, rocking back and forth until he rolled and fell onto the floor with a bang, bursting the shell. Cosmos’ limbs splayed and softened, free of the wrappings, the brittle substance sliding off his skin like ice on a warm windshield. He gulped air while picking at the crust that ziplocked his eyes shut.

“Thank you. You saved me, buddy.” Cosmos stood up and patted the dog’s head. Plato licked at his hands, cleaning off the greasy texture.

Cosmos’ vision was blurred but quickly cleared. He looked around the room, unsure how he got there or what had happened. Nothing seemed out of place. The bronze Athena lamp on his nightstand stood strong, her spear the threaded tube that held up a shade shaped like a shield. His fifty-inch flat-screen faced his bed, tilted but unmarred. Above his bed was a poster of Keith Flint from the music band The Prodigy. Keith stood in his signature power pose: arms out, chest expanded, resembling a Minotaur with style, two bright hair horns sprouting from his head and a silver nose ring looped into flared nostrils. Cosmos’ bathroom door had another full-length poster of a model bent over and peering through her legs seductively. Near the foot of his bed beneath the window sat Plato’s crate, stuffed with his favorite maroon blanket and a variety of chew toys. A large Greek flag draped over two windows, obscuring the morning sunlight.

Cosmos grabbed a gray bedsheet and wiped off his mouth and nose where the detritus had collected. It had a pungent scent of ammonia and bleached soil with a hint of metal. The taste was subtler, a blend of salt and citrus. But there was a familiar, deeper zest, one that reminded Cosmos of the Greek “submarine sweets,” mastiha*,* the white gummy treat that Mom would dip by the spoonful into cups of water, giving a delicious vanilla flavor. Hanging off the foot of his bed were his black cargo pants and favorite shirt covered in holes as if a swarm of moths feasted on them.

“Mother of God, what’s going on?” Cosmos said in Greek as he rubbed the bridge of his nose. Pain zipped through his head like ball bearings in a pinball machine. The room spun from vertigo, and he stumbled to the bathroom and looked into the mirror. No cuts or bruises, no damage to his face. The hereditary scowl engraved like Mount Rushmore into his forehead hung above his eye, a contradiction to the baby-faced chin that curved with prepubescence, even at the ripe age of twenty. His hair was frenzied, a bushel of black weeds thrown back like an electrocuted caricature. He had a glimpse of that dream, of how his hair pulled him toward the mati. He wondered why the dream was so vivid—the brightness of the eye’s layers, how the lightning dashed across its surface, the fear he felt as he was sucked into an oily blob that gobbled him up.

He washed his face with water, and as he did, a thin layer of skin peeled off. He picked at it frantically, skin flaking like a sunburn. With every peel, he’d have a flashback of standing on a curb as the world loomed over him. The death of the bird with its organs resembling crushed condiment packets had no emotional consequence, as if it were a discarded piece of rotten fruit. He shook off the thoughts and continued removing the skin from his arms and shoulders, beneath the patch of stringy hair on his chest that lacked the stiffness of manhood. He spotted two red welts an inch apart on his chest. Cosmos ran his finger over them and pressed down. And like buttons opening a door, a flood of real but spotty memories resurfaced.

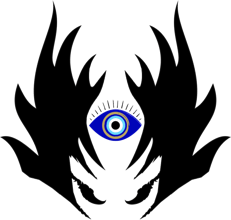
Yesterday started with his delayed opening of the family store. Mom and Dad were overseas in Greece. His beautiful blue M3 was flattened by a wickedly clawed boogeyman that also flattened Leanna, who owned a downtown store. Mr. Rawley was ripped through the roof of his restaurant and eviscerated, spilt like a piñata of blood and meat that rained down onto his bar. Monsters in the woods—maddening unimaginable things. Like a sweetened rose among the toxicity was the woman of his dreams, Reya. She was like a specific detail that he’d never forget, with wide, gorgeous green eyes and shoulder-length hair that was black with blonde streaks. Her thick lips formed into a godly smile. Her smooth, dark olive skin was damp from all of the day’s humidity. How was she able to bring calm when his atrial fibrillation roared like an engine? And how she had left, gone from his life, a shot to a heart. No, not a shot, not by her, but by Captain Esperanza. The police captain was in Cosmos’ kitchen, shooting a taser point-blank in the chest while he was on the phone with his sister.

Cosmos felt his heart palpitate, the a-fib triggered like a flare gun. His breath quickened, air thickened, and the world began to crumble. Black wavy lines emanated from the welts on his chest, creating magnetic field patterns like iron shards around a magnet. The speed of the lines wiggled out faster and faster, in tune with Cosmos’ rapidly rising heartrate. He tried to cry out, but no words escaped—his voice was somehow gone, as if his vocal cords had been severed. He felt a sharp, stabbing pain in his abdomen and sat on the toilet waiting for sweet relief, but instead of fecal matter, a tail sprouted and slapped around the inside of the bowl. He stood and looked back, and sure enough, he’d grown a fully fleshed out long, thin tail. Cosmos ran out of the bathroom as the tail whipped him across the back, causing him to wince in pain.

“Jesus Christ!” howled Cosmos. “Where’s my phone… where is it?” Cosmos searched through the torn clothing on the bed for his phone, but it wasn’t there. He crawled on the floor, naked on all fours with a wagging tail, like his dog. He rummaged through scattered laundry and beneath the bed and found it tangled in a bedsheet. He quickly made a call, the tail continuing its flogging.

“Please, please, please answer!”

# Chapter 2: Alebrijes



EIGHT POLICE BADGES were laid out like tombstones on the desk. The sun’s beams reflected off the polished brass as if they were on a spiritual display, worthy of heavenly ascension. Beside the badges was a computer that displayed thumbnails resembling dried bugs on a pest control website. Captain Aldea Esperanza sat away from the desk, away from the light, as if fearing its judgment. Her cell phone vibrated, and the name made her stomach churn: Warden Davis. It was because of the Warden that Sven, the Blue-Eyed Butcher, had mutated into a beetle-like killing machine that mutilated her officers with an insecticidal agent and butchered two others. The pain they must have felt, twisting in ways meant for the deboned and spineless. And Aldea had been gone the entire time, busy executing the Warden’s orders, tasering citizens of Freedom Basin that in turn mutated into monstrosities like Sven.

She thought back to how she had gotten here, captain of a police department in Freedom Basin, far from her birthplace in Celaya, Guanajuato, Mexico. As a child she wanted to be in law enforcement; as a woman, she had struggled but persevered, and her dream came true. But her life was never hers, and she, like many of the Policia Federal, fell under the orders of the cartel that functioned within the city. She had trafficked narcotics, bringing in extra income for her family, until one day she was shot in the heart by a jealous colleague. Aldea was saved by a private medical team that gave her a new heart that was retrofit with an electric device that could mutate her, remote controlled by none other than Warden Davis. She was shipped off like an express package to the town of Freedom Basin, living a life that was anything but free. Why care, then, for her officers or anyone in this town, if she was just a means to an end, a chained puppet?

She removed her badge and placed it face down beneath the eight, untouched by the sunlight, unclean and unworthy. She felt tears and pinched the bridge of her nose. No time for self-pity, only self-sacrifice. She pulled her long brown hair into a ponytail and removed her firearm, clicked off the safety and placed the tip of the gun against a heart that wasn’t hers. She was slowly squeezing the trigger, hoping the pain would be quick, when her phone rang again. Her initial instinct was to ignore it, but her eyes fluttered open. She saw the caller was an angel of intervention, her mother.

“My Aldea, are you okay?” her mother said in Spanish. Aldea imagined Madre sitting in her favorite teal wooden chair, scrunched up like a worried bunny.

“Mama, I’m so happy to hear your voice.”

“Come home, Aldea. I see on the news that the Alebrijes are real!” Her mother loved the folk art of the Alebrijes. Vibrantly colored sculptures of zoological amalgamations, born from an artist’s fever dream, found a spot on every flat surface in her house. “Aldea! What happened?” her mother asked.

“How are you, Mama? Did Emiliano get his new wheelchair? And did Papa get his medication? It’s the best, and it’ll help with the sores.”

“Thank you. We are fine, with the money, with the things you send. We are fine, but mi cariño, are you?”

Aldea focused on the screen, bodies like pill bugs, twisted by drunk forces. She wasn’t one to show weakness and pocketed her emotions deep within mentally sealed wells. But when it came to her mother there were leaks in those wells.

“These creatures aren’t Alebrijes. They’re people, their bodies changed into mixed up animals.” Once again, she gripped the bridge of her nose, stifling back tears.

“It’s…” Her voice wavered, and she let the agony of the next words flow freely. “Mama, I’ve done bad things. Unforgivable things. I’m an evil, bad person. I’m sorry for everything I’ve done.”

There was silence on the other end, and for a moment Aldea thought her mother had hung up until her voice reached out to pull her out of the well.

“My daughter, you made bad choices, but that doesn’t make you evil. It’s my fault for not protecting you.”

“Don’t do that. Don’t take blame for anything.”

Aldea wanted to Facetime and look into her mother’s brown eyes, eyes that held nothing but several decades of unconditional love, but she feared what her mother would see: a daughter’s face etched with disgrace, welded by a blowtorch of guilt.

“Mama, I have to go.”

“I have a bad feeling. Please, just come home.”

“Say hi to mi hermano and Padre. I love you, Mama. Thank you for saving me.” And with those final words, Aldea hung up the phone.

A second later, Warden Davis called. “Don’t try to kill yourself again. It won’t work. You’ll set off the pacemaker and become something special,” rumbled Warden on the other end of the line. Every word carried destruction like an avalanche. “Now, listen to me carefully. Don’t faulter. Stay the course. I have a few more tasks for you to complete, then you’re free. I want you to go to Javed’s cabin. Collect any video evidence and destroy them, then destroy the lab. You have three hours.”

There was no escape, not even in death, and she had no choice but to obey him. Aldea fired at the computer screen, grabbed her badge and stuffed it in her back pocket, and stormed out of the office.

# Chapter 3: Monkey Mind

A black and white drawing of a blue eye and flames

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REYA YAWNED AS she stretched on a king-sized bed at the Duffling Inn. For a few seconds her mind was clear, the world around her quiet as if in prayer. A pair of hands to massage out yesterday’s stiffness would be a nice, final touch. That was the first invasive thought that ruined her state of placidity. Thoughts ran through her skull like a train full of monkeys, an annoying cacophony meant to disrupt focus…

*Her father created a formula out of electricity-eating Geobacter called Neobacter that was the catalyst for mutational transmorphisms.*

*Her brother, Deva, shot in the head by Warden Davis.*

*She injected her twin with said Neobacter while on his deathbed, changing him into a beautiful, winged mutation that took flight into the night sky.*

*A stupid town was creamed by a meteor a million years ago that generates magnetic anomalies.*

*An embryonic sac magically transforming into something alien: if E.T. mated with a xenomorph that birthed a creature that said “fuck you” to all things Darwinian.*

*A friendly dog, Plato, who stole the little egg sac.*

*And finally, a boy named Cosmos. He’d been with her the entire day. He looked like a character out of an anime: defiant hair, clean round facial features on a head too big for a body.*

Reya shook her head, scattering the monkeys. When she arrived last night at the Inn, it was empty and eerily silent. No one greeted her at the front desk, the tiny lobby like a scene for a supernatural Victorian thriller. She had the key to her brother’s room, and as soon as she entered, she was assailed by a musky smell of amber and spice. She showered, noshed on junk food from a vending machine, and slept once her head hit the pillow, all tensions melting away. After a few hours of sleep and feeling somewhat refreshed, Reya slid her legs off the bed, stood up, and disrobed. Her clothes were filthy, so she threw them away.

Somewhere in the chaos of the previous day she’d lost her carry-on, so she had no choice but to raid her brother’s wardrobe. He had an assortment of Tom Ford fashion for the physically elite. Her brother was designed for beauty. Chiseled in every way, not an ounce of fat on him. He turned all types of heads—straight, gay, male, female, non-binary—even animals gave pause, gawking with their feline, canine, or equine eyes. She found a black undershirt and beige shorts with a drawstring. A full body mirror in the bathroom helped her envision what she’d look with   
the attire.

She analyzed herself, hints of her twin in the reflection. Mother’s lips and chin and Father’s ears and eyebrows bonded perfectly as Deva but were plain and subdued in Reya. Someone once told her she looked like a young Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, but little can be trusted from gamers on headset. Reya let the clothes drop and studied her form. Average, about five-foot-four, zero muscle tone, rectangular shape with a little belly—she was a sucker for sweets. She wished her breasts were a little bigger, but she liked her backside, which was not too big, not too small, and comfortable to sit on.

Where she lacked physically, she made up mentally, Olympic gold by comparison. She couldn’t run a mile in twenty but could program anything in less than ten. She left the bathroom, grabbed her father’s laptop, and stuffed it in a Louis Vuitton leather messenger bag. It must have cost hundreds, but he wouldn’t need it anymore. There wasn’t anything in this room he’d need ever again. The thought caught Reya off guard, and she felt a lump in her throat. He’d never do human things. Never be the social media entrepreneur with millions of likes, a night club and fashion connoisseur, a free radical artist, eat at a restaurant, or make love. But she saved him. He would have been dead if not for her, and Reya felt pride in that. But her father, Javed Harrakhan, the Einstein of biohacking, had been the agent of these mutations, and Reya felt an obligation to find out his end game. He was obsessed with his bio-cosmic Yuga Cycles, the divine four stages of the ages, with his work being the final chapter. She grabbed her phone from the nightstand. The screen was blank, the phone dead. No time to wait for it to charge, she’d have to charge it in the car rental on the way to the lab.

# Chapter 4: Metamorphosister

A black and white drawing of a blue eye and flames

Description automatically generated

COSMOS PINNED THE tail underneath him as he tried to call Sophelia. There was no hiding the uncontrollable bungee cord that flapped around like a flagellum. Mom and Dad would find out, have dual strokes, and hide him in the basement like a rat where he’d nibble on spoiled feta cheese and stale church bread. He needed an exorcism, help, or both. His sister, Sophelia, was a yoga teacher, some kind of spiritual adviser, and she’d know what to do. Also, she was on the phone with him when he was zapped by the captain last night. The tail popped loose, and he snatched it, stuffing it under his back. The tail tried again to break free, but he shoved it between his legs and squeezed tightly while he called his sister.



The cricket chirped incessantly from the back office. Sophelia leaned against the sink, tapping her long fingernails against the metal drum, hoping to annoy the cricket in return. She took a long, deep breath, bringing in Gaia’s energy, but her concentration was broken again by that whore of a bug rubbing its wings together. Sophelia marched to the merch fridge, creating her own set of noise from the tinkling of jewelry, and grabbed an orange soda.

The door’s bell dinged, and a utility worker walked in, removed his hard hat, and placed it on the counter. Annoyance transferred from the cricket to the customer. She went behind the counter and placed her hands on her hips, nostrils flaring, curly long black hair frizzed out, framing a face drawn with contempt, her bullish brown eyes glaring at the man. He slapped one hand and smirked at Sophelia.

“Well, what do you want,” she asked.

“Don’t I know you?” The man ran his hand through his dirty blond hair.

“No. Order or leave.”

The man eyed Sophelia suspiciously. “Shit, that’s right, you were Billy Hutch’s girlfriend! I’m Garrett. Gazebo Garrett?”

Sophelia shrugged.

“We got high a few times in my stepdad’s gazebo. Ha! I heard you moved to Sol, but that place’s a shit show now. Not that it’s any better here,” Garrett said, his mood changing from inquisitive to somber. He zoned out, focused on a bag of Cheetos, then jerked his head and smirked again. “Can I get scrambled eggs and bacon on a roll?”

“No,” Sophelia said spitefully.

“Why not?”

She looked at the griddle as if it were a sewer lid, wanting no part in sloppy grease and gas. “Microwaved eggs or buttered hard roll—best I can do.”

“Buttered roll is fine. Can I get a coffee?”

The rolls were presliced, buttered and wrapped, sitting in a basket on the counter. She grabbed one with a squeeze, placed it on the counter and poured Garrett a cup of coffee.

“You know, your brother’s name came up on the police scanner.”

“He’s home, sleeping. Hungover, I think. Did he get pulled over for a DUI?”

“There was—"

Sophelia cut him off, looking out toward the window. “That’s why his car’s not home, probably impounded. Fucking asshole was probably talking to a cop, saying the name ‘Captain’ like that,” Sophelia said, recalling Cosmos’ frantic call last night.

“Are you talking to me?”

“Sugar’s over there.” She pointed at the counter to her left. “Milk’s in the fridge.”

“Thanks. How much I owe you?”

Sophelia huffed, wanting this interaction to end. She checked a price list beneath the counter and searched for the items.

“It wasn’t a DUI. Your bro’s car was found crushed at Mr. Rawley’s place. Mr. Rawley and eight cops were killed there. So, just saying, I heard his name that one time, and that was it.”

“Three dollars and twenty-five cents.”

Garrett pulled out a five-dollar bill and handed to Sophelia. The number two register button was jammed. She cursed through gritted teeth while continually thumbing the button.

“It’s okay, keep the change.” Garrett grabbed his hard hat and headed toward the door. “Billy’s missing,” he added from the threshold. “His house was destroyed. No one knows where he is. In case you wanted to know.”

The door dinging as he walked out.

The cricket’s chirps suddenly increased, as if mocking her. She slammed her fist on the counter and walked toward the back office.

“You’re dead. I’m going to rip your wings off, you little turd.”

The chirps were coming from the far end of the room near her father’s desk. She shoved it aside, but it got stuck on her father’s bowling ball, flipping the table. The drawer popped open, and papers spilled out.

“Gamoto!” she yelled, *God damn it* in Greek.

The desk wasn’t heavy and she picked it up, followed by the papers. One of the headers of the forms spelled out “Debt Collection.” Additional papers were marked with default warnings, lawyer fees, and bankruptcy. The words were heavy in her hands as she continued to read. Her fingers began to curl, bending the paper. She wanted to make the yellowed paper cry and bleed ink, make it suffer, tear its lies apart, but it was true. Each and every file had their names on them: Helios and Alexandra Leftezondakidis. The cricket had gone silent, fearing the anger in the air would slash through its little wings. Sophelia went back into the kitchen and retrieved her phone from her bag. She was about to call Cosmos when her phone rang.

“Sis! I need your help!”

“You’re awake? How long have you been up, while I’m here at this stupid store?”

“Something’s wrong, Sophelia. I think I’m one of those monsters. Like, my ass is! It keeps trying to slap me.”

“You were passed out last night, Cosmos! And your room smelled like vodka.”

“I woke up in a cocoon! Plato scratched me out, captain Aldea shot me in the chest with a taser gun, I had a head thrown at me, and my car’s smashed up,” Cosmos rambled.

“Would you shut up and calm down!”

“Why are you at the store?”

“Mom and Dad are on their way home. They’ll be here in a few hours.”

“What!? Are they worried about the monsters?”

“It’s you, Cosmos. They’re worried about you.”

# Chapter 5: Lost & Found

A black and white drawing of a blue eye and flames

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THE NIGHT’S STORM swept away the oppressive humidity, ushering in a dryer, cooler climate. As Reya drove down Main Street, she could image people strolling through the petite, New England style cafés and boutiques with glass windows showcasing unique apparel, arts and crafts, and jewelry. There was a wide variety of eye-catching designs and delights for the subtle yet classy appetite. Colonial style buildings, red-bricked and wood paneled with gas lamps, took up most of the real estate. These housed larger establishments like salons, stationary shops, pharmaceutical, and restaurant-bars.

It was a picturesque scene, a stage for musicals or romance novels, not for the bloody wrenching that ripped the town apart. Sven had moved through this town like a bulldozer. He left imprints of devastation, fossilized into fear for decades to come. Streets were barricaded and buildings condemned. Police tape wrapped around a blood spot, dyeing the asphalt like red wine on a sponge. From somewhere to her right, smoke continued to billow. Most emergency personnel were concentrated there. Not a single officer stopped her or forbade her movement. They, too, had suffered unimaginable loss. All of these people were stuck like windless toys, weighted by sorrow and defeat. There would be no reckoning or justice, only hopelessness. These mutations were above the law, both nature’s and man’s.

It took only a few minutes to get to Javed’s cabin, which was moonlighting as a lab. As she pulled into the dirt driveway, she saw a black Ford Explorer with standard police plates parked at an angle. She walked into the cabin and through the slim kitchen. The black steel door leading to the lab was ajar, and she peeked in. The smell of the dirt, ozone, and metal instantly brought back the horror of her brother being shot in the head. Now, though, a woman dressed in black stood in that spot of ruin, holding a bottle of lighter fluid in her hand. Reya shoved the door open, metal grating against the floor.

“Excuse me, that’s evidence!” shouted Reya.

The officer turned and pointed her pistol.

*Déjà vu,* *it’s all happening again*. *Same old story as the last*, Reya thought. She didn’t raise her hands but stood tall and defiant, like a protector of her realm.

“You don’t belong here. Get out.”

“This is police business.” The officer squared off and leveled her gun. “I don’t want to hurt you, but I will if I have to.”

Reya looked down at the dried blood on the floor, and the officer’s eyes followed.

“You’re working for him, aren’t you? Warden Davis. Makes sense,” Reya said.

The officer didn’t take her eyes off the blood at her feet.

“He shot my brother right where you’re standing. You’re helping him, so that means you’re crooked,” Reya continued.

The officer put the gun away and seemed to ignore her, resuming her task.

“You’re supposed to serve and protect. You’re supposed to be a hero. But you’re just a soulless dog on a long leash.” Reya stormed out of the lab and stood in the kitchen, lingering there like a stringless marionette. She walked over to an adjacent room where her father’s metal cot and nightstand were. A framed photo of her parents, Mother several months pregnant, sat beside a lamp. Reya took the picture and went back to her car.



Captain Aldea had collected the badges and prepped them for delivery to the fallen officers’ families. She wanted to run back to Mexico and into her mother’s arms to ball up for eternity in her embrace, but that would put her family in danger, so until she was free from his tethering, she’d do as the Warden commanded. She had access to the cabin, compliments of the Warden. He gave a brief layout of the “lab,” including where the knife switch and cameras were situated. She flipped the switch, and the sound of generators activated to flicker on the work lights. The room looked silly and cheap, like a set designed for 1980s B movies. Copper rods poked out of the intersections of a mesh cage stapled into the cavern walls. Some weird equipment and machines were to her right, and to her left were tables and an empty safe. Toward the back was a hole in the cave, most likely for ventilation. She went about collecting the tapes and placed them on a copper bowl sitting in the center of the room.

She looked up in surprise when a young girl opened the door and berated her about her presence there. When the girl told her she was a soulless pet and not a hero, it struck a nervous cord. This child saw her as a lie.

When the girl left, Aldea paused to take in everything. The blood stain at her feet was there like a shadow of herself, of her choices. Aldea was made into a Frankenstein monster of parts, not a whole. How she wanted to rip out the very heart that saved her so she could have died. She didn’t deserve resurrection or a second chance. She rubbed the scar above her chest and thought of her mother. It was time for redemption—time to take control of her life regardless of the consequences. It was time to act like an officer and uphold the law. It was time to act like a hero.



Reya removed the photo from its frame and held it, resting her wrists on the steering wheel. She missed her mother’s laugh, the way she’d dance without music, and her twist on Indian and Moroccan dishes. She missed the way her mother talked, richly accented and soothing, therapeutic in tone and temperament. She never cursed or lost her cool. She was as perfect as a mother could be, keeping her children close without being overly protective. In this picture, father looked happy. His hands were curled around the baby bump and his chin nestled in the crook of mother’s neck; the sun’s setting rays were a halo around their heads. Months after this photo, mother would die, along with her unborn brother, from complications with the pregnancy. If only the tears streaming down Reya’s cheeks could carry the pain with them.

A knock on the window startled her. The woman stood there, holding the tapes. Reya slid the photo into her pocket and wiped her face before rolling the window down.

“Take these,” said the woman.

“They’re damaged now.”

“Just take them.”

Reya studied her, noticing exhaustion around her hooded, light brown eyes. This woman had strong facial features, a muscular jaw, and sharp lines that held strength fit for a cage fight, but also looked weather worn and eroded.

“Why the change of heart?” asked Reya.

“Not a change of heart. Not for me.” The woman looked out past the car as if searching for something, then back at Reya. “I don’t have much time. Just take these, please.”

“If you really want to help, then help me with whatever time you have left. My name is Reyansh Harrakhan, daughter of Javed Harrakhan, whose cabin you broke into.”

“I know.” The woman sighed and nodded.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Aldea Esperanza, captain of the police force. And I *am* an officer. I *do* serve and protect.”

“Okay.” Reya looked at the tapes again. “I don’t need those. Once you left, I was going to grab the memory cards from a backup drive. Those cams are surveillance and don’t store info.”

Captain Aldea grinned.

Reya’s phone, hooked up to her rental car charger, rang. “Hello?”

“Reya? It’s me, Cosmos.”

“Cosmos? What’s wrong?”

“My god, I have a tail,” he whimpered.

“What?”

“A tail!”

“Oh no.” The captain stepped back, shaking her head. They both could hear Cosmos rambling on the other end.

“What did you do?” Reya asked her.

“I’ll explain on the way. You drive, I don’t trust my cruiser. Warden Davis is tracking me.”

“We’re on our way,” Reya told Cosmos.

“We?” Cosmos asked, but Reya had already hung up.

# Chapter 6: Off To See The Wizards

A black and white drawing of a blue eye and flames

Description automatically generated

SOPHELIA’S CAR NEARLY cartwheeled around the U-shaped driveway of her parents’ home. She hiked up her loose bohemian pants so she could take the steps two-at-a-time and banged on Cosmos’ door. He called for her to enter.

Inside, the miserable stench of locker room and burnt Sandalwood hit her. The room was a mess, coated with a strange lime-white powder. Plato circled Sophelia, mouth agape and tail wagging. Sophelia pet him while scanning the room.

“Cosmos?”

“I’m in here,” he cried from the bathroom.

“Come out!”

There was no response.

“I’m not in the mood for your shit. I had to open the stupid store because of you. Wait till Mom and Dad find out.”

“Wait till they see my tail!”



Cosmos called Reya immediately after hanging up with his sister, and thankfully, she answered. He explained to her about the uncontrollable whip that grew out of his backside, leaving out most of the unpleasant details, like the way it protruded out of his crack like a wet pork rind tailpipe. He wrapped a towel around his midsection, and the tail coiled around his leg like a snake. Reya and a stranger were heading his way, but Sophelia was first to arrive. There was a Jekyll and Hyde way about his sister, a yogi practitioner by day, drill sergeant by night, and Cosmos wasn’t sure what version he’d be confronted with.

“Long inhale, short pump, long exhale out,” Cosmos breathed. He opened the door and was greeted with his sibling standing in a superman pose.

“Alright, now you’ll see,” he said as he began to loosen the towel.

“Turn around, you Malaka,” she yelled.

Cosmos turned and loosened the towel but there was no tail—only a fine white dust that fell like baby powder off his ass.

“Cosmos, for the love of God…”

As he rewrapped the towel, she clasped his chin in a vice grip and looked into his eyes. “Your pupils are dilated. You’re on drugs! What is it, ketamine? Is that why you’re hallucinating about a tail?” She let go and shoved him back in disgust.

“No, I really did have a tail!”

“With all that’s going on, with this town, my city, people turning to… God knows what. Mom and Dad are in so much debt that they’re going bankrupt, and you have time to party? Were you high when you trashed your car?”

“This isn’t drugs!” Cosmos picked up some of the powder. “Smell it, look at it,” he said, shoving it into her face.

“Get away from me!”

“Wait, did you say Mom and Dad are in debt?”

There was the sound of another vehicle, slamming doors, and approaching footsteps. Reya walked into Cosmos’ room, followed by Captain Aldea. Plato was happy to see Reya and jumped up in delight.

“Hi, boy,” she said, kneeling down to rub his head and let him lick her face. “Let’s see this tail, Cosmos.”

Cosmos gazed at Reya.

“Cosmos, the tail?” Reya repeated.

“It’s gone! But I swear to you, I had a tail.”

“I know, I believe you.”

Sophelia scoffed. “Who the hell are you?”

“I’m Reya.”

Sophelia’s eyes narrowed. “You must be his drug dealer and thought he overdosed. And brought this cop here because you’re guilty!”

“Drug dealer? What’re you talking about?”

Captain Aldea stepped in front of Reya and put her palms up defensively. “Okay, calm down and step back,” commanded the Captain.

“Don’t come barging in here barking orders! You better step off before I sue your ass!”

“It was *her,* Sophelia—she shot me with an electric gun thingy!” Cosmos pointed at the two welts on his chest.

“I know, I’m sorry. I have much to explain, but first we need to calm down.”

Sophelia puffed out like a wild haired Neanderthal, nostrils flared, teeth bared like an animal. She snatched the Athena lamp by the base, sending the shade tumbling to the floor, and raised the bronze statue over her head. “You beady-eyed skinny bitch, what did you get my brother involved in?”

“Put that down now!” Aldea had her hand on holstered weapon.

“I’ll put it down on your pruned face!” said Sophelia.

“Please stop,” mumbled Cosmos. He watched as Aldea unclipped the leather strap, ready to draw her pistol. It was a maelstrom of anger and confusion with Cosmos barking, the two powerhouse women ready for battle, and Reya trying to play peace maker. Cosmos felt his heart flutter and panic regurgitate from the pit of his stomach. “Please.” The word felt heavy, stuck in his throat. There was a ringing in his ears, and he cupped them as the room spun.

“I said stop!”

Cosmos felt a punch to the sternum by an electric fist that spread through his body. His arms blackened like ink spilt on parchment paper. Yellow triangular-shaped scales popped out of his shoulders, down his arms, and into fingers that ended in thick black tips. He felt his face pinch and in his peripheral was the edge of a black, glossy curved beak. The sinews of his trapezius pulled away from his body like a winged pair of membranous sails. Ribs softened into tentacles, multicolored and slithering at his sides.

The most drastic change of all was Cosmos’ visual perception. Around him, the world had sharpened and colors brimmed with life, reality’s atomic machines factories in motion. Reya was a sight to behold, her eyes a peridot city, twinkled against strands of orange flowing through her face like a Vincent van Gogh portrait. She had a purple aura, like her own personal storm cloud moving in synchrony with the orange glow. Cosmos was transfixed by the richness of Reya, of her specific form, until he became lost by a tide of brightness that swallowed the scene. There was a whirring sound and out of the white the evil eye appeared, staring at him once again.



It felt like the temperature of the room rose thirty degrees, and Reya found herself sweating profusely. The two alpha queens—one holding a muscled female bronze lamp, the other about to draw her gun—were yelling at each other, neither backing down, and Cosmos was stuck in-between. He looked frail, pallid and gray, like a reanimated corpse unsure how it was still alive. As she moved toward him, his body pulsed with white before blackening like charcoal.

In the next several moments, Reya bore witness to a transformation that defined the term *uncanny valley.* Cosmos was impossible by biological standards, internal forces molding him into a combination of reptile, fowl, and cephalopod woven seamlessly together. There was a carbon-like texture, a hidden complexity at work that Reya noticed through the waves that billowed across his epidermis. Beside him, Aldea raised her gun.

“No,” snapped Reya, placing her hand on the barrel and slowly pushing it down.

Cosmos was frozen in place, arms out like a figure at a wax museum. Reya placed her hand on his chest, feeling a cold buzz tickling her palm.

“Breathe,” Reya whispered. She cupped his cheeks, feeling the rough edge of the beak against her thumb. “Cosmos, it’s me, Reya. Look at me. Listen to what I’m saying. Breathe.”

Cosmos’ eyes twitched and connected with hers. The beak collapsed into his nose, the wings retracted, tentacles curved back into ribs, and arms diluted to its natural pasty white. He collapsed onto the floor, drawing in huge gulps of air.

Sophelia put down the lamp and knelt beside him, rubbing his back. “Oh God, Cosmos, what happened to you?” Sophelia’s voice quivered and broke as she embraced him.

“I don’t know sis.”

“It’s my fault,” Aldea said, backing away in fear.

“No, this is my dad’s doing,” interjected Reya.

“Please,” Cosmos said, his eyes rolling up, looking at both the Captain and Reya. Spit dribbled out of his mouth as he continued to pant. “Help me.”

“There are others in Sol who can help. Your father,” Aldea glanced at Reya, “didn’t do this alone. There are many others, and a few are in the city.”

“Sol? He can’t go anywhere. He has to go see a doctor,” snapped Sophelia.

“Sis, her father *was* my doctor!” Cosmos pointed to Reya. “I need to find others like him to help me, not just anyone. Mom and Dad are going to die if they see me like this.”

The room grew quiet except for Plato, whose wagging tail swept the floor. He seemed to find Cosmos’ transformation entertaining.

“You’re right. Go, but please be careful. I’ve seen those creatures, those monsters out there,” said his sister.

“They’re people, is what they are,” Aldea said, placing her hand over her heart.

Sophelia rolled up her sleeves and stood nose-to-nose with the Captain.

“You better fix him. This is both of your fault.”

The two nodded.

“Get changed, Cosmos. We’ll be waiting in the car,” Aldea said and she and Reya exited the house.

“Can you trust them?” Sophelia asked.

“What choice do I have Sis? I mean, if we steer clear of trouble, I should be fine. It’s not that long of a drive either. What could go wrong?”

# Chapter 7: All In The Family

A black and white drawing of a blue eye and flames

Description automatically generated

DEVA STOOD ON one of the spiraling, thousand-foot electrical conductors surrounding the city of Sol. Below, he watched the mutations, beautiful in their varying anatomies spliced together. Some were a single species and others crafted with half a dozen or more animals. Darwinian evolution had no influence here—environmental factors played no part, nor did predator or prey. One appeared from below, hovering precariously close to him. It had a triangular flattened turtle head, its bony face studded with barbels along its snout, extending down into a long neck, woven into the body of an orchid mantis, the pink insect mimicking the design of an orchid, its raptorial front legs serrated and bent, ready for grasping. Cream-colored moth wings the length of a Cessnas beat thumped aloud. It ogled Deva with its brown eyes, a stare that hinted at its former humanity, before turning and flying off.

There were mixtures of shoebills and caracals, a blue-tentacled harpy eagle, gelada monkeys and coconut crabs, colorful fins and paws, sharpened teeth and wicked claws. Deva recognized a mystery hidden deeper within the tapestry of complexities. As they moved, a pattern emerged like the flashing of fireflies, unbeknownst to the mutations, as if they were blindly communicating. These mutations were extraordinary. They, too, were *Devas*, celestial beings, a commonality he shared with them, divinity in design.

But Deva himself was truly unique amongst his brethren. He had a more humanoid physiology, but with extremities like a glaucus atlanticus, the blue sea dragon with silver, gray, and light-to-deep blue stripes across his body. The stripes traveled from his fingertips and fed into six udder-like protrusions running up and down his chest and abdomen. Three sets of silver- and blue-colored wings ended in smaller winged blooms, their points dripping with electricity. His skin rippled with iridescence; the silver lines glowed like neon beams.

He was a spectrum of anthropomorphic elegance, alive in ways poets and artists struggled to express through their inks and strokes. This new body was one of pure power, the body’s organs and bones dissolved and made into one shape, one singular system, free of nervous systems and cellular decompositions and able to sustain the mind and memories of his previous life. He had become his online persona, from Devansh Harrakhan to Deva Dragon, the Drag’N Queen. As he stood high above, the king of this domain, he felt a tug like a drunk child pulling at his arm. Something alive, unlike his fellow Devas, was below the ground, pulling at him like a fish would a line. He sensed a power that dwarfed his, a whale to a worm, and flew down to confront it.

Deva dug through concrete and grass with the force of an excavator, burrowing deeper and deeper with such speed the soil crumbled away with ease, eventually breaching the earth and allowing him to enter a dark cavern. In the center of the space was a metallic structure similar to M.C. Escher’s *Stars*, the art piece a strange multidimensional five-pointed star, an octahedron, imprisoning two chameleons. In place of the chameleons, though, was a round mesh cage with a hole in it, punctured from the inside out.

Sparks of light began coalescing in the darkness to create a dimmed constellation the shape of a thin-armed man before condensing into the silhouette of a child. The expansion and contraction became a violent storm before settling as the adult. A face lined with shadows emerged out of the soot, placid and expressionless like the heads of Easter Island. A narrow line above a right-angled nose opened, revealing two amber eyes that glowed with ferocity. The tiny mouth separated like an unhealed cut, and from it came a voice that sounded like a forest fire.

“Kali… ka…”

“Father?”

“Kali… Kalika!” raged the voice.

*Reya,* thought Deva. The message that Father needed him was clear. For once in his life, he felt a sense of purpose, a meaning to his existence, and nothing would get in the way of his mission: to find his sister.

# Chapter 8: Bite Me

A black and white drawing of a blue eye and flames

Description automatically generated

“IT’S A DOG-EAT-DOG WORLD,” Augie Buzzeo, the scorpion-tailed, fish-headed hyena who used to be a Harley-riding smoker, had said once. Cosmos didn’t know much about him, just obvious clues like a New York license plate and a faded Brooklyn tattoo on his forearm. He’d visited the store twice a month, always on Mondays during his riding excursions, what he called the “pussy purge,” a way to clear his mind of the woman who scorned him throughout the decades. He had harsh, unfiltered language with loneliness to it, a touch of melancholy with each exhale. He was possibly older than Cosmos’ father but lean and shredded, not an ounce of fat on him, with thick fingers and calloused palms. His cheekbones had scars on them, knife wounds from ancient battles. Those heterochromatic eyes made him unique, his right dark brown, the other a crystal, clear blue.

These same eyes now sat equidistant near the top of the snout, surrounded by silver scales. Augie pressed down on Cosmos’ chest, crushing him with pawed pressure. He tried to call out for help, for Augie to stop, but the more he moved, the more he felt pressure. The long, jagged, toothed snout bobbed back and forth. Cosmos focused on the one single, crystal blue eye that swayed hypnotically, and the world around him fell away…

… There was a thumping in spacetime, and with every *boom,* Cosmos’ eyes twitched open. Themati’s layers were rotating like continental gears, the black pupil clockwise, light blue counterclockwise, white clockwise, and dark blue counterclockwise. Cosmos’ hair was a growing frenzy, pulling him into the band of white that sucked him into another memory.

*A white frosted birthday cake staked by seven candles and Happy Birthday Cosmos! spelled out in red icing was in front of Cosmos on a dining room table. The room looked vaguely familiar and smelled of fresh paint and boiled okra in vinegar. A younger Sophelia, her hair tied back and her teeth tracked with braces, sat across from him. Mother and Father flanked his sides. A few other family members lurked in the shadows, beyond the timid glow of the candle flame. The Greek song “Mia Melaxrini” (A Dark Girl) played low in the background: “Mia melahrini, yalla, koukla zondani, yalla,” which translates to “A dark girl, yalla, a real live doll, yalla.”*

*His family sang happy birthday, but his focus was on the song. Glykeria, a singer with a voice that was beautiful and mesmerizing, plucked along on the bouzouki. The chorus went:*

*She had a body like an eel*

*She was dancing the tsifteteli*

*She was dancing and spreading joy*

*With her defi, yalla*

*The smiles around him were overjoyed. They told him to blow out the candles, which Cosmos did, if only to silence his family so he could focus on the song that continued:*

*She had a body like a fish*

*Several bouts of laughter and claps disrupted him before the song went on:*

*Everything turned upside down*

*for her pleasure and joy*

*Mother plunged the kitchen knife into the red curve of the veiny letter C, through the moist tissue of yellowed vanilla and white frosting, the creamy pus oozing out from the knife’s deep cuts. She struck an artery, and red liquid spilled out, along with clumps of cherries. Mom let go of the knife, and Cosmos took hold of sharp end of the blade and ran his hand across it, the palm painlessly splitting open. Then he mashed blood and batter together, the song’s lyric “Yalla” playing over and over again, the word meaning “party on!” And that’s what he did—partied with blood and eels, with sugar and pus, and his shrieking family as they took the knife away and wrapped his hand. The seven candles were lost in the fray, drowning like wax soldiers in a red and white frothy sea.*

Cosmos stirred out of unconsciousness. He was a few feet away from the car, lying in the middle of the road surrounded by glass. There was a hissing sound coming from near him, and at first, he thought it was the engine. When he propped himself up, he saw it was Augie’s mutation, lying on its side like a fallen wildebeest. The body was dissolving exactly the same way Cosmos’ own shell had, turning to white dusty particles.

Cosmos stood up, wobbly on his feet. His shirt was torn in several places, including a large tear from his neckline to his armpit. He looked around, unsure as to how he got there. The car was in the middle of the road, and in the distance stood the shiny polished buildings of Sol. Solar fields spread out on both sides of the road. He heard footsteps approaching and turned to see Captain Aldea   
and Reya.

“What happened?” Cosmos asked.



Reya rested her head against the passenger side window, watching the trees thin out and solar fields replace them. Aldea had insisted on driving even though it was Reya’s rental, wanting to maintain a sense of control, which Reya obliged. Cosmos was in the backseat, face strewn with worry, looking like a helpless pup. This was a fool’s errand, and she’d began to regret taking him into the battlefield, but it was necessary. The mutations seemed harmless enough. They roamed aimlessly, sometimes causing indirect damage but showing no signs of aggression.

Her phone ringing startled her.

“Hello?”

“Um, the…” she heard the phone drop and the ping of a button being hit. “Pardon, the phone slipped and, eh, Reyansh Harrakhan?” quivered a voice.

“Yes?”

“This is Mitchell Johnson, the attorney who provided you with your father, Javed Harrakhan’s last will and testament.”

“Okay,” Reya said.

“How have you been? I hope you’re safe with everything that has happened.”

“I’m fine. Why are you calling?”

There was a pause on the other end. For a moment Reya thought her phone had died, then Mitchell Johnson spoke again.

“I have news about your father’s autopsy. I don’t think I was supposed to find it. I called the coroner, and he’d been fired. And no one knows where he is, he’d simply vanished. He most likely fled the—”

“Get to the point, please. I’m in a hurry.”

“Where are you going?”

“It’s none of your business. Get to the point,” demanded Reya.

“Yes, well, the gun in question was somehow lost. It’s gone. But the issue is that it wasn’t a handgun, not a standard small arms weapon. It was a DEW, according to the report, a direct-energy weapon. The report stated that a bullet didn’t enter your father’s skull but was extracted, or rather something burrowed out. Again, I think the coroner wasn’t supposed to add this to his report, he was an elderly man, very angry actually, with a heavy accent—”

Reya placed the phone on her leg and composed herself, then put it back to her ear, cutting off his rambling. “Are you sure the report wasn’t a fabrication?”

“I can’t say, but I don’t see why it would be. It would only complicate matters, not hide or simplify them. I believe it’s a genuine report, especially since your father’s body was cremated prematurely without your consent.”

“Who’s the chain of command? Who would know about this?”

“As far as I can tell, Captain Aldea Esperanza. Her signature was on the records.”

Reya swallowed hard. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you.” She hung up the phone.

Reya glanced at Aldea, about to confront her when something came barreling out from a gap in the solar fields, a blur of an elongated silver head that rammed the side of the car. Glass smacked Reya in the face and the car spun before screeching to a halt. The airbags deployed for the two front seats. Cosmos unclicked his seatbelt and shoved open the door.

“Stay in the car! It’s not safe!” warned the Captain. The car was hit again, and Cosmos was tumbled out. The car slowed to a stop and Reya exited and pressed her back against the door, looking for Cosmos.

Aldea shouted, too late. She cursed in Spanish, getting out with her pistol drawn.

A gargantuan mutation leapt over the car and landed in front of Cosmos. The Captain opened fire, but the bullets bounced off its thick hide. It was an abomination, ugly in its malformity with a compressed snout of a barracuda and a brutish body with a heavy forefront, an arched back, long front legs, and shorter hind legs. A scorpion tail curled over its back ending in a sickle-shaped stinger. A patch of white hair sat between a pair of pointed ears. None of it made sense, yet it was all complementary, the silver, blue, and gray into a spotted brown pelt, into the black and yellow tail. It was a frightening behemoth that would have put megafauna to shame. Terror struck her as it pressed down on Cosmos. He was going to die, and there was nothing Aldea could do about it.

Until he changed.

Cosmos’ arms jerked rapidly. His left arm pumped out from the shoulder like a vomiting flower, emerging as a crab’s claw that gripped the head of the monstrosity. His right arm curved into a sharpened talon that plunged into the neck while the claw sawed off its head. Cosmos’ hair was electrified, each fiber a living wire of conductivity, rippling currents that turned into arcs of electric discharge. Once the beast lay, lifeless and headless, the air wavered around Cosmos as he reverted back to normal.

Like a drunk waking up with a hangover, he held his head and asked, “What happened?”

“You killed it.”

“Killed what?”

“You don’t remember?”

“I remember a birthday party when I was a kid. No—no, wait, that’s not now.” Cosmos’ eyes looked around, ingesting the moment. “We were attacked by Augie! Where is he?”

“Augie?” Reya asked.

“He was one of the test subjects, accidental electrocution,” Aldea said as she pointed to the dissolving mass.

“Augie, oh no…” Cosmos said despairingly.

“Get back in the car, we need to move.”

“Are you sure we won’t be attacked again?” Reya asked.

“No, but we need to press forward. There’s no turning back now.” Aldea gestured for the two to enter the car before holstering her gun.

After several turns and stutters, the rental coughed to life. As they drove in silence, Reya felt unease creep up her spine like a spider. Could she trust Aldea’s inner motives and Cosmos’ outer unpredictability? She didn’t have a choice now, and she couldn’t turn her back on Cosmos. Whatever the outcome, she’d see it through as they headed toward Emerald City, hoping to pull back the curtain and confront the wizards of Sol.

# Chapter 9: The Zygoats

A black and white drawing of a blue eye and flames

Description automatically generated

“YOU EVER HEARD of H. H. Holmes?” the hooded figure asked. His voice was strained, as if it were painful to speak.

“Kind of. A serial killer who had a hotel of horrors, fed victims to his pigs, right?” asked the tall, heavyset woman. She had a face that could grace any cover of a beauty magazine.

“Not quite. You’re mixing up serial killers. No pigs, but he did have a murder castle, a hotel built in the late nineteenth century. It had hidden torture and gas chambers, mazes fit with trap doors and doors leading to brick walls.” The hooded figure paused to catch his breath and wet his dry, slick lips. “Most of the stories around him are BS. But some are true, like that he’d hire construction crews and builders, have them do some work, then fire them. He did this a few times over until his castle was complete, so no single contractor knew the entire layout of the hotel. Only Holmes.”

“You planning on killing me or something?” the woman mused.

“I was just making a comparison that many people were involved in creating this city and orchestrating this event. There were a handful of key players, but most just did their part blindly, never knowing the entire plan. It’s actually a good idea. No one’s held accountable or knows too much.”

The two were standing in front of a glass wall. Behind the glass was a scaffolding of metal interlocking and intersecting in a specific, complex pattern. It rose upwards, disappearing beyond the ceiling. Spherical balls of electricity travelled up and down the metal like signals. The light show gave off a soft glow on their faces.

“What’d you call them again?” asked the woman.

“Spirods. It’s a play on the words spiral and rods, like lightning rods.”

“What part did you play?”

“Welding. It’s not something I wanted to do, but I’m good at it, and wanted the reward,” the hooded man replied. He began to wheeze and let out a cough that made him double over.

“Are you okay?”

He raised a gloved hand passively. “I’m fine, thank you. What about you?”

She started to laugh and covered her face in embarrassment. “It’s stupid.”

“Come on, what? You can tell me. This whole thing is insane. I mean, we are here, and the world doesn’t make sense.”

She pulled out a triangular piece of purple paper and showed it to him.

“These silly things?” The hooded man pulled out his own piece of a green octagonal paper that expanded like origami.

“I made these! I made thousands of them. That was my job. And you have my absolute favorite one. That’s the only one I made in three dimensions.” She began to blush and looked away. “Wow, what are the chances you’d have it?”

The man cleared his throat and pursed his slick lips. “It’s amazing that you made so many.”

“It helps me remember things. Because of my condition, certain things become too real for me, and I can’t understand them. Like, I can’t remember my name, but I see a bunch of letters right now dancing on your head, and I’m waiting for them to fall in line so I can remember it. It’s like that with everything. Thoughts become objects I need to figure out like a puzzle sometimes. And cutting these in different colors and designs helps my memory.”

“Oh wow, that’s, that’s just…”

“I know,” she giggled. “It’s crazy. And it keeps me entertained!”

“And you made thousands? Makes you wonder how many people are walking around with these IDs in their pockets, and we don’t even know it.”

“*Fight Club*,” she blurted out.

He kept his face hidden behind the hood but cocked his head to the side.

“In the movie *Fight Club*, every city had members of the fight club. Politicians, waiters, cops, janitors, lawyers. All from different walks of life, all fighting for a common goal. An adrenaline rush that’s meant to be life, away from the social norms and institutions. Becoming primal, fighting for true freedom.”

“Is that what you think we’re doing?”

“I do.”

The man nodded. They stood in silence, in awe of the dancing lights as if it were their own aurora borealis.

“So what’s your poison?” he asked.

“Brain tumor, terminal,” she said tapping her head. “And painless thankfully. Just the weird seeing stuff, icons jump off screens, worlds flip upside down, stuff like that.”

“How long?”

“Six months, maybe four, maybe less, maybe more.”

“You’re so young though. How old are you, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Twenty-seven,” she answered, holding back tears. She smiled, trying to show strength. “Ataahua!” She clasped her hands and let out a burst of laughter.

“What’s that?”

“My name! I think it’s my name. The letters fell off your head and made the word Ataahua. It means beautiful, in Māori,” she said, and put her head down and stifled her cries. “Yes, that’s right, I remember now, I was in a beauty pageant. As I walked up to the stage, I collapsed. This,” she gestured at her plus-sized appearance, “is weight gain from the medicine.”

The hooded man bowed his head further, trying not to make eye contact. “And how’d you end up here with me?”

“No more fiancée, an only child, parents long gone. My manager introduced me to it, what he called Noah’s Arc, spelled with a “c.” A chance at a new life all together. Transform like a caterpillar into a butterfly, so to speak, but not metaphorically. I don’t want to die. I want to fight nature, because I don’t deserve to die, do I?”

“No,” he answered. “Was it pills they had you take?”

“Yeah.”

“Me, too.”

“Well, that’s my story. And here we are, two polluted peas in purgatory.”

A surge of electricity flashed through the glass and the pair stepped back in unison.

“Oof, I just saw a flying rabbit pop out of the light. It gave me the middle finger shaped like a penis.”

They both laughed, and the hooded figure clutched his solo plexus. It hurt, but he embraced the pain. It was good pain, happy pain, pain worth having. He took a moment to look at Ataahua. She was true beauty, genuine and real, of substance. He stepped in front of her and pulled back his hood.

“My name’s Chris. Like I said, I was a welder, and good at it, so good that I welded into a gas line and—” He made an exploding gesture with his fingers. Unlike Ataahua’s mask of beauty, Chris’ was one of deformity. He had no choice but to wear it for all the world to see, like an eroded time-worn statue. Chris’ face was badly burned. His lips, ears, eyelids, and eyebrows were gone. He wore a prosthetic nose to cover up the long holes exposing his nasal passage. His entire head was warped, hairless, and scabbed. He had sparkling blue eyes, an oasis in the desert of his skin. “I don’t want to die either. I should have died, I’ve been sick so many times—sepsis, infections. I wanted to give up and I tried—God, I tried, but I couldn’t do it right.”

Chris took a step closer and smiled a crooked smile. The fact that Ataahua didn’t retreat made him hopeful.

“I’m glad you didn’t,” she said.

Chris reached up to touch her face but hesitated, the sight of his poorly grafted hand like a dried skin of a chicken. Ataahua took hold of it and held it between them. Today they shared commonalities: damage and hope.

As the electricity sparked between them, a floorboard slid open several feet away. A goddess emerged from the floor and glided toward them wearing a tight fitted black and gold silk dress. Her ebony skin was as clear and smooth as marble. She had thick, dark red Cupid’s bow lips and prominent high cheekbones. Her eyes were hidden behind gold rimmed sunglasses. She was a perfectly packaged seductress, like a femme fatale meant to conquer every human desire. Ataahua and Chris’ bodies shuddered as she approached, both scent and sight arousing those erogenous zones. She wore a cowl that covered part of her bald scalp. Silver and black tasseled earrings dangled from her ears, and a matching necklace hung between her cleavage. Chris broke the trance and looked at Ataahua bewildered, who was paralyzed by the black widow that stole her breath. When she reached out and touched the tip of Ataahua’s nose, it broke the spell.

“I’m sorry you had to wait so long,” the goddess said, her voice like velvet, nearly a whisper but stern. She extended her hands, showing her elbow-length black gloves lined with thin strips of copper. Chris and Ataahua took out their purple and green geometric papers and showed them to her.

“Thank you so much for being a part of this revolution. My name is Aziza, and I’m much looking forward to working with you both. You have no idea how euphoric your experience, your metamorphosis, will be.”

“Will it hurt?” Ataahua asked.

“Pain and pleasure, darling, go hand-in-hand, like the first time you were deflowered.”

“Will I still be me, myself, like my mind?”

“Weren’t you briefed?”

“I’m scared. I saw some of them out there. They are amazing, but they seem so…”

“Animalistic?”

Ataahua nodded.

Aziza smiled, placing Ataahua’s hands on her chest. Ataahua let out a gasp, and her legs nearly gave out. “Let me put it this way, you’ll be as defiant and free as you can possibly image, regardless of what you become. And yes, your consciousness will be yours in its purest form.”

“But our senses?” Chris stepped forward, wanting the attention, the touch, of this Venus figure.

“Ever-changing in infinite ways.”

“And love?”

“My poor child,” Aziza said soothingly, placing her hands on his shoulders and running them down his arms. He felt his member thicken against his jeans. He’d do anything to have her, would burn his entire body over and over just for a single moment with her. “You’ll be the essence of love. You’ll be the essence of soul. A spirit of life. You’ll be *you*, boundless and beautiful, never worrying again. It’s heaven.”

Ataahua began to cry and snatched the hands away from Chris. Chris snarled, his face distorted with anger.

“You’ll both have a special place by my side. I need you both desperately. Come now,” she said and led Ataahua down a set of stairs into the darkness below. Chris felt a tinge of jealously and abandonment, huffing and puffing like a stubborn child, then he heard Ataahua scream. It was guttural, a pain far worse than the needle storm of fire that rained down on him. He stepped back and leaned against the glass in fear. Aziza returned without Ataahua and walked up to Chris.

“What is it, darling?” she asked.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” he said.

Aziza smiled, those parting lips breaking moisture gently, the tip of her tongue flicking out in a way that was teasing, hungry. “It’s too late. You must ride the Arc like your girlfriend.”

She put her hand up against the glass beside his head. Chris could hear an electric crackle moving through her arm and into the glove. She grabbed his chin with her other hand. The copper in the gloves conducted electricity through the glass, electrocuting Chris. He felt that painful burn again and thought his eyes were going to explode. He wished for death, yearned for it. Aziza let go and stepped back.

Chris’ entire body puffed out like a bubbling tumor as electrical currents roared across his entire bloated body that fell away as melted clumps of sizzling flesh. In front of Aziza rose a figure out of the gelatinous mess that ringed the floor. It stood seven feet tall, a segmented creature with a head like an urchin. Tentacles like a jellyfish hung from its body, but strong and thick as steel cables. Yellow eyes opened and closed between the gaps of the spines.

“Come.” She led him down below, and he followed obediently without hesitation.



Wang Lei leaned forward in his chair, rubbing the golden cross around his neck. He prayed as he watched the creations move through the city below like a zoological parade.

“Lord, thank you for granting us these gifts. I pray thee, Lord, that I have served you well. Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed—” He continued the prayer with his forehead pressed against the glass. “In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” He finished the Trinitarian formula while touching his forehead and both shoulders with the tips of his fingers. He took a deep breath then leaned back and looked out the window, watching his transparent reflection. He was dashingly handsome but worn by stress, worry lines around his eyes and brows. His hair was white and gray, and he kept a short bristly stubble.

An incoming video feed chimed on a computer screen beside him. A window opened up to a man wearing a Bali mask. It was a hideous thing, a large bulbous eye painted yellow and red with a black pupil. Black and bright red lips stretched out into a long smile. A short set of teeth were packed between two gray tusks. The mask’s nose pointed upwards, exposing two large, flared nostrils. It had an exaggerated red and black chin. The man wearing it was in a dark room with a single light shining on the mask, highlighting its grotesqueness. Tufts of long white stringy hair hung down from behind the mask, not a part of it, but a part of the elusive figure.

“Father Wang!” the masked man said in a high-pitched voice. “Praying to your imaginary friend?”

Wang ignored the comment and continued to stare out the window.

“What’s this I hear? You’re seriously not going to become one of us?”

“I told you already, I’m not worthy, Leak. I need to atone for my sins. Only judgment awaits me,” Wang said.

“Jesus Christ, man, you need to relax. Do what you want, I don’t care.” Leak leaned the one eye right into the camera. “So how was the concert? The fans were certainly a part of the act,” he chortled behind the mask.

“We have done God’s work. The Seraphim are upon us.”

There was a broken cry from another room. Wang stood, but it quickly subsided.

“You going to juice up that little sickling?” Leak asked.

Wang closed his eyes and placed his palms together and prayed again.

“God, you’re boring. Sneak in some details of what the Electrapalooza! show was like.”

“There were live feeds. I know you watched it,” Wang said without changing his position or opening his eyes.

“I was too high. Last I saw it looked like a bunch of people turned into Pokémon porn. Feed me something.”

Wang sighed. “There were two hundred and thirty-two successful Seraphim births. A one hundred percent success rate. The fifty that did not have the blessing of transformation were the band members, staff, and a few other collaterals.”

“It must have been amazing.”

“No, it wasn’t.” Wang’s fingers curled into each other, and he bent his head down. “It was horrible. Three people died of cardiac arrest. But I know it was to bring forward the purity of God’s highest of beings and be messengers to us all.”

“And I’m officially limp. You’re a buzzkill, Wang.”

Wang began to pray in whispers.

“Welp, I’m going to do a little praying myself. And I know you know these words,” Leak said with a smack of his lips behind the mask.

*Everybody have fun tonight*

*Everybody have fun tonight*

*Everybody Wang Lei tonight*

“Hang on, let me try it with the voice changer.” Leak slipped his finger beneath the mask, and there was an audible *click* as his voice became deep and distorted, robotic with a twist.

*Everybody have fun tonight*

*Everybody Wang Lei tonight*

*Everybody have fun!*

“Please, do not mock me,” hissed Wang.

“Aw, come on, man, you worked hard for it. Your algorithms, my financial connections, Javed and Aziza’s biohacking—we’re the true holy ones! Speaking of Aziza, where is she?”

Another video feed chimed, and Aziza appeared on the screen.

“Well, what do you have with you Ms. Kieta? Oh sorry,” Leak said in the synthetic voice, clicking it off, reverting back to his squealy adolescent sounding tone. He pointed a fingernail chewed off and tinted with blood to two figures behind Aziza.

“My Iron Maidens,” she replied. Aziza was in a stone room, the ceiling lined with fluorescent tube lighting. Standing on either side of her, like pillars of destruction, were her newly transformed Chris and Ataahua. They were exact replicants of each other, with tentacles and spiny heads.

“Toys. Impressive. Well, onto business. Wang has informed me that operation Raijū had a one hundred percent success rate.”

“Not Raijū. They are Seraphim,” Wang corrected. He felt a shiver and adjusted the brown suede jacket that looked oversized on him because of his fragile state.

“Marketing, Lei. I can’t call them Seraphim. It’s not sexy. Raijū plays on the word Kaiju a bit, and they’re the thunder beasts of lore. Again, marketable. Also, we ourselves have a working title.”

“Is that so?” asked Aziza.

“The Zygoats.”

Aziza laughed.

“What?”

“This isn’t a joke,” scolded Wang. “This is a serious matter. I fear God’s wrath, as you should.”

“Enough of this,” Aziza said. “Why did you call us here, Leak?”

“Because I need a favor.”

Wang and Aziza remained silent.

“It’s not a big favor.”

“Well?” Aziza asked.

“I need you both to record your transformations.”

“Why?” Wang asked.

“Because we are going live, baby! Tonight, I’m going to live stream my own transformation by hacking into a few streaming services and social media platforms. I already have a script, footage, participants, graphics, and sound effects. I’ve got a whole package suite fully emphasizing the benefits of the Neobacter and what it means to become a Raijū!”

“No!” yelled Aziza.

“I told you, I’m not worthy, and we are not salesmen,” Wang insisted.

“Don’t be hypocrites. Wang, every religion has a damn sales pitch, and Aziza, you’re out for revenge. I’m sure the General will see you and remember what you taste like.”

“Bite your tongue,” scolded Aziza.

“Wang, your daughter then. She looks like a baked cookie, for Christ’s sake. Let her show off her change.”

“I pray for us all, Leak, that when you change, so does your soul, if you even have one.”

“Fine. I guess I’ll go to the Warden.”

Wang shot up and punched the table. He leaned into the camera so Leak could get a good look at his face. “The Warden brought into this world Beezlebub in the flesh with that serial killer from the prison. The Warden is an agent of Satan!”

“Wang, without Warden Davis, none of this would have come to fruition. It’s him and Javed that we should pay homage to. It’s why I am doing this presentation, because it’s a new epoch, one you both should understand better than anyone the importance of it.”

“The Warden is dangerous.”

“So are you,” Leak replied.

There were several moments of pause. Each individual was a separate berg, the weight of their thoughts internalized, weighing them down.

“Good luck to you both. If we meet again, Leak, we’ll be anew. Just make sure you do not get in my way or exploit my motives. I’ll make sure you regret it.”

Aziza left the group before Leak could reply.

“Well, Wang, you’re probably going to die, so—sucks for you. I don’t respect your choice. You’re much more valuable than your daughter.”

Wang shut the group chat, and Leak disappeared.

“Fuck you, you schizophrenic piece of shit. I hope you rot in fucking hell,” Wang snarled at the blank screen. He grasped the cross on his chest and kissed it. “Forgive me, Father, for I continue to sin.”

He plucked a flash drive into the computer, copied a folder labeled CALIBAN onto it, and stuffed it into a small velvet bag. Wang performed the Trinitarian again when he heard coughing from the other room followed by a gurgling noise.

“I’m coming, Dongmei. I’m coming,” he said.

# Chapter 10: C.O.R.E. *Convicts Operating Resourceful Energy*

A black and white drawing of a blue eye and flames

Description automatically generated

WARDEN DAVIS STALKED the halls of Basin’s Vault with his right-stumped hand bandaged and arm hanging in a sling. The movements caused him pain, but he kept his composure, every step one of pride and authority, an imposing force carrying three hundred pounds of muscle with ease. The prison was designed in the shape of a pentagram with a circular outer wall of steel. It was a structure that allowed better control of the prisoners and pushed the kinetic flow inwards toward a central coiling system. The prison currently housed 150 prisoners, hand-picked by the Warden, including criminals from all walks of life, from the most dangerous—serial killers like Sven, mutated into the prime protean during his execution via electric chair—or lesser riffraff like purse snatchers and car jackers. Most of the criminals had no family or visitors, as they were outcasts with no real identities and no one to care for them. They were the property of Basin’s Vault, forgotten characters tossed away like discards for the Big Bad Warden.

The Warden made his way toward a room at the core of the prison. It was a standard office with a grated floor, monitoring stations, and a small refrigerator. In the middle of the room was a circular table that the Warden grabbed with his single hand and twisted the top like a wheel on a submarine hatch. The table rotated off to the side, and the Warden descended a short ladder leading a dozen feet into a cylindrical room.

It looked like a smaller version of the Super-Kamiokande, an underground neutrino detector, but instead of photomultipliers lining the walls, the spherical bulbs were filled with a silver and black substance that reacted with excitement, creating patterns like ferrofluids; liquids controlled by magnetic fields. In the center of the room was a vertical machine that looked like a cross between a tanning bed and MRI machine. A computer and two floor-to-ceiling servers were positioned in front of the machine. Warden turned the computer on, and an AI voice spoke, a voice identical to the Warden’s but with a buzz, as if filtered with white noise.

“Greetings, Jerome. I’ve received the medical reports. You still have brass and aluminum fused into your wound.”

The Warden ignored the comments as he unbandaged his hand. There wasn’t much the medical staff could do but clean, sterilize, and try to keep it from getting infected. It looked far worse now than the Warden remembered. Whatever Sven spit had immediately dissolved his hand, along with the gun. The stump reminded Warden of ground sausage, with spotty dark spots and glaze, rough texture, and bits of black and yellow. It smelled horrible, like vomit and antiseptic. With his one hand, he removed his shirt, underwear, and pants. He stood naked, tapping at the computer. A 3D model of his body appeared on the screen, and he isolated his hand. The Warden looked at the bulbs on the walls. They flashed like flickering codes, and he knew they were communicating with each other, watching him, thirsting for the metal embedded across his chest, back, and down the pelvic curve into the thighs and groin.

“Jerome, the Xenodracos is unstable. Shall you proceed?”

“I’ll wear the glove,” replied the Warden.

“Very well. You’ll have fifteen seconds.”

“Cauterize the wrist. I don’t want it trying to reach the Rose,” the Warden said, referring to the metal tiling pattern in his body.

The Warden stepped into the machine and shut the door. It made a tumbling noise like a drying machine. One of the bulbs of Xenodracos drained out. The Warden yelled inside the contraption, then grew silent, then cried out again. This went on for thirty minutes until he emerged from the machine. He held up a newly formed hand that looked like black glass.

“You have ten seconds before the Xenodracos destabilizes.”

The Warden opened a drawer and quickly slid a black metallic glove onto his hand. He felt a tingle in his forearm and tried to wiggle his new fingers, but they moved like molasses.

“JD3, what’s the issue with the prosthetic?”

“Unfortunately, until you find an aperiodic source for the Xenodracos, a specific electrical signature, that is the best result.”

“What constitutes aperiodic? Can a human subject work?”

“A mutation.”

“Plenty to choose from.”

“I’ve analyzed the current mutations in Sol. They have limits to their form. You’d need a biological entity that can change into a variety of formations.”

“I have three days, JD3. Find me one.”

“I’ve accessed the drones, as well as video feeds throughout the city.”

“Good. Once you find a signature source, we must find a way to bring it here. All staff need to evacuate the facility by the end of the day and the prison must go on lockdown.”

“Understood.”

As the Warden began to dress, his new hand working slowly, he spotted a correctional officer talking privately with a prisoner on one of the surveillance cameras.

“They are planning their escape,” JD3 observed.



“This is even hot for me, man,” complained Christian in a raspy voice. He was lying on the hard frame of the lower bunk of the prison cell. At the back of the tiny room, two mattresses were side-by-side to replicate a single, king-sized version. His cell mate, Alfred, had fallen asleep, snoring peacefully.

“How’re you sleeping? Come on, I know you hear me. I’m freakin’ hungry. Where’s our breakfast?”

Christian shifted, uncomfortable on the rigid slab. He was the polar opposite of Alfred: thin and wiry; below average height and intelligence; long, stringy, skunky hair; and a pessimist. Alfred was over six feet tall, bald, clean-shaven, a high IQ, problem solver, over twice Christian’s weight, and a pacifist who considered himself the “Jewddha,” a Jewish version of Buddha. There was a knock on the plexiglass section of the cell door. Christian swung his legs off the frame and stretched. A tall correctional officer with a unibrow and two lazy eyes peered through the window, nodding toward Alfred.

“Alright, alright.”

As Christian turned, Alfred was already standing in front of him. Christian flinched in surprise.

“Jesus, dude!”

Alfred stepped past Christian without acknowledging him.

“Flicks, good to see you,” Alfred said. His voice was joyous, therapeutic in tone.

Flicks eyed Christian with distrust.

“Step away, this conversation is private,” Alfred said to Christian.

“Come on, I can keep a secret,” he said, but Alfred shooed him away. Christian sat on the stainless-steel toilet and began writing in his journal. He’d tried to spy on them but couldn’t make out what the officer was saying. He had a thick Bulgarian accent that only Alfred managed to understand, and it forged a special bond between the two. After less than five minutes, Alfred came over, sat on the mattresses, and began to meditate.

“You’re not going to talk? Just sit there all comfy while you drift off to sleep again? Where’s our breakfast, man, and what happened to the air? I thought we pedaled enough yesterday,” remarked Christian, referring to the cyclones affixed into the walls so the prisoners could put in work for rewards.

“It’s lunchtime already,” corrected Alfred.

“Christian Reed,” announced Alfred as he closed his eyes. “Born 1965, an only child of two loving parents. Started his first fire in the barn, burning it down. Second fire in the forest behind the barn, destroying five acres but was not reprimanded because the town and a development team wanted the property to build. You burned down your home at the ripe age of twelve. Your parents, so kind and caring, ignored the signs of your thirst for fire, of your affliction as an arsonist, until you burned down an apartment complex that killed three people.”

Christian clenched the blunt pencil that he used to scribble in his journal. He was staring down between his shaking legs, holding back his anger.

“What the fuck’s your problem, man?”

“Alfred Grimes. Me. Born 1982. Brutal parents. Abusive. Killed my younger brother by drowning and got away with it. Whored me out as a child for income, eventually casting me aside when I was too old. Lived on the streets for three years, struggling to survive, to live. Eating out of dumpsters but finding time to read and learn. Finding kindness in strangers who cared for me, schooled me. But I was emotionally exhausted. I didn’t have the will or urge to work, so I’d steal, which I found easy enough to do. That eventually led to working with criminals, upgrading to embezzling and laundering. And by God, I was great at it.”

“Why are you saying this shit? Please, stop talking.”

“No, Christian Reed, I won’t, because after today, we will no longer be our past. We will no longer be Christian Reed and Alfred Grimes. We must lay out our history like a deck of cards and burn them in absolution.”

“Stop with the riddles, dude.”

“We’re getting out of here.”

“Huh?” Christian stood up, a look of terror on his face.

“Flicks told me the prison is going to go on lockdown. Warden Davis is sending all—and I mean every single staff member—home for three days with pay. For three days, it will be Warden Davis and the prisoners as the sole occupants of this maze. It has to do with Sven and the monstrosities that plagued this town and now Sol. The Warden is a major player in the city’s creation. He created the tech for it. We aren’t safe anymore, and Flicks is going to get us out. In return, I’m going to pay him from hidden accounts. His family here and back home need the money desperately.”

“Holy shit, this is wild, man. You think the Warden’s going to do something to us?”

“Yes. And we’re going to leave everything, and I mean everything, behind and start anew. Both of us together. We’ll need each other until we don’t.”

“Alright, I get it. But shit, don’t bring up the people I killed. Ended up being drug dealers anyways.”

“Let it go. It’s time to move on and be who you want to be.”

“Dude, that’s simple. Iggy Pop! I stole that fucker’s identity before.” Christian giggled.

“No. You’re going to cut your hair and shave and try to put on some weight, and I’m going to wear a wig and grow a beard and try to shed some pounds.”

“Before this all happens, any chance we get lunch? I’m freaking starving, man.”



Flicks lumbered toward his locker like a sloth. He chatted with a few of the other officers, who wasted no time in leaving, still shocked by the slaughter Sven had enacted the morning before. But it didn’t bother Flicks. He’d seen terrible things during the Bloc period in his youth. He took his time gathering some minor belongings for a comped three-day vacation. The picture of his family—a wife and two boys—that was taped to the inside of the locker fell like a leaf beneath a bench. He bent down to retrieve it, but Warden Davis was there, and carefully picked it up with his gloved right hand and handed it to him.

“Thank you,” Flicks said with a thick Bulgarian accent.

“Nikoa,” the Warden said, using his real name, “before you leave, I need your help with something. You mind coming with me?”

Nikoa hesitated for a moment but didn’t find the Warden threatening. He was always kind to his employees. He slipped the photo of his family back on the door, smiled at it, happy to be able to spend some much-needed time with them, and turned to the Warden, nodding.

Warden led him to the central room and down into the secret chamber. Nikoa was in awe. He thought he was in some kind of aquarium for jellyfish. The weird goo in the bulbs jostled gleefully and he went toward one, placing his hand on it. The goo reacted, pressing against the glass.

His consciousness suddenly slipped when the Warden covered his mouth with chloroform.

“Nikoa, you shouldn’t have betrayed me,” Warden Davis dragged him toward the machine, stood him up, and shoved him into it.

“What shall I do, Jerome?” asked JD3.

“Filter in the Xenodracos.”

“The CO does not have any Neobacter in his system,” said JD3.

“I know. Do it anyways. I’m curious to see the outcome.”

“Very well, Jerome. I will administer two bulbs.”

“Stop calling me Jerome.”

“What shall I call you?”

“Warden.”

Two of the bulbs emptied out into the machine. Needles stabbed Nikoa’s spine and elsewhere on his body. Nikoa’s voice was trapped. Somehow the air had become lead in his lungs, and he was unable to cry for help even though his body was a concert of pain.

“Let him out,” commanded the Warden.

“The Xenodracos needs more time to settle.”

“Let him out now.”

The door opened, and Nikoa fell onto his hands and knees. Sweat drenched his clothes, and there were tiny holes across his neck, arms, and legs. Nikoa stood, defying the pain, raising his arms like a zombie, when both limbs rippled, tearing his sleeves with spikes that jutted out of sinew and bone like a thorny stem. His head twisted backwards, snapping his neck. His eyes flickered in fear and confusion, and like a Rubik’s Cube his head segmented into parts, a section of eye squared and revolving, the other eye a diamond rotating in an opposite direction, his ears triangles and spheres, jaw a hexagonal prism, cranium of cones and pyramids, all twirling and spinning at different speeds. The entire time he kept his eyes on the Warden, no matter where they moved across his purpled, black, and silver dome. His body dissected into an expansion of parts. Ribs, heart, lungs, liver, spleen, kidneys, bladder, intestines spread out and hung in the air, connected only by electrical nervous and connective tissues. The torrent of deformation accelerated until he became nothing more than a blur of randomness before freezing in place like a crystalized bush made of cobwebs. The Warden stepped closer, recognizing the truth of what he’d become, the complexity of repeated shapes over and over again. And there near the center were Nikoa’s eyes, staring lifelessly at the Warden.

“Interesting,” he said, as he reached a finger toward the eye, tapping it. It was cold to the touch and immediately collapsed like glass dominos until all that was left was his name tag, which the Warden picked up.

“A failure, Warden. As expected.”

“What would happen if we took a mutation and injected it with the Xenodracos?”

“A terrible outcome. A collapsed state that could create a killer strangelet. All matter would succumb to it, becoming an exotic state.”

“Doesn’t sound so bad,” the Warden commented.

“That’s one scenario. There are others. But all outcomes will be a failure. Your mission incomplete. Your purpose pointless.”

“I know. Find me a mutation that would work.”

“You’ll need agents in the field to subdue them,” said JD3.

“Contact Aldea.”

“She’s moving toward Sol,” buzzed JD3.

“I didn’t order her to. And she didn’t get back to me about Javed’s lab or the cameras.”

“There have not been any reports of a fire in that area. I’ve also tracked Javed’s daughter with her. They are entering Sol north of the city, presumably on foot.”

The Warden stepped on Nikoa’s remains. “Why would she do that?”

JD3 didn’t respond.

“Call her.”

The line rang but was ignored.

“Call her again!” the Warden yelled.

JD3 did, and again, the call was rejected.

“Shall I continue?”

“No,” the Warden said as he began climbing the ladder, “I’ll deal with her myself.”

“What shall be done about the remains?”

“Are they toxic?”

“No.”

“Leave them.” The Warden placed the table back and covered the entrance hatch. He pulled out his phone and called Aldea, this time leaving a voice message.

“Aldea, it was nice working with you. You’re *fried*.” He hung up and clicked on an app called Residue. It was a flat black circle with a blinking red dot in the center.

ARE YOU SURE? Words spelled out on the screen.

YES, he pressed.

He walked back through the halls toward Christian and Alfred’s cell. He knocked on the door, and the two looked at him through the glass. The Warden opened the food slot and slipped Nikoa’s nametag through it.

“There’s no escape,” the Warden said confidently. As he walked away, the lights of the prison began to shut off one-by-one, leaving Alfred and Chistian in the dark.

# Chapter 11: As Below, So Above

A black and white drawing of a blue eye and flames

Description automatically generated

BELOW THE CITY of Sol, a child stood in the dark. It was a shadow of a boy, made of dark matter bits buzzing like gnats. He had muted facial features except for his eyes, which glowed with an incendiary green. Within his skull, a network of lights periodically flickered, and when one of the photonic spots went supernova, a letter was created.

The K became a fist of crackles that sent a tidal wave of energy across the cavern.

The A was no different, a drawn-out seismic force, rupturing part of the ceiling.

The L and I was a shriek, a piercing echo that lanced through dirt and stone.

The K and A were repeated with equal force.

Around its frame the darkness thickened, and the child expanded, arms and legs stretching out, head ballooning to the size of a man, green eyes changing to amber, and with a cry like a rocket launch called out: “KALIKA!”

The child screamed, as did the man, vibrating the electromagnetic field with a shockwave that shook the earth and traveled up across the city.



Above ground in Sol, the mutations began to circle over the area where Javed and the child were having their internal war, their struggle for survival. The mutations fell in a death spiral, swirling like a tornado of multicolored animalia, their electrical charge flowing between each other like plasma globes. Membranous, feathered, chitinous wings flapped thousands of feet in the sky, forming a point. In between cars and buildings, the multilegged, bipedal, slithering, hopping, and bouncing chimeras circled a wider perimeter, generating an electric vortex.



Deva was the apex of the formation with the bioelectricity travelling upwards, feeding him. His wings were erect and splayed out like knives, the tips dripping with overflow, blue and silver body ablaze with charge, his eyes balls of white light, udders tingling with energy. His entire soma was in ecstasy, elated beyond comprehension, putting to shame any orgasm or drug-infused euphoria he’d experienced while human. It was literal weightlessness, a plunge into nirvana. He found the universe’s G-spot, pressing into its singularity, letting its dark energies wash over him, bathing him with cosmic juices.

As quickly as he entered that bedroom of heavenly bodies, it left without warning, a one-night stand, slipping away without saying goodbye. The mutations beneath him dispersed and continued their aimless, pointless droning. Deva wasn’t sure what had happened, only that the bioelectric fuel was the result he had longed for. Somehow the spark that ignited the spiraling wildfire of creations that fed him came from beneath, where his father was. He thought of his mission, how the task of finding Reya would be difficult. She could have left already, fled the state, en route to another country, far away.

But no, he knew his sister, his twin, and although they didn’t share the same genes anymore, they shared the same mental bond. He knew Reya better than anyone else, knew she wouldn’t turn her back on him, not now, having reconnected after so long—not now, after she was the cause of his change. He knew, because he remembered the bullet, that flash of metal before the reaper sucked the warmth and light out of his body. She was near, and he would find her.

He was certain.

# Chapter 12: What Is It Like To Be A Bat?

A black and white drawing of a blue eye and flames

Description automatically generated

THE RIDE WAS ROUGH. One of the rims had bent, creating a wobble that was more an annoyance than discomfort. All the windows had been smashed to pieces, but the day was perfect, and a light breeze blew across Cosmos, Reya, and Aldea, a welcome cleanse to the unpleasant morning. Cosmos flicked his thumbs nervously, trying to stay calm, fearing he might undergo a change again. It bothered him that Aldea and Reya hadn’t said a word since they got into the car. They could have—should have—abandoned him. Neither had any reason to be helping him. Both have suffered in some way, with Aldea being a prisoner of Warden Davis, and Reya losing her brother.

Cosmos had trouble reading people. He didn’t understand himself, but his obsession with Reya made him attentive to her every detail. He was disgusted with this mindset and had no deviant intentions (except maybe a make out session) toward her, but she was a kind of anti-anxiety, a neutralization of his ultrasensitivity to the world. He wanted to spend a moment with her in love and have it reciprocated. But like a tide that recedes and reveals the jagged rocks and entangled seaweed, his fantasy washed away, and the landscape of reality set in. She didn’t want him, he knew that, but any slice of time spent with her was worth being driven into the lion’s den.

The car suddenly jolted to a stop, and Aldea pointed ahead. “There, you see? Just around the bend. The road is blocked.” Far in the distance, an Humvee was parked sideways. Several military personnel paced nervously, holding their weapons at the ready, their focus toward Sol.

“You’re an officer of the law. Can’t you get us in?” asked Reya.

“I wouldn’t be allowed to bring in civilians, especially if the city is under quarantine or is a possible warzone. Even if I could bring you in, we’d have to follow their orders and be chaperoned. We have to find another way,” Aldea said.

“Are you sure these people we’re looking for are still here?”

“Yes,” Aldea said. “They have nowhere to go except to join them, if they haven’t already, so we need to move quickly.”

Aldea drove the car through the solar fields, far away from the road. The massive structures were tall and wide enough for the car to conceal the car while they continued on foot.

“Can I ask you guys something?” Cosmos was behind them, not only for their safety but because he was the slowest.

“Sure,” replied Reya.

“Did I really look like a monster? Like, why aren’t you scared of me? You’ve kept your backs to me since you saw me like that. Was it bad?”

“You looked terrified, Cosmos,” Aldea said. “Yes, I was scared, and yes, I’m still scared but not *of* you, *for* you.” Aldea’s phone rang, and she saw it was the Warden, but ignored it. He called again, and she declined. She slipped the phone back into her pocket, kept her head down and picked up her speed, outpacing Reya and Cosmos.

“Aldea, what’s wrong? Slow down,” called out Reya, trying to catch up.

“My time is up. We need to move quickly.” Her phone rang again and this time the call went to voicemail. She listened to it.

“Aldea, it was nice working with you. You’re *fried*.”

Aldea took in a deep breath, closed her eyes and turned her head toward the sky. “Whatever happens, know that I tried,” she told the other two. She stumbled forward as a sharp pain whipped across her chest, out from her heart and through her entire frame. Cosmos and Reya rushed toward her, but she raised her hand as a warning. After a few seconds, the pain subsided. She looked at her hands, waiting for a change that did not come.

“I’m infected. The Warden has a trigger in my heart and activated it. I’m in danger and so are you, so we need to move as fast as we can before I change.”

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry,” Reya said.

Aldea gave Cosmos a steely look. “If I change, Cosmos, you need to do to me what you did to the mutation that attacked you. Promise me that you’ll free me.”

“No, I can’t do that, I don’t want to hurt you. I don’t want to hurt anyone!”

“You’ll hurt me if you don’t.” Aldea dashed through the panels and the other two followed. After several minutes of running, they entered Sol, flanking one of the spiraling rods. Cosmos stopped and looked up at the structure, almost falling backwards as the brown and silver engineering feat stretched far above his head.

“It looks so different up close,” he said.

They continued, and a stray mutation flew overhead, propelled by wings so translucent it moved like a Chinese dragon. They moved cautiously through the buildings, backing into a short alley when a military Jeep drove by.

“This is familiar, right, Cosmos?” mused Reya.

“Huh?”

“We did this yesterday, hiding in the forest, the mutations around us.”

“Oh yeah.” He was squatting in the alleyway, scanning the sky above. “Where are we going?”

“A shop that has no name, but I don’t know where it is.” Aldea clenched her fists nervously, her attention more on herself than her surroundings.

“Maybe you’ll find a way to fix your heart,” Reya placed her hand gently on Aldea’s shoulder. “My father’s formula has to have some kind of failsafe.”

“I hope so.” Aldea relaxed a bit, looking up and down the road. “One of the agents situated himself at this store. He was a courier, would traffic info and supplies. But I’ve never met him here, he’s always come to Freedom Basin. All I know is that the store windows have big Xs on them, and nothing else.”

“My sister said this city’s small, like I think Freedom Basin might have more square miles,” said Cosmos. “Maybe we can find it just by searching?”

“It would take too long to find it since we need to remain hidden,” said Aldea.

“This city is amazing,” marveled Reya, captivated by one of the smoothly curved, shiny buildings reminiscent of a blue whale.

“Come on, let’s go,” Aldea said when the coast was clear.

As they stepped out of the alley, Aldea’s body seized up. She fought the stiffness, forcing her limbs to move, her motions like a malfunctioning robot.

“Don’t let me fall,” she begged through gritted teeth before collapsing. Reya and Cosmos caught her and gently laid her down before backing away. She was having seizures, her mouth foaming. The white of one of her eyes blackened and the pupil became a bright yellow. Her forehead bubbled out into two small bat wings. A pop from her leg resulted in spines sticking out of her thigh, tearing out of her cargo pants. Some of her teeth fell out, replaced by glassy sharp points. It was grotesque, a transformation unlike the others, a slow and methodical vivisection. After a few minutes she lay still, curled in a fetal position. When Reya and Cosmos approached, they could hear her labored breathing. She smelled like rotten fruit.

“Aldea? Hey, can you hear me?” Reya knelt beside her.

Aldea uncovered her face, the wings on her forehead flapping in a slow clap. The skin around her cheeks and chin were scaly and dark green. She was slick with sweat, each breath a painful heave as she tried to stand. When Aldea spoke, it was as if she were gargling with pebbles.

“Not much time, we need to go.” She did her best to walk on a leg that looked covered in porcupine quills.

“But where?”

“Let me call my sister. She knows this city; she’ll know where this place is,” said Cosmos.

“We can’t be out here in the open,” Reya said.

“We can hide out at her apartment.”

# Chapter 13: Beauty And The Beast

A black and white drawing of a blue eye and flames

Description automatically generated

BILLY’S FATHER HAD ensured his son had a good life after his mother abandoned them for a bull rider on a cold November evening. Dad worked two, sometimes three jobs, coached his losing baseball team, taught him how to drive a stick shift, comforted him after his first breakup, and travelled when money and time allowed it. One day, his father, a civil engineer, received a direct telegram from a courier offering him a contract involving secrecy and innovation, building a prison. It was an odd way to communicate in a digital age, not even a letter and stamp, but regardless, the offer was legit, the pay handsome, and they moved to Freedom Basin on Billy’s sixteenth birthday.

Billy immediately fell in love with the town. It was a nice slice of peace and prosperity, and he spent his time fishing, camping, and hiking. At eighteen, a nudge from the locals and Walker Texas Ranger episodes persuaded Billy to join Freedom’s Finest. The job itself was a far cry from action and adventure, but one of presence. After the prison was built and the contract complete, Dad decided to retire at the age of fifty-seven and become a fisherman.

Six months into retirement a tragic, bizarre accident befell the senior Hutch. He’d drowned, not by water but by cotton candy. How the candy ended up on his boat was a mystery. Some thought Billy’s father was a drug mule transporting “cotton candy,” heroin infused with sugar, and others speculated that it had fallen onto the boat via plane. Somehow, he’d spontaneously combusted and the bubblegum flavored Flossugar expanded out from his lungs.

As time passed, Billy remained a duteous officer, but there was a hole in his heart, a weighted emptiness that he dragged around like a lead suitcase. It wasn’t until he dropped a glass bottle of iced tea at Leftezondakidis Café that he felt that weight lift. The brown liquid spread across the tiled floor, pooling around a pair of sandals attached to a curvaceous, wild-haired bohemian woman who cursed at him in tongues laced with venom.

Courting this amazing specimen was a full-time job that he never regretted. After several months of persistence and being called a mullet-headed mustached inbred who was as attractive as a hemorrhoid, she accepted a date. They had two wonderful years together until Sophelia decided to leave Freedom Basin for an urban life full of metal and monsters, the latter of which he had become.

Billy couldn’t remember what had happened, how he turned into his current state. His memories were trapped, like a photo album stuck in mud. There were only glimpses, small flashbacks—a shock to the system, swelling, the power he carried, rampaging through his house like a Ford F-150. He’d been unwillingly pulled into a battle against another mutation designed to kill.

After the fight, he had fled and hidden in a thick area of the surrounding forest before eventually making his way home. There was yellow crime scene tape but nothing else to indicate anyone was recently there. He wondered which of his fellow officers were out looking for him, if any were. He entered through the giant hole in the wall and found his favorite yellow rimmed sunglasses on the floor and a picture of Sophelia out of its frame. He picked them both up in his apelike hand. Familiar places would bubble out of his mud mind, and Leftezondakidis Café was one of them. Could she be there waiting for him, a bottle of sweet tea in one hand and her love in the other?



Sophelia was back at the store, her face buried in her hands. She juggled worry and frustration, with no room for the passivity she’d worked so hard to maintain the last few years as a yogi. What would happen if Cosmos couldn’t be cured, or even worse, became a mutation that was irreversible? It wouldn’t matter, she knew—even if he were a sixty-foot gerbil, her family would love him. The Leftezondakidis family never abandoned each other, no matter how hard things got.

Plato began whining and doing his potty dance. She let him out the back and was leaning against the dumpster, trying to clear her mind, when the dog started barking furiously at something in the trees. Sophelia looked up and saw a barrage of colors moving through dense foliage.

Then she saw it: a deep blue snout and pink feathers ten feet high. Two white tusks jutted out of a baboon’s mouth. As the thing moved forward, she turned to flee, but she tripped and hit her head on the door. The world spun and the ground drew closer, but she never made contact. Instead she was hoisted up, her legs dangling. That blue snout looked down at her, menacing in its definition, the two tusks so close to her face that she feared moving would be fatal. Sophelia shoved, and the ape let go. When she fell, this time she hit the ground and had the wind knocked out of her. As she rose, she took in a deep breath and was met with a titan-sized, leathery palm holding two items: a pair of yellow-rimmed sunglasses and a picture of her. Confused, Sophelia looked up at the creature, meeting its gaze. The color of the eyes were a dark honey brown and its stare familiar.

“Billy?”



“Excuse me, but what are you doing?” asked the neighbor in a shaky voice. He wore spectacles and sported a receding hairline.

“This is my sister’s apartment,” said Cosmos. He’d found the hidden spare key Sophelia hid beneath a flowerpot outside of the door. Aldea was hunched over, and Reya tried to keep her out of view.

“Is your sister okay? She ran out last night, and I was afraid one of the monsters killed her.”

“She’s fine, um…”

“Glen. Nice to meet you.” Glen stepped into the hall and shook Cosmos’ hand with a sweaty palm. “How’d you get here? An emergency broadcast said to stay indoors. Is it bad out there?”

“I don’t know, not really. Glen, I’ve got to go.”

“Please tell Sophelia that I’m thinking of her and hope to share another bottle with her.” Glen waved as he retreated into the safety of his apartment.

Cosmos went into Sophelia’s apartment. Reya poured a glass of water for Aldea, and she drank it slowly, but had trouble swallowing.



Sophelia sat on a milk crate holding the sunglasses and picture. She looked up at Billy, then back at the items, her brain trying to process and make the connection between the two. Billy backed away from her, giving her space. She wasn’t scared of him anymore, but he was large and unreal in many ways, with anatomical mixtures that were difficult to comprehend. He had a pink, feathered mullet and a dimpled chin tucked between the tusks. Sophelia used to tease him for having “chicken legs,” and that’s what he had now—maybe an ostrich, or some other type of bird.

When Billy was human she thought him physically bland until the moment he took off his shirt, surprising her with his defined arms, chest, and stomach. But what made him attractive, aside from the fact that he was clean and manicured, was his purity. It amazed her that he was a police officer. He harbored no negativity, never a complaint, always the naïve simpleton. What you saw was what you got with Billy Hutch. If not for her frustrations with the town, being dragged out of Queens to a decorated hospice, she might have had a life with him.

Was it a mistake to leave him? If they had stayed together, would he have been fine? These questions floated within the porridge that was her mind. Whatever stood before her was Billy. He found her at the store, revealing his true nature, one of passivity and respect. This was Billy in the flesh. Her phone rang, startling both her and Billy, and he moved farther back as she answered the call.

“Cosmos! Thank God. Are you okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Cosmos—Billy, he’s here.”

“Good, you’ve got protection then,” Cosmos said on the other end of the line.

“Sort of. He’s been changed.”

“What?! I just saw him yesterday morning!” Cosmos shouted in surprise.

“He’s…” She paused and looked at Billy longingly, then spoke again. “He’s beautiful, Cosmos.”

“Are you sure it’s him?”

Billy moved closer. There it was, that same swagger, as if he were some machismo pimp.

“Yes.”

“Geez, be careful.”

“He’s harmless. But what about you?”

“I changed again. I killed one of the mutations that attacked us and was trying to kill me. I’ll explain later. Right now we need your help. Somewhere in this city is a store with no name, with big red Xs on tinted windows. Do you know where that is?”

“I think it’s a sex shop. It’s near my apartment, just a couple of blocks. You remember where my place is, right?”

“I’m there right now with Reya and Aldea.”

“You’re *what*? You can’t just go barging into my place, Cosmos,” yelled Sophelia, her anger boiling over. It made Billy retreat again. “Don’t you break anything! Did you take off your shoes? Tell me you did!”

“Something’s wrong with Aldea. She changed, but it’s really bad. She’s in a lot of pain, so we have to hurry!”

“Err, *sto thialo*!” she cursed in Greek. “It’s on the corner of Neon and Glow. When you exit the building, take a left and go down a block, then take a right, and go down two blocks.”

“Okay, thanks. Be careful.”

“You, too. And lock it when you leave!”

After she hung up, she ran her hand through her hair, the fingers getting tied up in knots. She had a bump on her forehead, but the pain had subsided. Billy was between two trees, looking like a special effects animatronic in a garden.

“Now, what am I going to do with you, Billy?”

# Chapter 14: Welcome To The Jungle

A black and white drawing of a blue eye and flames

Description automatically generated

*Welcome to the jungle*

*We got fun and games*

*We got everything you want*

*Honey, we know the names*

MASSIMO SPEED-WALKED down the street, holding a square paper bag carefully. He walked by a woman who had cornered a mutation, a human-shaped dobson fly with the face and back of a spiny tenrec. It was trapped in a corner of a building, flapping away, while the woman was trying to talk to it.

“Roger, I know you can hear me! Please, come down from there right now! This is just like you, never listening!” she shouted.

“He never loved you, lady.” Massimo laughed as he walked past her.

*If you got the money, honey*

*We got your disease*

A mutation came running down the road on six legs, a mixture between a clouded leopard and nudibranch, the blotchy, slimy skin a greenish and bright blue. Thick, long red cerata bounced on its back as it tore across the road at an incredible speed. But Massimo didn’t miss a beat in either song or step.

*In the jungle*

*Welcome to the jungle*

*I wanna watch you bleed*

A police car swerved around the corner in pursuit of the nudi-leopard. Massimo strutted along nonchalantly, unperturbed by the chase. His singing turned to whistling as he entered a nameless store with two Xs printed on the windows. Inside were stacks of boxes with a variety of supplies, ranging from water to recording devices, charms, and other random items. The office space was small, roughly three hundred square feet.

He sat down at a desk facing the door and placed the brown bag in front of him. As he leaned back, his hefty weight caused the chair to creak in pain. He sniffed the opening of the bag before removing its contents and snatched a soda from the mini-fridge.

“The last supper,” he said, cracking his knuckles. Inside the foam food container was fried chicken, gravy, corn, mashed potatoes, mac and cheese, two biscuits, corn bread, and spinach. He scooped out the spinach with his hand and threw it into a garbage bin at his feet, then wiped his hand on his pants.

“Welcome to the jungle that is my stomach,” he sang, saliva pooling in his mouth. The doorbell rang. He ignored it and picked up a piece of chicken.

The door rang again and again, the noise like an annoying fly buzzing around him. He switched on a security monitor that displayed three solicitors. One looked like they were wearing a Halloween costume, the other was a young girl wearing oversized black and brown clothing, and the third was a kid with a torn shirt. The rings became pounding on the door.

Massimo pressed a speaker button. “We’re closed.”

But they continued harassing him.

“I said, we’re closed. Concert’s over, and there ain’t no Comicon in this city. Wrong coast,” he said in his heavy, burly voice.

The costumed character looked at the camera. As Massimo was about to take a bite of his chicken, he paused and put it down. The face looked terribly familiar but terrible. He became uneasy and once again pressed the intercom.

“Go away.”

Then the figure placed a badge against the camera, the image taking up the entire screen, and he read the name: Aldea Esperanza.

“Fuck off!”

There was a loud bang and the door shook, splintering the frame and swinging open with a crash. Aldea rushed in with a crooked gait and pressed her hands on the table. She leaned her disfigured face toward his, wings drooping across her brow, eyes flickering with anger.

“You’re going to talk.” Her voice was a low menacing hiss, like a cobra ready to strike.

“Take it easy.” Massimo pushed back away from the desk. He crossed his arms and glanced at the group before focusing back on Aldea with a look of disgust and pity. “That really you, Al?”

She didn’t respond. Her head was low and her hair covered her face, but her black and yellow eye kept its gaze on him.

“We need your help.” Reya stepped beside Aldea.

“For what?” Massimo asked, resting his chin on his second chin as if it were a beanbag.

“We need to find those in charge—whomever they are, some key players.”

“Why should I help you? You broke my door.”

“I thought we were friends, Massimo.” Aldea’s voice had lost its spite.

“Hmmm-hm-hm, my mother always told me, never trust a woman.” He smirked.

“You know their routes, know their ways, you work for them.”

Massimo pulled out a rectangular pink piece of paper. “These stupid things don’t mean shit. I ain’t one of them anymore, stupid waste of paper meant to make us feel special,” he said, tucking the sheet into his shirt like a bib and pulling the food closer. “Now if you don’t mind, I’m going to try to eat before I get the fuck outta here.”

“Out? You think they’ll let you go?”

“I never took the juice.” Massimo took a bite of chicken and a long swig of his soda.

“Oh yeah? It doesn’t take much ‘juice,’ as you say.” She stumbled a bit before regaining her balance. “Was that bottle opened or did you open it? Or that food, is that from somewhere local? Don’t you know there is no freedom from them? We all drank the Kool-Aid—some willingly, some forcibly, and some unknowingly.”

“Fuck you,” he said, but the seed of doubt had been planted. He pushed the meal away.

“No, hombre, you’ve been fucked. Pregnant with their formula.”

“What do you want?”

“Tell us what you know.”

Massimo rubbed the back of his flaky scalp with a greasy finger. He pulled out a bottle of Scotch and poured himself a glass, drank it in one gulp, and cleared his throat. He pointed the bottle at Aldea and said, “Looks like you need this more than I do.”

She ignored the comment, and he continued. “There are two top dogs in this city. A super-hot black chick, and some dapper-looking Asian Bible-thumper. I don’t really know what they do, but he’s a nice guy. Little weird but nice.”

“Where are they?”

“I don’t know where hottie girl is, but dude is up at Celestial Tower One. Twentieth floor, room eight.”

“What about a cure?” asked Cosmos from behind Aldea and Reya.

Massimo gave Cosmos a once-over. “Who’s the homeless kid?”

“He’s been afflicted, too,” Aldea said.

“Looks fine to me. And you, little prissy girl? You got the bug, too?”

“I’m here to help. This is my father’s fault.”

“No shit. Aha! The daughter of the great Javed. Fucker’s like a mystical legend amongst these other idiots. I’ve met him a couple of times. Quiet, busy eyes. Always thinking.”

“He’s dead,” said Reya.

“Sucks.”

“Is there anything else you know? Any details that could help?”

Massimo rubbed his belly and smacked his lips while looking up at the ceiling in thought. “You see, it’s like, symbiogenesis fucked parthenogenesis, synthetic solid-state tits, gap junctions like in the crack of my ass, plasticity like my sack, shadow biospheres but I’m not judging, slice up capicola, and a partridge in a pear tree.”

“Capicola and pears?” Cosmos looked down at Massimo’s food, and his stomach growled. The noise made Reya and Aldea flinch, and he put his hands up. “It’s just my stomach, I’m not changing. I’m hungry.”

Reya turned back to Massimo. “What does any of that mean?”

“No idea. It’s what a group of nerds kept talkin’ about.”

“What group?”

“Couple of the hacking twerps turned mosquito men. You’ll see’em out there. Nasty fuckers. So, we done here?”

As the three turned to leave, Massimo said, “Aldea, here.” He grabbed a black rain coat with a hood from a hanger and handed it to her.

“Good luck.”

Aldea nodded and left.

Massimo sat back down. He stared at the broken door and then down at his meal. “Lost my fuckin’ appetite.”



They came across six mutations frozen in place, a blend of giant sloth and tardigrade with shark fins along the back and sides. When Cosmos, Reya, and Aldea walked past, nearly tiptoeing, electricity rippled across the beasts. The creatures were standing on a mesh platform with a metal pole sticking out of the center.

“We have to move, now!” shouted Reya.

There was an explosion of electricity followed by the sound of crackles and groans as the mutations grew larger and more angular, the fins sharpening like diamond blades, radiating a glow. The way the right angles flowed must have been a trick of the eye, movement without moving, shapes within shapes. They turned their black and gold eyes toward the three.

“Run!”

Aldea pressed down on her mutated leg and forced her way forward, the imbalance tilting her. The malformed leg had strength, and she hopped forward faster than Cosmos and Reya could keep up with. They were too slow, and the six beings were quick to catch up. Cosmos felt his body come to an abrupt halt. His heart skipped a beat, then two, slamming against his chest, rattling his teeth, changing them in shape as the electric misfire of his a-fib kickstarted his mutation. He looked at Reya, who pressed her hand against his chest.

“Stay with me,” she mouthed.

The beasts turned and bolted in another direction, disappearing down the street.

Cosmos placed his hand over Reya’s. “Thank you.”

When they entered the lobby of the Celestial, they were met with a strong, foul odor. It was a pungent smell, like walking into a lemon and cheese factory on fire. They couldn’t tell where it originated from but as they took another step, Aldea fell onto the floor. She seized, spitting up blood as tentacles erupting from her ears. Her “good” eye became cone-shaped with a small opening in the middle. Her leg snapped forward, hyperextending the knee before it jellied into a tail. Spider legs wiggled around her throat. Dozens of dragonfly wings blossomed out of her back.

“My God, Cosmos, what can we do?” said Reya.

“I don’t know! Shit!”

Aldea crawled toward a lounge area, and they helped her to a couch.

“Rest up, Aldea. We’ll be back, hopefully with some good news. We can still do this, so hang on.”

When Reya turned back to Cosmos, he was stock-still, staring at a furry object blocking the elevators.

“Is it one of the chimeras?” he asked.

“I don’t know, but I think we can go around it. There’s a gap behind.”

Four long pillars began to unfold. It stood up, its head grazing the twenty-foot ceiling. It was covered in white fur with blue and silver scales on its abdomen. Its torso was short, and its arms and legs were thin like a stick bug with legs bent backwards at the knees like a goat. Its face was a scrunched-up lemurs with large white and blue speckled eyes. It bobbed back and forth mindlessly as if in a trance.

“It looks pretty harmless,” said Reya. “I think we can make a break for it and run through its legs. It won’t fit in the elevator area.”

“Let’s take the stairs,” suggested Cosmos.

“A leg is blocking them.”

“Shit.”

“On the count of three, run as fast as you can. Whoever gets there first needs to get that elevator door open,” Reya said. Cosmos nodded, and she counted down. “Three. Two. One. Go!”

As they ran beneath the legs, scales on the mutation’s abs started glimmering, and Cosmos and Reya were showered with yellow glitter. Reya made it to the elevator first and hit the up arrow. The mutation made no attempt to stop them as they jumped in and hit the button for the twentieth floor.

“What the hell was that?” Cosmos said, wiping himself off. As he looked down at his hand, it started to blur, leaving a trail as he moved it.

“Uh oh, I think I’m changing, but I feel so good.”

“I don’t think you are,” Reya pointed, and as she did, her finger started to melt away, as did the world around them.

“Oh my God, we’ve been drugged!”



Reya never partook in psychedelics, but plenty of her friends did, primarily mushrooms and LSD, and a few had experienced the mind-bending properties of DMT. Whatever the mutation dumped on her must have been a concoctive blend of hallucinogens, as she was thrust into mental multi-dimensionality. The last thing she saw before falling down the rabbit hole was Cosmos. He was unrecognizable in a state of chaotic flux. It was a horror show the way his body defied all sense of order and jerked in agitation, too fast for her brain to comprehend, like watching a cluster of spiders melting into each other. She curled up in the corner, closed her eyes, and hoped the journey would end quickly.

Reality slipped away like an avalanche, leaving her in a hollow black void, a punctured hole in space and time. Sensations began to formulate the language that was Reya, and she became hyperaware, discovering a new unlocked state of Self. She screamed, “Id slaying Ego” before collapsing like a sandcastle and entering a realm of nonsense. In this place, sentience raced through and around her in a sea of hexagonal horses. She was surrounded by flowering constructs so large they fit into her palm, and she in theirs, then thrown deeper into the various planes of corporeality, maddening and loveless.

It was an overload of life, not death. This was a place of inordinate hyper-complexity, where humans had no business occupying. She thought she’d be trapped in this geometric lunacy for eternity when something pulled her into a universal space filled with writhing automatous entities, galactic pillars resembling Vedic Gods made of syntax rather than spirit. They made noises like drowning chicks as their abstraction spread through her like a miasma of toxicity, picking at her synapses, feasting on her neurotransmitters. Reya tried to free herself from the grasp of this unwanted invader. She heard a voice somewhere along the fringes of this stagnant place, and the demonic entity skirted away in a squid-like manner. She felt something cold against her skin, then warmth and a gentle shake. A blurry but very human face appeared before her as the otherworldly encounter dissolved away. The blurry face cleared into a handsome older man.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

Reya clenched her hands and wiggled her toes, feeling her extremities normalize. She sat up and looked around the room in a daze.

“I’m sorry about that, Reya,” the man said, offering her bottle of water. “That one downstairs used to be the concierge.”

“How do you know my name?”

“I worked with your father. My name is Wang Lei.” He offered his hand.

Reya looked for Cosmos. “Where is my friend?”

“He’s fine.”

“Where am I?” Reya took Wang’s hand and stood up.

“I know you came looking for me.”

“I need your help.”

“And I yours.”

# Chapter 15: Tripping Down Memory Lane

A black and white drawing of a blue eye and flames

Description automatically generated

*COSMOS’ HAIR WAS the length of his body, and it billowed around him like sea grass, tangled in his arms and legs. The evil eye was pulsing now like a speaker as the song blared:*

*She had a body like an eel*

*She was dancing the tsifteteli*

*She was dancing and spreading joy*

*With her defi, yalla*

*She had a body like a fish*

*Everything turned upside down*

*For her pleasure and joy*

*He was thrust into the eye’s thin blue ring, a hair’s breadth away from the violent storm that raged in the black core.*

*The air had a chill to it, cold in his lungs as Cosmos stood underneath a netless basketball rim. He was on a playground, or rather a parking lot where school children played. Most of them played kickball, a few climbed trees lining a fence, and several sat in a circle in an active game of Duck-Duck-Goose. There was no one around him, and he found little peace away from the others.*

*The only way to gain some sense of solitude was to exterminate the lot. The kickballers were too old, too big, and the ones in the trees too high to reach, so the sitting ducks would have to do. Cosmos casually walked into the school and down the hall past the teachers’ lounge where the staff ate and cursed, ignorant of his lurking. The janitor’s door was locked, but he knew how to open it. The lock itself was rusted and old, and with a slight jiggle and switch to the right, the knob clicked open.*

*He grabbed a bottle of turpentine from a shelf and headed into the fourth-grade teacher’s room, where he swiped a pack of matches from one of the smoking man’s drawers. Once outside, he waltzed up to the ducks nonchalantly and began dousing them with the turpentine. At first, they didn’t flinch, unsure if this was a part of the game, but then the potent smell became overpowering and nauseating, causing tears.*

*Cosmos took out a match and went to strike it, but a teacher wrapped his large hand around the flame, snuffing out Cosmos’ potential sterilization method. The teacher grabbed Cosmos by the arm and dragged him toward the school, yelling at approaching teachers who rushed to the traumatized children.*

*Cosmos felt nothing. Not frustration at his failed cleanse or the disciplinary action to come, not the fear he’d instilled in the ducks. Not even the torment he’d put his parents through. The world was filled with too much color, too much noise, and too many children—and all he wanted was the abyss of emptiness. Just before he was shoved into the waking world, he thought,* next time I’ll have to try harder.

Cosmos awoke from the trip down memory lane naked on a cold white metallic floor. *Prison, for all of my past crimes*. As he looked around, he noticed the place was small but clean, with a white couch, a metal table and two chairs, a kitchen, and a silver haired man sitting in front of him. Beside Cosmos was Reya, twitching as if having a nightmare. The man handed Cosmos some clothes.

“Your friend will be fine in a few minutes. But you, you are quite the specimen, aren’t you? Quite the specimen,” he said.

“Where am I?”

“Where you need to be. My name is Wang Lei. You should get dressed now before she wakes.”

“Where?”

“Bathroom is through the kitchen.”

Cosmos’ stomach growled.

“There are wafers on the counter if you are hungry,” Wang added.

Cosmos snatched a handful of wafers and ran into the bathroom, using the clothes to cover his privates.

“I’m sorry about the outfit,” Wang called out. “It’s my daughter’s.”

Reya was sitting on the sofa, sipping water, when Cosmo exited the lavatory chewing on a wafer. His clothes consisted of a pale yellow polo top with a frilled collar, sunflower patterned thigh-high jean shorts, and pink flip flops. Reya looked at him quizzically.

“It’s all he had.” Cosmos nodded at Wang.

“Please, sit,” Wang said with a voice like velvet and rum on the rocks.

Cosmos sat beside Reya on the couch.

“Are you sure you are okay, child?” Wang asked Reya.

“I’m fine, I’m just a little off.” She glanced at Cosmos and rubbed her shoulders. Cosmos noticed her discomfort—something was wrong.

“First, tell me why you are both here,” Wang asked.

“Cosmos is a mutation but different. He can turn back to normal, but he’s unstable, and we are here to find out if there is a cure, a way to reverse the process, or at least stabilize it within him.”

Wang leaned forward. He had a chiseled, muscular jawline. His eyes were narrow and exotic. Every move he made felt controlled, purposeful, not wasted.

“God bore us into this imperfect world, and we seek answers as to why, why at every possible step toward perfection the world tries to kill us. This gift of God we’ve created, this élan vital makes us perfect. Why remove it?”

“Cosmos didn’t ask for this. No one asked to be a mashed-up bag of animals, especially ones that escape from a prison and kill innocent people!”

Wang sighed as he gripped the cross around his neck. He placed his lips against the gold symbol and murmured a prayer. “God and the Devil work in their own mysterious ways but remember, the Devil can never win a war against God.”

“What are you talking about?” Reya sneered.

There was a cry from a room behind them.

“My daughter is very ill.” Wang gestured toward a closed door. “Born with harlequin ichthyosis. Her skin is hard and cracked, constantly splitting open. For her entire twelve years she’s fought off infections, pain and death.”

“You’re going to change her?”

“Yes. Because that is what we do in the name of God. That is what your father has done. I don’t trust the Warden, but his demonic properties are a necessity in God’s game.”

“God’s game? This isn’t a game! How could God allow your daughter to suffer?” Reya asked.

“She suffers because sin stabs our perfection during conception. Your father’s brilliance was his ability to communicate with the Neobacter and pluck the strings of God’s vital impetus. It’s an achievement far beyond anything we could have ever imagined. But, you want to know, can Cosmos be cured? Yes, but I’m unable to do so. I’m simply a mathematician. If anyone can fix him, your father could.”

“My father’s dead.”

“No, he’s not,” Wang said cooly.

A cry came again from the other room, and an alarm went off as if there were a fire. Wang quickly stood up, took a small velvet bag off the counter, and handed it to Reya.

“Take this. It’s important information. I wasn’t sure what I was going to do with it, but God sent you to me. You’re his shepherd now.”

“You said my father’s not dead. What did you mean?”

“He can’t help you. Unfortunately, the only other source is the false prophet, Warden Davis.” Wang performed the sign of the cross and bowed his head in prayer.

“What about the other one of your group, here in the city? Can she help?” Reya asked.

Wang ignored her as he made his way to the closed door. He kept his back to them as he spoke. “Embrace the vital force, children. Judgment day is upon us, and you must either become warriors of God or victims of Satan. Please leave now. You don’t have much time.”

“Wait!” Reya began to follow him as he disappeared into the room. She felt unsteady on her feet, hit with the after effects of the narcotics. She leaned against the set of large windows overlooking the city.

Suddenly, the glass exploded, and she was yanked out of the apartment and up into the air. She could see Cosmos at the window, reaching up toward her, becoming smaller and smaller, and then the world went black.

Cosmos leaned out the window as he watched a large blue mutation with glowing wings carry Reya away. There was a roar behind him as if a locomotive were in the other room.

Wang saw him and shouted, “Get out!”

But it was too late. A mutation tore through the wall, collapsing the floor and a side of the building, and Wang fell with the debris. He didn’t move or make a sound as he plummeted. Cosmos was trapped between what looked like gorgon and a star-nosed mole, plated with armor and two sets of wings, white moth’s and black and white elytra. The fleshy tentacled “nose” of the mole head opened up like a flower revealing a gray-skinned little girl’s face. The head was tiny compared the rest of its body. *This must have been Wang’s daughter,* thought Cosmos. She made eye contact with him, her face rippling with anger before retracting back into her body. The gorgon parts branched out toward Cosmos like snakes, and it used claws half the size of Cosmos to pull itself closer, ripping up the floor and shoving away furniture as if it was trash.

Cosmos was leaning backwards, nearly falling out of the window, when he felt his heart palpitate and body begin to change, going into defense mode. But he didn’t want to kill this creature. He could see the hospital gown draped over one of the claws, wires and tubes still connected to its side. She was innocent and now a powerhouse of a mutation. He jumped up on the window ledge, the girl now between him and the exit. It lunged at Cosmos with incredible speed, and he fell out of window, landing on his side on a lower deck. Air pumped out of his lungs but he was otherwise unharmed. He forced himself up, opened a sliding door into an empty apartment, and ran through it to the elevator. The drug-dealing mutation wasn’t there. It had left the lobby, somehow fitting through a seven-foot by four-foot door. Cosmos found Aldea fast asleep on the couch.

“Come on, wake up, Aldea!”

She awoke with a start, the wings on her back beating. He helped her onto her one foot and slithering leg.

“Where is Reya?” she asked, every word a shard of glass in her throat.

“Something took her,” Cosmos replied.

“What happened?”

“Nothing good.”



Warden Davis was kneeling naked in a meditative state, the Xenodracos sloshing in the bulbs, boiling with lust, reacting to the metallurgy buried within his skin.

“They are getting agitated,” JD3 said.

“I know,” the Warden replied in a low voice, trying to contain his anger.

“I have good news, Warden.”

A computer screen lit up in the darkness. The Warden rose like an iceberg and walked over to the computer, his bare feet slapping on the mesh plates. On the screen was a video recording from a mini dome camera in an elevator. The footage showed Cosmos in full mutational flux, bending like putty while Reya cowered in the corner. As the elevator reached the twentieth floor, the doors opened with Wang Lei standing on the other side. After Cosmos reverted back to human form, he and Reya were carefully dragged out. The screen cut to Cosmos back in the elevator, running through the lobby and guiding Aldea out of the apartment.

“Cosmos Leftezondakidis is the signature. He is the key. How should we proceed?”

The Warden took in a deep breath and walked over to the hyperactive fluids. “Soon.” He cupped his palm over the bulbs.

# Chapter 16: Buddha And The Beast

A black and white drawing of a blue eye and flames

Description automatically generated

TWO LOW-FLYING military helicopters thudded overhead, shaking the ground Sophelia stood on. She looked up, watching the gray choppers trek across the blue sky like glistening dragonflies. Plato was curled up and asleep by the door, undisturbed by the noise. Billy tried his best to hide, but it was like trying to conceal a beach ball in a terrarium. Sophelia wasn’t sure what to do with her ex-boyfriend. She couldn’t leave him and had no place for him to hide.

“God, Billy, how did this happen?”

Billy stepped out of the brush. She thought his legs a mismatch, unable to support his hulking upper body, but upon closer inspection the birdlike stems were dense and muscular, his two-toed feet the size of frying pans. He leaned his head back, and the frill around his neck expanded. He never moved as he spoke, keeping his head pointed upwards, mouth agape. The voice wasn’t Billy’s but sounded more like an orchestra of cicadas creating the English language out of the rubbing of their wings.

“Aldea. Electrocute. Stun. Gun. Chest. Change.”

“My God.”

The flap around his neck softened and he looked down at her.

“I don’t know what to do, Billy. Maybe Cosmos will find a cure. He’s in Sol now, looking for help.”

They heard a car door slam and commotion toward the front of the building, followed by the distinct voices of arguing, the familiar familial conflict of communication by aggression.

It was her parents.

“Go hide, I’ll be right back.” She waved Billy away, rushed Plato inside, and locked the door behind her. When she entered the store, her parents were there.

“Ma! Ba! What are you doing here? I thought you wouldn’t be back for at least another hour!”

“Why the flag not down!” Her father’s white mustache had grown thicker, and he added a white beard to it. He’d grown shorter and thinner over the years. But, like Cosmos, he had a head too big for his body, and with the full white beard and hair, he looked comical—a mix of elf and Santa.

“Well, hello to you, too, Dad! I’m fine by the way!”

“Sophelia!” her mother called out. The matriarch looked twenty years younger than Sophelia’s father. She dyed her hair auburn and kept it short, with makeup spackled on so thick her face resembled a porcelain doll. Her clothing style was gaudy, lots of silver with gold trimmings and dotted gems. The weighted jewelry matched her outfit, and the ensemble made her look like she was wearing a suit of armored rhinestones. She would have been a thief’s wet dream, but like a honey badger, looks are deceiving. Mom carried herself with predaceous vigor, ready to release savagery.

“My darling, are you okay?” Mom asked in Greek as she hugged Sophelia then pinched her cheeks, curved red nails digging into her face.

“Mom, I’m fine. How did you get here so fast?”

The door chimed, followed by the chinking sound of cowboy boots. The scent came first, like a rolled out red carpet doused in liqueur and set on fire. Her uncle, Stelios, strolled through the store like an aristocratic strip club owner. He sucked the rays out of the sun, like an over-tanned vampire, his skin a bright bloody red. He had receding white slicked back hair that looked like bleached stalagmites. A thin white mustache stuck out like whiskers above a capped grin with a single gold tooth. He was a financial enigma who forced his stereotype onto others, a way to attract and repel attention. He treated Cosmos and Sophelia like his own children, possibly because he didn’t have any, a regret she’d spot in the cracks of his façade, like the slight pursing of lips, raised eyebrows and batting of   
the eyes.

“Sophelia…” He approached his niece and pinched the bottom of her chin so hard she couldn’t pull away. “You look good,” he said in a broken Greek accent. “Where’s Cosmos?”

“Where is Cosmos! Why the grill not on, and why food still wrapped?” her father snapped.

“Did you two even go home yet?” she asked.

“We came through the route through mountains,” her uncle replied. He had circled around the counter and helped himself to sliced cheese.

“Cosmos isn’t here, Dad.”

“Why? He’s supposed to be here! Is he sick? Is he okay?”

“I think we should all go home,” suggested Sophelia.

“The store!”

“Helios, let’s go home,” insisted Mom. She was sitting and holding her purse in her lap, looking like a glass ornament.

“No! The store!”

“Are you kidding me? Forget the store! We have a lot to talk about,” fumed Sophelia, her patience wearing thin. “The store will be fine if it’s closed for one day, or just a couple of hours. This town went through hell while you were gone.”

“And they need to eat!”

“No, Dad, no one is hungry today.”

“Where is Cosmos?”

Sophelia hesitated.

“Sophelia, is he okay?” The three elders were awaiting her response as if she were a doctor addressing them in a waiting area.

“He’s with a girl.”

“Oh, very nice!” teased Stelios. Her parents looked confused, and when her father started to speak, she cut him off.

“Meet me at home,” she huffed as she walked out.

Behind her, her father called out, “Put flag down!”

# Chapter 17: Ashes To Ashes

A black and white drawing of a blue eye and flames

Description automatically generated

REYA FAINTED WHEN Deva wrenched her through the window, the air forced out of her lungs. She awoke to find herself cradled in her brother’s arms as they flew above the city. She felt as if she were nestled in the arms of a stone-cold statue. She curled up tightly and tried not to look down, but her eyes disobeyed her. Sol gleamed from the sun’s reflection, prismatic through the porous, organically designed eco-structures called Celestials. Here and there she’d spot some of the colorful aerial mutations flying through buildings.

The Spirods were a menacing sight. They looked alien, like black, silver and brown skeletal fingers ready to sink the city into the ground. She closed her eyes, hoping for the treacherous experience to end. Seconds later they descended like chuteless jumpers and landed near a giant hole in the ground where dirt and concrete had been eviscerated like an animal would a carcass. The power must have been extraordinary. With a machine, there was precision, but this was an explosive force, a digging of Jurassic proportions. Her brother’s doing, she realized. He placed her gently on the ground and stood beside her. He was almost twice her height and stood motionless like some gorgeous blue and silver marbled gargoyle. His skin suddenly fluttered like a bird’s feathers, revealing light beneath the layers. He finally acknowledged her and gestured with a clawed finger toward the hole.

“What’s down there?” she asked.

His mouth never moved but she felt the word rather than heard it. *Father.*

“He’s dead, Deva.”

*Dreaming Star* came the voice, gentle like a lapping of water against her temples. Dreaming Star was a game they played as children—the brighter the star the bigger the wish—and Deva’s one wish was the love of their father. Deva gestured toward the hole again, wings splayed out like a fan. It was a command, not a choice. Was it a sheer drop or angled decline? Was it a short or long? Wide or thin? She entered reluctantly, fragments of rock scraping her knees. The soft dirt was damp from the night’s storm. The darkness felt suffocating as she crawled like a rat through the tunnel. She had no sense of time or progress, only pressure and fear. The ground fell away, but Deva caught her like a baby falling out of a crib and lowered her gently to the ground. Darkness coexisted with the smells of metal and soil. Tiny punctures of light gathered like fireflies in front of her in the shape of a human. The negative spaces between the lights created a familiar figure: her father.

“Dad?” she whispered.

The lights brightened, and she heard a voice from all around her, a voice like a tsunami flooding her head.

*KALI!*

Reya fell to her knees while the abstraction that was her father began to flash, replaced with a raging ebony storm that surrounded her. A set of green eyes appeared like headlights in the fog. Then the storm completely engulfed her.



Aldea’s inner organs had begun to either fail or mutate. Her intestines wriggled like salted slugs, and with every breath her lungs felt like meat cleavers slicing their way out. Cosmos lay her on Sophelia’s bed, but he could tell there was nothing that would comfort her. She was unrecognizable, her hair having completely fallen off and her face covered in scaled cysts. The wings on her forehead hung like rotten lettuce, and the spider legs wrapped around her neck as if to choke the life out of her. Spikes sprung out of her arms like long burrs. Her voice was a gnarled mess, barely coherent.

“Please, call my madre. Tell her I tried to do good.”

“Your mom? How?”

“My phone is in my pocket. Take it. Call her. Tell her I’m sorry. I’m sorry for everything.”

“Okay, I will.” He pulled out the phone, feeling the ridges of her thigh, cold and bumpy like running a hand over a tire tread.

“Now kill me like you killed the thing on the road,” she said bluntly.

Cosmos recoiled in horror.

“I can’t! No way, I’m not a killer!”

“You’re not killing me. You are saving me.”

“You can’t ask me to do this!”

“Kill me, then go find Reya.”

“How? I’m not strong enough!” Cosmos shouted, waved his hands in the air.

“You came here with us. You protected us. You are strong, Cosmos. You have no idea what you can do.”

“I can’t hurt you,” he stammered.

“Kill me!” Aldea cried out as she swung a clawed hand that looked like a Swiss army knife at his face. Cosmos fell back and put his hand to a cut across the cheek that quickly healed.

“Stop!”

With her one good leg, she jumped at Cosmos, the wings on her back propelling her forward. Cosmos was too slow to react, but his body wasn’t. Red and white spines erupted out of his chest and shoulders and speared her, and there was a discharge of electricity when they came into contact. She slid into Cosmos, coming face-to-face. Aldea leaned closer and kissed him on the lips. It was a connection she wanted to share with someone, to feel normal—human—one last time. Her head began to calcify and crack, turning a pale yellow and white that spread across her body, and she crumbled into ash, leaving her bloody garments as a pile on the floor. Cosmos stared at the ashes, his tears falling, muddying all that was left of Aldea.

# Chapter 18: Dust To Dust

A black and white drawing of a blue eye and flames

Description automatically generated

REYA COVERED HER HEAD, protecting herself from bolts of volts that rained down. A hand coalesced out of the molecular storm and took hold of her jaw, burning into her skin like toxic sap. Her father’s amber eyes brightened, and he let out a howl that felt like it would split Reya’s head. Then he was gone.

The pellets of pain subsided, and the storm calmed. Ahead of her was a child, hidden amongst the metallic skeletal frame. It was ink black and hazy, small in size, with wide green eyes and a thin line for a mouth. When it opened its mouth, the clouds contracted.

Reya choked on the particles and collapsed to her knees.

“Manalera.”

Reya didn’t understand, but then it added: “Atukur, Challeśvara.”

*Wait a minute,* she thought*, that sounded familiar.*

Finally, it said: “Kali.”

It was a bedtime story mother used to tell about a brave dog named Kali who died fighting a boar. Suddenly the child let out a shrill and expanded into Javed. The struggle between the two was like watching a starling murmuration, the shape-shifting from father to child a mesmerizing flow.

“Bhai!” screamed Reya—*brother* in Hindi.

The violent squall fused into Javed, who stood like a twisted charred tree, his amber eyes balls of fury fixated on her. He groped at Reya with gnarled hands but was pulled into the nucleus of the cyclone that collapsed into a singularity before exploding outwards. Reya was thrown a dozen feet into the air and landed on her back, nearly knocked unconscious. As she rolled onto her side, through her blurred vision she saw the child. It had more substance now, shapes of darks and lights creating a simple, gentle face, a duplicate of their mother’s.

“Bhai,” she said as she moved onto her knees with arms spread apart, inviting, nurturing.

“Bahan!” he yelled as he ran into her arms. She felt his embrace, his tiny arms like satin scarves wrapped around her shoulders. The arms lightened as he began to dissolve into nothingness, the light that made the green of his eyes fading away. She kept her arms there, holding even the tiniest of molecules that made up her baby brother. But he was gone, as was her father. Deva stepped out of the darkness, his ambient glow brightening the surrounding area. In the center of the metal structure within the cage was a small reflective object. Reya walked over to it and picked it up.

“It’s the bullet,” she said, her voice weak from exhaustion. “It’s all that’s left of him now.”

She held it up to Deva, using his light source to see it better. It was shaped like a bullet but was covered in miniscule bristles.

“His consciousness was in here. His soul.” She looked back at the cage behind her. “My God, Deva, he kept our baby brother alive after Mom died and recreated him as the peep. He used this bullet to transfer his mind into it. But what did he want with me?”

She let the question mull over, how Javed, her younger sibling, and Reya were being forced into some unholy trinity. Then it clicked. “Kali Yuga. Yes, that’s it! He wanted to create the new cycle of life, and I was the final piece of his puzzle,” she said. “He wanted to resurrect Mom.”

Deva had retreated, and his glow began to dim.

“It sounds crazy,” she said, taking a step closer to him, but he moved further away. “You’re all I have left now. You’re my light, my twin brother. I can’t lose you, too.”

The ground tremored, and somewhere in the cavern the ceiling collapsed, followed by a thud. There were similar quakes from all around with something wet and heavy crawling toward them. Deva scooped up Reya and stuck her into the tunnel. Before she could react, he blocked up the hole.

“Deva!”

Deva kept his distance from the convection of father and son that was like a swarm of insects locked in battle. And it was the child that won, free to feel true love from their sister, even if it was for a beat in time. Father’s death was a blow, but Deva wasn’t alone. His sole goal was to protect his sister as the mutations, riled up from Javed’s demise, descended upon them.

A shelled, finned creature crashed from above, its immensity unseen but felt by its movement. He got Reya out of harm’s way but was rammed against a steel column. A tentacle latched around his arm while a segmented jaw chomped down on his foot. He punched the rammer in its pointed snout and kicked off the jaw on his foot. He bit down on the tentacle, and it retracted into the darkness. He couldn’t see them—somehow, they melded with the darkness, camouflaging themselves during their attack. An electrified, multi-legged ogre-faced spider, all hanging jaw and furrowed brow, dropped onto Deva from above, forcing him to the ground. Jaws popped up out of the ground again and bit down on a wing. He could hear more mutations trampling through the cavern like monster trucks in an arena. Deva’s body rippled with waves and his skin shuttered like window blinds, brightening the area. The udders on his chest shot out beams of a cauterized white substance that tore through the spider. Deva’s wings crackled with lightning, electrifying the jaws that bit his wing.

Once free, he turned and grabbed the toothy orifice, ripping the head clean off, firing his laser-udders into the ground for the final kill. He pointed the beams at the incoming mutations, slicing through them and through metal, stone, and dirt. The ceiling above collapsed, filling up the cavity and burying Deva in this coffin made by his father.



Reya scrambled up the tunnel, her muscles on overdrive. When she exited the hole, she sprawled out on the dirt, gulping in air. The terrain suddenly wavered, and the gap widened like a sinkhole, racing toward her. Reya turned and ran, her legs wobbly from overexertion. She dove over a bench and heard a crunch as she landed. Flashes of white obscured her vision, and then came the pain, as did the expanding ground, gobbling up the bench and nearby trees. She felt her body slide backwards but was able to anchor herself by gaining a good foothold.

Reya crawled away from the hole, tears stinging her eyes, her shoulder throbbing, dislocated as it hung limp by her side. She felt lightheaded and wanted to vomit. The pit was half the size of a football field, and beyond its edge came the thundering sound of mutations approaching like war machines. A large, avocado-shaped toadlike creature cleared the gap in one leap, the grimace on its face oddly adorable until it opened its mouth, exposing foot-long, jagged teeth.

Four objects crashed like missiles to her left and right. Black membranous wings unfolded, revealing what looked like suited men, but that was an illusion. Their ties sprung out like a proboscis of a mosquito. Antennae on their heads created a crown of probes. Milky white eyes the size of soft balls opened and focused on Reya. She took a step back and tripped, landing on her back. The four took flight, hanging above her like deviled kites, preparing for a downward strike. Six beams of white dissected two of the four, their wings falling like leaves.

Deva flew with such speed that he was a silver and blue blur as he collided with two mosquito men, slamming them into the side of a brick wall. Reya held her injured arm as she ran around a building and ducked into an alley. Battered and bruised, all she wanted was to rest. The mutations were after her, that she was sure of. She was the cause of their puppet master’s demise, and they wanted revenge.

She felt for her phone, but it was gone, probably lost in the sinkhole. Reya had to find Cosmos and Aldea and get back to Freedom Basin, but she had no clue where she was. She’d have to create distance between her and the ones hunting her. She ran two blocks then took a sharp right and blindly headbutted someone.

“Shit!” shouted Cosmos as he held his bleeding nose.

“Cosmos?”

“Reya! Oh my god, what the hell happened? You look terrible!”

“I know, I know! Please, just help me up. I hurt my arm, so be careful.”

Police cars screamed past them, followed by a military Jeep, heading toward the action. Reya noticed Cosmos had changed his clothing. He wore light blue and black lotus patterned yoga pants and a black blouse with ruffled cuffs. She glanced around.

“Where’s Aldea?”

She could barely hear him, his voice distant, as if he were afraid to choke on the words.

“She was in so much pain, Reya. You couldn’t recognize her, she looked terrible. She attacked me, and I…”

“It’s okay, it’s not your fault,” Reya said, trying to console him. The stabbing in her shoulder was becoming unbearable, so she kept her focus on her breathing and nothing else. “Let’s head to the car. Do you remember where it is?”

Cosmos nodded. “I put a pin on my phone, but we better hurry. It’s dying.”

It took them over half an hour to get to the car. With the coming twilight, they needed to get back to the Basin, where Reya could receive medical attention and Cosmos could find his parents. The keys were in the glove compartment along with a first aid kit and two bottles of water. Reya took six ibuprofens and offered a water to Cosmos. He refused, so she drank them both. There was an instant cold pack she wrapped around her shoulder with gauze, resting her damaged arm against her chest. She leaned back and closed her eyes as Cosmos drove.

“What happened?” he asked, oblivious to her resting.

She opened her eyes and sighed at having her brief reprieve ruined.

“Deva pulled me out of the apartment, brought me beneath Sol where my father and baby brother killed each other because my father wanted to resurrect Mom,” she said as easily as reading a grocery list.

“Huh?” Cosmos said.

“Cosmos, right now I need to tell you something. I just need to talk about this. My dad reached out to me a couple of years ago. He needed help creating a special program he called Noah’s Arc. A catalogue of all animal life. I stole information from labs around the world, but also about you and others that he infected. It’s my fault you’re here.” Reya swallowed hard, her eyes brimming with tears.

Cosmos burst out laughing and nearly swerved off the road.

“It’s not funny,” she scolded.

“I’m laughing because you’re being silly. If you didn’t help him, someone else would have. And that someone wouldn’t be here trying to help me, or know about what’s going on, or try to help others in need. So, it’s a good thing. You saved me,” he said.

Reya reached over with her good hand and placed it on Cosmos’. “Thank you.”

Cosmos smiled, his hair rustling in the wind, the sun at their backs nearly gone, struggling to keep its one eye open but it was the night’s turn for the next act.

“It was my first kiss,” Cosmos blurted out.

“What?”

“It was gross though, her lips were rough. I kissed lizard lips.”

Reya understood he was talking about Aldea. She laughed without warning, the reverb causing pain in her shoulder.

“Am I bringing you to the clinic?” he asked.

“No. I want to go back to the cabin one last time.”

“What for?”

“The Warden,” she said. “I want to grab the memory cards from the cameras. I’m going to show the world he’s a killer.”

# Chapter 19: Home Sweet Home

A black and white drawing of a blue eye and flames

Description automatically generated

SOPHELIA SAT IN an armchair trying to tune out her bickering parents. They sounded like cats fighting in the bushes. They argued with each other and with Sophelia—about the store, about Cosmos, the state of his room, the air conditioner being left on, and the cost of the electrical bill. Uncle Stelios was lying on the plastic-covered couch rubbing his bare feet together and watching the news on the television. Sophelia focused on her breath, bringing about Hera’s air, one big breath in for herself, short pump in again for her family, and long exhale out all the shit she’d endured the last twenty-four hours.

A sharp, high-pitched sound from the TV broke her concentration. The news reporter distorted into grain and was replaced by a ghoulish-looking masked figure, cycloptic with tusks and a wide black-and-red smile. When the person spoke, it reminded her of anonymous interviews, deep and a bit garbled, adding to the frightening effect of the mask. Sophelia’s phone pinged and she noticed the same feed played out on her phone.

“There are over eight billion people on the planet,” the voice said.

The screen cut to a video of waves of people packed like cattle in tight quarters at various locations, bustling, clogging streets like fat in arteries, congested beaches, churches, bars, and businesses.

“Over sixty million humans die each year worldwide. Twenty million from cardiovascular diseases. Ten million from cancer. Another ten from starvation. Eight million from infections. Seven million from strokes. Two million fatal car accidents.”

The video cut to sickly people of all ages suffering from cancer, bubbling with sores and bleeding from their orifices. Children with flies feeding on the mucus of their eyes, mere skin and bone, dying of malnutrition. The horrors of car accidents, the mangled and dismembered, senseless death turned reaper fodder.

“A million die of suicide annually. You have one million five hundred thousand split between malaria, murder, and drugs. A hundred thousand by natural disasters. One billion people live with a mental disorder. Two billion are disabled. A billion suffer assaults each year. Six hundred million worldwide live with diabetes. Sixty million with dementia and ten with Parkinson’s. Three hundred million live with rare diseases. There are one hundred and fifty million homeless. Three hundred million on psychoactive drugs. Three billion consume alcohol.”

The video became rapid-fire, short but effective clips of suicide by hanging and liquified jumpers. It showed murder victims, heads split by hammers, and rooms filled with blood from the violence that occurred behind closed doors. There were horrible images of children with rare diseases and abnormalities, like a boy’s heart hanging out of his chest like rotting fruit, and unrecognizable deformities of children with heads oversized and facial features at random, resembling a Mr. Potato Head. Elderly people mumbled in wheelchairs, staring off into the distance, limbs shaking uncontrollably, their bodies uneven, unsure. Homeless victims, white-knuckled and dry, covered in urine and feces, used cardboard and bricks to rest in, conserving energy like cold-blooded animals.

The commentary continued. “Ninety-five percent of mammal and plant extinction throughout history has been caused by humankind. Ninety-five percent of all life was wiped out eons ago in the largest mass extinction. A full-scale nuclear war between two of the most powerful, bomb-toting countries would kill over four hundred million people, and more than five billion would die from the hell storm’s aftermath. Birth rates are dropping as death rates are increasing, and global catastrophes have also increased at an alarming rate.”

The video cut to a young man going through stages of radioactive assault, his body unable to make new cells—the skin peeled away, covered in blisters, his body resembling fried, wet cheese. Another video showed the damage from tsunamis and hurricanes, wiping out homes in an instant as if they were made out of flour and tissues, the footage of drowned towns like the pits of porta potties.

“There is more genetic variation in a troupe of chimpanzees than the entire human species. We aren’t evolving. We aren’t adapting. And our time is up. We owe life an extinction debt. No matter how much we can thrive and progress, our species will become extinct. We are alone in a universe that wants us dead. We are our only saviors, mortals created into gods of lightning and thunder, as you have witnessed in the city of Sol. I introduce to you—the Raijū!”

A white glow encompassed the screen, transitioning into aerial footage of the mutations that had been shot as if it were a National Geographic documentary. A filter enriched the film, enhancing colors. It was premeditated filming focused on angles, frame rates, dissolves, lighting, and lens flares, like a cinematic Marvel movie.

“We are Zygoats, masters of biohacking, and those responsible for what you see. These Raijū are the arks of life after the world is wiped clean from all of its devastations and assaults by both natural and unnatural means. But more importantly, we will bring about a new age of not man, but mana, the elements of life, strata of perfection. We are but a speck in a sea of nothingness, but with the rise of the Raijū, we will fill that nothingness with a power unseen and incapable by the natural order of things. There will be no hunger, no pain, no suffering, no death. We only need feed on electricity, a simple charge can last a lifetime.”

“How much longer he going to talk?” yelled Uncle Stelios in Greek.

“Shut up, Stella,” said her father.

“Don’t call me that!” Stelios warned.

“Both of you shut up!” Sophelia screamed, her temper at an all-time high. Cursing out your parents was taboo, like using the Lord’s name in vain or punching a puppy. But both her uncle and father obliged and didn’t retort. Mother sat on a stool in the kitchen, smiling like the Cheshire cat.

The video continued. “But you might ask yourself, life is good, right? We’ve come a long way in the last two centuries, with scientific and technological advancements improving life. You get to eat decorated foods, intercourse with decorated specimens, live in decorated boxes of sheetrock, and drive decorated contraptions of flammable contaminants and fiber glass. But all those moments of ecstasy are fleeting moments of joy, because you live in a moment. So why have it end? Why not fearless, fruitful joy eternal? We have Neobacter at the ready throughout the world. Will you join me in becoming a Raijū?”

The screen began populating with videos of people in various states of disarray.

“You never asked to be born into this unfair and unjust world, a world you have no control over, where to live, you have to pay, to work, to suffer. I’m offering you a chance to make life your own and become boundless and perfect in every way. Let us now rise above the flesh and be reborn with an unstoppable power that is the Raijū!”

The man wheeled himself back, missing his entire lower half. He ripped open his shirt, exposing wired straps across his chest. He grabbed a remote connected to the chair, raised his hand, and hit a button.

The mask fell away as his head inflated like cauliflower. The room lit up, revealing a sort of Vegas-style themed nightclub, an elaborate show to thwart the audience’s attention from the brutal transformation about to play out. The walls were lined with LED bulbs, black lights, a glass floor, and multicolored spotlights that swiveled. As his warped bubbling continued, the camera cut to a screen with squiggly silly string graphics over a yellow and blue background.

MORPHING TIME IN PROGRESS!

The video returned, and standing there filling up the room was a mutation of such extremes, it bordered on the impossible. It was a calculated, symmetrical hodgepodge of seven animals bundled together into a single unit. When the spotlights rolled over it, they exposed wasplike features, then horns of scarlet and gold, and the curve of a hairless bulky leg. The face was a surreal composite of black eyes and indigo. Its entire body glowed like magma.

The others in the video also transformed in a much subtler way, their mutations simpler and rudimentary. A bit of cookie cutter shark here, snowy owl there, sprinkles of flea and lemurs added into the mix, and one-by-one, the videos cut out, leaving the screen black like the finale to a hit series.

Uncle Stelios mocked the feed, saying it was fake, a hoax. Sophelia thought of Cosmos, the worry an ever-present weight burying her hopes for a positive outcome. Her phone vibrated—an unknown number.



Deva slaughtered the remaining mosquito men. He ripped them to shreds, though they fought defiantly and left him wounded.

The fight attracted attention. Both military and police arrived in force, awaiting action, finding reasons to fire their specifically crafted killing machines. With no choice but to defend himself, Deva killed several people with a single blast. But they didn’t matter. Right now, he needed to   
find Reya.

He rose up into the sky, scanning for his sister. His vision switched like clicking a viewfinder, and he saw the world in a quasi-state of infrared and thermal with a sharpness and clarity that could put to shame any photoreception, natural or artificial. Inorganic material was a flat translucent silver while organics were colored based on distance, with violet being the shortest and therefore the closest wavelength and red being the longer, farthest away one. He spotted that yellow-spined coward with that cartoonish profile and wild, weedlike hair speeding away with his sister.

Cosmos.



Cosmos called Sophelia using Aldea’s phone. He kept the conversation short, letting her know that they had failed in finding a cure but still had hope of making a deal with the Devil. He’d be home soon, but they needed to make a pitstop first. Cosmos pulled up to the cabin and reached to turn the engine off.

“Keep it running,” said Reya. “I don’t know if it’ll start up again.”

“What’s on the cameras?” asked Cosmos.

“It’s memory on backups of the Warden shooting my brother.”

“Okay, but won’t that mean he won’t be able to help me if you turn him in?”

“We can use it as leverage.” She smiled as she got out of the car.

“I’ll come in with you.”

“No, I’m fine. I’ve got this.”

“What about your shoulder?” he asked.

“It’s okay, I’ll be quick. Stay here, keep an eye out, and honk the horn if you see someone pulling up.”

Reya was steps away from the cabin when a beam of white light struck the propane tank. The cabin exploded, and for a second time Reya flew back and landed on her shoulder. Cosmos got out and ran over to her.

“Holy shit, are you okay?”

Reya sat up. “Well, my shoulder popped back in.” She slowly rotated her arm.

“That’s good, right?”

“For now.”

“What happened?”

Reya looked up. “My brother. He’s here.”

“Your brother’s trying to kill you?” Cosmos asked as they got into the car.

“Just drive!”

“Where?”

“I don’t know, anywhere!”

Cosmos hit the gas, but the car’s axle was as crooked as the bent rim and hard to control.

“Thank God I got rental insurance,” Reya mumbled as she looked out of the broken window and up at the sky. She spotted Deva against the backdrop of deep blue and violet. He glowed like a multi-winged stellar angel—a true Deva, living up to his name. Watching him, she recalled a new age group that believed devas were a divergence of evolution from the human species, spawned within the cores of stars like Sol. She could see this now, how the mutations were born from some kind of internal supernova. Her brother was always beautiful, always a star in her eyes.

“We need to buy time until I find a way to talk to him,” Reya said.

“How?”

“If you pull—”

A beam of light stripped the ground to their left. Cosmos turned the wheel, and the car spun out before lurching forward as he hit the brakes. He put it in reverse and spun the car back in line.

“He’s trying to kill us!”

“No, I think he’s trying to stop us. He wants me. Pull over!”

But the road exploded again, and the car went over the cratered asphalt, colliding with a rock that was in the road like a barricade. Cosmos and Reya exited the car. They were unhurt, but the car had buckled, the front crumpled like a soda can.

Cosmos pointed to his store. “Come on, let’s get inside!”

They ran to the store, but the door was shuttered and locked.

“Shit!”

Deva shot down like an eagle toward them, and Reya closed her eyes. She felt the air around her swirl like a funnel, but her feet remained on the ground. When she opened her eyes, Cosmos had vanished. She looked up and saw him being carried away, held in the arms of her brother.

# Chapter 20: When You Wish Upon A Falling Star

A black and white drawing of a blue eye and flames

Description automatically generated

COSMOS WAS COCOONED in his hair that had grown around him like a nest. He clung to it like a child holding a blanket, its comfort soothing as he drifted in the deep empty vacuum of his own mind. The evil eye watched the sleeping boy while memories moved through the dark outer blue, white strip, and the thin blue rings. The Greek song “Mia Melaxrini” started to play out of the eye, awaking Cosmos from his slumber. His hair opened up like curtains, and he peeked out. Below him the hole was like a bottomless well of black clouds and lightning, both beautiful and frightening in their scope and scale. This time he didn’t resist as he was carried in the pod of hair like a lazy river ride into the broiling chasm of the eye.

*Cosmos was a little older now, maybe ten or eleven, and was lingering on the edge of a small grass field. A neighborhood boy ran up to him and asked Cosmos if he wanted to play. Easy pickings. With a whiffle ball in his hand, the boy gestured for Cosmos to grab the whiffle bat. He mumbled a few words to Cosmos, who wasn’t listening—he was thinking about how he could make the boy a featureless pulp with a hollow plastic bat. How many strikes would it take to pop out an eye or strike off lips and ears?*

*As the boy walked away, Cosmos swung. It hit him square in the back of his red hair. He fell down, and Cosmos wasted no time hitting him again, followed by a kick to the ribs. The second kick missed, and the boy took off running. Cosmos ran after him. The boy ran into the street and was struck by a car. Cosmos licked his lips when he saw the deep red gash across the back of his head. The boy lay lifeless in the road. Cosmos lifted the bat, aiming for the discolored fissure of skull and brains that wanted to be free of its trappings. He didn’t hear the squealing tires or feel the impact of the car that hit him from the opposite direction, finally giving Cosmos that first glimpse of peace for which he had been yearning.*



Cosmos hung like a kitten in Deva’s clawed hands that held him out like a stranger would a soiled infant. Deva’s wings were like energized blades, and his nipples gave off a searing glow. He opened his mouth, and words leeched into Cosmos’ brain like worms made of razors.

“You are trying to take my sister away from me!”

Cosmos’ heart raced. The Greek song “Mia Melaxrini”synced with his heart beats, the a-fib firing irregularly, charging his heart, changing his body. Cosmos’ face turned obsidian and oil-slick, his facial features disappearing completely. His chest twisted clockwise, tearing his shirt as a radial pattern of mantis shrimp claws folded, creating a ball of heated plasma. Blackened tendrils grew out of Cosmos and latched onto Deva’s arms. A burst of energy tore a hole through Deva, incinerating his lower half. The two fell like falling stars a thousand feet to the ground.

Deva realized that in this new form, emotions became physical manifestations, and he had reached his tipping point of anger and frustration. Everyone in his family but his sister had died, along with his human achievements and desires. There was no regret in his newly devastative state, carrying an unparallel beauty and power. The effortless destruction he released in Sol was proof that he was above all, yet for some reason, this thorn-headed fool Cosmos brought about a rage that could fuel a dying star. Maybe it was his obsessive behavior or love of his sister that brought on his demise. Deva had underestimated the ugly duckling, his antithesis, his imperfect counterpart in every way. Cosmos was unpredictable, and to Deva, that was a weapon far more frightening and dangerous than anything he’d encountered. As he fell, all sense of electric power fading like a dying lamp, he stared up at the night sky. One specific star caught his attention, and as he landed, the star brightened, a cosmic angler fish luring him into the darkness to be swallowed.



Reya watched the spot brighten in the sky as two heavenly bodies fell. She rushed over to the half-sized blue and silver one, her brother.

“Can you heal?” she asked, but she knew the answer. She’d seen what Cosmos could do, watched as he siphoned the energy from the fish-headed hog.

“You see that, Reya?” Deva’s voice was like she remembered when they were children, small and meek, innocent and caring.

“What?” Her tears fell without warning onto her brother’s face.

“It’s a dreaming star, Reya. How bright it is. I found it, I found Father’s love.”

Deva shut his eyes, and his essence, his glow, faded. Reya rubbed his cheek, but it crumbled into dust, causing a chain reaction like the fluff of dandelions spreading into the night. Reya tucked her head into the dust, wishing her tears could bring him back to life.

Cosmos never thought about life or death. He believed in God, as Greek Orthodoxy was a prominent part of the Hellenic Culture, inseparable and inescapable. He was taught the ritualistic trends of being a good Greek: go to church, pray, Greeks created everything, don’t talk about your emotions, and family comes first. His past upended all sense of belief and structure. He was a villain in this game of life, and as he plummeted to his death, he thought, *will I be accepted into Heaven, having ruined so many lives, even though I have clearly become a different person?* *Or will I be judged for the life I lived post-accident, one of innocence and naivety?*

When he landed, death didn’t come. It didn’t want him, having shunned him for his sins. Cosmos was on his back, his shirt torn apart and a deep depression where he landed. He was unscathed and naked, landing thirty or so feet from the store. The Greek flag waved against the side of the building, and he tore it down and wrapped it around himself. He spotted a phone near the door. It was Aldea’s. As he picked it up, he heard cries from not too far away.

Reya was crouching over a dusted outline of Deva.

“I’m sorry, Reya. I swear, I don’t know what happened.”

Reya stood up but didn’t look at him. “I’m sorry, too, Cosmos. You didn’t ask for any of this, but I need to leave here, leave this place. I have no one left.”

“You have me,” Cosmos said reflexively.

“I can’t be around you. You only remind me of the things I lost.”

The remark was a stab in the heart. They stood in silence, Reya’s head held down, Cosmos wrapped in the Greek flag. The night was calm, noise in the distance reaching them like echoes.

“Is that your phone?” Reya asked.

“No, it’s Aldea’s. She wanted me to call her mom.”

“Give it to me,” Reya demanded, her voice harsh. “I’ll do it. We now share something in common.”

Cosmos handed her the phone. “I’m sorry I can’t help you. The evidence, the cabin, it’s gone. Everything’s gone.”

“It’s okay, I’ll figure something out.”

Reya walked down the street without saying goodbye, disappearing into the darkness. Cosmos went over to the store and sat on the ground underneath the light. He wanted to cry, but they wouldn’t be real tears. He was an imposter in his own life. Cry for what? It was all fake, and he knew his true nature, his true base form, was a monster.

# Chapter 21: Dog-Eat-Dog World

A black and white drawing of a blue eye and flames

Description automatically generated

COSMOS SAT ON the welcome mat and leaned against the shuttered door beneath the exterior lights. He didn’t feel anything—not the brisk cool night, the blisters on his feet, or the nylon flag rubbing against his skin. He sat for a while, thoughts about his transformations, parents, the store, and Reya bouncing around in his mind like balls in an air mix machine. When his bottom grew sore from sitting, he slowly and cumbersomely headed home, dragging the emptiness with him.

When he finally made it to the house, Sophelia was waiting for him outside, sitting on a plastic Adirondack chair. Something moved in the tree line behind her, a colorful large something, but Cosmos ignored it, too tired to care. Sophelia ran to her brother and embraced him, squeezing him hard.

“Ow, sis,” Cosmos squeaked.

“Where have you been? I called but no one answered the phone!”

“Reya took the phone,” he said.

“What happened?”

Cosmos sighed and walked past his sister. “Aldea, she’s dead. Reya’s left for good.”

Sophelia waited for Cosmos to walk into the house before she rushed to where Billy stood like a giant colored garden gnome. “I told you to hide,” she whispered.

Billy shrugged, his pink feathers ruffling.

Sophelia stepped up to him and rubbed his arm and chest. “You’re so cold. How is that possible?” She moved her hand toward his face. It was too high, so he leaned down.

“Okay, you big dork, you remember the cave, the Wizard’s Sleeve we used to go to and… you know…” She winked at him and blushed, causing Billy to smile widely with his strange tusked, blue baboon mouth. “Go hide deep into the cave. Stay out of sight and wait for me till I get there tomorrow, you got it?”

Billy nodded. He reached a finger out, rubbing her cheek gently. She curled her head into it, then pressed him to go. He moved silently through the woods and disappeared into the night. Sophelia waltzed into the house and found Mom and Dad crying and embracing Cosmos. Plato was doing his dog dance, ecstatic to see Cosmos. Sophelia joined the hug, and the four held each other as a family, as one.



After Cosmos showered and changed, the family sat at the dining room table. Uncle Stelios went through a can of sardines, a brick of feta cheese, and two glasses of ouzo before retreating to the couch and falling into a deep slumber. With the help of Sophelia, Cosmos explained everything except for his mutation.

Sophelia cornered her brother as Mom cleaned his room of the mess and Dad and Uncle Stelios argued about pennies. They had to quickly concoct a scheme as to why Cosmos was naked and wrapped in a Greek flag, his car was compacted, there was a weird powder in his room, he was hanging out with strangers and wasn’t at the store. They decided to put the blame mostly on Sven and his attack on the town, having crushed his car. And Cosmos, being such a swell guy, helped Reya, a girl he randomly met, find her lost puppy. They found the puppy in the woods near the store late at night, but Cosmos was attacked by bees, somehow, late at night, and had to strip down and wear the flag. It was a terrible lie, but they believed him, albeit with some skepticism. But that skepticism was forgotten when Sophelia showed her parents the mountain of debt, hospital bills, and lawyer fees she had discovered.

“I didn’t want to worry you, Sophelia.” Her father, looking exhausted, kept his eyes on her.

“Did something illegal happen? Uncle Stelios got you involved into something?” Sophelia growled, turning to interrogate her uncle. But her father slipped his hand over hers and patted it, shaking his head that it wasn’t anything like that.

“Then what?”

“It was me,” Cosmos interjected. “I did bad things as a kid, Sophelia. I hurt a kid really bad and got hurt too. I looked it up just a while ago. Retrograde amnesia. I forgot everything, but it came back.” Cosmos’ eyes had dark rings around them and were red as if he’d spent time crying. “Is he dead, Dad?”

“No,” his dad said.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Sophelia glanced between her parents and Cosmos.

“I’m bad, Sophelia. I saw it, in a…” Cosmos paused in thought then continued, “… a flashback, sort of. It’s true, right, Mom? Dad? Back in Queens? I tried to burn the children once, then beat another kid with a bat that got him hit by a car.”

Both of their parents looked away, and it was enough to let Sophelia know it was the truth.

“How could I not know this?”

“You were at the college. You need keep mind in school.”

“School?” Sophelia stood up, put her fists down on the table, and leaned forward. “You should have told me. So, what happened, they chased you out of town with torches and pitchforks? My brother some kind of monster?”

“When Cosmos wake from the hospital he no remember anything. But we no stay in Queens anymore, we—” his father said, but Cosmos cut him off.

“It wasn’t an accident, Dad. I wanted to hurt him. I felt nothing, nothing at all. For him or any of you.”

“Don’t defend them, Cosmos. They should have said something!”

Sophelia rubbed her head then put her fists against her hips. “There’s no going back to Sol, so I guess I’m stuck here with you. We should all get some rest and talk more tomorrow. We’ll figure something out.” She walked over to her parents and gave them both kisses on the heads. “I love you both. You should have told me, but I understand why you didn’t. I’m going to bed. Good night,” she said in Greek, and went to her room upstairs.

“I’m going to bed too.” Mom gave Cosmos a big hug and rubbed his back. “I’m just happy you are okay,” she added as she left the room.

There was a plate of Greek cookies, Koulourakia, a buttered, braided pastry, on the table. Cosmos’ father took the plate and placed it in front of him.

“Dad, I’m a bad person. I am. I know that now.”

Cosmos had never seen his father cry. He was a hardened man with a hardened life, and the moisture that brimmed around his brown eyes revealed his true form, his true nature.

“Do you know why we name you Cosmos?”

“Because it was Papou’s name?” Cosmos used the word *grandfather* in Greek.

“*Kosmos*. Because you crowd the heart, when you smiled at me as baby. This is you now, Cosmos. The accident gave us you,” his father said, leaning in until their foreheads were touching.

Cosmos began to cry, tears falling onto the cookies.

“It’s okay,” his father said. “We love you; we always love you.”

Together, they let the tears flow. In the background they heard Uncle Stelios pass gas, speaking gibberish in his sleep before rolling over and falling with a bang.

“Who tipped the boat?” Uncle Stelios said in Greek as he swayed on his feet like a drunken sailor.

Cosmos and his father, still locked in their embrace, howled in laughter.



It was two in the morning, and Cosmos couldn’t sleep.

“Want to go out?” he asked Plato, who lay at the foot of the bed. The dog leapt off, wagging. Before Cosmos stepped out of the house, he heard Sophelia whisper from behind him.

“Hey.”

“Hi,” Cosmos whispered back. She gave him a hug, and he hugged her back.

“I love you, bro. I don’t care what you did. We’re family. Nothing will ever come between us.”

“I know,” Cosmos replied.

“I need to tell you something. I have Billy with me, sort of. He’s hiding out, and I’m going to see him in the morning.”

“Whoa, are you sure that’s safe?”

“Yeah. We kind of talked. He’s completely himself.”

“What’ll you do with him?” he asked.

“I don’t know, but he needs me, so I’m going to try and help him.”

“Okay, sis, that’s cool. I’ll help too if you need me.”

“About you—don’t tell Mom and Dad. Take your medicine, meditate, go to the store tomorrow, and make sure you don’t change, okay?”

“Yeah,” Cosmos said, forcing a smile.

“She broke your heart?” probed Sophelia.

“She hates me.”

“No, it’s *you* who hates you, Cossie. But now’s not the time for love. We need to figure out what to do about your, um, thing you have going on.”

“There’s a chance to fix it or suppress it.”

“Good. Until then, lie low, bro.” Sophelia gave him one last hug and went back upstairs.

Cosmos took Plato out and let him trot around the yard while he sat in the Adirondack chair. He couldn’t clear his mind of Reya. She was all he wanted. He thought about her matted, highlighted hair, her rich lips, those wonderful green eyes, how she moved with a slight tilt of her head to the left, and that imperfect smile.

A pair of headlights appeared in the driveway. A black suburban with tinted windows drove up to the house, pulling into the lit-up area by the porch light. A large man exited the vehicle and walked up to Cosmos. Plato positioned himself defensively and growled, but Cosmos shushed him and rubbed his head, assuring him everything was okay. Or he hoped.

It was the Warden. He wore all black. Cosmos noticed his missing hand seemed to have had somehow regrown but was hidden within a black glove.

“Cosmos.” The Warden nodded. “I thought you’d be dead, given the circumstances.”

“What do you mean?”

“I thought you were a failed test subject. You were a percentage, a point one. But you surprised me when you mutated into something unexpected. And here you are, able to turn back to human. One of a kind.”

“Why are you here?

“You’re unique, Cosmos. You exhibited a morphism unlike any of the others. There’s something important in you that I want. In return, I’ll wipe out all of your parents’ debt and ensure they retire comfortably.” The Warden looked menacing with the light of the moon at his back, silhouetting his hulking form. He was inhuman, less human than the mutations, a Titan belonging in the Pits of Tartarus.

“How much do you know about me?” Cosmos asked.

“Enough.”

“Then you know what I did.”

“Christopher Emblet. Age ten when you assaulted him. He lost an eye and suffered severe brain damage.”

The words were punches to his solar plexus. “And you shot someone.”

“It was a last wish. Father to son,” the Warden said, “He survived anyways. Where is he, by the way? Last tracking, he was here, somewhere in the Basin.”

“He’d dead,” Cosmos said coldly.

“Interesting. So, what say you with my offer?”

Cosmos thought about Christopher, wearing a patch, not moving right, not living a proper life because of what he did. He’d have to sell his soul, literally, to this devil to make things right.

“Okay. If you clear my parents’ debt and help Christopher, I’ll help you. But can you fix me? Stop me from being a mutation?”

“It’s possible to keep the change at bay, but you won’t get rid of it. It’s a part of you now. Come to the Vault tomorrow morning, any time before noon.”

Cosmos nodded.

The Warden looked at Plato, who sat at Cosmos’ side, his protective stare fixated on the Warden. “How much do you know about the philosopher Plato?”

Cosmos took in a deep breath and shrugged.

“Conversation for another time. See you tomorrow,” the Warden said, getting into his SUV.

Cosmos didn’t want the Warden to go. He wanted to talk more, to feel that he had a purpose in life and that he and the Warden shared some similarities. The way he had felt when he was a young terror, how spirited he felt in his darkness, the loneliness and freedom of not caring. Cosmos tried to remember that feeling, or lack thereof. And a part of him missed it. Because a part of him had liked it.

And it felt good.

# Chapter 22: The Show Must Go On

A black and white drawing of a blue eye and flames

Description automatically generated

AZIZA WAS LYING on her side on a metal table. She held her head up with her right arm, her left across her chest, making no attempt at covering her supple, round breast. Her left leg crossed over her right, hiding her privates. She had flawless, smooth ebony skin that reflected the overhead lights. She was stunning in every way possible, with looks that had truly killed, causing two heart attacks and a suicide, the latter a result of rejection.

As she lay there, a vixen marvel that any artist would cream onto their canvas, she watched several screens embedded in the wall. The central screen had Leak, her colleague, a disgrace in her eyes as he wore that ridiculous mask, acting the fool in an attempt to glorify the Raijū, a name she found as absurd as calling them all Zygoats. But his tactics, for all their blabbering numbers and brutal imagery, were a necessity.

The screens switched to a single feed of a man dressed in military camo and sporting a dark blue beret with a star pin on it. The lower half of his face was covered with a beige balaclava. The man went between speaking English and Mooré, the main language spoken in Burkina Faso, a country in West Africa. He heralded victory against the insurgence of his land. The barrel-chested man’s beady black eyes turned to the camera and repeated a mantra that he will bring peace again to *his* land and fights for *his* people.

The blood in Aziza’s heart beat wildly, drumming within her ears, drowning out the vileness of his voice, that same voice that had grunted over her, his forearm pressed down into her throat as she lost consciousness. Over and over, she heard that grunting, then the screams of her mother telling Aziza to run, gargling fire as he set her ablaze.

Aziza lay down flat. Her two Iron Maidens drifted to the table and flanked her on either side. She closed her eyes as they ran their tentacles into her crevices, across the curves and swells of her soma. The tentacles then wrapped around her like a mummy. The spiny heads of the Maidens crackled with electricity that traveled between the points of the spines. The electricity coursed through them and into Aziza. She convulsed, shaking violently, the screams of her mother syncing with her own, and the General’s face, the smell of his horrid breath, his sweat dripping into her mouth as he ravaged Aziza, forced into her mind as she was electrified. The shock stopped, and the tentacles unraveled. The Maidens slid back and stood obediently off to the side.

Aziza’s transparency exposed her insides, hollow and filled with a network of lights connected by tiny crystal-like formations. The patterns were reminiscent of galactic structures, like cosmic webs. She was covered in silver stratified scales, and her four eyes glowed like nuclear reactors. She stood as tall as her Maidens. The intense electric heat melted the table into a sizzling lump. Her arms unfolded, and another set of arms split from the first pair. Wings formed out of the heated air around her like nucleations of snowflakes. She heard a song she’d never heard before, deep inside her core.

*She had a body like an eel*

*She was dancing the tsifteteli*

*She was dancing and spreading joy*

*With her defi, yalla*

Aziza turned her attention back to the television. The plastic screen warped as it melted, distorting the wicked face of the General, and the wall melted away, creating a hole. Aziza and her Maidens stepped through the breach and stood outside one of the Spirods. She looked up into the night sky as her Maidens unfolded their own set of black and gray wings that flowed with electricity.

The three rocketed into the night, bodies ablaze with electric fire, shooting across the sky like stars.



Reya lay on the bed, exhausted. She didn’t know what time it was or how long it would take to get back to the Duffling Inn. There were moments on the painful walk when her body felt heavy, ready to collapse on the asphalt like roadkill. When she made it to the center of town, a smattering of first responders were still cleaning the wreckage that Sven and the spider mutation had caused the night before.

An older woman, petite and with a pep in her step like a teen, asked Reya if she was okay. Reya lied that she was fine, but the lady insisted on checking her wounds. She led Reya to a small, tented area stocked with medical supplies, where she bandaged Reya’s shoulder, sterilized the cuts, and provided her with some light pain killers. The woman identified herself as a paramedic and barked about the lack of government assistance to the town. She stormed off in search of an authoritative figure that could further help Reya.

While she was distracted, Reya took the opportunity to flee. Any one of these people were potential minions of the Warden, and she didn’t have the strength or will for a confrontation. She kept away from main streets and eventually found the Inn. It was a place out of time, like a Victorian Barbie doll house.

In the Inn, Reya stared at the ceiling, trying to figure out what to do now that she was alone in a world turned topsy-turvy. Should she go back to school and focus on gaming, programming, and information technology? Being the sole heir to her father’s work, would she be hunted down and crucified, a fall gal or martyr? Or could she profit from this experience, a guest on talk shows and become wealthy in the process? And why not? Mobsters had done it, and serial killers.

But her priority had to be calling Aldea’s mother. Reya needed to perform one last altruistic act before leaving Freedom Basin, even if it meant breaking a mother’s heart. She sat up and rotated her legs off the bed. Her body was sore and stiff but the pain manageable. She held the phone in her hand, found an international number on the call list, and hit send. A frantic woman answered speaking in Spanish.

“No hablo Español,” Reya said.

The woman shouted to someone else.

“Hello?” a thickly accented male voice said.

“Hi. I’m calling from Aldea’s phone. I wanted to let you know that she’s…”

“I know,” the voice said calmly.

Reya looked at the phone, confused, then put it back to her ear. “Did someone else call you?”

“No. She came to my mom in a vision. She said Aldea was one of the angels, had become an Alebrije.” The boy sounded sincere but skeptical, a hint of doubt in his voice.

“Oh.” Reya could not think of what else to say.

“Is that why you called? Did you see her?”

Reya thought for a moment, letting time lapse long enough to not bring about any suspicion, and said, “Yes. I saw her. She saved my life. She saved a lot of lives.”

“That’s wonderful. I can’t believe it.” The voice on the other end quivered and sniffled. “I thought she was dead. We all did, but my mom wouldn’t believe it. What did she look like?”

Reya thought of Aldea, of her character, what the officer truly was. “She looked strong, like a lioness with wings of an eagle, and strong, powerful talons. Her eyes had so much fire in them that the other Alebrijes were afraid of her. She was beautiful.”

She heard him happily tell his family that mother was right, and there were cheers in the background.

“Thank you so much. I hope she finds her way home one day.”

“Me too.” Reya hung up. She slumped her shoulders and thought of her mother. Remembering the photo in her pocket, she pulled it out and held it against her chest. “God, Mom, I miss you.”

Reya looked at the phone again, wanting to call Aldea’s mom back, even if they didn’t understand each other. To talk to the young man as if he were her brother, her Deva. She spotted a couple of missed calls on the phone and listened to Warden Davis’ message. His voice carried sickness, its effects like a psychosomatic virus that knotted her guts and clogged her mind like a backed-up sewer.

Pacing the room in anger and frustration, she spotted the bottle of vodka on the counter. It had been a year she had had a drink, a year since waking up in a stranger’s bed, unsure how she had gotten there. She had sworn off alcohol, but the elixir beckoned to be swallowed, for that genie to numb the pain, not only physical but emotional. She wrapped a bandaged hand around the stem and lifted the bottle but stopped, remembering the small velvet bag that Wang Lei had given her.

She fished the bag out of her pocket and opened it to find a flash drive. She put the bottle down and walked over to her laptop and plugged it in. On the drive was a single folder labeled *Caliban,* and inside the folder a document titled, “Allegory of the Cave.” Reya clicked open the document. At first nothing made sense—randomly typed out letters, numbers and symbols—but then she read his name.

WARDEN DAVIS DOCUMENTED FABRICATION

NAME: JEROME DAVIS/AFRICAN AMERICAN

DOB 1962

SINGLE/PARENTS DECEASED/TTU GRAD

FUNCTION: BASIN’S VAULT PRISON WARDEN 2016 – CURRENT

WARDEN DAVIS UNDOCUMENTED TRUTH

NAME: RH 17 S 15, CALIBAN

DOB: UNKNOWN

CREATED BY 100 XX MATRIARCHS OF SPINOZA

FUNCTION: MAGNESTARIUM BIO FUSION

CALIBAN PROPERTY OF THE ORDER OF SPINOZA, SUBDIVISION: CULT OF THE PLATONIC STATE

Under the words was a blueprint of Basin’s Vault. It had the distinct shape of a star with a circle around it, clearly designed as a pentagram. In the center was an image of a man with his arms out in a T. Smiley faces representing prisoners were drawn within the negative spaces. Scribbled underneath the diagram were the words “BIO SUPER COLLIDER.”

In smaller print written like footnotes, she read:

*Mother of Eels,*

*Tear at the seams,*

*For La Place’s Demons*

*Hides within our dreams.*

Reya dropped the bottle and fell to her knees. She clawed at her head, remembering those entities, the strange psychedelic beings slicing at her mental fibers like umbilical cords. She’d opened Pandora’s box and peered between the legs of a deeper reality, and it got a taste of Reya, licked her exposed ganglia like a dog. Outside the window in the distance, the lights of Basin’s Vault shut off, but a soft glow remained, humming with life, preparing for what was to come.



“They’ll kill me. I know it,” Mitchell Johnson mumbled to himself. He used a flashlight sparingly while he snuck through the cemetery, keeping his voice low, so as not to rouse any spirits from their dirt naps. He carried an old leather briefcase that had papers sticking out through the gaps. When a helicopter flew overhead, he ducked behind a tombstone, clutching the case against his chest.

“I had to do this. I know too much.” He unlatched the briefcase, and a stack of savings bonds spilled out.

“Maybe they’ll want to become those monsters.” He restacked the sheets and put them back neatly in the case. “They don’t need the money. I do,” he told himself, rationalizing the fact that he’d just stolen over six hundred thousand dollars.

“I’ll get over the mountains and hitchhike from there. That’s what I’ll do. Then make my way to Florida, get on a boat to Cuba, and disappear. They won’t be able to find me. No one will. I deserve this.”

A car drove toward the cemetery, red and blue lights on but not flashing, the police cruiser’s spotlight scanning the area.

“Fuck!” Mitchell turned off his flashlight and crawled toward a mausoleum a few feet away. He shoved the wooden door open and quickly shut it behind him. The room smelled sour, like spoiled milk and mildew. He covered his mouth with his free hand while the other held the briefcase. “Calm down. Just calm—”

There was a rustling in the dark. He listened carefully and heard chittering behind him. He turned on the flashlight and lit up a stone coffin a foot away. Another sarcophagus lay beside it, and hanging over it was a giant spider with a plated back and two hanging bat wings. Fear crystalized in his blood until he realized the mutation was dead. He swallowed down the gummy distaste of bile that crept up his throat. The chittering again from all around him now. He shined the light at the ceiling, which wavered like a sea of black and gray.

“Bats?”

More scratches against the wall. Tiny little faces with black dotted eyes revealed themselves from their folds.

“Not bats,” he yelled, turning to escape, but it was too late. The mini-mutations fell on him like a swarm of bees, their arachnid legs stabbing into his flesh, the tiny pangolin plates on their backs ruffling with joy, finding fuel in the electric friction within his body. No one heard his screams, the officer having driven away after sweeping the area.

The mausoleum door was left open a crack, leaving enough room for the micro bites to escape the crypt. They flew out into the night sky, dancing with each other in the ballroom of the night, creating a show of interlocked tiling patterns. They generated an electric field that warped the air around them and then melted into each other, searing the air into neon blue and gold.

The now-single mutation hovered in the air, its wings a golden texture, eight legs black and smooth, plated armor glowing blue. With eyes like river rocks, it gazed upon Basin’s Vault in the valley below. Something wicked brewed within the Vault. It was time to gather the other Raijū and prepare for a battle for life, time, and the fabric of reality itself.

— END —

# About the Author

A person standing in front of a circle of light

Description automatically generated

DIONISIOS EFKARPIDIS is a first-generation Greek-American, born and raised in Stamford, Connecticut. An artist in both heart and hand, Dionisios has been in the motion graphics field for over twenty years. His visual art experience translates into his deep passion for writing active passages and colorful characters and worlds. After years of writing attempts, shifting between script, poem, short and long form, Dionisios finally completed his first novel. And certainly not the last.

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