

Episode 1:

The Hanged Man

“As his reward for the gift he brought to the people of Serra, he was led deep into the desert, to a place where not even the coyote or the vulture would dare go. There, in that lonely wilderness, his persecutors found a cactus tree as tall as a clocktower and as broad as a barn. They lashed him to this cactus tree, hanging him by the ankle and impaling him upon those spines. They hung him there, and they gathered around to jeer at him, to hurl insults at him, to wipe every last trace of grace and dignity from that noble face. And when they had finally finished, and the sun had disappeared beyond the dark horizon, they walked away and left him there. They returned to their farms and their families. And they forgot all about him.”

- The Good Davride, Book of Repentances, 5:3

“I'm sorry.

I wish there was more I could say. I wish there was more I could do. But there isn't. I did everything I could. I tried everything I could think of. And now, the only thing left for me to do, is apologize.

I'm sorry.

You don't deserve what's to come, none of you do. Even the worst of you are simply children, caught up in the riptide of your passions. Please. Remember what I've taught you. Remember what I've shared with you. And hold on.

Because you just might make it out of here alive.”

— *Jaivuzar Keen*

1

The desert and the sky spread outwards to infinity, reaching endlessly towards the horizon line to meet each other, but never quite touching. No matter how much they yearn for each other, no matter how much they stretch and grasp for one another, they can never truly connect.

Such is the state of affairs witnessed by one Bangles the cowboy. He has watched the desert reach for the stars, and he has watched the night sky alight upon the stones and the sleeping soil. He has watched them dance by the light of the gentle moon. He has watched them blow kisses at each other under the glare of the envious sun. He has lost count of how many times that furious sun has fallen, defeated, extinguished by the futility of his own tumultuous emotions, only to spark awake and rise again a little while later. He has watched the desert grow to silence, untouched by the investigations of birds or the gentle clicking of beetles. He has watched the clouds depart, leaving nothing behind them but empty space. He has watched as the world around him grew more and more still, punctuated only by the blowing of the wind, to which his own lungs have become so synchronized that he can no longer distinguish the whim of nature from his own persistent breath. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale. And sooner or later, these breaths must stop and when they do, Bangles will be taken from this world. He will be taken from the sky and taken from the desert, and he does not know what will replace them. Perhaps nothing will. But whatever it is that comes next, whatever unknowable thing awaits him beyond the void, that is what he longs for more than anything. He knows that someday, when he least expects it, his breaths will come to an end and the story of his life will be over. He knows that this is inevitable. He knows that this is fact, as certain as the fact of the wind. But the wind does not stop, and his breaths do not stop. They keep on. They keep on, and on, and on, and on.

And so Bangles begins to entertain the possibility that he may be immortal. Perhaps he is as old as the desert. He does not remember. He has forgotten how all of this came to be. He knows only that he is. And the longer that he is, the more and more certain he becomes that he will never die.

But for Bangles, this is not an enticing prospect. He longs for an aberration, something to break the monotony of the rhythm of the wind that he breathes. He imagines what it would be like for the sky and the desert to consummate their love. He imagines the pink of the sky mingling feathery edges with the greys and the beiges of the rocks, bleeding their colors together until there was no longer any division between the two. For he would almost prefer the solid blur of unity to the static picture of the horizon. Anything. Anything to break that perfect balance between the sky below, and the desert above.

For Bangles is hanging upside down. He has been, and for so long that the only reason he can remember that the sky is not actually supposed to be below the desert is because of the gentle tug of gravity against his dangling skull and the heavy bovine horns that lay atop his brow. The pull of gravity stretches his cervical vertebrae, prying his occiput from the cradle of muscles that marries his head to his neck. The blood flows down with it, pooling in his brain. And this should kill him, should have killed him long ago. But it doesn't. Bangles keeps right on breathing the wind. Because Bangles is immortal.

He cannot see what he's bound to. He does not know from what he is hanging. But he is definitely curious. Perhaps it is a tree, or a wooden post. Perhaps he has been bound to a spire of stone, an obelisk looming above the desert. Perhaps it is some entirely unexpected construction, some incredible and intricate mystery awaiting his appraisal just outside the periphery of his vision.

The more he ponders it, the more he becomes consumed with the desire to know. He flexes his

wrists: they are weak, and limp, but they are still there, still functional, still bound by a nail through each palm to whatever it is that holds his chest open and spread-eagled. He rolls his ankles around, feeling the uncomfortable tingling numbness of pins and needles that stretches from his toes to his knees. His ankles are pinned by nails as well, but where his left leg extends upward from his torso in a straight line, his right has been crossed over his left, creating a horizontal bar at the terminus of which his right foot has been nailed. He turns his head to the right, and sees nothing but the same endless horizon. He turns his head to the left, only to find more of the same.

"How is it," Bangles says aloud to no one in particular, "That I can be immortal and yet bound up like this? If my body is strong enough to keep on keepin' on for all this 'ternity, well then, my body oughta be strong enough to break these here bonds as well."

And so he pulls against them. He struggles with all of his might to bring his right hand and his left hand to meet in the center above his chest. The challenge fills him with vigor. He does not tire. He only grows stronger, and before long he hears the tearing of his flesh against the nail. Finally, his hands pull free of their bonds, slapping together above his breastbone to mingle their blood with each other. But Bangles is immortal. And so the holes that he has torn in himself to free himself soon fill in with flesh and bone and blood as though the injury had never taken place at all.

With this success under his belt, Bangles takes heart. Feeling newly invigorated – and a little bit feisty – he sets about to pulling his knees towards his chest. Before long, he hears that sound of ripping tendons, and a moment later, he has tumbled to the ground. His face is full of dirt, and he breathes it deep. Until he coughs, his lungs spastically rejecting the intense amount of particulate matter that they are being subjected to. It feels awkward, and uncomfortable, and generally sort of terrible, and Bangles cannot remember the last time he felt this much alive.

Bangles staggers to his feet, slowly recalibrating to life beyond inversion. Before him stands the cactus that had bound him: tall, broad, and vibrantly green. The height of the thing astounds him. Even if he stood on his own shoulders, he wouldn't be able to reach the top of the cactus. Its regal flesh is tantalizingly swollen with water, and in that water, Bangles intuitively senses a great wisdom. But as he pushes his inquisitive fingers into the meat of the thing, the entire cactus crumbles into a pile of thick, chunky dirt.

"Aw, shucks," Bangles says, watching forlornly as the disintegrated cactus begins to blow away in the wind. "But I suppose that's just what I get for graspin' too tight."

As the wind carries off the last remnants of the once-regal cactus to points unknown, it reveals a colossal mountain range atop the southern horizon. Rows upon rows of precipitous triangular peaks reach towards the sky with jealous, beautiful claws, desperately desiring the heavens in ways the desert never could. Bangles is thunderstruck. His pulse quickens as he gazes upon their cold windswept hostility and the murderous elegance of their cliffs. To them, he is nothing more than a tiny ambulatory crumb of preposterous and petulant meat, a speck to be shrugged aside and hurled into the abyss. Even miles and miles away, these ancient stone gods tower over him, bestowing upon him a sense of scale entirely different from the one he'd been accustomed to while facing the other side of the world.

"Boy, I just ain't much at all, am I?" Bangles says.

The mountains agree, in majestic silence.

Faced with little else by way of goals or distractions, Bangles elects to walk towards them. He's had enough of looking at the empty desert. The change of scenery is welcome. And besides, sooner or later he might make his way up into one of those peaks, and then he'll have the lay of the land.

The hike is further than he anticipated, expanding his sense of scale even more dramatically.

"I have found myself in a bigger world than I expected," he says.

But the thing about being immortal is that tiredness no longer applies. Eventually, the sun sets, calling an eerie blue light to itself as it floats gently down to the horizon. It casts that blue light against the western faces of the mountains, illuminating their crags and cravasses. Bangles' heart swells at the sight of it.

"Thank you," he says, fully confident that, one way or another, his gratitude will be heard.

The sky above transforms from pale red to fathomless black, a vast and empty canvas upon which the stars may lay themselves, so that Bangles may investigate them at his leisure. He studies the strange and precise geometry of the constellations, and the wispy haze of galaxies and nebulae. He catalogs the colors of the stars: the simmering reds, the mournful blues, the exuberant yellows. The longer he gazes to them, the more of them he sees, the picture above becoming deeper, and richer, and deeper, and richer. So immersed is he in the celestial that he completely forgets about the ground.

So, perhaps it is only fair that the ground forgets about him. Expecting the support of firm terrain but finding only empty space instead, Bangles' left foot takes the rest of him with it, right over the edge of a cliff.

A long fall, but a minor setback. If he could even call it that. Bangles is, after all, immortal. No part of him breaks that can't be mended (and quickly at that). In fact, this sudden and unexpected variation in topography gives him a bit of a thrill.

"It all just keeps getting more and more interestin'!" Bangles says, though as soon as the words leave his mouth, a hint of a premonition casts a small shadow of unease across his otherwise enthusiastic demeanor. Yet it is nowhere near enough of a premonition to put a halt to Bangles' forward motion. And on he goes.

It is not long before he reaches the next cliff, and this time, he catches himself before he goes plunging over the side of it. He has decided that, this time, he will make the choice of whether or not to take the plunge. However, with all the relevant environmental data obscured by the night, Bangles will have to wait until morning to gather the information he needs to truly make his choice. With nothing much to do until then, Bangles sits down at the cliff's edge, allowing his feet to dangle over the side. His attentions come to rest gently upon the wind, and the comings and goings of breath from his body. Eventually, the sun crests the horizon, and when it does...

"Lord a-mighty!" says Bangles, leaping to his feet.

For the vista stretching out before him is even more beautiful than he could have imagined. Not content to merely organize themselves into desert and mountains, the rocks and the dirt have chosen this place as a showcase for their many experimentations. The world before Bangles is dotted with tall orthogonal buttes and great wide mesas of many shapes and sizes. Long lean fingers of stone point boldly heavenward, rising tall like trees and swaying ever so slightly when the wind picks up. It was the wind that carved them, of course, or was it? Bangles realizes that he is not so sure. Water also carves, but there is no water anywhere to be seen. Beyond these monuments to nature's improvisations, the land to the south rises and swells into soft curvaceous hills, hills that trade their smoothness for size the closer they get to those mighty southern mountains. Bangles edges closer to the cliff's edge, peering down to see how high up he is. He is much higher than expected. There are canyons and valleys far down below him, some of them so deep that he cannot see their bottoms. The topography of everything gets even deeper when he turns his head to the west, dropping precipitously in altitude. It really just keeps going, and going. There is so much beauty here saturating his eyes, that Bangles must dilate his very soul in order to process it all. He can't help but swoon a little, though he is careful not to swoon so much that he surrenders his choice to gravity. In fact, he has made his choice, at least for the time being. He has decided to take a moment to sit back down and enjoy this view.

As he sits and as he enjoys, the wind sings a song to him. It is a song that Bangles has heard many times before, during his tenure as prisoner of the cactus, and yet it is so much more beautiful to his ears now that it is accompanied by the frozen rhythms of the stones and the mountains and the hills. But as Bangles listens more and more closely to the song of the wind, he hears something moving inside of it that has never been there before. His ears perk up at the distant rumbling. It sounds like a far-off avalanche, but it is not an avalanche, for it is too sweet and too steady to be the haphazard tumbling of boulders. And it is getting closer. The sound is coming in low from the east. Listening carefully, Bangles realizes that it will be passing down beneath him in a matter of moments. He drops

to all fours and crawls to the cliff's edge, peering down into the depths beyond. To his great surprise, Bangles spies a railroad track far below him: a repeating pattern of little dark scratches hugging so close to the side of the steep cliff that he could not see it at all while he was standing. And running along this track there is a Train, a Train that sings an intriguing song but a Train so far away that Bangles can hardly see it. There is only one way for him to get a closer look. With a smile on his face, Bangles rises to his feet and makes his choice.

It's a long way to fall, offering Bangles a few moments to study and appreciate the Train as he draws near. The Train is tall, long, and mighty. The Train is proud and perfect. The Train is divine, as divine as anything manufactured could ever be. And it keeps getting larger and larger as Bangles falls closer and closer. Now he's able to make out some of the details. A chitinous armor of rich ruddy bronze encases the engine and all the cars that follow behind. Elegant golden railings ornament the rooves. Opaque windows – of an indigo blue so deep and so dark as to be almost mistaken for black – run in steady rows along the side of every car. Jealously, the sun adds its mark to each and every glistening surface. But the Train is more than just a beautiful sight: it is also a beautiful sound. It sings with the purposefulness of an angel, every screaming piece of it attenuated into a perfect harmony. It is choir and orchestra in one, a driving chord that never pauses for breath. Wherever this Train is going, it is getting there with a perfect balance of style and purpose, a mixture so potent that nothing can slow it down. Atop the relentless forward momentum of its many wheels, the power of The Train is effortless: because it is will power.

Bangles' jaw hangs open. His eyes bulge. His heart throbs. It all excites him so much, that he can't help but grab onto his own horns. By sheer accident, he has stumbled into a perfect trajectory, plummeting directly towards the roof of the Train, drawn towards the newly christened object of his affections as if by some intangible magnetism. There is not much time left. He is arriving.

2

It all fell apart so fast. So, so fast.

When Feska Pisces was born, the planet Serra was full of life. As a small child, she would sit in the meadow amidst the wildflowers, as little honeybees buzzed around and fluttering butterflies tickled her horns and her fingertips. There were forests then, with trees so high that little Feska could not see the tops of them, even if she leaned all the way back. She would wander through the forest clutching her mother's hand, with the family puppy (her name was Coco) running along side them. Young Feska breathed deep of pine needles and flower pollen, exhilarated by every little rustle of movement in the underbrush. Her mother would take her through the forest and down to the beach, and the two of them would sit with Coco amongst the driftwood and gaze out into the vast and peaceful ocean. Walking along the waves at sunset, little Feska would squeeze her mother's hand and smile as she watched the sun melt into the sea in a cloud of pinks and purples. Everything was perfect, and that's just how it was, every single day.

It only took fifteen years to completely destroy it.

In fact, it was almost fifteen years ago exactly when the ecologists first noticed something was wrong. Ocean levels were receding. Deserts were spreading. Pollen counts were down. Animal species were becoming endangered and then extinct at a baffling pace. As the seas drained down and down, the people of Serra did whatever they could to preserve the seed of life, building dams and desalinization plants to conserve water in the face of planetwide droughts and ecological devastation. But the world only got drier. More and more people began moving to the coastline, and as the coastline pulled further and further away from them, they followed it, down into the depths of canyons and trenches that had not seen the sun in centuries.

It was a natural exodus, one inevitable in retrospect, as the wind storms blowing dust around over what had once been grasslands, prairies, and forests made living at continent level almost unbearable. But down in the canyons and valleys left behind by the evaporating oceans, there was cover from the dust storms, and the promise of the occasional glimmer of water. But soon that promise was gone as well, and after a while, there was no more sense in searching. The oceans were gone. What little water the Serrans had left was all the water they had. It was all over. And fifteen years was all it took.

The nomadic refugees displaced by the environmental disaster quickly set about to consolidating what little water they had left, building dams and reservoirs, and then cities to surround those dams and reservoirs. They built high walls to protect their water from bands of savage marauders, and transparent domes to encapsulate their new cities and shield them from the dust storms while still allowing the sun to shine down through. They built railroads to stay connected, sending supplies by train down to the new frontier. Panarza is what they had called the continent upon which Feska was born. But most of the Panarzans had chased the ocean west, and had come to live in a vast topographical bowl in the exposed ocean floor, dubbed by unimaginative (or perhaps passionately optimistic) cartographers as New Panarza. Further back up the coast of Old Panarza was the city of Astralo, nestled amidst the volcanic mountains that overlooked what had once been a beach. It is the only populated city left in Old Panarza. Further west, the migrants had found a great ravine impeding any further progress, a cliff so steep and so dizzyingly high that the migrants took to calling it the Edge

of the World. The city they built there they called Spirena.

Astralo and Spirena, the eastern and westernmost poles of Panarza Old and New, are now the two largest cities left on the continent, but there are many others that lie between them. Or there had been.

Unfortunately, not all the different races of Serra were willing to band together in a brave new world. If they weren't going to set aside generations of racial animosity when things were easy, then they certainly weren't going to do it when things were hard. Feska wants to be angry at them. She wants to blame them, but really, she can't. When home and family are slipping through your fingers like dust, you'll latch on to anything hard and firm and hang on for dear life. And if the only rock left to you is hatred, then so be it.

Feska was born on the west coast of (Old) Panarza, but even when Panarza was full of life, it was never really hers. Feska is Hegovarian. All it takes is one glance at the pair of horns on her forehead to confirm it. Though her beige tan and her long tawny hair are also strong indicators. As is the density of her bone structure. And the fullness of her breasts. Feska is a Hegovarian, and though she was born here, in Panarza, the Hegovarian people are settlers on this continent. Hegovaria, their ancestral home, is somewhere down south, across what was once the Wandering Ocean. Feska has never been to Hegovaria. All she knows of that place is what she learned in school. Hegovaria is cold. Hegovaria is big. Hegovaria has had countless wars.

Before they settled in Panarza, the Hegovarians battled each other, for centuries. But in Panarza, they found a new enemy. A better enemy. The indigenous Xilas (a word Feska could never quite pronounce, her clumsy Hegovarian tongue incapable of the sibilant consonants unique to the Xila language) fought savagely against the foreign invaders. In fact, they still do. Even in the halcyon days of Feska's childhood, Xila *tavs* would raid the small farming enclaves outside the city walls. And it was even worse further to the east and to the south. The only way for a Hegovarian town to survive the vengeful Xilas was a good solid wall. Anything less than that, and it was only a matter of time before the next attack.

Altama: it's the name of the town in New Panarza that Feska now lives in, and the word is their word. It means "bowl shaped by two hands" in the Xila tongue, a reference to the nestled little pocket amongst the canyons in which it is located. When the Hegovarians first settled here, the Xilas had promised they would eat the Altamans like soup from a bowl. So the Hegovarians took the name to spite them, and, lo and behold, this little refugee town had endured for over a decade. The Xilas came to their gates now, not as marauders but as beggars, and in greater and greater numbers all the time. With them come the rumors, whispers about a sorceror queen called the Venri Khocue. To Feska, it sounds like a bunch of superstitious Xila nonsense. After all, Xilas are people who sleep in the dirt and think that the wind talks to them. Feska rejects Xilas, and any frightening stories they might bring with them.

In fact, Feska has also rejected Altama. For that matter, she has also rejected Serra. She has rejected this entire world. She has rejected everything beneath the stars. Every barren stone, every windswept hollow, and every spark of life foolish enough to glisten here only to be snuffed out. Feska has rejected Serra, and why not? Serra has rejected her. Serra has deprived her of the green grass she used to lie in. Serra has deprived her of the clouds she once gazed upon, and the blue sky through which those clouds had floated. Serra has deprived her of her mother and her father's embrace. Serra took her puppy away.

"Fuck Serra," Feska says. "And fuck everything else."

They hear her, but most of her friends do not acknowledge her. Feska mutters this kind of thing all the time. Her friends don't really have a response worth offering. But Feska suspects that most of them feel the same way that she does, whether or not they say anything about it.

The six of them are sitting in a bar on Valley Road, which intersects the western end of Commerce Street. There are many bars on Commerce Street as well. But Feska and her friends prefer

the bars on Valley Road. As dark, sticky, and bleak as the bars on Commerce Street are, the bars on Valley Road somehow manage to be darker, stickier, and bleaker. This particular bar is called Nowhere, and for this reason and this reason alone, it is Feska's favorite. The walls (assembled from the cast-off components of old trains and bound into some semblance of structural unity with canvas tarps) have been spray-painted black. The toilet seat is encrusted with a permanent veneer of vomit. And often enough, somebody dies here. It is a perfectly nihilistic ambience.

But Feska is not savoring the ambience. She's looking out the window. It is the only window in the entire establishment, and it is all the way in the back of the bar, past the bathroom doors, in a little nook that Feska and her cynical associates have commandeered as their own. Occasionally, they enter Nowhere to find that somebody else is sitting at their table. In those instances, the interlopers are quickly removed. Canda's been dating this guy Mickey for a little while, and Mickey has the unsettling confidence of a man who does not blink at homicide. He's not the biggest Hego, but he's muscular, and he keeps his hair short, which makes him look like a Penetrator, or some other branch of law enforcement. People tend not to argue with Mickey, or the gun on his hip. But today, the interlopers were three Xilas, with their ruddy skin, their wild hair, their dark sparkling eyes, and their long dirty claws marking up the place where Feska likes to set her drink. Xilas are stronger and much faster than Hegovarians, which means there is no margin for error, and thus no arguments and no warning shots.

"Don't do it," Feska had softly spoken, as she watched Mickey's hand go to the gun at his hip. But what could she do to stop him? What could she possibly say to change his twisted mind?

Then he shot the interlopers dead – pop, pop, pop – one bullet through the head for each of them.

Which means that the three dead Xila boys were no warriors. If they had been, Mickey's throat would have been slashed after the second shot, if not the first. But Feska suspects that Mickey was well aware of the boys they had been before he'd even drawn his gun.

Of course, then there was this whole issue of removing the bodies, which nobody wanted to do. Mickey was not about to clean up his own mess, and so it was up to the other two boys to drag the bodies out the fire exit and into the dumpster in the alleyway. There's Anford, who is badly in need of a shave that will never happen, and Julian (a new addition who has been hanging around Feska quite a bit lately, hanging around but not saying much of anything, as though his continued presence alone might somehow convince her to uncross her legs). These are people that Feska tolerates for practical reasons. Anford consistently acquires good *kek* and provides her with a place to use it in. Julian deters other males from investigating Feska's personal space. He's a docile creature, but he has an intimidating look – an enormous upper body, a thick nose, a heavy brow.

Now she's sitting in a chair still warm from the body of the young man who died in it, looking out the window into the alleyway. She's not looking at the dumpster, or thinking about the bodies stashed away inside it. Xila lives don't mean a thing to the city authorities. People die all the time in Altama. And then, more refugees come and replace them. Refugees, perhaps, are the only sustainable organic resource left in New Panarza. For now.

"Fuck New Panarza," says Feska. "And fuck Altama."

"What's on your mind, dear?" Scarlie inquires, under the pretense of compassion. Scarlie is wearing a red dress that sparkles and too much eyeshadow, and Feska likes that, because it means that people will look at Scarlie and not at her.

"Do you really care?" Feska murmurs back.

"No," Scarlie replies, sighing as she does so. "But I'd rather listen to you than those two."

"How long have you known him?" Mickey demands, with far too much gravitas.

"Longer than I've known you," Anford says. He would roll his eyes, were he not justifiably afraid of Mickey Altar.

"What's his name?" Mickey asks. "His *real* name," he adds.

"I've bought from him before, I'll buy from him again," Anford insists. "He has good product. I

trust him.”

“No,” says Mickey, his handsome features contorting into a sneer. “I don't trust him at all.”

“Why not?” Anford asks, a strategic error. Offering to understand Mickey's point of view is tantamount to surrender.

“I saw him talking to Jeriko Lodi. That guy's a piece of shit,” says Mickey.

“That's what a good *kek* seller does,” Anford explains. “They negotiate with the gross pieces of shit, so I don't have to.”

“There's a better way,” Mickey says, smiling mischievously in an attempt to come across as enigmatic. He comes across as arrogant.

“No, there isn't,” Anford counters. “*Kek* sellers are either total scuzzballs, Commuters, or both. And I'm not about to buy from Zoans.”

Which is largely because Zoan Commuters, principled in their own strange way, refuse to sell *kek* to nihilistic cynics like Anford, or Feska, or any of their crew. Feska had seen one of the amphibians on her way to Nowhere that evening, standing on a street corner, watching and waiting. In a world so dry and devoid of color, it's hard not to stare at the mottled purple skin of a Zoan. But stare too long, of course, and she risks having the teachings of Jaivuzar Keen inflicted upon her. Feska is not one for religion, and certainly not one for the relentlessly optimistic go-getter lifestyle of a Commuter.

“So you'd risk her life,” Mickey says, tilting his head towards Scarlie. “Or hers. Or hers,” he says, giving skinny pale Canda a squeeze, but staring at Feska. Mickey often stares at Feska, which often gives Feska the urge to put on more clothes.

“It's *kek*,” says Anford. “It's always a risk, no matter where it comes from. That's half the fun...”

“That doesn't mean -” Mickey starts.

“Fine!” Canda shouts, cutting him off. “Fine, Mick! You wanna buy for everyone tonight, you can! You don't have to jerk us around with all this sideways bullshit. Just offer to buy the shit, and then buy it!”

“What's your problem?” Mickey asks, with the infuriating serenity of a man who thrives on pushing other people's buttons.

Canda restrains herself from speaking any further. As do the rest of them.

“Well, fine,” Mickey says. He reaches into his pocket, pulls out two small plastic bags filled with dark powder, and deposits them on the table. “But I never offered to pay for any of you. This is the limit of my generosity.”

Feska looks at the bags and knows immediately that the powder inside is poison. And not in the traditional sense. Enough *zelia* could kill anyone, especially one of the stronger strains. Feska herself has overdosed and been revived on several occasions. It's enough to make her wonder whether or not it's really possible for her to die. But when she looks at these bags that Mickey has placed before them, she knows immediately that they have been cut with poison. Real poison. This knowledge is clearer than intuition, and more real than any fact culled from a book. But there's no point in her sharing this knowledge with anyone. Since adolescence, the future has come to Feska in drips and drabs, popping into her consciousness at inopportune moments. She has learned not to share these portents with anyone. People have a tendency to overreact, and that's more of a hassle than Feska can manage.

Anford opens one of the bags, releasing the intoxicating floral scent of the *zelia* powder into their little nook. He holds the bag under his nose and takes a cautious sniff. “Wow, that's potent,” he says, a beatific smile spreading across his face. “If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were tryin' to kill us.”

“He is,” Feska whispers, too softly for anyone to hear.

“If you want the good shit, you have to know where to look. You can't just settle,” Mickey lectures.

“And where *did* you find this, exactly?” Julian asks.

“Excuse me?” Mickey snaps, taking offense.

"Where'd you get the *kek*?" Julian asks again, more quietly this time.

"Fucking narco rat piece of shit," Mickey says, pushing his chair back as he stands up. "Who the fuck do you think you are?"

Julian does not answer. He looks down at his cup, his lip trembling a little bit as he holds back the urge to speak.

"Well?" Mickey demands.

"I don't know how to answer that question," Julian says.

"Oh, you don't? You don't know how? Am I being too complicated for you?" Mickey says, mockingly. "You're a fucking narco. Only a narco would ask where it came from."

"You're a bastard," Canda snaps at him. "And you ruin everything you touch."

Mickey puts a hand over his heart and pretends to look hurt. "I'm just trying to keep you safe," he says. "All of you," he adds, glancing over at Feska again.

"Please," Feska mutters. "Don't bother."

Anford finishes his glass of synthetic brandy, and tosses the empty cup onto the floor. "Well. I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm ready to move on to the next stage of tonight's festivities."

Outside, the sky is dark. Above the transparent dust shield that encapsulates the city, half the moon looks down on Altama with a mixture of concern and curiosity. The streets are blue beneath her light. Refugees of all four Serran races walk the narrow crowded streets, most huddled inside their coats. The newer refugees stand out because they keep looking around, as though they might catch sight of a lost friend or family member. But the refugees like Feska that have been there for a while don't look at anything at all. They just walk, their eyes fixated on the dusty path in front of them, hoping like hell that nobody tries to talk to them.

The five of them travel down a few rows of hastily assembled homes with tin rooves and broken windows. Each of these homes started as a tent pulled from a refugee's knapsack. And once the refugee who pitched that tent realized that this home would be more permanent than originally anticipated, they began to build out a little bit. Repairing. Reinforcing. Maybe even decorating a little. They draw electricity from solar-powered generator boxes scattered throughout the city, and fresh water rations from shipments that periodically come through on the train. The communal sewers are just holes in the ground. What little there is passing for a governing body to oversee the welfare of Altama has given up on any kind of permanent infrastructure. Feska can understand why. The desert is littered with the wreckage of fallen cities. When the wall went up around Altama, nobody expected the little refugee camp to last more than a year. And yet, somehow, it has managed to outlive almost every other little refugee camp in New Panarza.

The walk back to Anford and Scarlie's encampment is a short one. But any interval of time in which Feska has to coexist with strangers passing by on the street is, by default, a longer interval than it ought to be. Feska is a tall and beautiful woman, with an enormous mane of tawny hair, and as such, she draws stares from men anywhere she goes. Once upon a time, she had tried to evade those stares by cutting her hair, but the men had kept right on staring – only now it was her breasts they were staring at. That had felt worse, so she had grown her hair back out, letting it fall down over her shoulders to cover her chest.

That's why she does not swat Julian's hand away when he takes hers. She allows her hand to hang limply in his grasp, but not because of any particular affection she might have for him. Julian is handsome, but he's also shy and boring, and on the rare occasions when he actually opens his mouth to speak, his naivete makes Feska cringe. But when he stands next to her on the street and holds her hand, she becomes noticeably more invisible to the other men passing by, and that is a great relief.

Which is why it's so jarring when she hears the words: "Yer lookin' perty today, ma'am."

She turns her head a little. The compliment has come from a disheveled Hego bum, sitting on a pile of raggedy blankets in the doorway of what used to be a bank (a relic of a time when people

planned for the future). The bum's eyes are youthful, but his beard has gone grey prematurely, and when he smiles, Feska notices an unusual number of missing teeth. Feska has nothing to say to him. She just keeps walking.

"Whore!" the bum shouts after her, his obsequiousness evaporating almost instantly. "Stuck-up cunt! Yeah, you jus' keep walkin'! I know where *you're* goin'."

"Don't," says Feska, but her soft little voice is nowhere near enough to stop Mickey from pistol whipping the bum. She watches him bring the grip of the handgun down again and again on the bum's skull. She watches the bum try and fail to shield himself with his arms. She watches the pleasure glinting in Mickey's predatory eyes. All of it makes her sick. She wishes she were somewhere else. But there's nowhere else to go.

"You're welcome," Mickey says to her, once he's finished.

But Feska's not stupid. She knows it's not about her. She glares at Canda, who has been silently watching the entire tableau with her slender arms crossed. Canda and Feska have been friends for a couple of years now, which has been more than enough time for Feska to learn that Canda is a magnet for the worst kind of men. For the first few months of their friendship, Feska had pitied Canda, had punished her with dozens of condescending lectures. After one of those lectures, Feska had gotten high and stayed up all night thinking about her own hypocrisy in the situation. What bonded Feska and Canda together was a mutual conviction in the worthlessness of their own lives. Feska joined her with as much enthusiasm as she could muster in their shared pasttime of slow suicide by *kek*. What made suicide by bad boyfriend any different?

A few nights after that little epiphany, Feska had watched another of Canda's boyfriends get loud and drunk and violent while everyone else was just trying to enjoy their highs. In that moment, Feska realized exactly what made suicide by bad boyfriend different: it was an inconvenience to her. And from then on, it was hard for her to look at Canda as anything but an inconvenience. But cutting ties would be harder, and so Feska says nothing. She just glares.

But of the several bad boyfriends that Canda has dated in the two years in which Feska has known her, Mickey is the worst, because he is the most inconvenient. He looks at Feska too much. He talks at her too much. Occasionally, he puts his hand on her shoulder, and she can't help but notice that his skin is cold and hard, like a reptile's. She is genuinely surprised that he has gone this long without putting his gun to her head, marching her into some dark corner, and just taking whatever he wanted. She wouldn't put up a fight. Fighting would only make it worse. But Mickey, like a lot of delusional Hegovarian boys, imagines himself to be a gentleman.

The six of them arrive back at Anford and Scarlie's place, which is a home only in the sense that it has four walls, a roof, and a door, and the two of them tend to sleep there. There's no furniture really, only a couple of lumpy mattresses wrapped in sheets that have not ever been washed. Everything else has been sold. There is no stereo, that's been sold as well. The only decorations on the canvas walls are holes in the fabric (all of them torn by Mickey) and a few stains on the already septic green material. Feska sits down in a pile of dirty laundry unlikely to ever be washed. Some part of her is concerned that a rat might dart out of the pile and scurry across her ankles as she sits down, but she reassures herself with the fact that all the rats are dead and gone. Julian sits down on the floor next to her like an obedient puppy, but Feska does not acknowledge him. The last thing she wants is for him to try to make conversation. He's not very interesting, and while he is handsome, he is not handsome enough for Feska to pretend that he's interesting.

"I'll be right back," says Mickey. "I just remembered some loose ends that need tying up. Gimme the money, and get my pipe ready. I'm not goin' far, I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Yeah, yeah," someone says. Nobody's really listening to Mickey. The other five of them are fixated on the black powder in the little plastic bags, their minds empty of any other thoughts.

Mickey collects the money he's owed and disappears, much to everyone's relief. Anford lays out three stone pipes on the floor: one for Scarlie and himself, one for Mickey, and one for everyone else.

Anford and Scarlie need a separate pipe, because they like to mix *cotcha* leaf in with their *zelia* (a disorienting combination unpopular with most *kek* users). And Mickey needs a separate pipe, because for Mickey, exceptionalism is the rule.

As Scarlie distributes the black powder into the three pipes, the floral perfume of the *zelia* fills Feska's nostrils, obscuring the otherwise stale atmosphere of the room. Centuries ago, the Zoans had used *zelia* to treat aches and pains. Then, once the feather-headed Naraeans had enslaved the Zoans, they found out about the *zelia* plant, and many of them promptly became addicted to it. In the sort of hysterical over-reaction typical of their race, the Naraeans had banned the use and cultivation of *zelia* for hundreds of years. But now, the world is ending, and *zelia* has found a resurgence of use amongst the Hegovarrians. Resistant to overdose, but not to dependency, the Hegovarrians turned an obscure floral analgesic into one of the most widely traded substances in Panarza.

Feska loves *zelia*. She loves how it smells. She loves the gentle taste of the smoke. And she loves the way that smoke fills the void in the center of her body. When she takes a drag from the *zelia* pipe, everything inside of her that's cold and hard and empty fills with something warm and soft. She stops being lonely, because loneliness ceases to matter. She stops being afraid, because fear comes from not knowing and the *zelia* tells her all the things she needs to know. Best of all, *zelia* does not play with her mind the way *cotcha* does. There are no paranoid fantasies. There are no creative inspirations. There is only peace. *Zelia* is as close as Feska can get to dying without actually dying.

Though the possibility of an overdose is always there, slim though it may be. Feska watches Scarlie sprinkle something extra into one of the bowls, and it doesn't look like *cotcha*.

"What are you doing?" Feska asks.

"Making a little something extra," Scarlie replies in an innocent sing-song. "For Mickey."

"Oh," says Feska. "Are you going to kill him?"

Scarlie just looks at her and smiles.

"Good," says Feska. "What do you think?" she asks Canda, who has plopped down on the floor next to Feska.

"Whatever," Canda says, with a shrug. But Feska knows better. She can see the nervous way Canda's fingers pluck at the seam of her pant leg. Canda doesn't want to be alone. But she'll be dead soon anyway, and being lonely won't matter anymore.

The two men have no objections to poisoning Mickey. Scarlie finishes preparing the pipes. She sets Mickey's poisoned dose off to the side, and hands one to Julian while lifting her own to her lips. The little room fills quickly with pale grey smoke, and Feska begins to feel weightless and drifty, as though she were being lifted and cast about in an invisible current of water. Again and again, her lungs fill with that invisible water, and in that suffocation, Feska finds bliss. She feels her muscles relax. Her shoulders drop away from her ears. The fronts of her hips open up. And she stops feeling that nagging pain in her right wrist, the one she gets from masturbating too often. Mickey's stash is good. Not great, but definitely good. She passes the pipe around a few times with Julian and Canda before the three of them start to get sleepy. Canda nods off with the pipe in her hand, and Feska pries it away gently. Inhaling deeply, she offers it to Julian, but he's unconscious as well, slumped over on the floor. Indifferent, Feska sits on the pipe for a while, puffing idly, and thinking about nothing. And for a brief and beautiful moment, she is content with everything, exactly the way it is.

Through lidded eyes, she gazes across the room at Scarlie and Anford heaped atop a mattress, but they are also unconscious. The pipe has tumbled from Anford's grasp, and dumped its smoldering contents onto the dirty threadbare carpet, adding another scorch mark to a legion of scorch marks. They're dead now. All of them are dead. All of them but Feska.

Feska's disappointed, and a little surprised. Some part of her had hoped she'd die with them. Slowly, she rolls out of the pile of rags in which she is sitting and gets onto her knees. Yes, she's still alive. She still has a body, with motor control and everything. She reaches out and places an unsteady hand on Canda's throat, beneath the angle of her jaw. Feska isn't sure, but she thinks that this might be

how one checks a pulse. She finds nothing. Now she places her hand on Julian's throat. There's nothing there either. She shoves him, with what little strength she can muster, but he doesn't move. His body is completely limp. She pulls open his eyelids and looks into his pinprick pupils.

"Julian," she says, but there's no response. Feska touches her hand to her own throat, and yes, there it is, a pulse throbbing away beside her sternocleidomastoid muscle.

She looks around the room, searching for something to rest her eyes upon that is not one of her dead friends. But there are no pictures in here, no furniture, only shadows. So it is to the shadows that her awareness drifts, and it is there that she realizes the shadows are alive. And they are growing. She stares into the blackness, and it's deep, deeper than any well and longer than any hallway. The darkness is hungry and its belly is infinite. And it has found her. Her body tries and fails to awaken her with a surge of adrenaline. It is not enough to overpower the *kek*. Feska tries to scream, but she cannot. All she hears is the airy rasping of her vocal cords.

A boot collides with the door of the apartment, and it swings open, banging against the wall. Mickey strides in, a look of sick satisfaction on his face. Behind him, a squad of armed men covered head to toe in black pour into the room. The men in black set about to loading the bodies of Feska's friends into big black bags with hazmat symbols printed on the side. It's all happening faster than Feska's sedated mind can process.

"What's going on?" she asks, or tries to. What actually comes out of her mouth is something more like: "Wha... wha... hunh?"

"You're alive," says Mickey.

Dumbfounded, Feska can only nod.

Mickey smirks. "I always knew you were special," he says.

3

It's a rough landing, to say the least. Bangles has hit his target, and that's the most important thing. However, he has also hit a slender golden railing running horizontally across the roof of the train car. This railing, slenderness notwithstanding, has turned out to be unusually blessed with a profound degree of structural integrity. Now the top half of Bangles lies on one side of the rail, while his bottom half lies on the other. A temporary setback. Within moments, his separated halves have reconciled, and he's standing up and looking around. Or he would be, if not for all the dust riding the wind directly into his eyeballs.

"Shucks," he says, but opening his mouth only serves to let in more dust.

So when another being collides with him on the roof of the train car, one cannot entirely blame Bangles for being caught off guard, blinded as he is. But that does not stop the young fellow with whom he has collided from saying a few choice words.

"Hey, watchit, watchit, watchit," he says, in a thick accent that Bangles cannot quite place. Though muffled, there's a certain vibrant and musical quality to the strange fellow's voice.

"My apologies, good sir!" says Bangles, genuinely rueful. "I'd tip my hat to you, but it seems that I've lost it."

"We ain' got no time for this!" says the Stranger, who just happens to be wearing a most fantastic outfit. It's a one-piece suit of deep dark turquoise, streaked with iridescent threads poking through a thin layer of dust to catch the light of the morning sun overhead. He wears a turquoise hood over his face, goggles over his eyes, and a bandanna over his mouth and nose, rendering his features completely hidden. Around his waist and both shoulders, he sports a trio of utility belts laden with pouches of various shapes and sizes. His boots and gloves seem hard, yet lightweight and flexible. Bangles notices a lot of excess fabric dangling from the Stranger's sleeves, almost like a cape. The whole affair is riddled with slim pliable tubes, all of which connect back to a pair of tanks mounted on his back. Clearly distressed by something or other, the Stranger leaps to his feet, and keeps on running down the train, his metal tanks bouncing up and down on his back.

"Hey!" Bangles calls after him. "Where could a fella like me get some clothes like that?"

Which is when the next couple of folks collide with Bangles, hurling back onto the floor of the train. These two – wide thick men, with wide thick horns atop their wide thick heads – have bandannas and goggles as well. They also have nets and guns and fancy black sticks, and although Bangles does not recognize the uniform they are wearing, he knows lawmen when he sees them.

"What'n blazes?" the bigger of the two lawmen says, picking himself up and dusting himself off. "Boy, where'n hell're yer clothes?"

Bangles looks down. It's true. Compared to everyone else he has met today, he is woefully underdressed. "I can't say I recall," says Bangles, with sincerity.

"Idjit," the shorter of the two lawmen says, scowling as he picks the black staff he'd dropped up from the roof of the train. "*Kek*-lickin' brain-dead miscreant!"

"I don't know what half those things are," says Bangles.

"Damn fool," the larger of the two lawmen (whom Bangles has tacitly dubbed Officer Big Ugly) says, pulling down his bandanna so he can spit.

"I do know what that is," Bangles says.

"Do you know what this is?" asks Officer Short Stuff, brandishing his staff. The end of the thing

crackles with electricity.

"Magick wand?" Bangles asks.

Short Stuff jabs the staff into Bangles' ribs. The electric shock makes the naked cowboy jump about a foot in the air, and before he can land, Big Ugly has slapped handcuffs on his wrist and chained Bangles to the same railing that complicated his leap only a few moments before.

"Wait here!" Short Stuff yells.

"Okay," says Bangles, immediately opting out of the handcuffs.

But the officers of the law don't stick around to watch Bangles' escape act. They're off and running down the roof of the train, chasing after the mysterious Stranger with the metal tanks on his back. Bangles watches them and their little drama on top of the caboose (partially because facing the rear of the train means sparing his eyes an endless stream of little particles of airborne dust). The Stranger crouches at the very end of the train, his arms spread out to either side. He leaps into the air and takes flight, but he's too late. The lawmen snare him with their nets and drag him back onto the train, squirming and kicking, all the way back to where Bangles is supposed to be imprisoned.

"Well now," Short Stuff says, panting a little as he catches his breath. "Two Commuters. Two weasely scruffy no-good Commuters. Well, I got bad news for ya, boys. With all the crimes you been out there committin', I'm a-feared the only penalty fit to give y'all is a shot to the head and a shot to the foot. One each. So who's... gonna get the head..." he says, checking his gun to make sure there's a bullet in the chamber. There is. "And who's... gonna get the foot?"

"Okay," says Bangles, raising the hand that is supposed to be chained to the railing (though it does not appear that his escape has yet registered with either lawman). "I volunteer. To be the one that gets shot in the head."

To Bangles' consternation, the other three look at him as though he is crazy. Bangles is quite certain that he is not crazy at all, that he is, in fact, being perfectly logical. But sanity – quite unlike insanity – is not the kind of thing that can be conveyed easily in one or two brief sentences.

"Hang on, hang on, hang on," pleads the Stranger. "What about a trial? What about law and order? We'd like to plead our case."

"What'd he say?" Short Stuff asks Big Ugly.

"He says he wants a trial," says Big Ugly. "He says he wants law and order."

"Well, now, that's what I thought I heard, but gosh, it don't make a lick o' sense," says Short Stuff. "And it certainly don't sound fair. Now... he and I?" he says, waving the barrel of the gun back and forth between Big Ugly's chins and his own. "*We're* law and order. It is our duty to be fair and just. So, we're gonna look at this here situation in a fair and just manner. Sound good?"

"Why, of course!" says Bangles.

"Oh, come on!" grumbles the Stranger.

"It's alright!" says Bangles, in an effort to be reassuring. "They said they're going to be fair!"

"They said they're gonna kill us!" says the Stranger.

"They said they'd kill *one* of us," Bangles corrects him.

"Yeah," says the Stranger, pointing to himself. "Us!"

"Now hang on just a minute," says Short Stuff. "Let's all jus' stop and lookit the facts, 'fore jumpin' to any conclusions. Now, y'all are both Commuters, and that is the first o' yer offenses," he says, counting the first crime on his finger. "Y'all have that much in common. Ridin' the Train without a ticket – and not just any Train, mind you, but Champagne Charlie, the Southwest Chariot, the finest Train to ever grace these here tracks – now that's a second offense. A *serious* second offense. Now you..." he says, indicating Bangles with three outstretched fingers. "You have committed a third crime, and that is the ill-conceived notion that you can be runnin' 'round here with no pants on."

"If any of y'all have an extra pair of pants, I'd be more than happy to put 'em on," Bangles offers.

"But *you*, on the other hand," says Short Stuff, ignoring Bangles and turning to the Stranger

instead. "In addition to yer Commuting, you have committed the crime o' *kek*-peddlin'. Far more serious than failin' to conceal one's shame in public."

"Now, I can't say I'm ashamed of anythin'," says Bangles.

"Maybe ya should be," says Big Ugly, sneering.

"Hey, now, we think y'all could stand to be a lot more open-minded about *kek*," the Stranger interjects.

"Yer destroyin' the brains of the young and impressionable!" roars Big Ugly.

"We don't destroy anyone's brains," the Stranger insists calmly. "They've juzz been enhanced beyond repair."

"And there's more!" says Short Stuff, running out of fingers upon which to count crimes.

"Along with the crime o' Commutin', and the crime o' *kek*-peddlin', you have also committed the crime o' bein' a Zoan."

"A what?" asks Bangle.

Short Stuff yanks back the Stranger's hood and pulls off his bandanna, revealing a person quite unlike any person Bangles can ever recall meeting. The parts of the Stranger's face that Bangles can see alternate colors in vivid bands of fuchsia and yellow mottling. The Stranger does not have a nose, though he does have a couple nostrils on either side of a gentle lump that sort of approximates one. Along the sides of his neck and the top of his head, splaying webs of membranous fins flop about in the wind. Yet as foreign as the Stranger seems to Bangles, it's still clear from his features that he is a young and handsome fellow with an undeniable spark of consciousness bouncing around inside him.

"Well, ain't you a sight!" Bangles says.

"Hey *ling*, fuck you," says the Stranger, hurt.

"No, no, I'm not pokin' fun! I mean, yeah, I was real surprised at first. But I'm already 'customed to the surprise, and now, I just think yer real purty!" Bangles says, and the two lawmen share a cruel laugh.

"Nah, *ling*, you're, uh... not exactly our type," says the Stranger.

"No, I don't mean, like, sexy-like purty, I mean like work-of-art-like purty," says Bangles.

"Okay," says the Stranger. "That we can work with."

"Yer right," says Short Stuff, clicking off the safety on his handgun. "He is real purty. Maybe when I'm done with 'im, I'll mount 'im on my wall." He points the gun at the back of the Stranger's head, but Bangles puts his hand over the barrel of the gun. "Wut the bloomin' hell are you doin'?" says Short Stuff, his sense of humor rapidly evaporating.

"I don't really care much for violence," says Bangles.

"Too bad," says Short Stuff, pulling the trigger.

The back of Bangles' hand distends, pushed backwards by the force of the bullet. But the bullet is unable to penetrate the flesh of his hand, becoming caught amongst the tendons and carpal bones instead. Bangles' hand returns casually back to its previous shape. Holding up the bullet, Bangles offers it to Short Stuff.

"A souvenir," he says.

"Fuck you," says Short Stuff, turning the gun on Bangles. But instead of pulling the trigger, he just stands there, sweating and trembling. "Whugh. Mergh, merghugh," he says, struggling to move his mouth to speak.

"Are you alright?" Bangles asks, but he gets no response. "Is he alright?" he asks Big Ugly, but Big Ugly can only groan, apparently afflicted by the same mysterious force. "Are they alright?" he asks the Stranger, who is moving his hands in strange and powerful ways. His left hand slides up and down on a vertical axis, while his right approaches and retreats from the left in a circular motion.

"They're fine," says the Stranger. "They're juzz having a close encounter with gravity."

"How long're they gonna be stuck like that?" Bangles asks.

"Once we stop? A couple minutes," says the Stranger. "Juzz enough time for us to make our

getaway.”

“Okay!” says Bangles. “Where we gettin' away to?”

“Huh?” replies the Stranger. “No 'fenze, *ling*, but we're a solo operator. And we don' make exceptions.”

“Not even for folks who save your life?” Bangles asks, holding up the bullet.

The sight of it is enough to make the Stranger lose concentration. “Now, we, uh, we, uh, hmm... we don' quite know what to make of that,” he says.

“Me neither,” says Bangles, closing one eye and admiring the bullet with the other. “It's all perty strange, ain't it?”

“Sure izz,” says the Stranger, the sibilance of that final phoneme vibrating in his mouth with a pleasant buzz. “Look, *ling*, this izza free world. A strange world, yezz. But a free one. So... we're gonna jump. And if you feel so inspired, you can jump too. And if it just so happens that we jump at the same time, then we jump at the same time. And thazzall there is to it. Got it?”

“I... think so?” Bangles says.

“Whatever,” says the Stranger. “Kai kai!” He runs to the edge of the train car and crouches on the edge. “Kai kai!” he shouts again. He tenses his legs, spreads his arms, and launches himself into the air. The big loose sleeves of his suit are, of course, glider wings made of fabric, and Bangles briefly catches sight of a pair of two huge glowing eyes stiched into the material of the wings right before the Stranger disappears entirely into the air. Not wanting to be left behind, Bangles takes a deep breath and grins. He clears his mind, steps the to the edge of the train car, and, for the second time today, he hurls himself into the unknown.

4

Feska Pisces sits in the back of a transport truck. Mickey sits directly opposite her. He's smiling, and for this, she despises him even more. This is not a time to be smiling. Anybody with a soul would know that. The hazmat bags containing her friends' bodies are also in the truck, piled unceremoniously off to the side. Soldiers in black sit on either side of them, and on either side of Mickey and Feska. Whenever the truck takes a sharp turn, one of the soldiers next to Feska leans into her a bit, and that's a much closer proximity than she is comfortable with. She does not like how any of these men smell. She does not know where they are going, and she does not like that either.

"What's on your mind?" Mickey asks her.

Feska glares at him. Her mind is still heavy from the *zelia*. She hardly knows how to respond. "This sucks," she says.

"So... same as any other day?" he asks.

"No," Feska replies coolly. "What the fuck, Mickey?"

"What the fuck, indeed," he says cryptically.

"Don't give me that. I know you know what's going on," she says.

"I do," he says, shrugging and smiling that sick arrogant smile of his. "Don't you?"

Feska is confused. It really sounds to her like Mickey is referring to her prognostications. But Feska has never, ever, mentioned her prognostications to Mickey. She decides not to think about it too much. "So... what?" she asks. "Am I going to jail? Are you selling me off as a sex slave? What's happening?"

"You're not going to jail," he says, calmly. "And you're not a sex slave. You, my dear, are being recruited."

"Recruited? For what?"

The truck comes to an abrupt stop, and the soldier next to her leans his shoulder into hers again.

"Sergeant Altar! We're here, sir!" shouts the driver.

"Well then," says Mickey. "Shall we?"

He rises and extends his hand to Feska, and begrudgingly she takes it (only because she's too limp and stoned to stand up under her own power). The rear of the transport opens up, and the soldiers file out of it, some of them carrying the hazmat bags. Feska and Mickey are the last to disembark. Looking around outside, Feska can see that they're a ways up the canyon north of Altama. To the south, the city rests in the bowl of its little valley, protected by its dust wall and the massive bubble dome that rises from the dust wall and shields the atmosphere of the city. It's bone dry out here, and the oxygen is sparse. Feska finds it hard to breathe. Every so often, the wind picks up, pelting her face with little bits of dust. This is the first time in years that she's left Altama, and this inhospitable environment, of course, is why.

The group of them are standing in front of a particularly steep hill strewn with boulders. Mickey – or is he Sergeant Altar now? – pulls what appears to be a garage door opener out of his pocket and presses his thumb onto it. A pale green light scans his thumbprint, and the hillside rumbles as a massive door opens before the gathered soldiers. They march into the darkness, and Feska follows along behind. There is a large empty hangar residing in secret beneath the hill. The walls are illuminated with rows of little green LEDs, and they follow these LEDs deeper into the hangar until arriving at an elevator platform. Only Mickey, Feska, and two of the soldiers in black board the elevator, descending slowly

into another dark abyss.

“Surprised?” Mickey asks her.

“I always knew you were a creep,” Feska mumbles back. “From the first moment I saw you, I knew. But I underestimated just how much of a creep you are.”

Mickey laughs, and it's an angry laugh, the kind of laugh that makes her wonder whether or not he's about to hit her.

The elevator takes them to a well-lit hallway with pale grey walls. Everything looks new and expensive, and Feska wants to ask Mickey just how long all this has been here, watching and waiting on the outskirts of town. But she holds back. The last thing she wants is to give him the satisfaction that anything he is affiliated with is impressive in any way. They walk, the clang of their boots on the metal floor echoing along the walls. They round a corner, and head down a hallway lined with doors, some of which bear that ominous hazmat sign. But the door they stop at does not. Inside is a small room containing only a desk, with several chairs before it. Mickey pulls a chair out for Feska, and she resents him for this pathetic display of chivalry. But she sits in the chair anyway, because she is still very high and sitting down feels good. Mickey sits next to her, and their escort stand behind them, in the corners of the room. And for a while, they wait.

“Curious?” Mickey asks, barely able to contain his glee.

Feska looks at her nails (they're getting a little long and jagged), then away at a nondescript section of the wall.

“I suppose I should give you a little bit of a briefing. I imagine you've heard of the Well?” he asks.

She has. The Well are a paramilitary organization specializing in espionage, an independent firm contracted by Panarza's wealthiest and most powerful to spy on Panarza's wealthiest and most powerful. The running joke amongst those who buy and sell *kek* is that you never know whether or not you're buying from The Well or selling to The Well. It's a joke everyone tells and no one laughs at. The joke is particularly unamusing right now.

“Yes, you have, I know you have,” he continues. “Once upon a time, The Well was basically a tool that the Spire Clans of Spirena and the Buffs Survival corporation of Astralo used to get under each other's skin. Rich people playing rich people games. You know how it is.”

Feska does not. She does not know anything at all about being rich, or just what it takes to keep rich people entertained.

“But now, down here in the canyons, we've taken on a much more important role in the future of New Panarza, in fact, the very future of Serra,” Mickey says, beaming with pride. “Our job now is to ensure the survival of the Serran people. By any means necessary.”

“Which is why you killed my friends,” Feska says, deadpan. “To ensure their survival.”

Mickey smiles angrily. “It's unfortunate, but the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.”

“What about Canda?” Feska asks, a question she regrets as soon as she voices it, because she knows she does not really want the answer.

“Yes, I'll miss Canda,” he says, in a tone of voice clearly indicating that he will not. “I'll miss the way she would slap me across the face when we would have sex. And I'll definitely miss those perky little tits. But my life is not about me and what I want. My life is about our mission.”

“Which is killing people to keep people alive,” Feska reiterates.

“You don't know what we're up against,” Mickey declares, waving her righteousness indignation aside. “But you're about to.”

The door opens, and Mickey stands and salutes (Feska, meanwhile, remains right where she is). A squadron of sixteen Naraean women in black uniform hustle into the room, taking up a staggered formation on the opposite side of the desk. They flank the empty chair in the center, two rows of four on each side. The eight on the left hold their left hand across their chest and their right hand by their

shoulder, implying a line from the corner of the ceiling down onto the chair. The eight on the right do the same in reverse. “*Hai!*” they shout in unison. Each one of them brings the middle and index fingers of their right hand upwards to their lips, while the middle and index fingers point towards the floor. “*Hai!*” they shout again, before returning to their original position not-so-subtly emphasizing the chair. An elderly and regal looking Naraean man strides into the room, his long silver feathers reaching from his scalp down past his shoulders. He is dressed in a navy blue uniform with a red sash across the front and a golden mantle atop his shoulders, and his chest is decorated with all manner of little colorful glistening medals. Of course, being an elderly Naraean man, he is also the shortest person in the room, but that does not stop him from projecting an air of dignity and authority that immediately irritates Feska.

“Important guy, then?” she asks, a question no one in the room answers or even pretends to have heard.

The Naraean officer takes his seat, and promptly tents his fingers, so that he may study Feska over the steeple they create. “This is her,” he says, flatly. Like any upper class Naraean, his voice is high and breathy, and almost charmingly effeminate.

“Sir, yes, sir,” says Mickey. “Feska Pisces, allow me to introduce you to General Naro Magine, of The Well.”

“Yup...” says Feska, still studying every minute detail of the nondescript portion of the wall that she had selected several minutes ago.

“What does she know?” asks Gen. Magine.

“Noth-” Mickey starts.

“I know you killed my friends,” Feska interjects. “And I know you did it because you think you're saving the world. And I know the world is beyond saving.”

“Hoh,” says Gen. Magine, vocalizing a mildly sympathetic acknowledgement. “What did you do?” he asks Mickey, sternly.

“Sir, a little science experiment, sir,” Mickey says, grinning.

“And since when are you a scientist, Sergeant?” Gen. Magine inquires.

“Sir, I needed to verify her immunity, sir,” Mickey says.

“He poisoned our friends,” Feska says. “My friends,” she corrects herself.

The General's eyes bore holes into Mickey's head. His chest rises and falls once, a soundless sigh. “But *she* is immune,” he says, at last.

“Sir, yes, sir,” Mickey says. “She inhaled double a fatal dose with no side effects that we can immediately discern.”

“So now you're a doctor as well, Sergeant. Impressive,” replies Gen. Magine, in a tone of voice indicating that he is in no way impressed. “A scientist and a doctor to boot. It's a wonder you find any time at all to be a Sergeant.”

“Sir, I -” Mickey starts.

“We'll send the young lady to the infirmary, for a second opinion. A more thorough one,” says the General.

“What if I don't want to go to the infirmary?” says Feska.

“If you'd rather, we can throw you outside and leave you to die in the desert,” says Gen. Magine. “No? Then it's settled. You'll go to the infirmary and I shall accompany you.”

“Sir, I can take her, sir,” says Mickey.

“You've brought us a live asset, Sergeant Altar,” says the General. “That's enough for one day.”

“But sir -” Mickey says, frustrated.

“You are relieved of duty until tomorrow,” says the General. “You will use some of your downtime to prepare an abstract for me regarding this science experiment of yours, and your methodology and conclusions. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to confirm that our live asset is not about to become a dead one.”

The infirmary is very clean and very modern, and the towheaded Hego doctor who introduces himself with a "Hey, friend! I'm Dr. Snow!" is friendly and courteous and kind of cute, with his frameless glasses and his blonde hair pinned down by a sanitary hairnet. None of this improves Feska's mood in any way, but as upset as she is, she still reclines into the examination chair without argument. As a Naraean nurse draws blood from her arm and the doctor investigates the integrity of her tonsils, General Magine stands and watches with his head held high, either unable or unwilling to leave his decorum aside for even a moment. His retinue of sixteen ninja girls or whatever they are have also accompanied him inside, making the already small infirmary almost claustrophobic. Feska is grateful that Naraeans are so skinny and short.

"You are from Altama," the General states.

"Uh-huh," says Feska, attempting to speak around the tongue depressor in her mouth.

"You have encountered Commuters in Altama," the General states.

"I have," says Feska, her mouth no longer being prodded by foreign objects. The doctor has attached a sphygmomanometer to her arm and is checking her blood pressure. "Zoans mostly, but..."

"Yes," says the General. "Their religion is spreading. More and more young Naraeans and Hegovarians are taking to the trains. You've heard the Commuters' gospel."

"Yeah," says Feska. "Go to work, help your neighbor, eat *kek*, have fun, be the best you can be. Whatever that is."

"And you've heard the tales of Jaivuzar Keen," says the General, who appears unable to ask a question without turning it into a statement.

"The Commuter messiah. They say he was an alien," Feska says.

The General is silent for a long, tense moment. "He was," he says at last.

"What?" asks Feska, taken aback. "Jaivuzar Keen was real? And really an alien?"

"Yes," says the General softly.

"Is that what you think you're saving the world from? Alien messiahs and *kekt*-out Commuters?" Feska asks.

"No," says the General, scornfully. "Commuters are frustrating in many ways, but they do not compare to the true threat."

"The true threat?" Feska inquires.

"Hoh," says General Magine, a low, sad sound. He shakes his head, and his shining feathers slide back and forth along his mantle. "Hoh, hoh. Yes, Jaivuzar Keen was an alien visitor. But he was not the only one."

"Okay," Feska replies.

"You're skeptical," observes the General. "Good. Where you're going, skepticism is a crucial asset."

"Where I'm going?" Feska asks. "I've been going places all day. It'd be nice to just sit down for a while."

"Don't worry," the General assures her. "You won't even have to leave that chair."

"Oh," says Feska. "Good."

"Um, sir? Excuse me, sir?" Dr. Snow interrupts.

"Yes, what is it?" replies the General, with more than a hint of impatience.

"Sir, it's time for... we need to... the pap smear, sir," Dr. Snow explains, blushing a little bit.

"Pap smear?" Feska repeats, astonished.

"Ah. Yes. Right," the General says, a little flustered. He signals for his retinue to depart, but he himself hesitates at the door for a moment. "Well. I've much to attend to, Ms. Pisces. We will meet again in the near future. In the meantime, thank you for everything you are going to do for us."

"Um... you're welcome?" Feska mumbles.

"Now, this will be a little bit cold..." says the nurse, and Feska is too bewildered to do anything

but oblige.

Dr. Snow, meanwhile, is setting up what appears to be a microphone and a recording device. With a thick black clip, he affixes the microphone to the examination chair about five inches from her left cheek, then gets down on one knee to fool around with the combination of a safe inside the supply cabinet from which he has withdrawn the rest of his tools. From the safe he withdraws a black suitcase, and again, unlocks it with a combination. From the suitcase he withdraws a black syringe, and it takes Feska a moment to realize that it is not the syringe that is black, but its contents.

"Really, sir?" says the nurse, noticing the syringe in the doctor's hand. "She's still high, and we haven't had any time to run our tests. Don't you want to wait, sir?"

"Of course I want to wait," says Dr. Snow. "But it doesn't matter what I want. She's alive, she's not about to die, and time is of the essence."

"What... what's happening now?" Feska asks him, warily.

"I'm going to give you a little shot," says Dr. Snow. "You like kek?"

"Yeah," Feska mutters. "If it's good *kek*."

"Okay, well, try to think of *this*..." says Dr. Snow, flicking the end of the needle. "Like *kek*! It's an experience. Just lie back and let it hit you. You'll probably be talking out loud at some point, saying stuff you won't remember saying. Try not to think about it, but while you're in there, allow yourself to narrate everything. Describe it exactly as you see it. Because if you do that, you and I and everyone else here at the Well might be able to save a lot of Serran lives. Can you do that for us?"

"What? Are you..." asks Feska "Are you asking me to get high? To save lives? In a government lab underground? With some chick sticking cold metal junk up my pussy?"

"I'm almost done!" the nurse shouts from down below.

"...and aliens?" Feska adds.

"Yes, precisely," says Dr. Snow. "All of it. Though technically, we're not a government organization. More of a paramilitary organization."

"Technically," Feska says. She sighs, but rolls up her shirt sleeve anyway.

A look of intense apprehension falls across Dr. Snow's face. But he notices her noticing his apprehension, and immediately he plasters a big fake grin onto his face. He winks and gives a thumbs up. "Tchk-tchk" says Dr. Snow, clicking his tongue against the rough of his mouth. And then he plunges the needle into her bicep.

Within seconds, the room fills with darkness. Shadows dominate the examination chair, the cabinets, and the walls, rising up from the floor like seaweed from the bottom of the ocean. Tendrils of darkness slither over every surface, coiling around Feska's wrists and ankles like snakes. Beneath the shadows, the room begins to fill with water. The doctor and the nurse are totally motionless, frozen in the rising water. Now it's at their knees. Now it's at their hips. Their skin is no longer the usual grey of healthy Naraeans, but pale and translucent, like wax paper. The shadows lunge and swallow them whole. But Feska hardly even notices. She is fixated on the rising water, getting closer and closer to her mouth and nose. She tries to move, to get out of the examination chair and somehow get to safety, but she cannot. The willpower is there, frustrated and urgent, but her body is completely disconnected. Feska is more terrified than she's ever been in her life.

"I wish the water was gone," says Feska, and though they are not the words she is choosing, they are coming from her mouth all the same. "I wish the water was gone. I wish the water was gone. I wish the water was gone. All gone."

The shadows hear Feska's words and then they come for her, sliding up her legs and her arms, and spilling across her face. As the shadows approach her ears, she can hear them whispering, louder and louder, until the whispering becomes a buzzing, and the buzzing becomes saturated with wetness, the frothing and slobbering of thousands of tiny mouths that just keep eating and chewing and biting and tearing. And then, all at once, they stop, and Feska feels the shadow exhale across her face.

"All gone," breathes a woman's voice, cold and hollow and deep.

The examination room disappears, and now Feska is standing outside, on the barren hillside above the city of Altama. Below her, Altama looks small and sad and frightened, nestled into the valley and hiding beneath the dome of its dust wall, like a wounded little animal frightened of the savage world into which it has been thrust. But the shadows have found their way here too. Feska can see them pouring into the city streets, filling them like inky black floodwaters. She sees the shadows swallow every tent-house and every street light, every junkyard and every hydroponic farm, rising higher and higher, until everything inside the dome is solid black.

"All gone" breathes the woman's voice again, her words slithering through the valley like a bone-chilling wind.

"I will never see this place again," says Feska, and though she did not choose those words, she knows that they are true. "There was nothing for me there," she says. "There's nothing for me anywhere."

The reply sounds like the clicking of a thousands beetles, and it takes Feska a moment to realize that what she is hearing is laughter. "Nowhere, anywhere. Just you."

The world goes dark, and Feska panics. Has the shadow taken her eyes? Has the shadow taken her life? Perhaps it has. Perhaps Feska Pisces has finally died. Panic gives way to surrender, and Feska relaxes into the darkness, wondering what, if anything, is going to come next.

But then she awakens back on Serra, strapped to a guerny, being rushed through a corridor in the underground facility, with official looking men all around her. She turns her head, and sees Dr. Snow running alongside her, looking frantic and worried.

"Am I dying?" she asks, hoping a little that the answer is yes.

He chuckles a little bit and smiles. "Nope, you look pretty alive to me, friend. We're evacuating."

"Evacuating?"

"We told you that you were going to save people, remember?" says Dr. Snow. "Well, it looks like you've started with us."

The exit they leave through is not the one Feska remembers from when she came in. They're on a different hillside, one that does not overlook Altama. Waiting for them are four of the tallest men Feska has ever seen. They entirely black, from head to toe, and it takes Feska a moment to realize that they are not men, but androids. They stand at the four corners of a large platform some sixty by sixty feet. Everyone evacuating is getting onto this platform, stepping on and sitting down as close to the center as possible. Dr. Snow wheels her guerny onto the platform, and collapses the legs of it, bringing it down to floor level. He grabs onto the guerny tightly.

"Hey, don't worry," he says. "I gotcha."

"Me too," says Mickey, who would, of course, have to be here. He sits down with them and grabs onto the other side of the guerny.

The four black androids grab onto the four corners of the platform, and slowly, carefully, they lift it off the ground and hold it level with their waists. And yet, the platform continues to ascend, because the androids are flying with it. They are whisking Feska out of the valley of Altama and away from her home.

"Flying... robots," Feska says, bewildered.

"We call them Valkyries," Mickey explains.

"I thought air travel was forbidden," Feska says.

"Yes, the Spire Clans have forbidden air travel," says Dr. Snow. "But we're the Well. We have a permit."

"Where are we going?" Feska asks.

"The Well," says Mickey. "Obviously."

"I thought wells were down," Feska says. "In the ground," she clarifies.

"Gotta get high to get down!" says Dr. Snow, flashing another thumbs up. "Tchk-tchk!" he says.

5

Bangles does not see the long, curving sickle of scrap metal before he lands on it, so the sensation of being impaled comes as quite a surprise. He sees blood on his hands, and an arc of gory steel protruding from the place where his liver used to be. His arms and legs spasm, and he notices that he's not touching the ground. Slowly, he begins to slide down the metal shaft.

"Aw, shucks," he gurgles.

Bangles hears a swoop as the amphibian in the turquoise glider suit lands on the ground below him.

"Oh, shit. Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit. Oooo-kay. Okay, okay. Hey, can you, uh, hear me, *ling*?" the Stranger's trembling voice drifts up from below. "Hey, uh, if you're okay, juzz like, well, don' nod your head, and don' say nothin', but, uh, juzz like, don' die, okay? Um. Shit. Does that sound good?"

Bangles sighs, and the movement of his diaphragm against the hard edge of the scrap metal shreds his insides a little more as he continues his slow, slick descent down the sickle. The metal groans under his weight, and Bangles decides he would rather not see how the laws of physics would have this all play out. He wrenches his body to the left, away from the wound, and lets the edge of the metal tear through his obliques and rib cage. He doesn't fall as far as he thought he might, only a few feet. Gurgling a bit, and covered in blood, he staggers to his feet.

"Ho...lee fucking shit!" says the Stranger.

Bangles smiles and waves him off. With his other hand, he feels the wound. It's bad enough that he can't even really breathe. But it's no big deal. Already, he can feel himself regenerating. The blood on his hands, on the metal, on the ground, all of it flows back towards him, running up his legs and back into the gaping hole in his abdomen, carrying little pieces of liver, muscle, and bone with it. He takes a deep, ragged breath. Having finally dispensed the last of his 'oh shits', the Stranger's mouth hangs open and slack.

"I'm really sorry about all this," Bangles says, his voice returning as his diaphragm reassembles. "I know how bad this all looks."

"Oh *shit*," the Stranger replies, apparently not out of expletives after all.

"I didn't mean to give ya such a scare, now. I'm gonna... I'm gonna try to be more careful in the future..." Bangles says, trailing off and meekly scratching the back of his own neck.

"Fuck... We thought we'd seen everything," the Stranger says softly. He backs away slowly, his eyes scanning the junkyard for something he can hide behind, or maybe use as a weapon.

"Yeah, I suppose if yer not an immortal yerself, this is all kinda mystifyin'," Bangles says.

"Immortal?" the Stranger asks, pulling off his goggles for a moment, and revealing his wide golden eyes and his big triangular pupils. "Who *are* you?"

"Welp, my name is Bangles," Bangles says, extending one hand while sheepishly scratching at the back of his neck with the other. "And I don't die... at least, not as far as I know. And that's all I got. I was hung from a cactus a while back, but that ain't a thing no more."

"Hung from a cactuzz?" buzzes the Stranger, skeptically. "Like Johnny Davride?"

"I ain't sure who that is," Bangles says, though his intuition tells him that that ain't the truth.

"What? How on Serra do you not know who Johnny Davride is?"

"I don't even know what Serra is," Bangles says.

"It's the name of this planet. The one we're standing on right now," the Stranger says, stomping

his boots incredulously in the dirt.

"Well, that's the name of this planet, then," says Bangles. "Now that we've got that cleared up, would you mind telling me your name?"

The Stranger eyes him suspiciously for a moment, and then extends his hand. "This one is Krezh Balta," he says.

"Hmm," says Bangles, taking his hand and shaking it. "That's a mighty fine name, but I have to be honest: I'm not sure if I can pronounce it. Kresh?"

"Krezh."

"Um... Kresh?"

"Krezjdh."

Bangles pauses a minute, struggling to wrap his head around this foreign phoneme. "Kresh?" he tries again.

"Close 'nuff, *ling*," says Kresh. "Well, it's been fun. But we gotta get going. These water tanks aren't gonna last forever, and we'd rather not die of thirst in the middle of nowhere."

Looking around, he sees that the two of them are standing in the middle of an immense junkyard. The scrap metal that impaled him is one of dozens of angular ribs reaching up from the desert like the bones of a giant mechanical whale. There are huge stone and marble slabs here as well, lying amongst the metal. Some lie flat, but others jut up and out of the dust. There are a few carved marble pillars fallen here as well, though all of them have been broken into fragments. A short distance away, there's an entire two-story marble staircase lying on its side in the dirt. For some reason, the sight of it reminds Bangles of the mountains he'd been seeking. But he has no idea what direction those mountains would be from here. The sun is directly overhead, and Bangles has completely lost his bearings after jumping from the train.

"Hey, um, Kresh?" Bangles asks.

"What?" asks Kresh.

"Would it be alright if I tagged along with ya? See, I don't rightly know where I am, or where it is I'm going."

"Fine," Kresh says. "We're going to Altama, which is north of here, and if we don't start walking now, the sun'll be down before we get there."

"Well, let's go!" Bangles says, excitedly.

Nearby, there's a junction in the train tracks. One set of tracks heads west, while the one that Kresh follows heads north. As the two of them make their way through the scattered stones and mechanical wreckage strewn about, it's not long before another question has popped into Bangles' head.

"Hey Kresh, what *is* all this?"

"What, like... life?" the Zoan asks, confused.

"No, all this junk," Bangles says, kicking a discarded chassis with his bare foot and shattering his toe. Of course, regenerating something as small as a toe is such small fry business that he hardly notices it at all.

"Ohh, *ling*. This used to be a city, and not all that long ago."

"Oh," Bangles says. "Well, what happened to it?"

"We don't know," Kresh says, climbing over another pile of discarded metal scrap. "The obvious thing is to blame the Xilas. And thazz what everyone did, for the longest time. Xilas raid cities. They kill and they steal and they burn everything to the ground."

"What? Why?" Bangles asks, shocked that anyone would be so pointlessly destructive.

Kresh pauses on top of the scrap heap, fixing Bangles with a perplexed stare. "Becuzz they're Xilas, *ling*. Thazz how they live. *Zharo khocue* and all that violent nonsense. Do you really not know what Xilas are?"

"I don't know much of what *anythin'* is," Bangles says, sheepishly.

"Okay. Well, this wuzza city. And Xilas knocked it over and burned it down, because thazz what

Xilas do.”

“Okay,” says Bangles.

“But here's the problem. The Xilas say they didn' do it.”

“Oh,” says Bangles, thinking for a moment. “Are they lying?”

“Maybe,” Kresh says. “Probably. But, see, usually Xilas like to brag about their violence and their cruelty. So, if they're saying they didn'... then maybe, juzz maybe, they didn'.”

“Then who did?”

Kresh shrugs. “The Xilas say that some crazy demon god of theirs did it.”

“...come again?”

“The Venri Khocue. It means the Desert's Vengeance in their language, and thazz about all we know. We're not anthropologists.”

“I see,” Bangles says, stroking his chin thoughtfully as he walks. “What does this Venri Khocue look like?”

Kresh sighs and shrugs. “No one's ever seen her. Which is probably because she's just a story.”

“I don't understand,” Bangles says.

Kresh sighs again. “It's like this, *ling*. Xilas are raiders by nature. They don' build, and they don' grow food, they just sweep in and take whatever they can. Only there's less and less to take all the time, and they're dying off. Now they're coming crawling back to society, begging for food and shelter, and trying to convince us that they didn't do the things we know they did. They say 'we didn' do it! The Venri Khocue did it! And she'll come for us too, please help us!' But it's not like they leave any survivors behind, so there's nobody around to give the other side of the story.”

“So, they *did* do it.”

“I don' know if they did it. Nobody does.”

“I'm confused,” says Bangles.

“Obviously,” says Kresh.

“If the Xilas are so bad, why don't the people in the cities just turn the Xilas away?”

“Because the Xilas bring guns and knives and they know how to use them. The path of least resistance is to just let them in. They're going to find a way into the cities one way or another. It doesn' stop the violence from happening – anywhere Xilas go, there's going to be violence – but accepting their refugees keeps it to a minimum.”

“Huh,” says Bangles. “Maybe they'll learn civilization if they hang 'round long enough.”

“Oh, they did,” Kresh says. “Some of them, anyway. But then they forgot.”

“We're almost there,” Kresh says. “And not a moment too soon. We can feel our tanks getting low,” he says, tapping one of the metal tanks on his back.

The two of them have been hiking along the train tracks for hours, much of it in silence. They've left the ruined city in the dust, slogging up rubble strewn hills and down through steep and perilous canyons. It has been a very strange day, and Bangles feels a bit remiss regarding his role as a traveling companion. It's hard to make good small talk when one doesn't really have much to say or think about, just endless questions to ask, and Bangles can tell that he's been wearing Kresh down with his constant inquiries.

“So, okay,” Kresh says. “Our memory sez we go down this valley here, and you see that hill up ahead? The edge of the mesa there?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Altama is, like, juzz the other side of it. And then we can find some water and some food and a place to sleep.”

“Okay,” Bangles says, well aware that he has no need for any of those three things.

The thought of exploring a city gives Bangles a rush of excitement. And yet, the closer they get to their destination – tantalizingly invisible beyond that wall of stone – the greater Bangles'

apprehension. At first, he chalks it up to jitters: a little extra nervous system excitation anticipating this brand new city and all the crowds of interesting people he's on his way to meet. But the closer they get, the deeper and darker and more urgent the feeling of dread, until finally Bangles can contain it no more.

"Uh, Kresh, um... this is gonna sound pretty weird and yer not gonna like it..." Bangles says.

Kresh freezes in his tracks, clenching his fist with the barely contained patience of a parent about to throw their misbehaving child out a window. "What?" he asks.

"I want to go back."

"Of course you do," says Kresh, exasperated. "It's not an option."

"Yeah, I know, it's just... I have a really bad feeling about this," Bangles explains.

"A feeling," Kresh repeats.

"A really bad one," Bangles insists.

"Bangles, *ling*, your immortal ass can go do whatever you want," Kresh says. "We, on the other hand, will die if we don't get water within the next twelve hours. So, we are going to keep on keeping on, and you can follow, or you can not."

"Alright," says Bangles, but he does not feel alright about any of it. In fact, he's becoming quite agitated with Kresh and his condescending demeanor, and he walks on for a good ten minutes in silent seething animosity before he catches himself and realizes what kind of thoughts are going through his head. This hostility is so far removed from the state of being he has been used to that he has a hard time accepting it as his own. But perhaps it is not his own. Acting on intuition, Bangles decides to quietly test a hypothesis. Perhaps the closer they get to their destination, the more the hostility will grow, and if that proves to be true, then the only sensible choice will be to escape to a locale with a less pervasive ambient misanthropy.

Bangles clears his mind and trudges onward in silence. After a few long moments, his eyes come to rest upon the depleted water tanks strapped to Kresh's back, and he finds himself wandering why, exactly, this other person's lack of preparedness should become his burden. He feels the desire to snatch Kresh's tanks right off his back and hurl them down into a ravine somewhere. That would teach him a lesson.

But what lesson exactly? The lesson that Bangles is a violent and unpredictable jerk who can't be trusted. Bangles strokes his bony chin. There is simply no good reason to lash out at his new companion. And yet the urge is there, tightening his muscles, quickening his pace, lifting his arm and reaching towards his unsuspecting friend.

"Kresh," Bangles says, placing a firm hand on the Zoan's shoulder. "Stop. We have to turn back."

Kresh does a double take. "What? No. No, we can't turn back, *ling*. We've been over this. I'm running low on water. I need to re-up, stat!"

"Kresh, I'm not playin' aroun' here. Somethin's wrong. Somethin's really, really wrong. I can hear it... or feel it... or somethin' like both those things at once."

"Bangles, *ling*, thizzizz not up for negotiation. We need water to live. Now, we don't know if you noticed, but water is not exactly an abundant resource in this immediate vicinity. Or anywhere, for that matter."

"Okay. Okay," Bangles says, starting to panic. "Kresh? What if there's a compromise?"

"What?" Kresh says, exasperated.

"Like, okay. Is there a vantage point? A place where we can go and look down at the city before we just stroll on in there?"

"*Kai*," Kresh says, biting his lip and looking heavenward as if to ask the sun himself to spare him any more of Bangles' foolishness.

"Please. I'm begging you. Please," Bangles says, dropping to his knees in the dust and clasping his hands. "If I'm wrong, I'll carry you into town."

"*Kai*, no," Kresh says rolling his eyes. "Okay, we'll climb the hill instead of walking around it like normal people. Will that make you happy, *ling*?"

"Yes. Yes, it will. Thank you, Kresh."

"Okay."

"I mean it, thank you."

"Okay!" Kresh says, throwing up a hand in frustration.

Kresh, agile fellow that he is, makes it up the hill before Bangles does. The nimble Zoan crouches there at the top, where the hard vertical rock of the mesa's edge meets the soft gentle incline of the hill, silently surveying whatever lies beyond. Bangles hustles up the hill to Kresh's side, plunging his bare feet deep into piles of dust and sending little cascades of stones tumbling down the hill behind him. The closer he gets to the top, the stronger and stronger the feeling: a synaesthetic sensation like a cold black ichor in his veins and the buzzing of a horde of angry locusts. Bangles feels overwhelmingly that he needs to grab that stubborn Zoan and wring his skinny little neck, but he grits his teeth and perseveres until he finally reaches the top. He peeks over Kresh's shoulder, but what he sees chills his bones.

They stand in a ring outside the city within the high clear dome. None of them are moving, but all of them staring, staring intently at the wall that separates them from the city inside. Many of them are what Bangles assumes must be Xilas: red-skinned men and women with no horns and long dark hair. But some among them are Hegovarians as well, and others a shorter people with feathers instead of hair. But the one that stands at the front gate of the city is none of the above. In fact, it does not even appear to be. It is a gash in the fabric of reality, a fluctuating void approximating the shape of a woman, tall and slender, her arms and legs uncannily long. The being that is void lifts one arm. There is a long quiet pause. And then the city of Altama explodes.

The first thing he sees is the smoke, and there's a lot of it, thick and black and obscuring much of what Bangles must now assume is the former city of Altama. And that's the second thing he sees, the wreckage of the wall and the dome that mark the perimeter of the city. The glasslike bubble dome of the city has been shattered, and some of the smoke leaks out through the top. The city walls are black and charred and rent apart in many places. But the ominous ring of watchers stands unbroken. They show no surprise, now emotion at all. Even the ones who have been pelted with falling shrapnel stand unperturbed. But the people of the city are an entirely different story. Bangles watches as two Hegovarian men stumble out of a dark cloud of smoke, locked in what appears to be an embrace. But there is nothing loving about this embrace, as becomes clear when one of the men grabs a rock from the desert and shatters the other man's nose and jaw. Beyond them, a trio of red-skinned dark-haired men with no horns, what Bangles assumes must be Xilas, tear a fourth of their own limb from limb. As soon as they've finished dismembering him, the two bigger ones immediately set about to dismembering the third. Bangles looks away from them, only to see a Hegovarian woman bite off the ear of her young child, who is furiously clawing the flesh from the woman's forearms with both hands.

"Oh shucks, this is not good!" Bangles exclaims.

"Shut. Up," Kresh snaps.

"Hey, um, Kresh, uh, we gotta get outta here..." Bangles insists.

"No! Look!" Kresh says, pointing to a group of pretty purple frog people hiding behind a chunk of mechanical wreckage blown free of the wall around the city. They're huddled together, looking scared as hell: the only people in that war zone who aren't fighting each other over nothing. "We're down there!" Kresh whisper-shouts. "We have to help us!"

"Aw shucks..." Bangles says. Those poor Zoans are surrounded on all sides. But Bangles is immortal. There must be something he can do. He's about to scramble his way down from the hilltop to the city to at least try to be heroic, when he notices the woman that is the void turning and staring up at him, staring directly into his soul.

"There is nothing you can do," says the woman that is the void, and her voice is the hissing of

snakes and the gnashing of teeth. "They are mine now. All of them are mine."

"Kresh, that thing, that shadow... thing... whatever it is, it sees us!" Bangles says, grabbing Kresh by the shoulder. "We have to go. It's too late for these people."

"Okay. Okay. Fuck. Okay. Okay. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Where are we gonna go?" Kresh turns to look at Bangles, with real desperation in his face. "Bangles, I'm almost out of water! Where are we going to go?"

"Well," Bangles says, trying to think. He makes the mistake of looking down at the carnage unfolding beneath them again, snapping his head away at the sight of a teenage Hego girl crushing an elderly Xila woman's head with what appears to be a lead pipe. "Well. Um. Are there any other cities nearby?"

"The closest one is Spirena. Fuck, Bangles, we can't go to Spirena."

"Why not? Because we definitely can't go down there."

"I know. I know. Oh fuck. Oh *kai*. Oh *kai*, oh *kai*, oh *kai*," Kresh says, hyperventilating as he stares wide-eyed into the slaughter.

"Kresh? Hey, Kresh?" Bangles says, patting Kresh gently on the back.

"*Kai. Kai. Kai. Kai*," Kresh says.

Bangles can clearly see that Kresh is panicking. The void is too powerful and the chaos too frightening: it's obscuring the Zoan's judgement. Bangles decides that the best thing, right now, is to put as much space between themselves and the void as they possibly can. With one lean but powerful arm, he lifts the slender Kresh up and carries him over his shoulder back down the hill, running as fast as he can. He does not stop running until they are back on the canyon floor again and almost half a mile away from the former city of Altama.

"Alright," Kresh says. "Alright, *ling*. You can put us down."

Bangles obliges, gently depositing Kresh onto the dusty ground. "Kresh... was that the Venri Khocue?"

"Holy fuck," says Kresh. "It... it was something, *ling*. We don't know. We don't know..." He curls his knees up to his chest, rubbing his forehead with the palm of his hand.

"I am feelin'... I am feelin'... I am feelin' most particularly not so good," Bangles says, slowly coming to grips with the horror he has just witnessed.

"Yeah. Same. We need a hug. That's you and us both," Kresh says, softly. He takes a deep breath and exhales slowly, making a calming musical buzzing tone, then wraps his arms around Bangles. Bangles is momentarily bewildered by this sudden show of affection. But it feels good enough that bewilderment doesn't matter, and he hugs Kresh back vigorously.

"We're okay," Bangles says. "We got away. We're okay. We're gonna be fine."

"You, maybe, immortal, or whatever the fuck you are. But we're not. We need water! Bangles, if we don't get water in the next twelve hours, we'll dry up!"

"It's okay. We'll just get to this Spirena, or wherever it is."

"No! Fuck!"

"What's wrong?" Bangles asks. "I don't understand."

"Spirena is our home," Kresh says. "We can't go back there. Not now. Not... not now."

"Kresh, I been standin' out here in the desert a good long time, and I can stand out here in the desert another good long time. But you ain't gotta choice, man! We're going to Spirena, okay? And we're gonna get you some water. You just gotta tell me how we get from here to there, and I'll take you there. Carry you every step of the way."

"No," Kresh says, stepping up and dusting himself off. "No, we can take ourselves there. We'll have to go back the way we came, all the way back to the junction in the train tracks, and hope against hope that another train comes by."

"And then?"

"And then we catch a ride to Spirena..." Kresh says, a look of grim determination passing across

his face. “The City of Spires.”

Spirena. The City of Trash Fires.

From her perch high atop the Lashlei Spire, Rosalim Lashlei looks down upon the sprawling metropolis of Spirena. More trash fires than usual tonight. There must be a fresh influx of refugees in from somewhere. Rosalim (but really, she goes by Rozz. Rosalim is what her mother calls her) has lost track of how many cities have been destroyed by the Xilas. At this point, it's easier to remember the ones that remain. The shanty town of Altama is just a few hours northeast by train. Continue another eighteen hours or so northeast up the former coastline to the windswept edges of Old Panarza, and one would reach Zulae. Zulae is larger and more established than Altama, but it is but a blip compared to Spirena... and to Astralo. The Hegovarian capital of Astralo is some twelve hours south of Zulae by train, and almost a day's ride from Spirena. Not that Rozz has ever been to any of those places. She knows them only from books and geography lectures, and someday, before they're gone, she hopes to see them.

The world is ending all around her, but it is not the end of the world that is on Rozz's mind. She is an *ashura*, a warrior princess of the Naraean elite, and the pressures of her training have exhausted her. Rozz endures hours of conditioning and sparring, each and every day. She will get no break, unless she fails, and failure is not an option. She is a Lashlei, daughter of Gargan and Avatylië Lashley, in the direct lineage of one of the most powerful families in the world. She trains every day, because the strength and the honor of her family are at stake. But more importantly, she must protect her beautiful, beautiful boy.

Oh, Helo. He is such a handsome boy. Rozz wishes he were here with her right now, so she could stroke his soft grey cheeks and run her fingers through his pretty black feathers. How gently he speaks. How sweetly he sings. Nobody matters more to her, anywhere else in the world. It is for him that she trains for battle. Rozz must defend him at all costs, even if it means losing her own life in the process. But to die for him would be worth it, this she knows with all her heart. Rozz would sacrifice herself a thousand times over, if it meant that Helo could live just one more minute.

Helo is not her husband, though she adores him with the passion of a lover. Helo is not her child, though she protects him with the ferocity of a mother. Helo is her *dovei*, her brother, the scion of Clan Lashlei, and the future of their family rests with him, and his beautiful, beautiful voice.

Rozz wishes she could hear him sing, right here, right this instant. But she cannot. Neither she, nor any of the other *ashuras* (all of them her sisters or cousins) may seek his favor. None are permitted by their parents to become his favorite. It would be too dangerous, or so her mother tell her. If Helo were to start choosing favorites, Rozz and the other *ashuras* would be at each other's throats in no time at all. Rozz, with the naïve sincerity typical of a bargaining teenager, insists that she would never turn on any of her Clan. But her protests fall on deaf ears. She cannot be with him. And so, she comes here instead.

Her family's Spire is structured something like a flower: a long, supple stem reaching high above the rest of the city, topped with a broad blossom. Here, where the blossom meets the stem, a series of windows, ledges, and lonely terraces have been carved into the stone of the spire. It is upon these ledges that Rozz finds a nest, dangling her slender legs over the city far below. These terraces are her elder sister Vaieu's lair, exposed to the air so that she can call the winds, if need be. For she is *kori*, a storm-caller, and the winds are her privilege and her domain. No doubt, Vaieu is skulking around here

somewhere. But hardly anyone else ever passes through here, and so this is a place that Rozz can come to be alone. Her desire for solitude is strong. She spends all day in the company of her sisters and her cousins, clucking and pecking at each other like hens. It is exhausting, almost as exhausting as the exercises and the forms that she must practice.

But here, she can be at peace. Tonight, beneath the durable transparent dome that encloses Spirena, the air is still. There is no breeze to ruffle the black feathers atop her head, no chill to bring color to her slate grey cheeks. Beneath her swaying feet, the dumpster fires of Spirena burn in silence.

There are no fires in the wealthier neighborhoods. They have indoor climate control thanks to Clan Taiun, and automated security thanks to Clan Vargas. That they have four walls and a ceiling at all is the doing of Clan Lashlei. The business empires of the Spire Clans are integral to the functioning of Spirena. They are the glue of Spirenian society, and they have been justly compensated. The closer one lives to the base of a Spire, the more expensive the real estate. The other well-to-do Naraean families have always fought tooth and nail for the right to own a proximity to the Spire Clans. It's been this way for centuries, since long before her ancestors crossed Daeus Supalai, the great ocean that had once covered the dried out cliffs and valleys where Spirena rests now. Even the Spires themselves are the same, born across the ocean by the *kori* and the winds they summon, and planted down, first in Old Panarza, and now in New Panarza.

The Lashlei Spire occupies the northeastern section of the city, also known as the garment district. Home to Clan Lashlei's prized textile mills, the garment district is the height of fashion on the dying continent of Panarza. But Clan Lashlei make more than clothing: they also manufacture ropes, cables, carpets, furniture, paper, insulation, curtains, blankets, and all manner of other amenities and necessities. Even as plants and animals have disappeared from every corner of the continent, Clan Lashlei continue to manufacture their wares, ready to clothe and shelter anyone who can pay their fees. Their capacity to create new products for the marketplace is seemingly infinite. They are the wealthiest Clan in all New Panarza, if not the whole world, and everyone with a bank account is indebted to them one way or another. And that includes the other Spire Clans, loathe as they are to admit it.

Across the way, Rozz can see the Taiun Spire, looming over the northwestern sector of Spirena, the largely Zoan occupied district which has come to be known as the Reservoir. Even before the Great Evaporation, Clan Taiun was essential to the Spire Clans' survival, laying the pipework and structuring the aquaducts that would ensure clean drinking water and functioning sewage systems wherever they chose to build a home. But in the years following the environmental cataclysm that eradicated almost all life on Serra, Clan Taiun have emerged as the most powerful family on Panarza, if not the entire planet. Beyond Taiun Spire is the cliff's edge, the Well, a yawning void plunging deep into the dark and murky bowels of the planet. And somewhere, at the very bottom of this hole, there is water. Clan Taiun have built the massive drills and siphons that coax this water from the sediment, and they hydrate the entire continent with it. Every Panarzan may owe the Lashleis their money, but every Panarzan also owes the Taiuns their life. No amount of gold could ever mean a thing if the Well runs dry.

To the south, the Vargas Spire, the smallest of the three, completes the triangle. Here reside the laboratories and manufacturing plants of Vargas Industries, where all of Panarza's most cutting edge technology is brought to life. Clan Vargas do not have the centuries of pedigree that Clan Taiun and Clan Lashlei do. But they certainly have their fair share of the power. Clan Vargas have automated the service industry. They have automated law enforcement. They have automated bureaucracy, information services, and government. They have automated agriculture (or little of agriculture remains). They have automated manufacturing. They have rendered live Serran labor obsolete, but that is for the best. Post-Evaporation, most Serrans have lost the will to work.

Rozz does not understand why this would be. But then, she does not understand much of anything at all about the distant little ants who live beneath her family's Spire. She has lived almost her entire life in this eyrie above the city. Their ground level way of living is as foreign to her, as her spire-top way of living would be to them.

Every day goes something like this.

Rozz and her fellow *ashuras* are roused from sleep at five thirty in the morning by a gong rung in the hallway of their dormitory. They must be prompt, and they most demonstrate decorum. That means no slouching, no grogginess, and no drooping eyelids. From their dormitories in the eastern portion of the spire, they walk to the adjacent lecture hall. Here, they find their seats, roost, and meditate for an hour. As they sit in meditation, clearing their minds and focusing intently on circular breathing techniques, Avatyli Lashlei, Rozz's mother (or *keira*, in the old Naraean tongue), walks up and down the rows of roosting girls – about two dozen of them, all told – clutching a short leather whip in her hand and striking any girl disrespectful enough to fall asleep atop her meditation seat. At 6:30 AM, the *ashuras* leave the lecture hall to sit cross-legged at the low tables in the adjacent dining hall, where they are served a small meal of lab-grown fruits and lab-grown proteins. They are given a little bit of time to sit and rest and socialize with each other if they so choose, and then at 8 AM, they take the stairs from the dining hall to the roof of the Spire, where they shall commence with their daily conditioning.

First, they must run. The way of *ashuras* is to move quickly, so quickly that an untrained eye could hardly follow them. They gather in the center of the ancient stone arena atop the roof of the Spire and begin their conditioning by sprinting, as Avatyli Lashlei, clad in black and standing trackside, clutches her stopwatch and scowls at the stragglers. Once the sprinting has got their blood flowing and warmed up their joints, the *ashuras* must practice their stance. They hold a lunge position, with their right knees bent in front and their back legs long, while their left hands hang low and ready by their waists. They hold up their right hands, tucking their third and fourth fingers in, while their index fingers, middle fingers, and thumb press as closely together as possible without actually touching. This position of the hands is called *foria*: the Naraean word for perch. Here, in the space between those three digits, the young *ashuras* must focus all of their awareness, for it is here, in this space, that they shall breathe their weapon, their *tuogi*, into existence.

“Hai!” sing the girls in unison, listening for the beat kept by the crack of Avatyli's whip. “Hai! Hai! Hai!”

The first few shouts are flat, almost hostile. These shouts are the hammer that taps on the glass of the ego, tapping and tapping until finally that resilient glass begins to crack. As the walls of the ego come down, a river of emotion pours from each of these girls: a deluge of pain and sorrow and fear and rage, a flood that transcends words. All the confusion and frustration of their adolescence, they channel into their voices. “Hai!” they sing, but it is much a moan as it is a song. “Hai!” they sing, breathing out their sadness, for if their eyes were to fill with tears upon the battlefield, they would be lost. “Hai!” they sing, breathing out their rage, for if they were to succumb to fury upon the battlefield, they would be lost. “Hai!” they sing, breathing out their fear, for if they were to freeze in panic upon the battlefield, they would be lost. “Hai!” they sing, because breath is sacred. It is breath that gives life. And in the hands of an *ashura*, it is breath that takes life as well.

Once every emotion waiting within the young *ashuras* has been given voice, a quiet clarity falls over them. But there is no time for these warriors-in-training to savor this moment of inner piece. Again, they hold their hands in *foria*, but now they sing a different song: “Whyu.” It is the hum of the blade, the arcane phoneme that generates the ethereal structure of the *tuogi*. “Whyu,” the *ashuras* sing, with ferocious determination, and the air begins to swirl around their *forias*. Convection currents move across the *ashuras'* faces, as the weapons they are conjuring emerge forcefully into being. Although the *tuogis* are invisible, the *ashuras* can feel the weight of them atop their *forias*. Gently, they heft their sonic blades, confirming the reality of the subtle sword they have created. The right hand guides and the left hand stabilizes. The *tuogis* must be held with the utmost care, for every plane of these almost intangible weapons is razor sharp.

Thus begins offensive practice. The *ashuras* file into two lines, each of them assigned a random

partner. At the crack of Avatylic's whip, each pairing commences sparring in slow motion. They move as cautiously as possible – as though fighting underwater, or in a dream – for a slip of the blade could easily slit the throat of a sister or a cousin. Every so often, somebody loses a piece of clothing or a lock of hair, but it is nothing compared to the toll of a real battle. Several of the girls have a long narrow scar on their cheek or their forehead, and Rozz has seen the scars the uniforms hide through the steam of their communal dormitory showers. Though the pain of an old injury haunts her neck and shoulders every day, Rosalim has been lucky enough thus far to not have her skin cut open in the arena. Her mother insists that this is because Rozz is too careful, too concerned with self preservation. Rozz knows that her behavior is wrong, that such cowardice is not at all how an *ashura* is supposed to conduct herself. But when she sees the predatory sheen in her cousin Sefoni's eyes as they spar today, she cannot help but fear for her safety. After a few rounds of parrying and thrusting, the *ashuras* switch partners, and after a little more sparring, they switch again. Rozz is a capable warrior, but she is not the best fighter in her family. Nor is she second best, or even third. But she is young, and perhaps, in time, she will grow more confident, and more powerful.

The next stage of offensive practice is skirmish. While the *ashuras* had focused on sparring, the Lashlei Clan's servants had arranged an obstacle course around the arena, placing stuffed humanoid dummies in strategically sensitive areas. Once sparring is complete, the *ashuras* run the obstacle course, one at a time. The goal is to run the obstacle course as quickly as possible, while delivering a fatal or crippling blow to each and every dummy. After each *ashura* runs the course, most (or ideally, all) of the mutilated dummies are replaced with a set of fresh ones by the servants. Now it is Rozz's turn, and at her *keira*'s signal, she hits the ground running. She sprints up a ramp, veering left to eviscerate one artificial enemy, then leaps to the right to slash the chest of another (she misses, but severs a hand on the follow-through, which is almost as good). She dives off the top of the ramp and catches a trapeze between her legs, hanging low to decapitate another dummy beneath her as she swings across the ravine. At the furthestmost reach of the pendulum swing, Rozz front flips off the trapeze and onto a trampoline, bouncing once to reach a dummy positioned atop a high ledge. Rozz does not jump high enough to reach the dummy's abdomen, but she is still able to cut the thing off at the knees. She stumbles a little as she lands, but she presses ahead all the same, leaping left to go through one hoop, leaping right to go through a second, and leaping left again to clear a third, splitting another dummy from groin to clavicle before her feet have touched the ground. And with that, the trial is complete. Sweating and breathing hard, Rozz heads back to the stands where her mother and siblings have been watching and waiting. They hardly acknowledge her as she takes her seat. But Rozz can accept that. If they say nothing, it means her performance was passable, and often, that's the best she can hope for.

Now that everyone is thoroughly exhausted, it's time for defensive training. One *ashura* – selected at random – takes position at the center of the arena, while the other girls form a ring around her. At Avatylic's signal, the girls in the ring begin pelting the *ashura* in the center with hard rubber balls the size of oranges. The *ashura* in the center bobs and weaves, occasionally throwing up her *tuogi* to deflect a projectile she cannot otherwise evade. The more skilled *ashuras* can broaden the dimensions of the *tuogi* considerably, shifting the thing dynamically from a sharp narrow blade to a wide blunted shield. But Rozz is not yet that skilled. She lacks that extremely fine control over her formant and her vocal cords. When it is her turn to face the gauntlet, she relies more on the nimbleness of her reflexes than her proficiency with her *tuogi*. Upon the close of the exercise, her mother chastises her accordingly.

“You are not training to protect yourself, Rosalim,” her mother snaps. “Any animal can protect itself, scurrying away into the underbrush to hide. Is that what you are? A cowardly little animal?”

Rozz wants to look away from her mother's haughty scowl, but she is forbidden to. She must not react, she must not show any emotion. She must maintain eye contact. Deep inside, some small part of her wants to agree: *Yes, keira. I am a cowardly little animal. I want to run as fast as I can, and hide*

where no one can see me. Rozz despises this in herself. But she cannot escape the part of her that wants to escape. Beneath the heat of her mother's rage, a tear forms in the corner of Rozz's eye. Avatylic catches sight of it, and her face contorts into a snarl of revulsion. With lightning speed, she flicks her whip, striking Rosalim hard across the face.

"Spoiled little brat," Avatylic fumes. "You're a stupid selfish girl, Rosalim. Do you think this is all about you? Do you think we're conditioning you, so you can be healthy? So you can be strong? No. I am making you what you are so that you can protect the honor of this family. I am making you what you are so that you can protect *us*. We have given you life. The least you can do is give that life back to us."

Now it is 1 PM, and time for lunch (though as hungry as they are from all their exercise, most of the girls invariably take time to shower and groom themselves before sitting down to eat). The lunchtime meal is the largest of the three they will get: a hearty salad (lab-grown) supplemented with proteins (also, lab-grown. However, those few *ashuras* who are excelling in all of their training are rewarded with eggs and meat from a live chicken. The location of these domesticated chickens has become one of the most closely guarded secrets of Clan Lashlei. But they must have live poultry. After all, Clan Taiun and Clan Vargas also have live poultry. Perhaps, the Spire Clans are the last who do). The girls are usually much chattier at lunch than they are at breakfast, but Rozz does her best to avoid most of them. She has a couple friends – her cousin Ioni and her cousin Melosa – and she sits with them, in a safe corner of the dining room where they can keep a careful watch on the other tables in case one of the more esteemed *ashuras* hurls a handful of food in their direction.

Ioni is a beauty: fey and slender, and in no way cut out for the rigors of combat. Perhaps soon, she will be removed from the *ashuras* entirely, and offered up as a bride as part of some business compact. Ioni is well aware that her future is uncertain. She has dropped into a sort of zen state fusing seemingly boundless reserves of patience with a certain low-level ambient panic that follows her around like a storm cloud, threatening thunder but never unleashing the rain. Melosa, meanwhile, is an ugly girl and she knows it. There is something reptilian about the bones of her face, a disturbing trait accentuated by the unhealthy greenish pallor of her skin. Accompanying those inexplicably unfortunate genetics, a long scar runs from her right ear across her nose to the corner of her left eye: a memento from last year's battle. "Better me than you, pretty bitch," Melosa had said to Rozz in the hospital. Melosa does not bother to wash herself before lunch, or very often at all for that matter, and her feathers are usually greasy and matted in a manner wholly unbecoming of a Lashlei. When Melosa looks in the mirror, she laughs. Of this trio of dining companions, often it is only Melosa who speaks, crafting strange and perverted insults about the other girls in the room. Sometimes, she turns her invective to Avatylic, and Rozz is not sure whether to commiserate with Melosa or defend her *keira*. Confused, she opts for quiet ambivalence.

"Your mom's a sadist," Melosa says today. She's sitting sideways in her chair, leaning her head against the wall and surveying the other *ashuras* as they eat.

Rozz, still stinging from the whip, says nothing. She is fixated on the self-assigned task of balancing as many black beans as she can upon the concavity of her fork.

"She loves bossing us around like this," Melosa says. "She lives for it. She gets off on it. She masturbates herself awake at five every morning, dreaming about what she's gonna do to us."

Rozz has attained nine beans. A personal best.

"She loves to make us sweat," Melosa continues. "If I bottled my sweat, and gave it to her? I bet she'd drink it."

"Hai," moans Ioni, a nervous little sound. Disgusted, she sets down her fork. "We saw her hit you today," Ioni says to Rozz. Under the cover of the table, she slides a comforting hand along Rozz's thigh, giving her friend's patella a squeeze as she rounds the knee.

"Hoo, hoo," Rozz says. "I need to try harder. I'm thinking of myself too much."

"If you don't," Melosa says. "Who will?"

After lunch, the girls return to the great hall to attend a history lecture several agonizing hours long. The lineage of Clan Lashlei is long and storied, and as representatives of their Clan, the *ashuras* must be well versed in it. No matter what the subject of the lecture – whether the ancient history of their homeland of Naraea, the more recent history of the Naraean immigration to Panarza, or the modern struggles of the Naraean community of New Panarza – the instructor always manages to situate Clan Lashlei at the center of the narrative. Rozz had never thought to question this Lashlei-centric view of the world, until about a year ago, shortly after the last battle of Liasha, when Melosa had slipped her a note in the middle of the lecture. The note read: “They're fucking with us.”

Rozz had asked her about it at dinner, after the lecture: “Who's fucking with who?”

Melosa had made a surreptitious scan of the dining room before answering with a whisper: “The Lashleis are lying to us.”

“Ho! *We* are the Lashleis,” Rozz had said, declaring the obvious.

“Our parents, our aunts and uncles... *those* Lashleis,” Melosa said, irritated. “*They* are lying to us. They're probably even lying to themselves.”

“About what?” Rozz asked.

“About everything,” Melosa replied in a conspiratorial whisper. “What was today's lecture about?”

“You should know, you were there,” Rozz replied.

“The Zoans. And how the Lashleis liberated them from savagery and bestowed upon them the gift of civilization,” Ioni interjected, her sarcasm making clear that she also believes that they are being fucked with.

“Yes. The Zoans and their liberation into slavery,” Melosa said.

“Hai! Buzzers aren't slaves. They're employees,” Rozz said, delivering the party line with vigor.

“Can they quit their jobs?” Melosa asked, calmly.

“I don't know...” Rozz mumbled, her confidence in her worldview already fading.

“They can't. Not without being punished,” said Ioni.

“Punished?” Rozz asked.

“Prison,” said Ioni. “Or worse.”

“Sounds like slavery to me,” Melosa said, with a shrug.

“And how do you two know all this?” Rozz asked.

But there was no reply, only an exchange of cryptic glances, leaving Rozz feeling even more alienated and alone in the dining room than usual.

Today's lecture is on the disaster at Ragni fifteen years ago, when the dam that held their reservoir in place had broken, and the largest urban settlement of Zoans in the history of the world had been obliterated in a flash flood. Those few Zoans who did survive, survived because of the beneficence of the Spire Clans. Or so the story goes. Rozz doesn't know what the truth is, but (thanks to her conversations with Melosa and Ioni) she knows the truth can't possibly be what she's hearing. Spire Clans don't help other Serrans. Spire Clans help only themselves. A cloudy head distracts her as she drifts through the dining hall and returns to the arena, joining the other *ashuras* for a couple hours of unstructured training. While the other girls spar, Rozz stretches alone in the corner of the arena. She's not yet eighteen, and yet her wrists, her hips, and her ankles feel sore all the time. But her neck and shoulders have it the worst: dogged by the dull lingering vestiges of last year's injury. Rozz folds over from a standing position into a forward bend, touching her toes and allowing her head to hang down. Gravity gently applies traction to her cervical vertebrae, and she feels the traumatized muscles of her neck ever so gradually letting go their grip. A shadow falls over her: her *keira*. Avatylic stands silhouetted against the setting sun, her face shrouded in darkness.

“Rosalim. Why aren't you sparring?” Avatylic asks.

“Am I forbidden to stretch, *keira*?” Rozz replies, straightening up and looking her mother in the face.

"You are forbidden to perpetuate foolishness," Avatylic says. "Your *foria* is weak. Why aren't you practicing?"

"My shoulders..." Rozz says.

"Your form is improper. And your alignment is terrible," Avatylic lectures. "Stretch all you want, Rosalim. Stretch until you are soft and limp, like one of those weak-willed egg-layers who work in our sewers. But it will not help you."

"Then what..."

"Take your stance," her *keira* orders her, and Rozz obliges. "Adopt the *foria*. Yes. Your stance is no good."

"What must I..."

"Be quiet, Rosalim. I cannot diagnose or correct what is wrong with you. You must do that work yourself. Hold the *foria*. Hold it as long as you can, and while you are holding it, you must study it. Embody it. Learn every aspect of it, inside and out. Your body is your responsibility. Your *foria* is your responsibility. There is no shortcut to mastery. There is only the work. You will do the work."

And with that, her *keira* is gone, back to observing the other *ashuras*, her regal face a mask from which no trace of approval can slip free. Rozz performs the *foria* as instructed, standing in the lunge until her legs begin to shake, holding up her right arm until her shoulder feels as heavy as a stone. By the time the session is over, Rozz can hardly use her right arm. Even a simple shrug causes her pain: a sharp nervy twinging that zig-zags across her deltoids and down her bicep. She enters the great hall with the rest of the *ashuras* for the evening meditation, roosting atop her seat and attempting to focus. But the pain distracts her, and so she neglects her circular breathing. By the time the bell rings to call her from her seat, her face has contorted involuntarily into a grimace. But she does not care. Because now it is time to return to the dining room for a moment with Helo.

Her *dovei*, her brother, her sweet sweet boy, sits in a chair in the center of the dining room, with a dozen of the *ashuras* gathered at his feet. "Hai!" they moan, caressing his soft black feathers and his gentle hands, grasping at his shirt sleeves and clutching his pant legs. "Hai!" they wail, pressing their cheeks to his shin or his shoulder. The other dozen, Rozz among them, wait impatiently against the wall, seething with envy. One of the girls at Helo's feet dares to run her finger across his cheekbone to his ear. But she lingers there too long, and Avatylic cracks her whip, striking the reckless girl in the back of the head.

"Enough! Next!" Avatylic shouts, and the first dozen begrudgingly rise to take their place against the wall, while the second dozen scamper across the floor and swarm around the object of their affections. Trembling with emotion, Rosalim falls to her knees before him, placing her hand gently upon his thigh. She wants to speak to him, to connect with him, to share with him the secrets of her heart. There is so much she wants to say to him, but all of her thoughts get tangled together when she tries to speak. The only sound that makes it out of her mouth is "hai!" And she says it over and over again, a mantra of love: "Hai! Hai! Hai!" Rozz is delirious. She no longer feels her pain, and she hardly notices the other girls fighting for space at Helo's feet. For one brief beautiful moment, his darling eyes find hers, and for a moment, time stops in Rozz's world. Then his gaze moves on to the next girl, and Rozz feels herself wilting a little bit. Helo says nothing to any of them, which Rozz knows is for the best. He needs to protect his voice, his precious precious voice.

"Enough!" Avatylic shouts again, and reluctantly, Rozz retreats to the perimeter of the dining room. Once, over a year ago, she disobeyed her *keira*'s command and stayed by Helo's side, clutching his shoulder, until she was forcibly pried from his body. She was not allowed to see Helo for an entire week after that. It was, without question, the most awful week of her life to date. So when Avatylic demands, Rozz obliges. Once all the girls have retreated to the walls of the dining room, they fall deathly silent. For it is time for Helo to sing.

He begins gently and softly, holding long deep notes, his eyes closed, his face serene. Once his vocal cords have been properly warmed up, he begins to explore his middle register, his voice clear and

bright. The song he sings is an old Naraean battle hymn, a song so full of anachronistic terminology that Rozz cannot really tell at all what the lyrics are actually supposed to be about. Honor, probably. Or valor. It doesn't matter. The lyrics are irrelevant. They are simply the scaffolding atop which Helo's voice dances so beautifully. Higher he rises, higher and higher, the pitch of his voice catching a sudden updraft and ascending another octave up, up into the heavens. He throws back his head, and his vibrato flutters at the throb of his diaphragm until the note he is caressing gives up its lofty perch and drifts back down to earth with the ease of a leaf upon the wind. Helo finishes his song and the girls squeal with deafening ecstasy. Were Rozz able to detach from herself and regard the scene as an uninvested observer, she would be astonished to hear two dozen girls make so much noise. But she cannot detach from herself. In fact, she almost loses herself entirely amongst her shuddering chirps of joy. How privileged she is to have an angel like Helo in her life! His sparkling eyes and his celestial voice are what make her daily struggle worthwhile. She could not stand it, any of it, without him. He is the root of her discipline: the condition of her obedience. Gracefully, he rises from his seat and takes a bow. And Rozz screams until she is about to faint.

Once Helo has departed, Rozz and the other *ashuras* grab a quick snack and socialize a while before heading off to bed. This is the time of day when Rozz would normally wander down the deep spiral staircase to that lonely exposed terrace ledge, but some nights, like tonight, she finds herself hanging around the dining hall instead. Riding high on a cloud of endorphins and giggling uncontrollably, the girls are barely able to converse with each other. Even Melosa's paranoid cynicism is softened by the atmospheric residues of Helo's performance. She munches on an apple from a hydroponic garden, staring through lazy eyelids at nothing in particular. Sitting next to Ioni, Rozz finds her pretty cousin's fingers intertwined with her own beneath the table.

Before long, they are called off to bed, and Rozz, exhausted from her day, falls asleep within moments. But she is not alone in her dreams. Ioni joins her in the realm of sleep, embracing her tightly, and taking her to a palace of yielding pillows and comfortable silks, so unlike the ascetic accoutrements of the Spire. With soft hands, they explore one another, applying the moistness of their mouths to each other's necks and foreheads. But the dance they share is not about real passion. It is simply a method of blowing off steam, a release valve to the sensory overload that is Helo, a salve to the stress that is their destined occupation. And yet, even something as sweet and pure as this communion must be kept a secret from Avatylic and the rest of the Clan. The Naraean people find such affections to be repulsive, particularly between members of the same gender, and so, they are expressly forbidden. If Rozz and Ioni were caught together, they would never be allowed to see each other again. It is only in dreams that the two of them may hold each other. When they have both been adequately stimulated and relaxed, Ioni departs from Rozz's psyche, leaving her to her own dreams. In a matter of hours, she will be awoken again, and she will return to the great hall for meditation. And the cycle will begin anew.

This is her life. It is the only life she knows.

Spirena. The City of Liars.

Kalisa Ferris sits by the third story window of the building she's squatting in, her rifle steady against her muscular shoulder. Looking through the sight, she takes aim at a brightly illuminated billboard. "Experience the WONDER of Spirena!" it reads, the shifting and sparkling digital colors of the word 'WONDER' piercing the night and flooding Kalisa's adopted bedroom with an unnatural glow that never stops moving. The light stumbles through her window and falls across her horns and her red hair. She is exposed. But there is nobody down on the street to see her. She fires, and takes out the power unit perched on top of the billboard. Her horns and her red hair return to the darkness, and Kalisa tastes relief (at least, for a moment).

Don't shoot the messenger, that's how the saying goes. But there's nothing in there about shooting the message. It's what those fucking buzzers deserve anyway. They woke her up at the ass crack of dawn yet again this morning, with their weird music and the rumbles and groans of their construction equipment. And this is the trash they leave behind: sentimental billboards that won't let you look away. No one consulted her about moving these eyesores into the neighborhood. Behind her, another one glows through the curtains at the opposite side of the room. It looks like the moon, if the moon was an unnatural and invasive atrocity that perched on your windowsill, staring at you without your permission and refusing to leave.

"Fuck," says Kalisa, feeling the need to shoot her gun stirring inside her again already.

It's a little hopeless. On some level she knows this. Tomorrow, the Commuters will come back and fix the broken signs, and it will be like Kalisa had never fired any bullets at all. But she has to shoot something. So, what else is she going to shoot? Herself?

She considers it, and not for the first time. In fact, this has become her nightly meditation. She brings the barrel of her rifle in close for a kiss, wrapping her tongue around it and tasting gunpowder and cold steel. She thinks long and hard about what it would mean to pull the trigger. What will happen next? Will there be someone or something waited for her on the other side? Will she be punished for this one last act of violence? Will she be punished for all the acts of violence that came before it? Will she be rewarded for persevering as long as she did? Will she simply fade to black? But it doesn't matter how long and how hard she thinks about snuffing her own candle and the chain of events that may or may not follow. There is simply no way to know. She's no Davridian, that much is clear. She's no Commuter either. But does that mean she doesn't believe in God? Or reincarnation? Or any kind of magic at all?

Once upon a time, Kalisa survived a fire. And not just any fire. She survived the Last Fire. The fire that scrubbed Panarza clean, devouring every desiccated tree and every wilted blade of grass. The fire that killed billions of starving animals, and millions of starving people. The fire that swallowed an ecosystem that was hanging by a thread, leaving behind nothing but ash. Now that ash blows around on the wind with the rest of the dust, stinging the eyes and clogging the throats of everyone stupid enough to keep on persisting, and not just lie down and die. Kalisa laid down in the fire. But the fire did not kill Kalisa. And if the fire couldn't kill her, then what could?

A flickering light from the window on the other side of the room distracts her from her meditation. Annoyed, she takes her rifle to the other window, and the other billboard. "SPIRENA! Prosperity, joy, and happiness!" it reads, the big red digital letters bouncing across an electric blue

background in an endless loop. Kalisa – destitute, cold, and miserable – pulls the trigger, and the billboard blinks out of existence. Now, her room is truly dark, dark enough that she stubs her toe on a box she'd been using as furniture as she stumbles her way to the pile of unwashed blankets she calls her bed. She collapses into the pile and waits for sleep.

Sleep doesn't come. Kalisa's still too angry to sleep. She keeps thinking about the Commuters, and the fact that in only a few hours they'll be back on the job site and stealing her sleep away.

"Hypocritical bastards," she mutters to herself, the words muffled by the wad of stinking cloth she's buried her face in. "If they're so tolerant and acceptin', how come they ain't toleratin' or acceptin' the fact that I'm a night person?"

But there's a cure for her insomnia. In fact, it just so happens to be the cure for everything (or at least, everything that plagues Kalisa). Without lifting her face from the blankets, she reaches out with her right hand, rummaging around in the canvas sack she keeps by the bed. She wraps her fingers around the cold stone pipe and the little baggie of *cotcha*, and, sitting up, she pulls them out of the sack. She takes a pinch of the dried up herb between her thumb and forefinger and sprinkles it into the mouth of the pipe. Ready to spark up, Kalisa sends her attention inwards, feeling the anger stewing in her belly. She thinks of the buzzers, and their stupid billboards, and the anger inside of her pulses and throbs. Gathering into a sort of serpent, it swims in her intestines and curls around her spine. Kalisa calls it up, lifting it from her abdomen to her thorax, where it gathers in her right shoulder. From there, it flows down to her hand, where it culminates upon the tip of her index finger: a hungry little flame, illuminating the dark green of the *cotcha*. She touches her finger to the herb, and pulls deeply on the other end of the pipe. The smoke is heavy and sweet, and stings the back of her throat as she sucks it down. In a few moments, she can feel it start to work, melting the tension in her extremities and lulling her gently down into the softness of her bedding. Several minutes later, she is asleep.

But not for long.

"Yuri!" Kalisa shouts, awakening with a start. She sits bolt upright, and her long red hair falls into her face like an avalanche. She's breathing hard, her chest heaving, and she's sweating, at least as much as her traumatized body can still sweat. The buzzers are back. Outside, she can hear the *boom-thwack boom-thwack boom-thwack* of the Commuter's music, a thundering bass drum and a thick digital snare that sets the tempo of their labor. The starting and stopping of their cranes and their power tools follows that beat closely, a cacophonous symphony of whirs and shrieks that herald the coming of yet another billboard into her neighborhood. "Fuckin' shit!" Kalisa says, the muscles of her neck and jaws tightening with anger.

Pushing her hair out of her eyes, she reaches for the bag of *cotcha* and the stone pipe again, and hurriedly packs the latter with the former, spilling little green flecks of *cotcha* into the faded old blankets she's sitting amongst. She's almost out of *cotcha*: not good. She sits up to smoke, and the blankets (slightly damp) fall away from her naked body, exposing her scars. They run up and down her arms, groping her ribs and cupping her breasts, wrapping across her back and down to her sacrum, these blisters and distortions of skin and tissue disrupting her pallor with red, pink, and white. She studies the scars on her arms as she takes a long, deep drag of *cotcha*, noting, and not for the first time, that they could have been so, so much worse. She takes a second drag and puts the pipe and the baggie back into her sack. The alkaloids in the smoke drape over her nervous system like a warm fluffy blanket. Warmer than these paper thin rags, anyway. But it could be worse. The burns took a chunk of her sweat glands, and if they hadn't, she and the rags would all be drenched right now. As her brain gradually takes on more and more of the plant alkaloids, Kalisa comes more and more into the present, leaving the past in the past, and chuckling a little as she does so, laughing not at anything in particular, just laughing as a nervous response to the tension leaving her body. She waits there a while, about twenty minutes, just feeling her body, and soothing herself in a wordless appraisal of the present moment. And, for a little while, the music outside actually sounds like music.

But then the peak effects of the herb begin to subside, and with them, Kalisa's happiness. A power drill whines outside, cutting through the intangible fabric of Kalisa's chemical womb, and she slams her fist into the floor. After fussing restlessly amongst the rags for a little while, she finally drags herself out of bed to put on a dirty tanktop and a dark green pair of men's cargo pants. What she tells herself is that she's going outside to steal some food.

But as soon as her feet touch the sidewalk, that vague little semblance of a plan evaporates. The new billboard looms down above her, long cables snaking tightly around the pillar that supports it. It's being mounted on top of what used to be a liquor store, what is now just an empty shell with thick walls, a nondescript structure sturdy enough for the buzzers' purposes. There's a squad of Commuters on the roof of the building, some of them grabbing onto the cables, others waving their hands and conjuring that strange Zoan magic. All of them push and pull in tandem, carefully tugging the billboard into place. Most of them are buzzers, their brightly colored skin glistening in the morning sun. But Kalisa can see Hegos and featherheads too, and their chipper smiles offend her. They bob their heads and sway their hips to the music, dancing as they work. A crane supports them from down on the street, stabilizing the heavy pillar as they bring it perfectly perpendicular to the rooftop. On the sidewalk near the crane, a Hego stands with his back to Kalisa, and she calls out to him.

"Hey, asshole!" she growls, brandishing her rifle as she hustles across the street.

The Hego turns, and the first thing Kalisa notices is that he's got a gun in his hand, and the second thing she notices is that he's pointing it at her, and the third thing she notices is that he's not actually a man. The Hego Commuter's features are androgynous, even moreso than Kalisa's butch jawline and thick horns. Tall and lean, with a flat chest, a flat ass, and a pair of spectacles perched in the center of her oval face, this sexless Hego looks like she was born to be a librarian. But she's not a librarian. She's security.

"What's on your mind?" says the Commuter, taking aim.

"I'm tired and I need to get some fuckin' sleep," says Kalisa.

"Sounds like a you problem," says the Commuter, cool and calm, handgun steady. "And not an us problem."

"Oh it's yer problem, alright. Those fuckin' lights y'all keep puttin' up all over the place are keepin' me up at night," Kalisa says, cocking a thumb towards the building with the boarded up windows across the street.

"Living in the slums, huh?" the Commuter asks with only the faintest shred of empathy. "Our condolences."

"Condolences?" Kalisa asks, confused.

"Our regrets. Our sympathies," the Commuter explains, her gun still pointed at Kalisa's face.

"You know... you don't have to. Live in an abandoned building in the slums, that is."

"Spare me the good word, preacher."

"I'm not here to preach. If you want a job, and a place to live, you could have it. We could give it to you. All you'd have to do is work for it."

"Oh, fuck off," Kalisa growls at the woman with the gun.

"We're offering you help," says the Commuter, patiently.

"Yer offerin' to take away my freedom. Offer all you want, you ain't gonna get it."

"Your freedom to what... go hungry? And shoot at our billboards?"

"Now who said anything about shootin' billboards?" Kalisa says, smirking.

"I did," says the steely-eyed Commuter. "Last night *somebody* shot out our billboards, and now we have to do our job twice. *Somebody* is costing us time and money."

"My condolences," Kalisa says, tauntingly. For a long moment, she stares down the Commuter with the handgun, unblinking and resolute. But soon enough, the rumblings in her belly lead her away from the construction site and off in search of something to soothe her appetite.

Meanwhile, the beat goes on, synthetic drums pounding from the speakers mounted up on the

rooftop. Drills whine and whir, twisting their screws into the base of the pillar above. And another unwanted new neighbor has moved into the neighborhood.

“Yuri!” Kalisa shouts, sitting bolt upright in her bed. Her chest heaves with every ragged breath, as little beads of sweat gather on her forehead. Those beads of sweat glisten with kaleidoscopic blues and pinks. They reflect and distort the busy colored lights that invade her room through the threadbare curtains, the lights that have mistaken her sullen face for a playground. “Motherfucker,” Kalisa says, glaring at the ineffectual curtains drawn across her windows. She reaches for her *cotcha* and her pipe, but the little baggie is almost empty. “Motherfucker!” Kalisa says again, louder this time.

She rolls herself out of bed and crouches by the window, peeking through the curtain and reading the restless message that lights up the night as it slides back and forth across the new billboard: “Spirena! A city where we can all be free... TOGETHER!” Kalisa notices that her fists are clenched and shaking. She takes a deep breath, than another, but she's still shaking. “We can all be free... TOGETHER!” Serran hypocrisy at its finest. It's all she can do to stifle the scream that wells up inside her when she reads those words. Before her eyes, the word 'together' breaks down before her into its constituent parts: TO GET HER. Is it intentional? Or is Kalisa just being paranoid? She doesn't know, but it could easily be both. She takes up her rifle, fixing the billboard in its sights, then puts it down again. A bullet isn't going to do it. The buzzers will just come back tomorrow and repair whatever little damage she does. It's a civic project, which means it's being funded by the Spire Clans – the rich assholes who run Spirena – and Kalisa is going to run out of bullets long before the Spire Clans run out of money. If she wants to send them a message, she's going to have to try harder. A lot harder. Rummaging around inside her canvas sack, she finds her stash of plastic explosives. She fights the temptation to take them all. Really, she can't. Explosives are expensive. She can't just waste them all in one big orgy of rage.

She'll need a disguise as well. She's over six feet tall and built like a gorilla, enormous even for a Hegovarian farm girl. She pulls a black long-sleeved shirt on over her tank top, pulling the sleeves down to her wrists to hide the burn scars on her forearms. She puts a dark green hooded cloak on over that to obscure her breasts, and she pulls the hood up over her flaming crimson hair. Her horns poke out from under the hood, but that's alright. Her horns are not the slender, delicate affair of most Hego girls. Hers are stouter and thicker, almost masculine. If someone caught sight of her in the street, they would see her thick butch horns and her thick butch jaw and assume she was male. And hopefully, that's the description any eyewitness would share with the Harpies. That is, if any eyewitness told any story at all.

Out on the street, the bums gathered around their trash can fires are too drunk to notice her. As far as they're concerned, she's just one of them: another derelict going nowhere to do nothing, moving only for the sake of moving, shambling from place to place without any goals beyond short term survival. The bums are too preoccupied with staying warm and drinking their misery away to care about anything that isn't immediately in front of them. Kalisa passes by undetected, invisible by virtue of her irrelevance.

The offending billboard sits atop the roof of a two story building, though the poles that support it are another three stories high. A piece of cake, for Kalisa. Even though she grew up in the relatively flat expanses of farmland back east in Coxex, she has become quite the climber since arriving in Spirena. How long has it been? Twelve years? Fifteen? Kalisa has stopped counting the days, and she has stopped counting the years. She no longer celebrates her birthday. She has tits and bleeds once a month, so she's a woman and not a girl. Someday, she'll stop bleeding, and her tits will hang down by her knees, and then she'll be old. Until that day, she's too young to die and old enough to know better. Why get more specific than that?

Getting onto the roof of the building is easy. She vaults up on top of an empty dumpster, grabs onto a windowsill, and she's pulling herself onto the roof in no time. Shimmying up the pole that

supports the billboard is a little bit harder, but Kalisa loves to exercise (it's one of the only things that makes her body worth having). Wrapping her muscular thighs around the pole, she pulls herself up, hand over hand, hoping she's not too conspicuous. But nobody sees. The night is still. She climbs onto the back of the billboard, and disappears into the shadows of the support struts and the wiring that keep this tacky nightmare alive and standing. Kalisa pulls her automatic belaying cable from her pocket and wraps it around her hips, tight enough to squeeze her groin a little bit. Wrapping her legs around a metal bar running horizontally along the bottom of the billboard, she gently lowers herself towards the pillar until she is dangling upside down. Here, at the top of the pillar but a little beneath the base of the billboard, she anchors the other end of her belaying cable. One firm hand at a time, she carefully brings herself back to right side up, using her considerable upper body strength to keep herself stable until she is sitting once again on top of the horizontal metal bar. She places the plastic explosive here, at the junction where the base of the billboard meets the top of the support pillar. Now she's ready to light it. She touches her index finger to the explosive, directing her seemingly bottomless reserves of rage up from her bowels and into her extended digit. Once the explosive begins to spark, she rolls backwards off of the billboard, freefalling towards the roof of the building below. Her bomb goes off at right about the same moment as the belaying cable goes taut, truncating her descent only a few feet above the roof of the building. With a groan, the billboard leans forward, until the top of the metal pillar snaps off, and the whole electric atrocity comes tumbling down. The billboard smashes forcefully onto the street below, and Kalisa smiles. The crash of the metal and the tinkling of the glass on the asphalt are music to her ears.

Now, to make her getaway. She reaches up and presses a button on her end of the belaying cable. But it does not release its hold on the pillar above. Frustrated, Kalisa jabs her finger into the button over and over again, but it's no use. The mechanism inside has jammed. Cursing, Kalisa reaches for the knife at her belt. The belaying cable is expensive enough that she'd rather not destroy it. But she's got to escape. She's already put together a substantial criminal CV for herself. The last thing she needs to do is to get caught by the Harpies again. She can already hear the sirens approaching in the distance, wailing like restless ghosts. But as soon as she pulls the knife free of its holster, someone pushes the barrel of a handgun into her forehead. In the dim light of the street lights and the billboards, Kalisa recognizes the little frameless eyeglasses and the homely androgynous face of the Commuter security guard who had pointed that same gun at her face earlier that day.

"Somebody's in a lot of trouble," the androgynous Commuter says, smirking. Behind her, a troop of buzzers have gathered, and a few of them set about immediately to detaching Kalisa from the snare in which she has inadvertently trapped herself.

"Y'all gonna shoot me?" Kalisa asks.

"No," says the Commuter.

"Y'all gonna hand me over to the Harpies?" Kalisa asks.

"Hell no," says the Commuter. "It's us you fucked with, and it's us who will decide what to do with you. We're Commuters, asshole. We solve our own problems."

8

At breakfast this morning, Avatylic is standing in the center of the dining hall. She stands in front of the chair where Helo would have sat, but she does not sit. The *ashuras* trickle into the room, silently taking their seats. All eyes are on Rozz's *keira*. At last, she speaks.

"Tonight," she says, an inscrutable frost veiling her jet black eyes.

But they all know exactly what she means: Liasha, the annual battle for which they have been training. Avatylic departs, the tails of her long black coat following her out of the room like a shadow. Breakfast is served, and the *ashuras* huddle together, communicating in hushed whispers. Rozz looks at the slices of hydroponic pear on the plate before her, and her stomach lurches. Though she knows she must, she cannot imagine eating at a time like this. The angel is coming. Tonight.

"You gonna eat that?" Melosa asks, using her fork to indicate the pale yellow slurry of lab-grown eggs on Rozz's plate.

"No. I mean... I should," Rozz says.

"You should," Ioni agrees, softly. Beneath the table, she brushes her hand gently against Rozz's thigh.

"Do you think you'll be on?" Melosa asks Ioni.

"Hoo," sings Ioni dismissively. "It doesn't matter how much I train. I'll never be an athlete."

"Yeah, it's true," says Melosa, uncomfortably familiar with the hard truth as always. "You're a lover, not a fighter," she says, eliciting a little blush from Ioni.

"But... don't you love Helo?" Rozz asks. "Don't you want to protect him with all your heart?"

Ioni sighs, shrugs, and looks away. "I do love Helo. Of course I do..."

"Yeah, yeah," says Melosa, rolling her eyes. "We all 'love' Helo."

Rozz nervously chews her lip. There's a subtext to Melosa's comment that she doesn't quite follow, and she doesn't know what to make of that. She jabs her fork into a slice of pear and places it into her mouth. It tastes good, but she doesn't want to chew it. Instead, she pushes it against the roof of her mouth with her tongue, letting the juices slide down her throat.

"You'll be on," Melosa says to Rozz. "So will I. You'll probably be on offense, and I'll probably be on mix."

"Really? Offense?" Rozz asks through her mouthful of pear.

"That or on mix. You're fast," Melosa says. "Really fast. You have excellent reflexes, and you can out-manuever any of the bigger girls. Putting you on offense or mix would make the most sense."

Rozz forces herself to chew and swallow the lingering piece of fruit. "That's not what my *keira* says," she declares.

"Your mother's a weird petty bitch," Melosa says, casually.

"Hai!" Rozz wails, the sound pouring forth involuntarily. "Last time, I brought our family no honor. I disgraced myself."

"Aeia Taiun kicked you in the face," Melosa says. "As I recall, she kicked you so hard she almost broke your neck. They had you in traction in the infirmary for over a week. I remember. I was in the infirmary too."

"Hai..." Rozz moans, a strangled sob. The face of Aeia Taiun flashes before her eyes: the orgiastic snarl of sadistic pleasure contorting the girl's features, the blood splattered across her high

regal cheekbones.

"Honestly, we're lucky to be alive. If you can call this luck," Melosa says, looking over her shoulder warily at the other *ashuras*. "You're a good fighter, Rozz. Really, you are. I've sparred with you every day for the past eighteen months. Believe me, I know."

"Is that true?" Rozz asks Ioni.

The delicate girl shrugs. "Maybe? Maybe you're good at fighting, I don't know. It doesn't matter how hard they ask me to train. I have no head for fighting. I don't know what good fighting looks like. I don't know what an oxymoron like 'good fighting' even means. But I do know this. Whether or not you are a good fighter is not the real question. The real question is... do you hate them as much as you love Helo?"

Rozz is silent for a moment. "Do you?" she asks Melosa. "Hate them."

"I hate everyone," Melosa says with a cheery smile. "You're all dumb fuckers."

"*Hai*. I can't eat this," Rozz mutters, pushing her plate away.

"You really should," Ioni says. "Tonight will be very difficult for you. You need to take care of your shoulder."

"You're psyching yourself out already," Melosa says, dragging the tines of her fork along the vertical muscles of her jaw. "Do you want a performance enhancer?"

"Keep your voice down," Ioni hisses.

"What? No," Rozz replies. "I'll... I'll find a way to calm down."

"You will, dear," says Ioni. "You're just surprised."

"I wonder how they know he's coming," Melosa says. "The Raelia," she adds, offering a clarification that nobody required.

"Is the angel real?" asks Rozz.

"Oh, it's real," Melosa replies. "Real enough to kill for, anyway."

Conditioning in the arena today is light: jogging, calisthenics, vocal warm-ups, and a bit of sparring. After a couple hours of training, Avatylië gathers them all to her feet.

"The Raelia comes tonight," she declares. "It has been almost a year since our last Liasha, almost a year since the last time the Raelia has blessed us with his presence. Some of you had not yet joined our ranks. Some of you were too green to show your honor. Some of you still are. Watch. Listen. Learn. This is not your fight tonight, but perhaps the next one will be.

"The Raelia comes tonight. This is what it has all been building towards. All your training. All your education. Every moment of your lives has led up to this point. This is what you have been born and bred for. Tonight, you will become the living embodiment of the power of Clan Lashlei. Tonight, you will herald the messenger of God.

"The rules of Liasha are simple: protect your beautiful boy, and destroy the wretched boys of the other Clans. When the Raelia comes, he speaks through our boys. What he tells those boys, we cannot know, until our boys share it with us. But if our boy is killed before he can share with us what he's been told, then the word of God shall pass us by. And we shall be deaf to the will of God until the Raelia returns again, to bring the message anew. Know this: the Raelia walks across time the way you walk across space. The past is his library. The future is his fortress. And it can be our fortress as well. Unless you fail.

"Remember who we are, my children. We are Clan Lashlei. We bear the blood of kings, of conquerors. We are titans amongst the realm of mortals. We have been chosen to rule because we are pure in the eyes of the Raelia. And pure we must remain. We must not stoop to the viciousness of Clan Taiun, or the vengefulness of Clan Vargas. We are better than that, and we must be certain that the Raelia sees that. Perhaps a few of you are wondering about Aeia Taiun. Some of you remember what happened the last time the Raelia graced us with his presence..." Avatylië says, trailing off. In her peripheral vision, Rozz can see a few of the other *ashuras* responding to the sound of the bitch's name,

tightening their fists and clenching their jaws. Avatylic sees them too. "Cowards!" she yells. "Only the weak and the foolish obsess over the past! When you are on the battlefield, there is no past, and there is no future. There is only the battle before you. Do not lose sight of it."

Avatylic hesitates a moment, her thumb caressing the stock of the whip in her hand. "Still, there are things you must know. After the events of last year's Liasha, the Spire Clans have agreed to make a few changes to the proceedings. One might even call them concessions. But we must make sacrifices in the interest of preserving harmony between our clans. That is what it is... to be honorable," Avatylic says, and Rozz can see that the fist that holds the whip is shaking. "First of all, Aeia Taiun will not be returning to the battlefield. There is more to being an *ashura* than brutality and domination. Clan Taiun have been reminded of this. They have been punished for their dishonor. But I must ask that the cowards among you refrain from celebrating. Because we have had to make another concession to go along with that one. To balance the scales of justice, Clan Vargas are being allowed to bend the rules ever so slightly. After last year's massacre, we have allowed Clan Vargas to adjust their... methods of recruitment."

"Androids," Melosa whispers to Rozz, so softly that Rozz can hardly hear the word at all.

Androids. But that is Clan Vargas' stock in trade after all.

Rozz remembers what happened last year. Lying sprawled on the hard stone floor of the arena, she was in too much pain to move, and so she watched it all. She watched the golden-feathered Vargas girls falling one after another, as Aeia cut through them like scissors through cloth. She watched Aeia hold the last of them, Vax Vargas' daughter Hera, by the throat. She watched dignified and white-feathered Zalamae Vargas, *keira* of Clan Vargas, rise from the stands clutching a pistol, taking aim at Clan Taiun's wretched boy. She watched the entire battle come to a standstill: Aeia's *tuogi* at Hera's throat, Zalamae's pistol unwavering. She watched Aeia surrender, depositing Hera on the ground like a dirty piece of clothing. She watched the humiliated *ashura* stomp her boots through puddles of blood as she walked off the battlefield.

Rozz was taken from that same arena in a stretcher. She spent the next week in a hospital bed and the next month in physical therapy. She was one of the lucky ones.

"I have been closely evaluating your performance," Avatylic announces, snapping Rozz out of her momentary reverie. "I have been taking notes, and thinking long and hard about which of you to choose for the honor of greeting the Raelia. I have made my choices, and there will be no grumbling and no bickering over the choices I have made. My decisions are final," Avatylic says, allowing the last word to ring out above the heads of her gathered flock. "As per the regulations of the ceremony of Liasha, I have chosen three of you to be on offense, three of you to be on defense, and three of you to be on mix. Leicha, Nigaera, Sefoni: rise. For your strength, your ruthlessness, and your willingness to take life, I have chosen you three for our offensive line. Be ready to crush our opposition. May your song pierce the hearts of our enemies. Achaeafa, Kalasim, Lakaesa: rise. For your endurance, your devotion, and your willingness to sacrifice yourselves, I have chosen you three for our defensive line. Be ready to give your all for our cause. May your shield protect the scion of our family. Melosa, Puosi, Rosalim: rise. For your speed, your flexibility, and your quick wits, I have chosen you three for our mixed line. Be ready to take the place of anyone who falls in battle. May you walk the razor's edge of life and death with grace."

Rozz stands, but she wants to crumble. Her heart is in her throat. She sees her mother, and the other *ashuras* standing and sitting around her, but they don't register as much more than dark and shapeless blobs. Only her pride and her honor are keeping her vertical. Really, she did not expect to be chosen for Liasha, especially not after her poor performance last year. She can feel the scorn of the other girls around her. But she has been here before. Hopefully by tonight, that scorn will have transformed into love, even if only for a brief time.

"Eat well, and rest well," Avatylic demands. "There will be no lecture tonight. We shall reconvene atop the southwestern ledge of this arena at sunset tonight. You are dismissed."

Rozz spends the next several hours in an anxious fugue. Everything seems painfully bright. Wandering the featureless stone halls of her Spire in a somnambulistic daze, she can find no respite from the electric lighting. But the faces of the other *ashuras* she passes in the halls are even worse. Their eyes blaze like spotlights, and Rozz feels as though she is cooking beneath their glare. In an effort to shield her overactive sympathetic nervous system, her mind shifts into tunnel vision. Rozz can see what's immediately in front of her, and nothing else. Escaping the dormitories, she tries looking for solace at the terrace ledges that overlook the city. But there is no relief here: only a cold wind tempting her to close her eyes, step off the ledge, and leave her family, her duty, and her honor far behind. Unsure what else to do, Rozz retreats to her dormitory, locking the door and drawing down the windowshade. Rozz strips naked and climbs into bed, and for a time, all she does is breathe. An unknown (but heartbreakingly brief) interval of time passes, and then Rozz hears activity in the hall outside her room, and a small spurt of adrenaline courses through her nerves. It is sharp, like pain, and it wakes her from her trance immediately.

She gets out of bed, and gently takes her neck and shoulders through their range of motion. Her upper torso is uncomfortably tight, but not bad considering what she negotiates on a typical day. Satisfied with the state of her body, Rozz dresses herself in her finest combat uniform, sleek and form-fitting. The silk of her tunic is smooth and light and clean, black with a gold trim that runs along the cuffs and shoulders, and down to the inseam of her leggings. She pauses in the mirror to adjust her sleeves and pull her leggings a little higher onto her slender hips, and now she is ready. She opens the door of her room, joining the tail end of the *ashuras* filing through the dormitories— both those who will fight and those who will not — on their way to the southwestern ledge.

The southwestern ledge is a massive fan-shaped section of the rooftop arena of the Spire, about one hundred and fifty feet across at its broadest arc and composing one third of the arena. The ledge is delineated by deep grooves that separate it from the rest of the arena, grooves that run all the way up into the seating area. The *ashuras* who will spectate tonight take their seats in the bottom row. The nine who will fight, Rozz included, line up in front of them. Before the first row of seats, nine heavy iron chains are bolted to the ground, and each of the chosen *ashuras* takes her chain in both hands. They stand in silence, facing the center of the arena, waiting.

Rozz's elder sister Vaieu is the first to arrive, with two of her assistants in tow. A cold wind arrives with these three *kori*, sweeping across the rooftop arena and stirring Rosalim's short feathers. The *kori* are dressed entirely in black, save for a golden pin in the shape of a tree over each of their hearts: the sigil of Clan Lashlei. When stern scowling Vaieu arrives at the narrowest point of the fan of the southwestern ledge, she pivots on her heel, taking up her position facing away from the *ashuras*, her hands clasped behind her back. Her two assistants take their positions on either side of Rozz and the row of chosen *ashuras* holding their chains, forming the base of a triangle of which Vaieu is the apex.

Helo is the next to arrive. Brave, beautiful Helo strides across the arena, a look of gentle benevolence upon his handsome face. He is dressed in a long flowing black robe, with a golden trim around the collar that rings his precious throat. In the center of the southwestern ledge, equidistant between Vaieu and the *ashuras*, a waist-high stone podium and another heavy chain awaits him. He takes his place atop it, grasping his chain with both hands, his head held high. Rozz wants to cry out for him, but she knows that if she were to disrupt the Liasha, she would never be allowed to see him again. She wonders if perhaps all of the other *ashuras* are suffering through the same stifled desire. But each of them knows better than to submit to their emotional urges. That would be unbecoming of a Lashlei. So for an uncomfortably long time, they stand and they wait.

As the sun closes in on the intangible void beyond the horizon's edge, Avatylic makes her appearance. She wears a black strapless dress of the finest stitch, her pale shoulders left exposed to the chill of the approaching night. A brooch of arboreal gold, much larger and more elaborate than the one

worn by Vaieu, pins a long ruffled sash to her chest. A net of golden chains gleams from within her massive head of feathers. Below them, her eyes have been accented with thick, dark eyeliner and a metallic golden mascara that gleams in the last rays of the disappearing sun. Her lips bear that same gleam. Rozz glances at the long sleek black gloves that cover her mother's forearms, but she does not see the whip. Behind Avatylic, two columns of similarly attired Naraean noblemen and noblewomen file into the arena. These are Rozz's extended family, her aunts and uncles and some of her older cousins. They take their place in the seats behind the spectating *ashuras*. Rozz does not turn around, but she knows that Avatylic will take the uppermost center seat.

At last, as the sky begins to darken, Rozz's father, Gargan Lashlei, completes the entourage. Descending from down out of the sky, his great marble throne glides slowly and assuredly towards his assembled family members. He lowers his throne to a point a couple feet above Vaieu's head, a great mass of sculpted stone that could obliterate his daughter utterly, if he chose to allow gravity to run its course. But Vaieu does not flinch. Slowly, Gargan moves his throne forward, floating towards Rozz and her chosen sisters and cousins. Gargan is tall for a Naraean, and lean, his bony shoulders and sunken chest visible beneath the open black robe that hangs from his body. His gaunt cheeks and his brow are furrowed with the many lines of age, and he wears dark glasses over his eyes, because he is blind. But what is most astounding about Gargan is his hair: long, black, and flowing with a life all its own. The tendrils of his hair drift upon the breeze like the tentacles of a sea anemone, slithering across the hard edges of Gargan's throne and grasping at vespers upon the air. Only Gargan, and a select and treasured few of Rosalim's older sisters, possess this extremely rare genetic mutation, and is a magnificent sight to behold. Rozz feels more than a little awe as her father, her *keir*, approaches her. But his steady forward motion does not waver as he approaches first his son, and then his daughters and nieces. He passes over their heads, sweeping upwards to ascend the risers, and finally bringing his throne to rest in its place atop the highest row of seats. For a long moment, everyone is frozen stock still. No one fidgets. Nobody coughs. Until Gargan breaks the silence, clapping his hands together once, twice, thrice.

At his signal, Vaieu and her two *kori* assistants thrust their hands into the air, and a powerful gust of wind blows across the arena. As the *kori* hold their hands high, the entire fan of the southwestern ledge begins to rumble and shake, as the winds begin to lift this great piece of stone from its resting place. Though she's been through this several times before, Rozz still finds this process of lift-off unnerving. She notices herself clutching the chain white-knuckled, and – consciously, deliberately – she allows herself to loosen her grip. She looks to Helo, and the calm and assured manner with which he holds his chain, and she does her best to emulate his ease. There is no escape now. There is no going back to her dormitory to hide beneath her blanket. Slowly but surely, the ledge rises into the air.

The dust wall dome enclosing the city of Spirena is the largest that has ever been built, and this is not mere opulence. The Spire Clans would not dare to ask the Raelia into an uncomfortably confined space during his yearly visit. Even as the southwestern ledge continues its dizzying ascent, the roof of the dome remains distant, as do the tops of the high canyon walls to the north and south of the city. But the awe-inspiring rock formations that encircle Spirena disappear from Rozz's awareness as the other two ledges come into view. Clan Taiun arrive from their spire to the west, and Clan Vargas arrive from the southwest. As their ledges draw closer, Rozz can see that the other two clans hold the same formation as her own. Even the uniforms are the same, though the colors are different: Clan Taiun wear navy blue with a crimson trim, and Clan Vargas, white with a jade trim. The ledges draw nearer and nearer together, the stonework of all three grinding loudly as their edges brush up against each other. Finally, in unison, the three ledges form a perfect circle. Vaieu, in the center of this newly assembled arena, stands almost close enough to her *kori* counterparts from the other clans that she could reach out and touch them. The anxious fluttering in Rozz's chest dissolves, pushed to obliteration by a wave of adrenaline that brings her reality sharply into focus. Her mind is clear. Her heart is calm. She is ready

for battle.

Rozz shifts her gaze to the right, sizing up the *ashuras* of Clan Taiun. Tall and furious Aeia is nowhere to be seen, and yet Rozz denies herself relief at the terrifying *ashura's* absence. There is no telling what lies in store for her tonight, and no virtue in lulling herself into a false sense of security. For what she sees to her left makes the feathers at the back of her neck stand on end. The nine *ashuras* chosen by Clan Vargas are all perfectly identical. All of them have the same golden feathers. All of them have the same graceful nose in the center of the same oval face. All of them have the same vengeful glare. Because all of them are Hera Vargas.

Rozz is alarmed, but there is no time for protestations. Something in the sky above catches her eye, and Rozz sees a great slithering of pink light, vast in its perimeter, descending upon the dust wall dome. It is there, and then it is gone, perhaps nothing more than a trick of the eye. But Rozz cannot dwell on such things now. She will have time for speculation after the battle.

As patriarch of the most senior of the three clans, Indar Taiun is the first to clap: three times, slowly and loudly. The *kori* of Clan Taiun call in the moat – the defensive obstacle that protects their corner of the arena – using the winds to summon great cisterns full of water. For the Taiun's ledge is not flat like the other two ledges, but riddled with bowl-like concavities that mark the periphery of the ledge. The *kori* empty the cisterns into these concavities, filling them in with hip-deep water, and surrounding their *ashuras* with the moat. They finish their work with a collection of small boulders dropped into the water to become stepping stones leading from the positions of the waiting *ashuras* to the ledges of the other two clans. Now that Clan Taiun have finished, it is Gargan Lashlei's turn to clap. Vaieu, and the other *kori* of Clan Lashlei, summon the forest – an array of mighty javelins twice as long as any Naraean is tall, studded with spikes and wrapped with barbed wire. The Lashlei *kori* thrust these javelins into the surface of their ledge, lodging them there like a copse of murderous trees spread across the terrain that Rozz and her sisters must defend. Vax Vargas, patriarch of the youngest of the three clans, claps last, and the *kori* of Clan Vargas summon their defense: the grottos. For Clan Vargas do not fortify their ledge by adding to it, but by taking from it. The stones of the floor are pried loose by the wind, and lifted into the air, leaving behind an array of holes perfect for swallowing wayward feet and twisting ankles. At last, the arena is ready for battle. All three *keirs* clap three more times in unison: they are ready to begin.

“Hai!” shout the *koris*, their arms once again reaching towards the heavens.

“Hai!” shout the *ashuras* in return, dropping their chains.

Helo has relinquished his chain as well, as have the other two boys from the other two clans. They are despicable boys, Rozz is certain. They are unworthy to breathe the same air as dear sweet Helo. With their hands held out to the side, the *doveis* tilt back their heads, open their mouths, and sing. Their song is soft at first, a deep baritone throb swelling in three-part unison. As they hold this note, the stones they stand upon begin to glow brighter and brighter, until the entire arena is illuminated by their light. Together, the *doveis* rise a perfect fifth, then soar up a major sixth, before descending a third and coming to land an octave above their first note. This is the call to arms. It is time for the *ashuras* to take their positions. The defensive lines encircle their *doveis*, and the offensive lines from a single file column behind their lead *kori*. The mix line stand in a row between the other two lines. Rozz stands in the center of her mix line, with Puosi to her right and Melosa to her left. Each of them drops into a lunge, assuming the *foria*. Matching the tonic pitch of the *doveis'* song, each of the *ashuras* sings her *tuogi* into being. The *doveis* ascend a tritone, take a half step up to a perfect fifth, and then leap a perfect fourth to a tonic two octaves above the note from which they'd begun. It is time. Liasha – the Battle for the Angel – has commenced.

Immediately, the offensive lines break formation. Leicha and Nigaera Lashlei maneuver around the forest and two *ashuras* from Taiun leap across the stepping stones in the moat, all four of them colliding at the seam that separates their two ledges. But the sparring is no longer in slow motion. The quartet of girls move at lightning speed, darting here, darting there, looking for an opening in their

opponent's defenses and then slashing into it without hesitation. The remaining members of Taiun and Lashlei's offensive lines turn their attention to the Vargas lines. Sefoni Lashlei finds one golden-feathered adversary from Clan Vargas threading her way through the forest, and the two warriors lock blades. But the math does not favor Clan Taiun. Their last offensive *ashura* comes up against two of Hera Vargas invading the moat. Two members of the Taiun mix line break off and come to her aid, but it's too late: the two Heras, operating in tandem, have knocked the poor girl into the water with a splash. Rozz flinches as she watches the Taiun girl's head collide with one of the stepping stones. Clan Vargas is out for blood.

Rozz dashes to her right to support Sefoni in the forest. The Hera droid doesn't see her approaching until it's too late. Dodging an overhead strike from Sefoni, the droid swings at Rozz, but Rozz ducks low and lunges for the droid's Achilles tendon. Her *tuogi* slices through the machinery as though it were as soft as flesh, and the droid crumples, sinking to one knee. Sefoni seizes an opportunity and kicks the droid hard in the throat. The Hera droid collapses backwards onto the gruesome spikes of one of the Lashlei's trees, gasping and clutching spastically at the air, her *tuogi* disabled. But there is no time to revel in this momentary victory.

In a flash, Rozz has returned to the defensive line circling around Helo. Her dear sweet boy has long since departed from unison with the other *doveis*, belting and wailing an ecstatic improvisation that sends a chill up Rozz's spine. But she cannot stop to listen to his song, not in the heat of the battle. Over in the Taiun's ledge, the entire Taiun mix line have rushed the two Heras that have invaded the moat, making short work of the pair of outnumbered androids and holding their heads underwater until they are disabled. But closer, where the forest meets the moat, Leicha Lashlei falls to her Taiun adversary, blood spurting from her shoulder. Without hesitation, this emboldened Taiun *ashura* plunges into the forest and sprints towards Helo's podium, only to fall immediately to a well-coordinated pincher maneuver from Rozz and the Lashlei's defensive line. Rozz and her sisters descend on the girl like a pack of wolves, cutting her uniform to ribbons and leaving her bleeding out on the cold stone floor.

But Nigaera Lashlei is still fighting the other Taiun girl at the seam between the moat and the forest, and she is losing. Leaping to support her sister, Melosa grabs one of the trees' deadly branches and swings, launching herself through the air. She is attempting a diving kick to the enemy's ribs. It's a bold maneuver, and it fails, the Taiun girl sidestepping the attack effortlessly. The enemy locks *tuogis* with Nigaera Lashlei, pushing her down onto one knee. With terrifying agility, the Taiun girl brings her knee to the side of Nigaera's head, striking her in the jaw. Nigaera's *tuogi* wavers, and the Taiun girl seizes her opportunity and swipes across Nigaera's face. She misses Nigaera's throat but catches her chin, and a flash of red arcs through the night sky as Nigaera crumples to the floor. But the rampaging *ashura* has already turned her attention to Melosa. Traversing the forest in a split second, Rozz dashes to Melosa's side, slicing at the Taiun girl as the Taiun girl slashes at Melosa's throat. Melosa rolls out of the way, a near miss, but Rozz's attack falls just short, passing through the fabric of the Taiun girl's uniform without catching her abdomen. The Taiun girl's elbow comes down hard on Rozz's jaw, and cold pain rings out across the entire left side of Rozz's skull. Her *tuogi* interrupted, Rozz waits for the finishing blow, but it does not come: Melosa has drawn the bloodthirsty Taiun girl back into battle.

Rozz takes the opportunity to recover her *tuogi*. Only a few feet away from Rozz, Vaieu stands stock still as the battle rages on around her. It's a truce, one of many. The *koris* are never to be attacked or endangered in any way. To do so ensures immediate disqualification from Liasha, and perhaps even the execution of the offending *ashura* and her *dovei*. Rozz looks to her older sister, but sees no compassion, not even acknowledgement. Vaieu stares straight ahead, a look of intense concentration on her face. To Rozz's left, a scream rings out from Helo's podium. It is not Helo who screams, but Puosi Lashlei, bleeding from the hip. Her face contorted in pain, she clutches the wound with both hands. A member of the Vargas mix line has penetrated the ledge. Sefoni Lashlei is nowhere in sight. Adrenaline stirs Rozz's legs into motion. She does not think. She does not feel. She moves. The Vargas droid feints

towards Kalasim Lashlei on the defensive line, only to change direction last minute, plunging her *tuogi* into Lakeisa Lashlei's face. Rozz is almost there, when a burst of horrible pain explodes across her back: the Taiun girl. Rozz falls face forward onto the stone floor of the arena, avoiding a collision with one of the trees by inches. Somehow, she finds the energy to roll to the right and dodge her enemy's vengeful boot. Scrambling to get to safety, Rozz can feel the warm wetness of her blood saturating the back of her black silk tunic. But there is Melosa, locking *tuogis* with the Taiun girl again, giving Rozz a precious moment to get to her feet. She wants to help Melosa, but the situation is dire. Sensing weakness, another Hera Vargas droid is invading the forest, rushing the Lashlei's crippled defensive line. And there is no one between her and Helo.

Rozz is running to the podium in the center of her ledge, running faster and harder than she ever has in her life, weaving around the trees at lightning speed. Her breaths are ragged and sweat stings her eyes, and somewhere in the back of her mind, there is pain. But pain is irrelevant now. She makes it to Helo's podium without a moment to spare, leaping onto the glowing stone and holding up her *tuogi* to protect her precious boy. As soon as she throws up her *tuogi*, the Hera droid is bringing hers down, and the two *ashuras* lock blades. The convection currents created by the collision of the *tuogis* whip across Rozz's face, rustling her feathers. Delirious, Rozz pushes back hard with all of her might. But the android is stronger. Defiant, Rozz stares into the empty eyes of Hera Vargas' simulacrum. But those eyes are not as empty as she'd assumed. Somewhere in those ocular imitations, Hera's spiteful arrogance sparks within. The android senses victory, leaning forward, pushing the edge of Rozz's *tuogi* up and over Rozz's forehead, past her crown, and closer and closer to Helo's throat. Helo sings on bravely, trusting Rozz to save him. She must save him. She has to. But she feels her right foot losing purchase and sliding across the podium. She feels her knee buckling.

And then she feels the twinge in her shoulder. First, it's a tingling, but it quickly metamorphosizes into a stabbing pain. The tingling spreads down her arm and across her elbow, sapping the strength from her wrist. Rozz's *foria* wobbles, caving in a little on one side. She's losing control of her weapon. And her enemy can sense it. A cruel smile spreads across the android's face as she leans in harder and deeper. All Rozz can do is watch in horror as the cybernetic replica of Hera Vargas pushes Rozz's *tuogi* just a little bit closer, just enough for a sliver of red to open up across Helo's larynx. With agonizing slowness, the sliver spreads and blossoms into a deep red flower, rending apart Helo's delicate grey skin before Rozz's eyes. His song has stopped. The only sound is Rozz's scream.