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This book is set in 13.5-point Perpetua.

Dimensions 5.2” x 7.5”

“Sometimes a man stands up during supper

and walks outdoors, and keeps on walking,

because of a church that stands somewhere in the East.

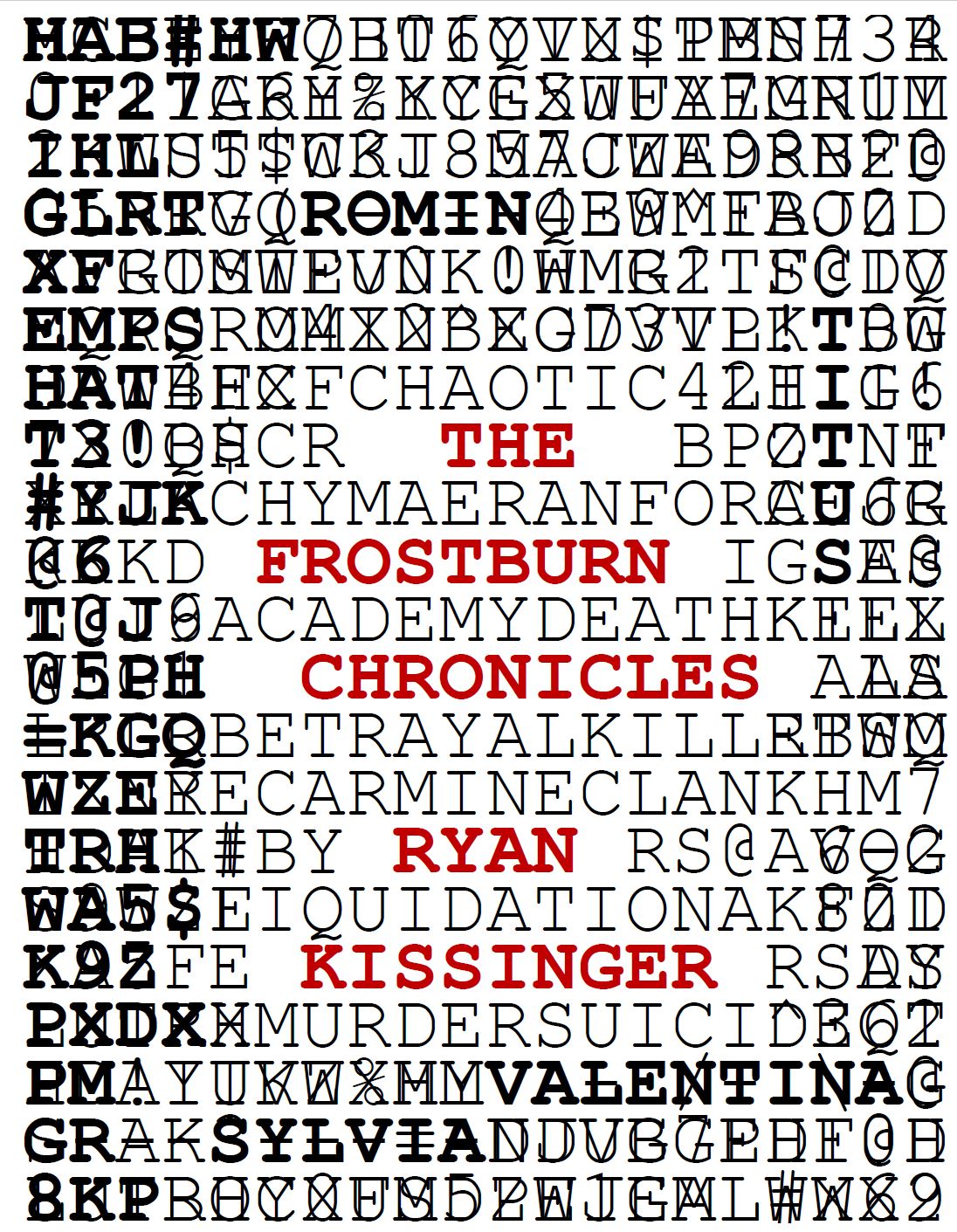
And his children say blessings on him as if he were dead.”

“And another man, who remains inside his own house,

dies there, inside the dishes and the glasses,

so that his children have to go far out into the world

toward that same church, which he forgot.”



PROLOGUE

ESSAY ONE

# 00. UNTITLED

1

*The guilt hangs on my shoulders with the ghosts of everyone I left behind: strained by the weight of their splintered realities, begging myself for forgiveness as if I could ever feel the lightness of your frame again.*

*I wish I could have been the one to take you home—yyou’d ride my shoulders and swivel my head like a lantern in a lighthouse, that way you were my beacon: the way your corn silk hair reflected light, I knew I had to stoke the fire in your heart until the end of either one of us, like a vagrant fanning flames to fight the frost in a bitter winter, like most of the Outwallers in this city that die on the streets without the warmth of Essence in their veins.*

*This is the last record of your existence. I’d carve your name in every wall of this town if it meant your image would live forever, I’d carve it in my flesh if it wouldn’t make you sob in protest, so instead I let it bleed across these pages as a last-will-and-testament to the life you lost so early. I can begin to shed the nightmares of all the unwritten endings I rewound, and maybe after a thousand words or a hundred pages it will bring me back to you.*

*Somehow life continues. I’ve played this game enough times to get an ending I’m satisfied with, or at least to a point where I feel like my heart won’t collapse from the grief. I’ve heard the last words of friends and family so many times that I think I understand them better than they understand themselves: for all their flaws and features, death is the ultimate test of a person’s character. It wasn’t the road of lesser casualties or the path of least resistance, but the only one that wouldn’t turn my stomach, though this inadmissible guilt will never leave me for the impossible decisions I had to make.*

*What does it mean to be a God among men, Ellie? What does it mean when the Gods don’t even realize the strings you pull through death? What happens when time doesn’t squeeze and stretch in a single stream like the Ahkvasans say it does, but you get caught in endless eddies swirling around like the leaves in Sylvia’s teapot before she pours them out? I never asked to be anything close to a God. Mortal man can never reach to those levels of transcendence when he has already placed himself on the precipice of death, the binding of his ego to the life he has when infinity isn’t an option. Mistakes to him are meaningless when his path is linear and he can’t trip over the same crack twice, but if you know the future then everything is your fault and your hands will always be covered in blood.*

*I typed these hundred pages to chronicle you if I can’t write your name on every wall in the city or etch it in my flesh or shout it from the rooftops without the gravity of the guilt dragging me to the ground: they’ll be blank when I return, but it doesn’t matter. I’ll be the orator for this story forever and I’ll write it a thousand times if it lets you live a second longer.*

*Your funeral is Thursday: they’re burying you next to your Pappy in the cemetery, but I don’t think I’ll make it until then. Time is a place when you’ve visited the same scene more than once. I still see you waiting there at the other end of the gun barrel for me to save you, so I’m coming home to you one last time.*

ACT ONE

FROSTBURN

# 01. ADIABATIC

1

*The sky is grey.*

Sylvia draws her hands into her pockets; a phantom escapes her lips as her vision drags across the ground, bent a head shorter than her friends by the hunch in her posture.

*The snow is white.*

Valentina rushes to catch up. Her golden scarf trails in the wind, a crimson ‘V’ stitched into the fabric with the words VERMILLION as it wraps around her face.

*The streets are drowned in shadows.*

But it’s only dusk: the towering ivory cliffs of the Compass Rose consume the daylight of the town far beneath us. Romin towers over the party by an extra foot, his brawn and chocolate skin sinking the shade of stone streets as he rambles with a lively bass in his voice.

*The fire is warm.*

I watch as the snow disintegrates before it touches the ground. The churning stomach of smoldering steel hums at a faint frequency from the power stations, but I doubt that anyone can notice the static in their surroundings: the entire town’s ears are already ringing with tinnitus. Breathing in-and-out and noticing the smallest details keeps me calm. And the frequency of the power lines sing like my sister Ellie’s strings, and I imagine what note they would play if I could grasp the charcoal columns of smoke and fasten them into a bow.

“And that’s the last time I ever messed with the Merlot,” Romin says. His cheeks dimple on worn laugh lines. “And Viktor and his fireteam wouldn’t win against us---not then, not now, not ever.”

“*Pray tell* we’ll win the next one, love,” Valentina says. The refusal of her sister’s eyes when they pass always heats her blood: any hotter and their half-shared genes might boil off. But the thickness of Romin’s arms sucks the heat from her heart as she melts into him, as if his strength could steady all the seasons of her feelings, as if he could carry her world on his shoulders.

I watch Sylvia tilt her head to the sky, watching the clouds scroll past on the eddies of a faint breeze, imagining how she would capture them.

“Any inspiration for new posters?” I ask her. I know that late nights studying in her bedroom cause her cursive to taper off into drawings, and those sketches often turn into inspirations for the propaganda posters.

“It’s easy when no-one criticizes your work, most have never seen them, you know,” she mutters. Her bright crimson eyes flash into his for a second. “Just draw something scary and you can give people a reason to hate it, right?”

“Most people struggle to hate things they can’t see after all. It’s tough to hate something that hides in the faces of the dead,” I reply, as my eyes trail the posters sprawled on the buildings: the words WHO ARE YOU INVITING IN? and NO VISA FOR NON-HUMANS matching the horror in her drawings.

The shadows bleed further across the town, and the points of the grand Compass Rose tower hundreds of stories above the vast populace: man-made mountains of ivory bricks that elevate the rich away from the impoverished (and cadets whom are lucky enough attend the Academy that allows their families to live close.) It keeps food on the table for my sister and close enough that I can visit her, so it’s more than I could ever ask for.

We mutter our goodbyes before the funicular cars pull into the station, but I’m the only one to board. Valentina, Romin, and Sylvia return to their apartments as the cars sweat hydraulic fluid. Their doors wheeze open as their riders disburse, preparing for the next descent to take me home to my sister.

Sylvia grabs my cloak before I enter.

“Tell Ellie I love her,” she says.

“I will,” I reply, catching the rare glimpse of one of her smiles before her crimson eyes nervously flicker back to her other friends.

1

The house stands like this: two italic letter ‘l’s’ slanted over, chipping paint on the sides with slats that bore all the way into the house. But it’s my house, and I like it.

SECTION ONE

BLACKWATER

# 

# 01. ADIABATIC

1

The house stood like this: two italic letter ‘l’s’ slanted over, chipping paint on the sides, and slats that bore all the way into the house, looking as if it would collapse at any moment. But it was his house. And it was comfortable.

Seminary should have ended by now. Titus waited for Ellie to approach in her uniform, to wipe the sullen expression she always carried when she made it into the poorest side of town, dilapidated houses that a sunk her spirits without the brightest colors and hedges and manicured roads in the other developments.

The house was still saturated with the smell of lavender: dissolved in the aged wood like a fine wine soaked into its barrel. It still smelled of her—and that’s exactly why his father Clint never wanted to return, even to take care of his own daughter.

He caught a glimpse of her flaxen hair from a distance, absorbing the faintest light that filtered through clouds of smoke. The columns rose into the sky from the furnaces, either bright orange or green whether they burned essence or coal. With the faintest sound the door creaked open, followed by a face expecting hours of loneliness before her father would return. It filled his heart just to watch the change of her expression.

“How was seminary, little bug?” Titus asked.

“Tie!” Ellie said, as her face creased with a full grin, running to embrace him. He lifted her into the air, spinning her around in pirouettes as she giggled and chortled in a staccato of laughing snorts, matched in her brother’s laugher as he set her on the ground.

“Where did you go, Tie?” Ellie asked.

“Off to run some errands for father,” he said. The house was freezing—either Clint forgot to pay the heating bill, or there was another outage. “He’s been working to close on an artifact I found last week.”

Ellie’s eyes didn’t leave the floor as she brushed her dolls’ hair. “It’s been lonely and some of the times I walk to Pappy’s instead of coming here,” she said, “even though he can’t talk to me it still feels nice being next to him.”

Her brother’s heart sunk. “I’m sorry. I wish I could take you with me to the Academy, but you’re too young to go to Academy Island,” Titus said.

“It’s okay,” Ellie said, scratching the wax from her eyes with fists balled like silver coins.

“And Dad’s just doing his best,” Titus said. “He’s trying to provide for you. And I’m fighting for you at the Academy. We care about you, Ellie,” he said, but Ellie hung her head, eyes concealed behind fluorescent bangs.

The silence drifted between them for a while, but it was okay. Just watching her hands fumble with the toys was enough to warm his heart a little bit, the way her strands of hair glistened just like her mother, her youthful complexion and amethyst eyes that rested behind narrowed eyelids, as if joy and innocence still glowed inside her. But her eyes were empty windows that held no candlelight, just like the rest of the house, as dusk dissolved in the distance—it would be another cold night, but at least he was there to keep her warm.

“At least we’ll visit Grandpa Everett in the morning. I have to drop you off so the caretakers can take care of you again,” Titus said.

“Okay,” she replied halfheartedly, but she cracked enough of a smile to say she was thankful for the company. He wished he could fill her with a thousand lifetimes of love and energy. But the Academy was the only way their family earned enough money to survive, and if he made it to the next tier beyond Garnet, maybe Clint could spend time with his daughter instead of slaving his hours at the shop.

Or he could hope, at least.

2

“I’m so s-s-so cold, Tie,” Ellie said. He felt her body shiver through the blankets he wrapped around her.

“Just one more night and you can stay at Grandpa’s estate,” Titus said. His grandfather was getting worse—health declining so quickly his room was always flooded with healers, and he knew this might be the last time he’d see him.

“But I have a gift for you, little bug,” he said, “a special treat I found on my travels. But you can’t tell anybody about this, okay?”

“What is, what is it?” Ellie said, as her brother withdrew a single book from beneath his shirt.

“A story, but not just any story. A story from hundreds of years ago,” Titus said. His sister’s eyes lit up from beneath her bangs, exposing the crescents that dug beneath her eyelids, but her eyes shimmered with a passionate curiosity.

She tensioned the blankets around her shoulders as Titus sat next to her on the bed. She rested her head against him as he spread the book between both their legs, as she relished in his body heat, and Titus flipped to the first page.

“Why isn’t the ink red?”

“That’s why you can’t tell anyone,” Titus said.

Black-ink illustrations saturated the page: the crests of six races scattered all across Fosroth. “And to the Humans was entrusted the powers of life and the power of entropy that warmed their lands: casting slashing bolts of fire with a backdraft of freezing snow; to the Chymaera, the powers of death, controlling the reservoir of reincarnation; to the Verdala, the powers of space, the strongest among their ranks able to teleport and rotate through dimensions. To the Revenant, the powers of electricity and connected minds across all their people, and to the cat-kind Ahkvasa, the powers of time, slowing the world around them to a near stand-still. And to the Auvrya, the powers of flight and mind.”

The pages were a bizarre sight: one had illustrations of city walls. Vines hung from the sides: grasses covered the landscape, and through the ink he envisioned the colors of full fields of flowers. The ‘beyond’ he knew was only greyscale with three shades of brown. Familiar buildings hid behind the walls, and he recognized them—it was a picture of Blackwater.

They scanned the pages until the ink dissolved into the dusk, and the vellum no longer caught enough light to show the words, and the last page held a single line of text that said WE WILL NEVER FORGET THE STRENGTH OF OUR PAST, AND THE AMBITION OF OUR FUTURE.

“Can I keep it?” Ellie asked, kicking her legs against the bed, squirming beneath the covers like a cave slug, but Titus could only disappoint her.

“We’re going to have to burn it,” he said, “but I hope you enjoyed it. The Storytellers can’t write fiction like this anymore.”

“But why?” she pleaded.

“Because it’s illegal.”

“But why?”

“Because it’s lies,” he said. “You have so many other story books to read from.”

“But they don’t have these pitchers, Tie,” Ellie said, “they’re so pretty look!”

He glanced at the map on the first page again, that read CAPITALS OF THE SIX RACES. Blackwater rested in the distant north, and the ancient city of Nordhaven beneath it. The Ahkvasan jungles coated the southeast as dense spikes, and a massive crater read ‘Xi’Nu,’ which he guessed was the Verdalans’ city from the stories his grandfather read him. Ellie marveled at the floating lands of the Auvrya.

“Pretty amazing they can draw like that,” Titus said. “I wish we could live in that world, don’t you? A world with more than just Humans.”

“Yeah,” she said. Her eyes grew heavy. The cold sifted between them like a wet blanket. “I’m still cold, Titus.”

“It’s okay, little bug,” he said, wrapping his arms around her, feeling her muscles weaken as her form sagged in his arms. He covered her with comforters, brushing her hair to the side, so weak and frail and innocent. His skin was warm, but his heart was still frozen. So he left her.

The book shouldered in the fireplace: aged vellum was so easy to burn. In his sleep he dreamt of a different world: of tall grasses above his head and bushes furnished with full leaves, of a blue sky, of the fullness of the sun shimmering through and the colors of so many flowers dotting the landscape, the smell of foilage and moss as he sprawled across the grass, looking up at the castle walls.

He conjured fire in his hands, and snow spat from behind the flickering flame. It only took minutes before the landscape desaturated to lines on vellum, and everything went black. He was deep underwater again, holding his breath, chasing a crimson light that beckoned him from the dark.

3

“It’s time to go, Ellie! Where are you?” Titus said, squinting through the brightness of the candlelight, trying to let his eyes adjust. He couldn’t make out much at the top of the stairs— her small little silhouette rummaged through the trunk, the clinking and clanging of little trinkets as they deposited themselves across the floor, clattering against the walls as she tossed them.

Titus called, “You better be careful with those walls! I’m gonna hear it if you put another hole through there.”

“I know, I know,” she whined, “but I can’t find it!”

“What are you looking for?”

“Claws, where is he.”

“What— don’t you have him every night? Where did you last put him?”

“I always tuck him into bed when I get out of bed so he can sleep,” Ellie chimed.

Titus dropped his rucksack on the floor and removed his boots with a grunt. “Alright, alright, I’m on my way up,” he said, his footsteps creaking the stairs. But as soon as his hand slid against the polished railing—

“Wolfie!” Ellie exclaimed, grabbing her stuffed critter from the top of the dresser, balanced haphazardly atop a chair. She jumped down, snuggling the stuffed wolf as she slid it into her backpack.

In a struggle to meet the ends of the twine, she tugged angrily against it. “Whoa, careful there,” Titus said. “Anger will only make things worse. Let’s get your bag set up a little better,” he said, as he took the trinkets from the bag and set them across the floor.

“You see, Claws is a big guy, so he should go in there first,” Titus said. “And then your book, ‘cause this is pretty big, too, you see? And here, the rest of it should fit in just fine,” as his hands spun the twine into a double knot. “There you go! Now let’s get on the road, Grandpa is waiting,” he said.

“But the locket,” Ellie said.

He glanced back once again. He must have missed its matte pink shell that sunk into the floor, untraced by the dusk that poured through the window. His fingers carefully opened the seal, adhered shut by several coats of Ellie’s pink paint, looking at the picture of Moira inside, and for a brief second, the memories had returned to him again. From the image of her face, he recalled when the faintest ghost would part from her lips, as he felt her hands pull at the sheets and tuck him into bed, and her fingers rub against his back, so icy and cold, just like her flesh at the…

He tossed the locket in the bag and rose to his feet. Then he walked down the stairs to a place beneath the candlelit chandelier.

“Let’s go, Ellie,” he said.

“What was that?” she asked, stumbling down the stairs in her leather moccasins.

He paused, finding a moment where the deepness in his throat wouldn’t fight the tone. “Nothing,” he said.

Ellie reached for Titus’ arm, closing her fingers around his palms to feel the comforting warmth of his skin. She guided him to the door as he spun the handle, the stillness of inner air buffered by the inclement weather while snowflakes began to descend. Titus flipped up the hood on her seminary school uniform, and bent down onto his knees, allowing her to jump on his back, carrying her into the clouded haze of flurries. She lowered her head to his ear.

“You know a weird thing?”

“What’s that?”

“Wolfie is alive, did you know that?” Ellie said.

Titus chuckled. “And what makes you say that? Does he talk to you?”

“No, silly,” she stammered. “But he can move! Not when I watch him, but sometimes when I come home, he climbs onto the dresser and watches over my room.” Ellie said.

“I think that’s just Clint,” Titus said. “Sometimes he watches you when he gets home.”

“But daddy wasn’t there last night, and I tucked Wolfie in,” Ellie said.

Titus paused. “Last night? What do you mean?” he said, as the white room grew claustrophobic. The flakes stopped sending shivers down his spine—it was something else that stood his hairs on end.

“Maybe I forgot I moved him,” Ellie said, shrugging it all off, “maybe it was me.”

“Hm,” Titus grunted.

They continued trudging through the snow, Titus’ footprints leaving a trail that rapidly dissolved behind them in the tumultuous winds, and Ellie broke the silence again.

“What was Mommy like?” she asked.

He hoisted her higher on his shoulders while he fumbled for the words.

“Well, her smile was the first thing you’d notice—the first sight that greeted me when I got home from training. It was the face I’d always look for on the sidelines, she was always cheering and waving and so happy all the time,” he said. “I wish you could have known her better.”

“Why, was I too little?”

“Yeah, you were three when she passed. Plus, she was busy all the time,” he added. “She worked really hard in the orphanage, and after work, she’d always be working other jobs, too. When I was little like you, she’d always take me to the orphanage since Daddy was busy watching the city. It’s where I met a lot of friends, and it’s where I met Sylvia,” he said.

“Oh,” Ellie said, “and so if I came from Mommy and Daddy, where did you come from?”

“You’re real tough on the questions tonight, aren’t you?” said Titus, as she nodded against his shoulder. “I was adopted from somewhere beyond the walls. Everett found me out there. And at that time, our mom and dad had just been married, and they really wanted to have a kid. Let’s just say that they tried a couple times, but nothing happened, and when they heard from Everett about me, they were very, very excited. They had the chance to have a boy, to take care of him and love them with all they had, and to raise him to grow big and strong and fight for the city,” he said. “That was me.”

“And when did I come along?”

“Well,” he said, “one time, they found out that mom was pregnant, and they had you. They were so excited when you were born, they called you the little miracle. You were born so small that the elders had to take care of you for a while, making sure that you would develop and get some meat on your bones!” He took her hand and teethed on it. “Nom nom nom, get some meat on those bones!”

She giggled into his ear, protesting with flailing arms and legs as he shifted her up again. “We were such a happy family,” he said, remembering the days when Everett would read to him, the fireplace crackling with the heat of his essence ablaze, Clint and Moira leaning against each other on the long couch. “We thought that there was nothing that could ever tear at that.”

He remembered when Clint and Moira would argue, shouting matches about where she would disappear to in the night, thinking some estranged lover waited on her. He still remembered the look in their eyes in the heat of the moment, Moira with that inhuman, spiteful glare to think her own husband could doubt her.

He still hoped that that would never be true.

“And where did Mommy go?”

“I’ve already told you so many times,” Titus said, “why do you ask so much?”

“Because you never tell me the whole thing,” she said.

“It’s because we don’t know, either, one day she went to the market, and—"

Crunch.

He paused in his tracks and glared into the blinding haze of powder: the darkness looked back at him.

“What’s going on, Titus? Just finish the stormmmm…”

He covered her mouth, backpedaling slowly, and felt his eyes lower to the bottom of the road. Ellie pulled his hand away.

“You’re scaring me, Titus,” she said, grabbing tighter. His heart stopped. For a second, he thought he saw two sets of indentations, but it must have been the jaggedness of the powder washing about in the icy, tumultuous winds. He continued onwards at a brisk pace.

“We’re fine, Ellie, I would never let anything happen to you,” he said, a wavering in his voice, grasping for her icy little hands.

“Wh..wha…at least finish about Mommy,” said her muffled voice.

He huffed an “alright” while lightly jogging through the snow. In the white room, every sound was another stranger around him. “I’ll have to keep it simple. Your mother was out late one night, getting some food from the market after work. It was just the wrong time at the wrong place—she could tell something was off. Only bystanders saw the incident—it was all so random and sudden. She didn’t have any debts to pay to the gangs: like the Carmine or the Merlot. Some say she was killed by the Chymaera. But that’s impossible, since they’re outside the walls.”

“What do the Chymaerans look like?”

“Very, very dark purple, they have a thick outer shell like a crab,” Titus said, “though very few have lived to tell.”

“Just like my Visitor!” Ellie said. “Just like Shadow Man who puts him on the dresser!”

4

“Gods, Ellie,” Titus said. “Why didn’t you tell me this earlier?”

“I forgot,” she said.

“That’s a pretty big thing to forget,” he replied.

Ellie said, “And since there’s are all these red people out of the house.”

“Red people?”

“The city red people, Tie,” she said.

“City…red…you mean…the city guards?”

“Yeah yeah, they want to look at Pappy’s things. They say about books and the under space,” Ellie said, burying her bright-red ears into Titus’ shoulder as her teeth chattered. They were getting closer. He could see lanterns in the distance, along with the echoes of distant voices. “Yeah! They’re there.”

“By grace, what do they want?”

“I don’t know,” Ellie said.

Titus tried to listen through the tumultuous winds.

“But they kept talking about the basement, how the helpers won’t let them dig into the floor, how they were going to get an order from the top red people,” said Ellie.

Their torchlights spun around the property like floating embers from a blazing fire. Their shouts crackled through the haze.

“Find a damn entrance, then find the damn basement!”

# 

# 02. REVERSE ENTROPY

1

He struggled to hear Instructor Amora over the sweltering heat, over the noise of machinery churning with the fuel of coal and the residue of aged essence. All the pinions’ faces were covered in soot, saturated on their skin from smoke and steam, glowing crimson and amber from the distant flames. Cadets shoveled coal into the belly of the machines, gnashing teeth on the gears screaming in protest, driving the crankshafts that screeched above them. The only new system was the belts that stretched down from above, whirring at such a frightening speed that any loose hair might scalp them if they weren’t careful. They were the only new addition that wasn’t centuries old, besides the need to power the deafening machines with fuel in the first place.

“We use the Spark-petre in these machines when it’s available. It ignites stronger than coal. In fact—just a pinch has the energy of almost ten pounds of it. And we use it to power the machines that craft our weapons, and the machines that provide the Academy with energy.”

“But where does it come from?” a cadet asked

“From beyond the walls, a trade secret,” she said.

“But how come the rest of the city isn’t powered?” another asked.

“Because we don’t have enough energy. In fact—we’ll be out in the next five years. The only part of Blackwater we can power is the center island, where our cadets train to defend the walls.”

“The most important part,” one said.

“Yes. You are the pinions, the future of our people, and you will decide our fate for the future, which brings us to today’s lesson. “

She polled the crowd until every pair of eyes returned her glance, then the question broke: “What is a pinion?”

But none replied, and their eyes wandered. The cadets in the back struggled to hear her over the abrasiveness of the screeching metal, and the cadets in the front refused to answer.

“This isn’t the training fields,” the instructor said, “you won’t be punished for giving a wrong answer. Give me a try . . . Titus?”

“It’s what we are,” Titus said. “Cadets of the Academy are Pinions. We drive the future of the academy.”

“That’s true, but not what I’m looking for. What is a gear pinion?” she asked, pointing to the cadet next to Titus.

Romin answered. “It’s a gear that drives another. It takes the twisting from a shaft and exerts it on another gear to rotate the whole system.”

“And you can see that above,” Amora said, “I brought you down here to show you how these mechanisms operate, because you’ll be designing them if you’re concentrating in Demolitions or Operations, you’ll be designing the devices that give us leverage against the Chymaera.”

“So why are we so obsessed with designing things?” Valentina asked.

“Shut up, Valentina—” Romin nudged her.

“What, Romin?”

“Obsessed with designing things? Obsessed? We’re obsessed because it’s the last bit of leverage we have as an entire race,” Amora said.

“Here she goes again—now she’s not going to stop until after lecture is over.”

“Her voice makes me want to jump in a furnace head first,” Romin said.

“…And the foundations of our city have been lost to time, forgotten by our people, traded for this movement of spirituality. But I was a Cadet like you. I fought just like you will, alongside the First Army. The snow was freezing, and…”

“I’d rather be painting in the arboretum,” said Sylvia.

“And I’d rather be fighting on the fields,” said Roland.

“And I’d rather be asleep,” said Valentina.

“I just want to be out of the heat,” said Titus. “I’ll do any of those things to get out of here.”

They could barely hear Amora’s words anyway. The machinists’ hands flicked between handles on the lathes, ribbons of metal doused in cutting fluid shearing from the surface.

“…But that takes us away from what we were talking about. The most important thing about gears is to keep them from breaking. You can never have two pinions in a system. If two gears are driven, they will always be placing force on each other. If they are driven against each other, the system will be crippled. And if there’s too much force, you could shear the teeth straight off, and the system will explode.”

“Remember that, Romin,” Titus said, “or else I’m gonna shear your teeth off.”

“The point is that, like all machines, gears have a life cycle. They can only be under stress for so long before they wear out, before the stress creates a crack, before the system explodes and kills innocent people, like what happened ten years ago in this exact spot.”

Titus scanned the ground. There were dents across the floor, stains of crimson bludgeoned into the metal.

“That’s why we design so carefully. And that’s why we are so obsessed about designing. Our works keep us safe. They should never take the lives of our own people.”

Titus scribbled on his pad, but instead of clean lines, the ink dissolved against the sweat that dripped from his face, leaving splotched marks across the page. He grunted in protest and threw it in his bag.

“That’s enough for today. Good luck in your matches, upper classmen. This marks the last year to change places: the start of the last year for all of you.”

Her eyes locked with Titus; he nodded in response. He was right on the cusp of Dragon Class, if only his team could beat the lowest fireteam in their division. That meant a boost in his families’ funding that could get his sister Ellie through preliminary training for the academy. His team required a lot more training. And a good meal for once. They’d been training so hard they only ate two meals a day—besides Romin, who could wash down a whole turkey leg with half a handle in under a minute.

2

The dining halls were empty since it was an odd time of day, right between lunch and dinner, when the smells of freshly-cooked poultry waited another hour until tearing. They had to be early. They signed on for their weekly hunt and would have to board the rails in two hours, so they tore through their platters fast. A word didn’t escape them, but it wasn’t uncommon after fifteen years of fraternity.

Titus managed a glance at his team between bites. Romin carnivorously chowed a whole face of the turkey leg in almost a bite. Messy scraps escaped from his mouth. Valentina sighed—her parents would regret ever blessing their relationship if they saw him eat like that, the richest family in Blackwater held manners above almost everything with the fancy dinners they hosted every week.

Romin returned the acknowledging grunt.

Too bad. I haven’t eaten all day.

Andrea jabbed him with her elbow.

You’re making us look like a bunch of savages.

Sylvia couldn’t reach with her feet so she leveraged her deadpan glare.

You gotta be kidding me, Romin.

Romin glanced to Titus, hoping for some help.

You’re on my side here, right?

Titus looked away and sighed, taking another mouthful of corn-on-the-cob.

You’re on your own. I can’t argue with Sylvia. That’d make us both losers.

Romin tossed the fifth bone on his plate. He almost reached for another before Valentina raised her hand to stop him.

“Gross,” she said.

He swatted her hand.

“I’m hungry, Val. A man’s gotta eat if he’s gonna hunt,” said Romin.

“And he’ll lose it outside if he eats too fast,” Valentina Vermillion said, raised so straight it was a miracle if a speck of dirt ever made it on her uniform. But she no longer held the title of Vermillion family—her ties were severed for reasons beyond her power, by a hateful, spiteful mother who could never forgive her father but could never hate him either.

Romin was known to wealth just like Valentina, but not for moral reasons. His parents were activists and arsonists who gave their lives for their beliefs. Romin was the last blood relative that could take over the clan.

“Are you stopping by the compound before we leave?” Titus asked.

“The brothers and sisters haven’t seen me in ages, I don’t think they would let me leave,” Romin said. “They don’t like the idea of me risking my life outside the walls, either.”

“What about you, Syl?” Titus asked. Sylvia spent her entire life with Titus. They were brought into the orphanage at the same time from beyond the walls, the only difference that Titus was adopted, unlike her.

“I got everything in my room ready to go,” Sylvia said. She spent almost her entire childhood in the orphanage, with enough abuse to show up on her wrists in scars, and in other hidden wounds reopened every time she avoided others’ contact with her bright, crimson eyes.

“Then let’s reconvene at the station in one-and-a-half hours,” Titus said. “Gates open at sundown, and only long enough to let us out.”

And thus they were known as Phoenix Family—the fireteam of orphans, born from ash.

“Fair enough,” Romin said. “Let’s go, Valentina. Don’t want to forget your sword again, do you?”

She let her expression speak for her, and Romin wrapped his arm around her. He lifted two fingers, signaling a short goodbye before braving the snow. Titus chugged the rest of his water, glancing upwards—all the colors of the sunset began to filter through the stained glass, clattering silverware chiming cups and dishes as the dinner crowd began to arrive. Sylvia was inattentive to it all, using the last fleeting hours of fresh light before the snowstorm to draw the contours of clouds in charcoal on her drawing pad, lost in her own separate world.

“Sylvia,” Titus said.

Her hand gently swept across the page, head ducked, saturated in the contrast of the curves, and he decided not to disturb her. It was too fun to watch her so concentrated on her work, and it was among his first memories of her at the orphanage, the one escape to transcend the physical world.

“Why do you always draw clouds?” Titus asked instead.

She took a minute to reply before her head raised. Her crimson eyes met him, unaware of the dark smear on the breast of her uniform.

“They’re so light and free. Too high to ever touch the ground, the way they float over the tallest mountains, too high to touch. But you can feel it in the charcoal when you blend it across the page.”

Sylvia grabbed his hand.

“See?”

She traced his finger across the page. Abrasive scratchings of vine charcoal dissolved into cotton clouds, the carbon leaving a shimmering jewel at the tip of his finger. “I guess you see clouds a lot when you only look up at the sky or down at your feet.”

Sylvia slid her hand in calm concentric strokes across the vellum. “And the stars, too. It’s not fair how beautiful they are up there when there’s so much bitterness on the ground.”

“You just have to find the good in the world. You just have to find something—or someone—to fight for, and once you do, it’s like the first day of the rest of your life.”

“I know. Because I have you. My ‘Guardian’.”

Titus blushed. She looked up and returned as smile.

“Gross. I hoped you’d forget,” said Titus.

Sylvia said, “I could never forget. You visited me every day.”

He felt the uncomfortable feeling return to him, churning his stomach at her words. “Of course. Anyways. Let’s go back,” he said.

She flipped the front of her pad, returning the vines to a wooden case engraved with a single letter before she finally noticed the front of her dress.

“Oh, no… I just washed this yesterday,” she said.

Titus hoisted his bag by the straps. “Took you long enough. I didn’t want to tell you if you didn’t notice.”

“You wouldn’t understand,” she said. “That’s the thing about being a girl—you forget they’re there until they get in the way.”

“Oh, please. Like when?”

“Like, running, cleaning… it’s why I picked Archer, because we just stand in place.”

He creased his brow. “Really.”

“Really,” she said. “And because running is terrible.”

Titus said, “It’s a wonder you keep your figure when all you do is read and draw.”

“And do a hundred sit-ups every night before bed,” she said.

“And about half a leaf of lettuce for every meal . . . I won’t be surprised if you or Valentina pass out one day. Romin and I eat as much as we can.”

“Then why is Romin so big when you’re a twig?”

“Because he drinks all the time. He’s fat. The Carmine keep sending him ale and wine,” Titus said. “My dad’s an alcoholic, but he doesn’t have money to spare to fund my habits.”

“I guess it’s better that way. I see you a lot more often,” Sylvia said, bracing for the cold.

Titus’ shoulder barged the door ajar. Snowflakes siphoned through the crack, while the fragrant smells of poultry and fish fry dissolved away. He slid the hood over his face as Sylvia shivered, so he removed his mark to cover her.

“Thanks,” she said.

But his mind had already left the walls, wondering what ancient wares they could find on their patrol—a legal patrol, a legal journey beyond the walls, not as a Frostpunk. Last time they found explosive boxes from the ancient mines, what looked like Spark trapped between cylinders of steel. There were caves where skeletons had retired, the flesh washed with their bodies along with the curse, glowing purple still marked in their bones from a century ago though no Chymaera could be seen. There were signs, swords, and literature, a rare sight after the book burnings.

When he returned home he reclined on his bed, envisioning clouds in the cracks of the ceiling and how Sylvia would smudge the lines with her fingers, how they’d dissolve into gentle gradients.

A cold wind caressed him until he noticed the window was ajar, but he was too tired to remember the last time he opened it, if it was him or Sylvia or one of his hall-mates trying to make the climb to the girls’ floor above, but all he could think of was clouds. He remembered who he fought for, who he loved and who it protected, who he’d keep up in the sky so the dangers of the world could never reach her, even if he got nothing from it, if no feelings returned to him.

Titus reached to slide the window shut, the faintest hum of coal churning in the cylinders of the engines far below as it almost lulled him to sleep. But the beckoning of adventure beyond the walls called to him louder.

The only source of light poured in through the window. He watched as the locket teetered back and forth in the window from its silver string, the same locket his sister had. It saddened him to know that someday she would be too heavy to carry.

“It’s time to go hunting, Phoenix Family,” said Titus as they approached the train: mounting the platform as it huffed haughty clouds of smoke.

3

The train car groaned in protest as sparks spat between slivered slits of lumber. Hay dampened the discomfort of the wooden benches, bolted to the walls with metal chains.

Romin’s bag clinked with the buckling of the rails. Who knew how many bottles he had taken with him; he was far too talkative for midnight.

“No, but seriously, though,” he said, “seriously. Why do the conductors get sparkpetre to power the trains when the rest of the city gets nothing? It just doesn’t make sense,” he said.

“Oh, what, you haven’t heard of the secret society of train conductors?” Sylvia said.

Titus said, “They protect the night with the furious anger of a thousand steam engines. They churn flames brighter than the spark of their cylinders, their shrill yell louder than the whistle of . . .”

“Pray tell, is that why they get all the Spark?” Valentina asked.

“You idiot,” Romin said, “that’s not a thing.”

“No, no, for taking Pinions on and off the island, but . . . shouldn’t they use it for the rest of the city?”

“Ideally,” Titus said, “but trade is almost a religion here. It’s a huge business—it’s why my grandfather made so much and retired early.”

Valentina twisted her flaxen hair into a ponytail, mumbling with a pink ribbon between her teeth. “Then why don’t people find something else to believe in?”

“Because they’re witches. If Romin’s blood wasn’t so popular to the community, he’d be found beyond the walls somewhere in three pieces,” Titus said.

“We’re not witches,” Romin said. “Everybody knows logic and reason is valuable—passion, honor, glory, all those keywords they spin in Academy lectures like a lathe, but there’s nothing wrong with having faith in something. It’s not religion. It’s scientific. We study the Black Texts to see what’s veritable.”

“The stories from Seminary are fiction.” Valentina said, “nothing more, nothing less.”

“If you saw the studies from our scientists, you’d see something different. Why else does the government suppress our studies?”

“It could be true,” said Sylvia.

“It’s fiction,” Titus said. “Faith is something people create for themselves to have purpose, but it’s not true. It’s a vehicle, an ever-receding pocket of ignorance to comfort us from the unknown.”

“Oh come on, Frostpunk, it’s not like you haven’t cracked a spine a couple times,” Romin said. “And the science isn’t based on feeling, it’s based on fact.”

So they agreed to disagree.

Valentina twisted the ribbon into a bow, fluffing the edges of the wire. “Still doesn’t explain why train conductors can waste our spark, though. Something just doesn’t seem right.”

“Then let’s earn Dragon Class so we can see the world beyond,” Sylvia said.

“Pray tell, that’s the dream,” said Valentina.

“ We’ll have so many great stories to tell after we get back.”

“Back from what?” Titus asked.

“From Graduation,” Sylvia replied, but the others were tired of hearing it again—her hope and assurance was no better than the furnaces keeping out the cold.

“Sylvia, there is no life after graduation,” Romin said.

Sylvia’s crimson eyes sparked with a certain passion. “Then what else do you live for, Romin? How is believing in survival any different than this ‘faith’ you talk about?”

“I just live to fight like everyone else,” he said, “just like my older brother who didn’t come back either. I just want to have something to believe in until the end. It makes life here better.”

“So then it’s a conditional faith, like Titus said. Faith as a vehicle. So what’s wrong with believing something that’s helpful?”

“Because reality is something that’s crucial,” Romin said.

“I’m with Sylvia on this one,” Titus replied. “It’s emotion. The reason why we have passion. Why you’re all half-sick of my speeches to inspire you guys before matches.”

“That contradicts what you said earlier, Titus.” Romin said.

“But I didn’t finish,” Titus replied. “Believing in something that harms others is worse—reading those books is the reason why my grandfather is terminally ill. Witchcraft does more harm than good.”

Then Sylvia cut in: “And why doesn’t that idea bother you? Dying, leaving your people behind? It should bother Titus about his sister. It bothers me about losing you all. It should bother Valentina about . . .”

“About what?” Valentina snapped.

“About losing this fireteam,” said Sylvia: a quick save.

The uneasiness pitted itself in Titus’ stomach whenever considered it—sometimes he felt like running away, sometimes he wondered about the consequences. Sometimes, when he slipped past the walls, he’d find himself looking for places to hide out in case he absconded, and he wondered if the others felt the same, but Ellie grounded him in Blackwater. Sometimes Titus wondered if the Academy could really catch them.

Maybe if they stayed together, they could survive—Valentina knew so much about survival as a Medic. She could prepare fresh kill, and he and Romin could set up camp every night, or set up in an abandoned cabin somewhere, there were so many of them beyond the walls, and Sylvia could scout the area and prepare defenses in case the Chymaera had stumbled upon them. Or, scratch that—maybe they could join a foreign city. The foreign trade cities were unknown to citizens unless you were a trader. Maybe they could follow one of the caravans from a distance, or at least they could stake it out in the surrounding lands, like all the adventures from all the stories Everett read him as a child, the black-text pages—

The lurching of the train car lifted them off the seat, and he caught himself staring at Sylvia’s thighs, bare flesh exposed to the frigid air, trembling, but not from the elements.

“Cold?” Titus asked.

“Tired,” she replied, but Titus read “scared.” Sylvia rested her head against his shoulder, and Titus put his arm around her, wrapping hear a little tighter to transfer heat.

The rest of the train car ride was in silence, but he enjoyed the change in pace. The academy halls were always filled with screeching and laughing and screaming, and he despised being packed so tightly when all he wanted was to be alone.

He felt Sylvia stop trembling, the faintness whistle on her warm breaths matched in the air that hummed through the slats, and he breathed deeply in repose. His eyes rested beyond the wooden slats where candlelit windows cast silhouettes on the walls, watching the rest of Blackwater fall asleep while their night was just about to begin.

4

The darkness of distant candlelight dissolved with the death of day. The entire mountain felt like it rested on the edge of sleep—the way the soft, tender breezes rattled the trees, smells of pungent, pine air churning through the gaps, the loudness of the academy halls traded for the whisper of winds as billions of leaves bristled by with the turbulence of the winds.

Sylvia walked alongside Titus. Romin and Valentina laughed behind them. The first couple times they ran patrols beyond the walls, they were scared of the crack of every branch, of every shadow, as if something would reach out and attack them if they separated too far. Before their foray into the darkness, the outside world beyond the walls was incomprehensible, the only sign of the Chymaera in the faintest amethyst glow in the bark of the trees, but even then it seemed that twilight was just playing a trick on them.

Titus looked around: there wasn’t a single glowing tree in sight.

“Your mother was so special to me,” Sylvia added. “Moira took care of me, stood up for me, the reason I survived the orphanage.”

“She told me before she passed,” Titus said, watching as the tree line grew indistinguishable from the night sky, replaced with the light of the first stars that out-glowed his lantern. Sylvia drew her hands into her cloak, wrapping and bundling them against the gale winds that rattled the trunks. “She was my reason to fight as a child.”

Sylvia nodded with chattering teeth—the wetness of the air was making her shiver. “So what do you fight for now, then?” she asked.

“I see my sister,” he said, “and I try to imagine the person that she sees in me since I might be the last role model she has. Clint’s too busy to be there for her, though he tries.”

Titus’ eyes settled against the darkness, rods and cones accommodating for a world of black and white: of black, charred trees now glowing with the faintest amethyst glow against the white, crunchy powder on the ground.

“But what do you fight for?” he asked.

“Maybe I’m still trying to find it,” she said. “But I’m convinced something’s there, your mother showed that to me.”

Titus nodded. He watched the side of Sylvia’s hood scatter clouds of breath. Only a short while remained before they made it to the stakeout point.

“But you’re definitely a large part of it,” Sylvia said. “My Guardian.”

“Stop,” Titus said, watching the shape of her laugh in short clouds, wishing Everett never read them that book in the first place.

She broke his embarrassment with a rhetorical question. “Are you going to the party?” she asked.

“Yeah, with Romin and Valentina,” Titus said. He knew the answer to the next question before he asked it—“but are you going?”

“I don’t know, maybe,” she said.

“How about this: ‘Sylvia, I want you to come with me to the party because we will have a great time together.’”

“I don’t know, it’s just—”

“No, let me rephrase: ‘Sylvia, you’re coming to me with this party whether you like it or not, because I can’t stand to see you all cooped up in your room and I’m forcing you to go,’” he said.

She cracked a smile. “Well, if I have to…”

“…then you’re coming,” he said.

“What’s this? Sylvia’s actually going to a party?” Romin said.

Valentina crunched on a sack of peppers, and the pungent smell filled the air, clearing all their sinuses from the sniveling cold. “That’s news to me,” she said.

“I can’t remember the last time I saw you drink, Syl,” Romin said. “Have you ever?”

“A really long time ago,” she said.

“How else can you survive the Academy?” Romin asked. “That’s why the Carmine keep me hydrated, or else I’d die of thirst.”

Valentina said, “Then I guess that makes one of us, addict.”

Titus drew into his bag and fumbled for a bottle of mead. Another uneventful patrol was passing, just like all the other ones before it. The rusted cache box awaited them, and they’d have to write a report of observations so that the officers could use them to observe the enemy’s movement patterns. His eyes scanned the trees—they were far more amethyst than last time, meaning the Chymaera might be closer, although the presence of about ten Chymaera in one spot could very faintly light all the trees aglow in almost a two-mile radius.

He considered Sylvia’s words until they made it to the site, hung up on the feelings she described of Moira, questioning why he couldn’t recall her or the feeling of her touch, why he couldn’t recall an image of her face and why they were repressed in his mind. She passed away so suddenly at a young age, and Titus didn’t remember much of his childhood. He heard the most about it through Everett, but even then it seemed like he was holding back on a lot of the details.

“I’m reading a radiation factor of four,” Valentina said.

“I was thinking around four, too,” Titus said. The bark showed active discoloration in veined patterns and the trees looked charred black, meaning Chymaerans had passed through the area at least a day ago.

Valentina said, “And what did Fireteam 227 read on their trip yesterday?”

“Two,” Romin said. “Means that they’ve been through here in the last twelve hours.”

Titus’ heart began to race: he lost the smell of the pine air and the sound of the wind whistling through the trees. “I don’t think we’ve ever been this close,” he said, watching as Sylvia shivered either from the cold or from the onset of fear.

Romin said, “It’s not going to happen to us, if that’s what you’re getting at. Last attack happened a year ago.”

“But they happen about every eight months. So we’re far overdue, by almost twice as much,” Titus said.

He felt his breathing accelerate, cursing how the darkness made the shapes bleed into each other, praying to the Gods that a triangle of glowing eyes wouldn’t glare back at him if he glanced the wrong way.

But then it happened again, just like any other time his anxieties before the match, the same itch that ran across his arms as if a warmth had enclosed him. His mouth washed again with a bitter taste, and his heart rate slowed to a near standstill.

He was calm again.

“We’ll be fine,” he said.

He lost his sense of smell and hearing again, filled with a certain adrenaline he only got before his matches.

The cache was approaching. Valentina and Romin were calm. He glanced down at Sylvia’s trembling wrists, where her nails dug into the flesh of her palms. The slightest trail of crimson ran down her wrist.

“They can smell blood, you know,” said Titus.

He drew into his bag, taking a sheet of cloth from his pack, pulling her to the side of the path as Andrea and Roland advanced, wrapping it around a cotton pad at the base of her wrist.

“That’ll give you something to hold on to,” he said, glancing around cautiously, his breaths deeper than the expanse of grasses that stretched around the field, waiting for something to emerge, his left hand tracing the cool metal of the hilt of his sword.

His sensation of the world was still limited, and even the abrasiveness of the fabric gauze couldn’t be felt by the numbness of his hands, but it wasn’t from the cold. The sounds of nature disintegrated from his perception until all he could hear was the only thing he felt, the slowest beating of his heart, steadily pounding through his skull like ceremonial drums, the bitter taste in his mouth the only sense to match it.

He heard the cry of an animal in the distance, whipping his head around to confront it. The Chymaera made clicks for echolocation, so even if they were close, he would never hear them.

His sword was already drawn, trying to match the sound to any animal he knew—there were no animals inside the walls besides dogs, so he was far too unfamiliar. Which was weird that the sound was so familiar.

Sylvia whipped around at the sound. Maybe it was familiar to her, too, Titus thought, from the panicked expression on her face, and it still bothered him, until the word rested on the edge of her lips and he could see before it broke—

It wasn’t an animal after all. It was a cadet.

“Valentina!” Sylvia shouted.

He felt his heart start to race again, all the worst-case scenarios racing through his mind, trying to remember from all the lectures what the Chymaera looked like, all the sketches—he knew they had glowing eyes that pierced the darkness, glowing in many colors, but he had never seen them. The Cadets always talked about them like ghost stories, that the first time you saw them was the last time, why so few soldiers could sketch or report on what they looked like.

Titus’ feet broke the dirt, and before he knew it, he realized he was sprinting towards the sound. He hoped they weren’t the Chymaeran supersoldiers of legend, the soldiers of mixed blood, of the tortured children taken from the Humans and reborn through the process, said only to return within the time span a single week about ten years older, scarred all across their bodies as if they had been fighting for a decade, the ability to transform into a monster three times taller than a full-grown Academy soldier…

He could barely see their figures through the darkness. Even Rolin wasn’t moving. He expected he’d be cracking some stupid joke about this, how they were far too overdue.

A branch cracked behind him, and then he realized Sylvia was no longer running alongside him. He panicked. His head whipped back, but she was right there.

Another branch cracked. Or he thought it was a click, so he scanned the whole area, his heart beginning to race again with the panic, the bitter taste beginning to dissolve from his awareness until he could no longer taste anymore, and another sense was subtracted from his awareness.

He took Sylvia’s hand, either out of fear or protection or a mix of both, and Romin and Valentina’s figures were still in the distance, right at the sight of the Cache, expecting to see another shadowy figure steal them away with a dagger, expecting to see the silhouette of fresh blood spray across the ground or for them to disappear in the blink of an eye, so he kept his eyes open, unable to feel the frigidness of the air as it dried his eyes, unfeeling metal of the hilt as he almost made it to them, just to be regrouped that they might make it out alive—

Valentina’s mouth was still agape. But there were no Chymaera.

She pointed to the ground.

The cache box was destroyed.

5

Pages scattered all across the ground, a whole five years of reports scattered. Titus finally had the time to take in his surroundings. The trees were glowing bright, but not in veined patterns. They were glowing full amethyst, pulsating, meaning that—

“This is radiation factor seven,” Sylvia said. Her nails dug through the fabric and crimson streamed again.

“That means they were through here minutes ago,” Titus said.

But there was no time to talk.

Valentina was the first to react and Sylvia was the second to follow. The bitterness had already left before the rest of them turned to sprint. There was no time left to hear for clicks or sounds or animals or breezes or trees or insects, the feeling of the Chymaera breathing down their neck was enough to propel them at full speed, sprinting helplessly toward the city even though the city walls weren’t in sight, fumbling over tree roots as their footsteps crunched in the snow, the presence of the same fear following them all the way back to the gates.

They had no time to talk, no breath to spit words. The city lights approached closer as the amethyst presence in the trees dissolved, and soon the guards took note of their presence, spinning the massive convex mirror of the watchtower to light their path in flickering firelight.

Titus saw no shadows to the sides. His eyes struggled to adjust to the blinding light but he kept running, no matter how gravely his exhausted body begged him to slow down, no matter how strongly the urge to vomit almost overpowered him, tunnel vision concentrated only on the path ahead, trying not to stumble over rocks, entirely unaware of anything instantly to the side of him although he could hear the heavy breathing of three other cadets behind him.

“Pinions at the gate!” the guards shouted. The portcullis lifted by the sweat of ten guards and Titus stumbled directly under, almost catching an edge.

“Now it’s zero days since the last incident,” Romin wheezed, laying on the ground right next to him, “by Gods, I’m glad we made it back.”

To his side, Valentina and Sylvia spread like ragdolls across the ground, their equipment sprawled behind them. Romin’s bag was open. Glass bottles spread all across the ground along with Valentina’s medical supplies.

Sylvia said, “Let’s never sign up for a night shift again. I’m not risking my life until after graduation.”

The guards approached from atop the bastions in disbelief. “What happened, Cadets?”

Titus took a deep breath. He tried to recall the last twenty minutes of sprinting for any details. “The cache was destroyed, pages littered everywhere. The Chymaera must have found it,” he said.

“Last team was two-two-seven at sundown yesterday, and they reported activity level two,” the guard said.

“And we saw . . . activity level seven . . . full amethyst . . . in the trees, and the smell of ozone, they had just passed through, and . . .” Valentina said, her vocal cords fighting her lungs for breath to speak the words. She leaned against Sylvia who felt for the rapid beating of her heart.

“They didn’t get us, though, those bastards,” Romin said. He glanced at the bags. Sylvia had dropped hers and Valentina packed her stuff in his bag. But then he realized that Titus’ wasn’t on the ground, so he looked to Titus’ shoulders.

And it was at that exact moment that the guards had realized it too,

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” the guard said. Titus felt something poking against his back, He rapidly threw his bag on the ground.

An arrow protruded from the sack, skewered all the way through.

“Titus!” Sylvia shouted.

Titus quickly removed his cloak, throwing his academy armor on the ground to check if—

“Those arrows are essenced with the curse, look,” the guard said.

Sylvia rushed up to him, twisting him in the flickering light of the watchtower where shadows ran down his back like flowing water. At the same time, Romin lifted the back of his armor from the ground as Valentina inspected the plating.

A single scratch ran across the metal, but the fabric was untorn. Titus’ skin held no lacerations.

Titus breathed deeply as the panic slowly left him. He lifted the arrow from the ground.

“If it was only a little lower, it would have missed the metal and skewered you through the back. Even with adrenaline you would have felt it. You would have been dead. That’s what happened to those four cadets eight months ago, said they—”

“Shut up! Shut up, we’re not losing anyone,” Romin said, his fear dissolving into anger, fists cramping his fingers against his palms as it quickly converted to curses.

Romin’s words trailed off in mumbles. The guard put his hand on Titus’ shoulder.

“You better keep that lucky arrow,” the guard said.

Titus turned the arrow in his hands, amethyst veins running down the shaft, the obsidian tip still undented, images flicking past of the family he almost left behind, the face of the little girl he swore to protect.

# 

# 03. THE CRUCIBLE

1

“Like hell you won’t be drinking tonight, Sylvia,” Valentina said, twisting her hair into a ponytail.

Romin’s muffled voice chimed from behind the door, admiring Sylvia’s sketches all across the walls. “Tonight’s the first night of the only break we have left.”

“And it’s why we came to your room in the first place—we knew you wouldn’t come out on your own,” Valentina said with a laugh.

Sylvia borrowed a dress from her, sewed with a bright gold and crimson that almost glowed brighter than the rings of her eyes. She admired her bare flesh in the mirror. It had been so long since she had dressed up like this—she didn’t even own any dresses in the first place, or much else besides her academy attire.

Valentina’s fragrance filled the air in a powdered mist, the color vermilion pouring down from her shoulders until the fabric pooled on the floor. Seven other dresses hung from the walls, jealous of her selection from having never been worn.

“He’s going to love you,” she said, “pray tell, I bought that dress two years ago, but it’s been in my closet ever since,” she said.

Is this real gold? Sylvia wondered.

“And yes, it’s real gold,” Valentina said, “taken straight from the yolk of the city, forged directly from the gold stores and woven in long strands. You can keep it if you want. Or sell it for some cash.”

Sylvia laughed instead of shaking her head in disbelief. She guessed it felt good to be going out for once.

“Let’s get on with it,” Romin whined.

“Oh, be patient, Romin,” Valentina said. She spritzed two sprays of her perfume on Sylvia’s neck as Sylvia adjusted the clasp of her crystalline necklace.

Romin said, “Or else I’m gonna go through Sylvia’s journal!”

“Romin, enough,” Titus said.

“Page one: Titus is my…”

“…Aah!”

Sylvia threw open the door, only to be met with Romin’s smugness. Titus blushed as he elbowed him into the wall.

“You have a journal?” Romin said. “Well, I guess I know what to look for if you two take any longer. I bet Titus wants to read it, too.”

“Shut up, you idiot,” Titus said, “you’re only killing your chances at this point.”

“He is,” Valentina said. “Pray tell, I can’t even begin to count all the other guys who would wait for me, who would complement me on my dress, who would chew with their mouth closed instead of making a mess…”

Titus reclined against the bed, protesting with the creak of the bed frame. Sylvia’s charcoal sketches dissolved into the shadows on the wall, some colored with red and green, the only two colors she could find, most black and white.

He lost himself in her works before he saw her as she turned the corner, feeling the emotions swell inside him at the sight of her flesh, her skin so soft and youthful, her face radiating its own light, catching a whiff of Valentina’s fragrance that fired all the right signals in his brain. For once, she wasn’t slouched over, her hair wasn’t in a disordered tangle. She stood half a head taller than Valentina.

“It’s in the old training silo,” he said, before glancing at Titus.

“And the liquor! I left it in your room. Can you grab it for us?”

“Sure,” Titus said. “I’ll head down the stairs. Don’t wait for me.”

“Aye,” Romin said, grabbing Valentina’s wrist, who in turn dragged Sylvia through the door and around the corner.

2

Titus descended the spiral staircase at the end of the hall, and it was strange hearing the academy halls so silent—the echoes of cadets carried like a chorus of ghosts, resonating in the stairwell so strongly that the metal stairs shook with each shout. But all he could feel was the night breeze through the cracked windows of the tower, the distant lights of the train ferrying cadets from Academy Island, and it reminded him of the feelings that stirred on his trips home.

The memory of her flaxen hair reminded him of the sound of her strings, the angelic softness that carried him to sleep, matched by the tinnitus of the empty halls. But his head felt light as he approached his room, as if the dim electric light had suddenly become brighter. He checked his pulse. It wasn’t another episode. There was nothing to be panicked about, it couldn’t be.

He felt his fingers grasp around the edge of the doorknob before hearing the sound of rustling paper in his room, considering he had left the window open, and so he cursed to himself—it’d be a cold last night under the covers.

He put his hand to his head, it couldn’t just be a head rush. The headache was growing stronger, pulsing through his skull and through his veins as if he wasn’t breathing at all, if someone was detecting his thoughts, as if he could hear another voice—

He threw open the door, raising his eyes to the window, but it was shut.

A silhouette returned a glare in the darkness—short in stature, but muscular: inhuman, like nothing he had ever seen before.

He saw the letter opened on the desk. The figure opened its mouth to speak, but hesitated with indecision, as if struggling for words, as if they saw the face of someone they hadn’t seen in half a lifetime.

Titus’ heart pulsed. He opened his mouth to shout, but the headache grew stronger, and he clenched his head, collapsing to his knees as if his entire body had lost control, trying to distinguish the figure’s form as it clawed for the window.

He watched its lips.

Ah.. Ve..

What? He couldn’t understand.

Re...

But the figure was rushed. He watched it disappear into the darkness, jumping from the windowsill into the night air.

“Wait!” he called, until the pulse grew far too strong, and he felt his body collapse to the floor.

He raised his head, scanning his surroundings.

The window was shut.

He fumbled around the room, feeling the air between his fingers, the pain still pulsing in his skull. The air was still cold. He glanced beneath the window—snowflakes still scattered across the floor.

The letter was closed on his desk. He reached to inspect it, twisting the vellum between his fingers, but the seal was still unbroken.

Romin’s bag sat next to the desk. In disbelief, he considered maybe he had begun drinking far too early, as if someone slipped one of the Verdalans’ day-tripping potions in his drink. He lifted the bag to his shoulder, taking the letter in his hands one last time, but it was too dark to read the sender. His headache still pulsed from all the motion, trying to pull together an understanding of what just happened, afraid to investigate, considering if the halls really were haunted, or if one of his floormates had pulled a prank on him.

But his friends were waiting, and the absolute silence began to frighten him, so he dashed for the door instead, descending the grand entry steps three stairs at a time, sliding against the handrails, wondering how Romin could run with such a heavy bag.

The foyer was entirely empty—even with break, it was odd to see it so empty. He expected to meet them there, to group up before the party, but they had vanished, along with all the other cadets in the building. All he heard was the wind rustling the flags outside, their poles clanging with the latch pin chains, the distant sound of wind chimes from the garden and the whistling gust that rattled the shutters.

He ran for the silo, descending the hill from the barracks, expecting to catch them headed over: it had only been several minutes, or so he though as his cloak flayed behind him.

He tried to remember the stranger. Just remembering its presence sent shivers down his spine, but he had no time to reconcile for its appearance, so his eyes skipped to every branch, checking behind every rock as if it would spring on him at any minute. He could tell in the taste of his breath that he was close, motivated by the fear of how uncharacteristically quiet the campus was, but reassured by the approach of the big metal cylinder just over the hill, the sound of shouts and laughter. Strange, he thought. Their fireteam agreed to help set up with 238 and 451, while several of the six-hundreds stood watch for Academy officers to try to bust them, so the party couldn’t be starting yet. In fact, cadets were leaving to return to the trains.

He cracked open the door, and finally the sound caught up with him, along with the intensity of the scene, as if the cadets’ energy in a single night could fuel the entire academy for a month.

He looked around for Romin, or Valentina, or Sylvia, or someone that he could recognize, but there were so many cadets crowded around the catwalks—from the second story, he saw mock fights breaking out in the old training pits where bodies sprawled across the floor, cadets cheering, showering bright liquid from bottles across their bodies, unable to tell if red wine or blood exploded with each kick and each punch. To his left, he saw barrels stacked against the wall concealing an entire wing of the silo. Tunics and trousers and blouses scattered across the floor, and a quick glance of fresh flesh made him realize why. The last glimpse was of passionate scratches across their backs, of cherry red lips pressing against each other with the last chance to feel any passion at all.

3

“Gods forbid they stop us when they’re sending us all to die!” one cadet shouted. “They can burn in oblivion before they tear us from our last celebration!”

The entire silo erupted with cheers and shouts brassier than a human sacrifice. He saw Valentina take the hand of a random cadet with a smile, but before he could reach for her, she had already disappeared. The grating smell of booze seeped into his nose as he approached the makeshift tables, where several familiar faces were veiled behind fans of cards.

“Put it away, Otwin, that’s not funny!”

“The healers can’t save you now. Now what was that about Lucinda, huh?”

Otwin pressed the steel blade against his neck.

“You wanna repeat that one more time?”

“Enough!” Diedrich yelled.

“Chill out, we’re just messing around,” Otwin said, putting his arm around Diedrich. “He’d never mess with my girl.”

“That’s what you think.”

Otwin glared with a menacing look, before a voice called from behind them.

“Get over here, you two, we’ve got a game of Crux to finish. Oh, and Titus, about time you came out of that room. Are you in, too?”

“Sure,” he said. “But didn’t the party just start? And where’s Syl— ”

“Your girl? I don’t know. We didn’t hear any noises tonight in your room, did she decide to take the night off?”

“Shut up, Vasco,” Titus said, “I’m serious.”

“Let’s go, then.”

Vasco stuck the cards beneath the base of the giant mug, filled to the brim with mead and whatever other concoction they could get their hands on.

“And the party’s been going for hours! Where have you been?”

“Hours? I thought it just started,” Titus said. He glanced around. Just as Romin’s name crossed his mind, he saw him approach the table.

“Where the hell have you been, Titus? It’s been like three hours. Thought you were hoggn all the booze to yourself, I would’d’d to kill you.”

“Did you see Valentina? She was—”

“Sh..” Romin looked away, as if he was pissed off but too drunk to say anything coherent, so he reached for the deck.

He drew the first card.

“Vaas. Ahkvasan God of time.”

He raised the glass to his face, and all the others did too. As soon as he lowered his, the next chugged another three seconds, and the next, until it was between Diedrich and Otwin. Ten seconds later, they finished their mugs.

“Gods, you guys, we’re only on the first card,” Titus said. “We’re gonna run out before we even finish a round.”

“He’s just trying to prove he’s not a bitch, like, like…” and he froze as soon as Otwin glared at him.

“Uh, my turn!”

He pulled another card.

“And it’s… Pharos! Auvryan God of flight,” he said.

“First person to bare teeth finishes their drink,” Otwin shouted over the loudness of the dance floor.

They all masked their teeth behind their lips. Vasco was already laughing, struggling to keep it in.

“Come on, we haven’t even started yet, Vasco,” Diedrich mumbled.

“You’re not that gone yet,” Otwin mumbled back.

“Alright, alright, just get on with it.”

He snickered.

“Ca-caw!” Diedrich exclaimed, fluttering his arms like an eagle while staring straight at Roland.

Roland turned to Otwin.

“Ca-CAH!”

Otwin started to laugh, but he wasn't broken yet.

He ever-so-slowly turned his head towards Vasco, who was already trembling, lifting his arms in a soft fluttering motion. As soon as they locked eyes, he shrugged his eyebrows.

He burst out laughing, almost falling out of his chair before being caught in a coughing spell.

“Drink, you loser,” he said. “Otwin, your turn.”

“Alright.”

He pulled a card from the deck.

“And… Echelon. God of, whatever,” he said.

“Lightning,” Vasco replied.

Diedrich cut in. “‘Lie-ning Lie-ning.’ Did you even pass A-school?”

“Of course I did,” he said, “how else would I be here?”

He swished his drink around.

“Shocking fact. Let’s see…”

He reclined back in his chair, staring out at the pitch-black beyond the window.

“Did you know… that I didn’t pass A-school?”

“You’re going to have to do better than that.”

“Weak.”

“Pathetic, Vasco. Something better.”

“Fine.” He continued swishing the glass. “I was adopted, from beyond the wall. Just like Titus and his girl.”

“No way that’s true,” Vasco said, “you would have told us that by now.”

“We’ve only known each other for less than a year,” he said, “with the way housing switches so often. No way I would have told you by this point. I was once from the town of Theres, until it was . . .”

“Sylvia!” Titus remembered. “Where is she?”

He turned to Romin.

“Where is Sylvia?”

“I dunno, find her yourself,” he said.

Titus said, “Where did you see her? Where did you leave her? You know you can’t just let her drink alone…”

Romin didn’t even face him. He was talking to a wall.

He raced to find Valentina, pushing past the shoulders of cadets, hoping she was sober enough to hold a memory. Three hours. What the hell had happened in three hours?

He pushed past the two first floor fields, saturated with mead and honey, wondering who had the money to waste all the drink. Several cadets were making out in the corner, and others were dancing on the catwalk. Others sprawled across the floor, especially the failures—the lowest-level heart cadets that would be sent as the first line of defense—too many to treat for alcohol poisoning, or whatever was inside these bottles that glowed with a shake of the liquid. They were weak enough to want to die before they departed beyond the walls.

He caught another glance of Valentina on the floor above, so he darted for the stairs, before a voice caught him first.

4

“Berguard!” a voice called. But it wasn’t Sylvia, and it wasn’t Valentina.

“Orphan,” he shouted.

Titus decided to ignore him. He wasn’t worth his time, not until after break.

“Loser,” Viktor said.

“Piss off,” Titus said.

He kept walking. So did Viktor.

“You know, I’ve been looking for someone to fight with in one-on-ones.”

“Our fight is after break. Second day we get back. How about you wait until then,” Titus said.

“I don’t think I can wait that long,” Viktor said. “I get withdrawals without that dejected look on your face, when you realize you’ll never make Dragon Class.”

Titus decided to keep ignoring him.

“The son of the Derelict, Titus Berguard!” Viktor shouted.

Cadets’ heads began to turn.

“I can’t leave Sylvia drink alone here,” Titus said. “She’s in danger. Please let me find her.”

“’Please? No, I wanna hear you beg harder,” Viktor said. His dragon cloak glowed in the candlelight, marking the highest class that only a tenth of a percent could reach.

“I wanna hear you beg for your life, bitch,” he said, “just like Sylvia did. Just like she did when I took her clothes off, that scream, that look in her eyes when I forced her to…”

Titus’ fist erupted across his face. Viktor felt the blood erupt from his mouth with a smile and the savory bitterness of red wine.

“There’s no healers to help you here,” Viktor said, “but maybe like these heart-level cunts you’re looking to die before you get beyond the walls. Maybe it’s better that way. Maybe a son can die for this father’s failures. It’s too bad yours would amount to nothing…”

The cadets were approaching. There was no room to squeeze past them. They were pushing him. They were pushing him into the training pits. They were going to force him to fight, he could hear them shouting louder with Viktor’s name on their lips, now pummeling him, hitting him, punching him towards the edge, closer to Viktor . . .

“ . . . so you should thank me, Titus, I’m gonna send you back to your mother so you can say the goodbyes you never got to tell her, and maybe you can meet your decaying grandfather when he dies after you. Maybe you can put his brains back together with your pieces after I scramble them!”

He felt the thousand-degree heat churn inside of him, his skin scalding hot, his breaths growing short, vision constrained in blinders where he could only see what was in front of him.

“I’m feeling generous today, so I’m gonna give you the chance at a partner to carry you,” he said.

Titus scanned the crowd. Romin was out of sight, too drunk to even know what was going on. Sylvia was missing, and his heart ached at the idea of what could happen to her, what she could do to herself with too much. Valentina was too busy cheating on—

“I’ve got Vera Vermillion, the better sister over Valentina in your team of orphaned trash,” Viktor said. Vera looked extremely uncomfortable, but she didn’t resist. The Dragon cloak billowed on her back, along with the pride that joined her at the hip.

Titus scanned the crowd further without a sign. All he saw were more and more cadets’ faces turning, cheering, beckoning their fight as Viktor played the theatrics. He couldn’t find Sylvia. He had no idea if she was here. And if she went back to her room, then…

He was getting closer to the edge, heels against the edge of the pit, scrambling for a foothold, stomach churning at the idea of another fight. There were no friends here besides his fireteam, no one else who would fight against the Dragon Class warriors. His boots protested against the starkness of the incline, until an elbow against his face threw him backwards, deeper into the pit, and all his breath left him when he slammed against the floor. Viktor slid down the incline with his heels. Vera reluctantly followed, unable to even make eye contact with him, and wondered how she would even be able to fight. The last time Titus saw her was when they were kids.

“If you have no friends, then I guess you’ll have to fight alone,” Viktor said.

“Wait, Viktor—” Vera said, grabbing his wrist. He whipped his hand backwards, striking her in the face.

“No, Vera, we’re doing this,” he said.

There was no exit. All Titus could see was the pinions surrounding the pit, throwing whatever objects they could find into the center, the deafening noise ringing in his eardrums until he lifted himself from the ground, and found his fists raised, prepared for the worst.

But then the sound of sliding rubble scraped behind him. A hooded figure approached.

5

“He’s not fighting alone,” the figure said.

A feminine voice. Her face was indiscernible, stature about a head shorter than him, hands covered with gloves, entire body concealed with fabric.

“Who is this?” Viktor said.

“A very old friend,” said the Stranger.

They turned to Titus, and in the darkness of the silo all he could distinguish was the diamond in the figure’s pupils growing wider.

“You and I are going to talk after this,” she said.

Titus nodded, accepting any bit of salvation that was offered to him.

“This fight would have put you in the infirmary for five months, and you would have lost all your training. You would have lost your place just below Dragon Class.”

“What?” Titus said. “How do you . . .”

“But you would have still been sent beyond the walls. Your whole fireteam would have been fodder, and you’d be torn to shreds by the Chymaera in less than a day, and we’d only find out about your truth years later.”

Viktor raised his fists and Vera hesitantly followed.

“They’re Dragon Class, you know,” Titus said.

“That means nothing,” she said. “There’s no chance they can contend with a Chosen.”

Her head tilted upwards, and Titus noticed another pair of eyes watched them from the hole in the ceiling, and distant memories of Everett’s stories returned to him, stories in black text that floated from the pages.

But Viktor was already upon him.

Titus took the brunt of the first hit.

His jaw twisted to the side as a burning sensation enveloped him, only quick enough to dodge the second punch before he rolled backwards on the ground, rapidly returning to his feet to gain the footing for an offensive.

He watched as the mysterious stranger weaved between Vera’s punches.

Titus knew Viktor’s fighting style too well: unreserved, aggressive, and he knew how to evade it. Titus allowed an opening for Viktor’s dominant hand and dragged his body in in the opposite direction without a moment’s notice, enough to drive an elbow between his temples and clip his feet to the ground.

The stranger had already incapacitated Vera. She sprawled across the ground, unmoving, unconscious, just as the rest of her fireteam became aware of the fight.

“Vera! Gods, what happened?” Bothe shouted.

His heels scratched against the rubble as his hand dragged behind him, trailed by Mara, who wore the same ruby-crested Dragon cloak. But both didn’t bare their fists. Instead, they drew rusted steel poles from the ground.

“It’s alright, Vera,” Mara whined, rushing the stranger with two rods. But the stranger drew from her belt with a single golden dagger.

Bothe rushed to Viktor.

“Don’t bother me, Bothe,” Viktor said, deflecting Titus’ knuckles with the flick of his arm. Titus motioned to clip his feet again, but Viktor wouldn’t be fooled again. “He’s mine, Bo!”

Titus took a knee to the face. Blood sprayed from his nose. His vision ran blurry. Cadets were pouring mead from the second story, cheering his adversary’s name, and above, he saw Valentina breaking first base with another cadet before they locked eyes, and she saw her sister sprawled across the ground.

She scrambled down the stairs, cursing as she scanned the floor for her bag, but she couldn’t get through the crowd or get down the metal spiral stairs, creaking so loud with such a load it was almost on the brink of collapse. Metal chains hung from the ceiling, and in her drunken mind she got the last and only idea she could conceive.

The Stranger was taking on two cadets at this point, but neither could keep up. Titus could feel the presence of her energy from the other side of the ring, watching the emerald glow of her circuits with each afterimage of her evasion. Viktor was aggressive to a fault but fighting like this would run Titus out of energy: he had no essence like Viktor. There had to be another strategy, he thought, as the metal chains above him rattled.

“Gods, Valentina!” Romin shouted. He jumped from the balcony with a single leap, shouldering all the force with a forward roll, knocking over all the drunken cadets that stood in his path. Valentina hung directly over the pits, about two stories in the air, her white knuckles tenaciously grasping the rusted chains as she descended one hand at a time, losing strength in her hands as the stranger’s friend observed her.

“You think you’re so high and mighty, Viktor,” Titus said, “but you’re weak and pathetic where it counts.”“You piece of shit,” Viktor said, as his blows grew less calculated and more aggressive.

“You raped her, not because you were strong, but because you’re trying to tell yourself you’re not weak.”

He hammered his fists with grimacing teeth.

“Next month, I hope you die on the front lines with all the other Heart cadets when I take your rank and send you to the bottom.”

“Rauughhh!” Viktor shouted.

He was beyond a fair fight. He glanced to all the pinions who cheered his name, motioning for the single tool that stuck from the ground.

“Titus!” Valentina shouted. The cadets were rattling the chains, laughing, cheering, calling her a ‘crazy bitch,’ showering her with liquor, and throwing bottles at her. The alcohol had saturated her hands, and with the disparate flakes of frozen powder whistling through the gap, she struggled to hold on.

“I’m coming, Valentina,” Romin slurred. He plowed through the scrum. Several cadets launched into the pit, knocking Bothe to the ground as the Stranger fought Mara with no struggle.

Valentina screamed. Holding on any longer was like grasping live wires from the Academy’s generator, and she couldn’t feel her hands. She began to slide, losing traction against the metal, hands scraped and bloody and exhausted.

Viktor caught the shovel as it descended, tracing his fingers across its jagged edges. Titus glanced to the stranger, who tossed him Bothe’s rusted metal rebar from before, with only a second to react as Viktor was upon him.

But the entire fight halted with Valentina’s scream in her fall from grace, when her fingers finally gave, when her legs could no longer wrap around the chains. The sensation of a certain power pulsed through her, enveloped in a pulsing energy as if she were underwater, descending at half the speed she expected. She caught a glimpse of a figure above whose hand extended, and Titus was caught off guard by Valentina’s demise, just noticing as Romin approached him.

Viktor’s shovel swung for Titus’ head. A clang reverberated through the entire silo as Titus crumpled to the ground.

The stranger’s eyes flooded with panic as if a hundred years had gone to waste.

But the shovel hadn’t struck him. They were both falling.

6

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# 

# 04. HEAT TRANSFER

1

“Sylvia!” Titus shouted.

He threw open the door. The room was pitch black.

“Sylvia, where are you?”

“I’m right here,” she said.

She was sitting in the corner tracing vines of charcoal against the paper, still in Valentina’s dress.

“Why did you leave the party?” Titus asked.

“Just not really my scene,” Sylvia said. “You should know me better than—” She caught a glimpse of his battered face. “By Gods, Titus, what happened?”

“My match with Viktor got moved to today,” he said.

She traced his face with her fingers. “You idiot, why were you fighting in the ring? That’s a great way to get killed before we graduate.”

“I was forced to. He forced me to. Viktor.”

The inflection of his name made her shiver. “Well, did you beat him at least?”

“Our match got interrupted. Valentina almost fell to her death before Romin caught her and that stranger saved her, but then the officers arrived and…”

“Forget all of that,” she said, raising from the chair as her bare feet carried her to the bathroom. “You smell terrible.”

“And you’re not any better, turning Valentina’s dress into a sweat rag,” Titus said. “So much for turning it into money.”

She creaked open the door. “Oh, come on. Do you want a towel? A bath? Or…”

She approached closer to him, pressing herself against his chest as she tightened her arms.

“…or me?”

“Uh…” He stammered: eyes absorbed in the cut of Valentina’s dress with a single question loaded on his lips.

“How much did you drink, Sylvia?”

She looked so intently at him with her beautiful, crimson eyes. Or at least until she slammed her clumsy head against the foot of the bed.

Sylvia felt Titus’ chest harden as his lungs refused to release. She broke out laughing with a snort, and Titus on the floor struggling to breathe. Sylvia collapsed against the bed, fighting for breath as if she had been poisoned, unable to move in her sprawl.

“Hahah…gods…ouch. Ow, ow,” Titus said, as the carpet grated into his wounds.

Sylvia climbed over the top of him, either seductively or sarcastically, cleavage fully exposed by the cut of the dress. “Looks like you’re going to need a healer,” she slurred, “looks like you need someone to share their heat with you, someone to share their essence with you. Well, lucky for you, Titus, I’m a goddess,” she said.

“And I think you killed my libido,” said Titus. He struggled to squirm out of her grasp but she wouldn’t let him go.

“Stop. Stop it. Stop,” she said. His wounds stabbed with each strand of the carpet, so either way he was fused with the floor.

“I’ve been waiting for you. I waited a whole two hours for you before I left the party. All I needed was just some handsome guy to help me take off this dress…” she said.

“You’re still drunk, you lightweight.” He glanced at her drawing. All that etched the page were confused scribbles—even Ellie could do better.

“…so will you help me? Maybe I could reward you….”

He fumbled his hands against the back of her dress for the bow.

She whispered in his ear. “There’s a reason why they make dresses this way. And a reason why I like them so much.”

He got a hold of the twine, and one loop disappeared through the knot.

“Because you always need someone else to take it off,” she said, her nose pressing against his cheek as he inhaled the strong alcohol in her breath. “I think it’s so much better that way, Titus, don’t you think?”

He undid the last loop: with his last energy he collapsed against the floor.

Her legs straddled him, the weight of her body pressed on his torso as he watched as her rise from his chest until she was fully upright. She peeled the dress as she eyed him lustfully, the softness of her skin more delightful than wine, bearing the fruit of a feeling that sprung inside him, compelling him to motion while suppressing another certain emotion that always followed, and with a newfound energy, he slid from beneath her, lifting her frame onto the bed as she closed her eyes in anticipation, his left arm under head, and his right arm embracing her.

Titus’ lips pressed against her neck, hands grasped around her wrists, pinning her against the headboard, the salty scent of sweat stirring their senses by the irresistible twist of their bodies.

The masculine side of Titus drank in to her surrender, the surrender her face when she gave in to his strength, the loveliness of her voice as she called for him.

He could taste the exhaustion on her sweat, and the sound of her heavy breathing was the only sound beyond snow pattering against the windows and the distant laughter of other cadets.

He continued to kiss her.

“Is this okay?” asked Titus.

She opened her eyes softly.

“Keep going.”

“Are you sure?” He asked. “We don’t have to try this if…”

“You’re fine, Titus,” she said, “I trust you.”

With his right hand braced against her shoulder he let his left hand to act on its own. Sylvia found it nestled behind her neck, his thumb caressing the side of her face as his lips pressed against hers, his teeth softly clasped around her bottom lip as her body squirmed against him. He grabbed for her breast with such fullness, tasting the texture of her breath as she inhaled his incense through her nose, his right hand stroking her side until it reached lower, tracing against the curvature of her frame until his fingers reached the fabric of her robe.

She flinched in protest, grabbing for his hand to draw it back above her waist.

“I-I’m sorry. I’m just not ready for that,” she said, “you know what . . .”

He nodded. “I know, sorry. I won’t force you to do anything.”

His fingers traced against the strength of her core and Sylvia felt for his chest, brazen from scars in countless years of training. Her lips were like lovely scarlet ribbons, matched in the crimson rings of her eyes that mirrored moonlight from the snowstorm, and Titus’ flesh was pleasantly cold, contrasting the warmth of her body in steaming heat as if she could ever thaw him, but she still searched for the one her heart remembered—even if she couldn’t find him.

His muscles were still exhausted from the fight, his muscles sore, and anaerobic exercise like this left him without any strength left, running only on the testosterone he had left over.

His arms gave and he collapsed against her.

She squeaked with laughter: in repose, her nails traced through his hair as he managed to lift himself. But she didn’t bare her lips to him. Instead, her glance met his, and with a certain sickness in his stomach, he quickly looked away.

“It’s okay to rest,” she said.

“It’s alright, I can keep going,” Titus said, that teetering emotion bringing four letters to his mind scaring the hell out of him, almost enough to make him disappear.

But she still didn’t give in to him. He crashed to the side of her and allowed his arm to slide beneath her. But she still resisted him.

“Let’s do things different this time,” she said.

“It’s alright,” he said, “I like it better this way.”

She laughed. “You don’t have to be my ‘guardian’ all the time, Titus. Just relax. Open up to me.”

Open up to me.

And then he remembered.

He began to remember again, the smell of her breath far too similar, the tension of her legs like the hands that grasped his neck, the darkness of the room lit by a single window—that feeling of heat in his ears as if frostbite had consumed them, the redness in his eyes, the poisonous scream of his lungs as she shouted.

“Open up to me, Titus! You have to tell me what he did,” Moira said, but it was all so fast and unbelievable, so impossible in the moment to process all those emotions like flooding a reservoir that would take years to drain through a single crack. And he looked up at her when he laid in her lap—her nails tracing through his hair with that look of horror—as if she could feel the approach of death before it came to her—and that bastard in the corner who wouldn’t forgive himself for the rest of his life—not until death came to take his shift at the store, and he realized he was breathing way too fast as Sylvia’s embrace tightened, but there wasn’t any glass shattered across the floor, there wasn’t any shouting from the downstairs, so he let his lungs fill with her breath as it if were an elixir that could ease the feeling for a while.

He removed his arm, and in repose her arms reached around him. The sheets were damp with her sweat, and he could smell her presence behind him from her perspiration and Valentina’s fragrance.

And then he felt the same sickness inside him.

Some part of him wanted to shatter entirely. Some part of him wanted to tell Sylvia how it felt when his mother died, and all that pain suddenly came to his mind—in that stinging pain behind his eyes that brought no tears, the stinging pain that made it feel like if he tried he could actually fall apart in her arms, but he was too afraid of surrender. He would tell her about his sister and how much he tried to forestall her change, how proud he was of her strength after her passing so many years ago, how much he and Everett had to raise her and the toll it took on his soul, and after Everett’s mental health deteriorated how badly she cried when—

He felt stabbing shivers down his spine when she slid her nails against his skin, matched by breath from her breathing down his back. She rested her face above his, and he relished in the warmth of her skin, of her fullness pressed against him, compressed with the force of her grasp, her legs twisted around him like the vines that clamped against the Academy dorms’ facade in the summer.

The wave of emotion was so close to breaking, its leverage stronger than the waves crashing against the coastal cliffs of Melenia, and he felt it with each palpitation of her heart, imagining it beat for him, the smell of her breath sweeter than milk and honey matched in her fragrance.

But his father’s words were the only ones that shielded his mind: although his heart so strongly beat otherwise, he could smell his presence in the light alcohol on her breath.

He was running, just like that night where crimson fragments of glass shattered across the floor, the blood he saw when he descended the stairs, and suddenly the mix of her fragrance and breathing reminded him too much of the alcohol on his father’s breath, her grasp too much of his father’s hands around his neck as he struggled for breath, and eventually he couldn’t take it, feeling as if he was going to break and lose a part of himself his father crafted for him.

Gods, it felt so nice to feel the touch of another human being, but he was running.

Just like the last time he ever really cried before his father suffocated it out of him.

And then she spoke:

“I want you to know that I’ll always be watching you,” she said, “because . . .”

He braced to deflect the brunt of her words as if it could shatter him, and he left her before she could finish her sentence.

2

“I’m sorry, Ellie,” he said.

The rope was already tied in his closet for the hundredth time; he had tied it and untied it and tied it and untied it a thousand times, as if just the dance of his hands could set away the oblivion that consumed him, that pressing absence of feeling that saturated his colors. Even Sylvia’s skill with art couldn’t color him in—so many times he believed there was a blue sky above the smoke, but all he clawed for was to escape the air of an ashen purgatory.

He wasn’t upset. He wasn’t sad. He was just tired, and the emptiness of that distant glance in her eyes: the longing for that restorative force he couldn’t bring her just proved he was damaged, broken. Maybe Ellie would find a better brother in the foster system. His mind always told him he was easy to forget, and maybe it was right this time.

“I’m a shitty brother for even considering this,” he said, “and I’m a shitty person,” he said, “and I’m a shitty son for giving up like this,” he said, and the images of dying cadets filled his mind: flooded with liquor on a one-way trip to oblivion, and he saw himself among them. He hated the idea of anyone feeling sorry for him, or trying to rescue him, or making him feel better, or asking for help, or diagnosing his problems.

The stool stabbed the ground with four slender appendages, twisted limbs like the decaying trees beyond the walls, and he wasn’t sure if the ceiling would hold his weight, and then he began to wonder if it would be better to do it beyond the walls, but something attracted him so strongly to the idea of someone feeling sorry for him, or crying for him, and he hated that feeling with a livid spite.

Am I actually going to do it this time, he thought, and he hated to admit that the roleplay was fun. Fireteam 451, number two-zero-five, just another statistic that will be written off in the Gazette. The idea of being forgotten filled him with such a strong feeling, and for a time, he wished he was never born, cursing the idea that anyone had to suffer from the simple fact of his existence.

Ribbons of light-beams tangled around the thread of the noose as his hands tied the last knot, the feeling of the rope around his neck like a certain set of hands, hands that brought him into the world, hands that drank and cried and blamed themselves for their wife’s death, hands that destroyed themselves, hands that hated themselves, that still had a ring around the finger, an invisible golden leash tied to the past.

Get on with it, the voice said. Enough of all these damn emotions.

The cold caressed him so gently. A single tip of the chair would send him away, and he didn’t know where that trip would take him. He tried to cry one last time, but his emotions failed him: in that moment he decided he didn’t care. He could never be vulnerable. He could never love…

Get on with it! The voice shouted.

His toes tipped the chair; a single muscle-spasm away from deliverance like all those other cadets. The change in inertia felt like he was floating, like he was in that dream, at the bottom of the lake, glancing at effervescent bubbles shimmering to the surface as the air peacefully parted from his lungs as if he had seen the true nature of beauty in the world, inexplicably alive and surging with a thousand colors that a hundred thousand words could never explain like the glowing of that single gem, and all those muffled voices . . .

The chair tilted, and it was only then that the regret flooded him as he scrambled to tilt it back, but it tilted too far. His hands thrashed to grab the rope when the image of all his friends flooded through his mind on the smallest glimpse of hope that he thought he had lost forever, pictures from the full axis of time compressed in one last flash of electricity through his brain, dumping all the power for one last second that stretched on towards both ends of infinity . . .

The noose tightened.

The rope snapped, and the window glass shattered.

3

“No, no, no, you can’t die yet,” a voice said, “or else they’ll get the inheritance! The whole house will burn down, and all the evidence!”

It was familiar, but not too familiar.

Something stabbed into his cloak, piercing the flesh of his chest as the figure grabbed him, convulsed him, shook him in tears. “Do you know how hard I’ve worked for this? Do you know how long it takes to start over? Do you know how many cycles it’s been?”

She buried her face in his chest with heaving sobs, and Titus found his hand on the top of her head.

“Twenty years, six times. You die in a cabin. Then from a Chymaeran arrow. Then the shovel. Then the noose. Then the assassination. Then Graduation, and then it’s twelve years until it opens again, I’m one-hundred-and-forty, Titus!”

He gazed at the ceiling, eyes glassed over.

“And do you know how many times I’ve explained this to you? Do you know how many times we’ve had this conversation?

Titus mumbled. “I—”

“—Don’t have a reason to live? You wouldn’t believe how many people show up for your funeral. You should see your father. And that little sister of yours. And this is the reason why Sylvia and your father end up killing themselves, leaving little Ellie—”

Titus said, “Whoa. Don’t—”

“—Tell you what happens? Are you kidding me? You’re so selfish,” she said, “so selfish to want to throw the entire world away when THIS is the divergence point that causes it all. The Ahkvasa research this for twelve years before they figure out why.”

“Why does it—”

“—Deal with you?”

“Stop finishing my sentences,” Titus shouted. “And what do I matter? I’m just a random Cadet— you want to see the random string of digits they call me instead of my name? Do you know how worthless it is? They’re right, they’re right, do you know how worthless it is?”

“Get over it,” she said, “I’ve already tried being nice in this conversation. All you do is just mope around, and then you get killed again. Someone needs to wake you up.”

His heart pulsed. “ Who’s after me?”

“The laws of nature,” she said, “and from this point on, you don’t even own your own life anymore. It’s being leased by a force that’s come to collect.”

“By Gods,” he said.

“But we can evade it. After a while, this curse of predestination will disintegrate.”

“But after how long?” he asked.

“After years, but it depends. We’ve done this many times before. Why else are we the curators of history, the saviors of the timeline?”

“Saviors of the timeline? The Ahkvasa. You mean from the childrens’ tales?”

She said, “So this agnostic metropolis of cattle IS full of idiots. I forgot you have a lot to catch up on, Titus, but I’m bringing you up to speed in record time. We’ve only been talking for less than a second, I mean, look around.”

The main log of the wooden truss spat in splintered fragments, still frozen in the air after giving in to his weight, and even the tessellations of crystalline shards still sprang from the window. The snowflakes weren’t moving. His cloak still hung above him, fluttering in the motionless breeze.

“Welcome to the Twelfth Correction, Titus. We’re in a war against Lady Luck, Father Time, and the forces of entropy that consume the universe,” she said, “and the only way to change the future is to secure the past, just like we have six times before.”

“The last time, you said. So there’s no return,” Titus replied.

“We can only travel back as far as the last Seamstress. I was the last. And I’ve taken my place again, but this time I’ve drawn the closest I’ve ever been. You think it’d be hard enough breaking in, but you wouldn’t believe how hard it is to break out of the Royal Palace.”

“I bet,” Titus said, nursing his headache, rubbing the rope burns on his neck. “From your build and training, I’m guessing you’re a guard.”

She broke in shrill laughter, followed by a staccato of short snorts through her nostrils. “Are you Humans really this stupid? It’s like you don’t know what Essence is, like—-”

Titus glared at her quizzically, only proving her point further as she realized she began to pity him.

“—the fire and life in your palms, can’t you feel it?”

He extended his hand, waving it through the air laxidazically. “No,” he said, “what does it feel like?”

“Like…like, do you know how many times we’ve had this conversation?” she asked. “Then you won’t believe me when I tell you I’m Ja’ada Li’iasva.”

Titus reclined against the wall. Stars and static red dots still stung in his eyes: he was more enticed by the cracks of the ceiling. “So where are you going to go now, Jah-da?”

“Jade? The Princess of the Ahkvasan Kingdom? Chosen and second heir to the throne?”

“I think my grandfather read me a story about that once, or it was in Seminary,” Titus said, “it’s hard to think after you try to kill yourself.”

“And it’s all true!” said Jade, eyes wide, crescents of her pupils expanding to full circles. “I’d have you thrown in prison if you talked to me like that in my kingdom.”

“And they’d hang you out to dry in the gallows if you showed your face,” Titus said. “But where are you going to go?”

“I’m staying right here,” Jade said. “Just like last time. We can’t be sure when the assassins will attack— last time they came after your grandfather’ funeral, but too much has changed this time. This is the last chance.”

He slouched against the corner without protest. He hung his head in submission, the noose around his neck, and the cord still hung in the air, along with the splintering fragments of wood hovering across the ceiling.

“But for what,” Titus grumbled. “Why should I care.”

“For what? For the Chymaera. The Essence of Life and Death is separated for a reason. If they have a half-blood vassal for the Human essence, they’ll resurrect entire armies of the undead, and strip the soul from their bodies with the powers of the Auvrya,” she said. “My people. My family. My world. You haven’t seen the beauty behind these walls, but I want to show you,” she said, “because you’ll never forget.”

“I almost left my sister without a brother,” Titus said, the lightning in his brain finally reaching beyond the stem. “I almost left her alone, my sister.”

He tucked his knees to his chest, cocking his head against the wall. “Just because I couldn’t feel, just because I couldn’t, I’m such a piece of—”

“And you can fight for her.”

He dipped his head in his hands: palms damp, but no sounds escaped his mouth. “And I almost left her there, all alone, and Everett, and Clint…”

He felt the gasp of his lungs, the stinging in his eyes, the resistance, the tension in his heart, the sound of her heavenly strings ringing in his ears with the sounds of tinnitus like phantoms of an untrodden future path.

“I almost killed her, Jade.”

“But you can save her.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because there’s a future out there where she makes it,” Jade said. “Because we can prevent the genocide that destroys Blackwater, the last chance of salvation, the lone pickoff-point of divergence.”

Titus raised his head, her words like a tuning fork of the perfect resonance.

“But to be honest, I’m not the only one who came here to see you,” she said. “I’ve brought someone who will burn it in your heart forever, and I’m sorry I have to do this.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why else did three hours pass in an instant?” she asked, “why else did you awake with a headache? There’s another friend I want you to meet, a friend who can only stop by for a brief moment—”

Black wings blocked the moonlight. The entire room dissolved in darkness as the last fragments of glass flung from the windowsill.

“Meditate on the image, Ja’ada, I know it hurts,” the voice chirped. Time was still stagnant. Titus clutched his head, screaming at the headache, but the shockwaves of his screeches couldn’t resonate when the particles of air refused to collide, so all he could do was listen as his eyes rolled to the back of his head, the feeling of the color orange enveloping him as if entropy had entirely died.

“This isn’t a punishment, but a lesson you get for desertion,” Ja’ada said. “You’ll be the ghost of your own future. You’ll haunt yourself forever to escape the terrors you wouldn’t have ever seen: but also to fight for the divinity of an unspeakable beauty. It’s then and only then that you will ever realize your entire life has been .”

4

Deliverance came for this city watching through the eye of a crimson moon. I was there before it watched: as if all the smoke this city breathed on the Gods wore their lungs in staggering coughs of bright scarlet that lined the streets. The ashes outpaced the snow until the air tasted like flesh, but the end had only begun.

They had found the Vessel.

The harvest was over.

And all of his senses were gone: just a lone observer in the back seat of another’s mind. He had already tried to scream for the last seven hours, or however long it had been. He was—I was outside of time, I was in her mind, and all I could do was monologue to myself on what I had seen.

All your troubles dissolve real fast when all you see is the wreckage of places you once remembered. And it’s then and only then that you discover all the little nuances you pick up on.

Like that chip in the sign of my father’s shop, right corner, for example—I clipped it when I was a kid throwing rocks to try to make it swing. Clint was more concerned about the shattered window—he wasn’t angry, just disappointed: he wouldn’t feel those emotions until much later, long after my sister and my mother and the punishment for heroism he still drinks to. But in this future, the sign hangs around his neck. The window is shattered, but not because of any rocks. Not any of my rocks. I tried to yell for her to stop, but she didn’t know any of these faces like I did, and Ahkvasans’ senses are so heightened I could smell his cologne before she turned the corner.

Or that house Sylvia and I played in a couple times, having poor-kid fun that didn’t involve a hoop and a stick, with the collapsed roof and dust-ridden everything that made us sneeze and laugh, and the cellar we called our ‘adventure cave’ when we could still squeeze between the bookshelves, that place where she kissed me that one time and we read Everett’s books, and she got the happiest sad look in her eyes when I said I would protect her. For the karma of our fun it stays standing as the last house on the block. Everything else glows amethyst, and I can only recognize by smell. I can’t control Jade. I can only watch her, and my eyes only shut every time she blinks.

She’s in my grandfather’s house—it still smells like the forest beyond the walls, and the couch still sits in the corner where he read to me, and all Ellie’s ‘red people’ are sprawled across the floor with glowing amethyst in their veins like nothing I’ve ever seen before. I’ve been asking where Ellie is for the past hour, but all I can feel is the tears from her eyes, but it’s not from the casualties, like it’s anything she hasn’t seen several times before. Fifteen years until the next chance, and her hands are tightened balls like Sylvia’s whenever she thinks about Him, and I can feel the warmth of blood as my claws dig into my hands trying to remember where the key was last time, the key to that bookcase that opens to the basement, but I don’t have time for that.

I feel the anger scald the essence in my circuits like gunpowder in a crucible, and either time slows around me, or I’m speeding up. The diamond cutting tool is in my hands: useless without the power of impulse, and it almost feels as if I can see light as a flowing liquid before it reaches my eyes, in the sparks of the metal on the wall when I cut it like butter, such a small force yielding endless power when it’s divided by the hairs of a nanosecond, as seconds tick by for me at the near speed of one-over-infinty. In this world, I’m not the Chosen yet—for now, it’s my brother. But the bloodline of our royalty carries near-infinite power.

The door erupts in white flames. The entire wall glows in plasma, the air sucks out of the void I left with enough power to collapse the rest of the house, but I can’t let it fall yet.

Her thoughts say Everett’s inheritance was supposed to go to my family—she thinks it was seized by the city after the assassination. I scan her mind for any memories, but she never saw her, she never saw Ellie, and it’s hard to to tell when this livid anger keeps rising whenever I think of the number fifteen, and the powers of nature that keep killing this idiot whose grandfather was one of the couriers of the Phantom Abolition, and another fifteen years before

Everett? What does Everett have to do with the Abolition? Why didn’t he tell me this? And, and—is that why he went away on ‘vacations’ so often? When I was young? Or, wait, wait a minute…that house, that picture looked so familiar…was that his house? Why didn’t he tell me any of this? Why did he keep it from me? Why is everything burned and why do they destroy all the evidence every single fucking time? Why can’t they just leave one scrap of a clue? Fifteen! Fifteen! Fucking fifteen and I’ll be here again! That fucking number!

But she misses something, that— on the table right there, next to the metal shelf and the furnace, that’s got to be everything, I remember that chest, that chest he said “would be mine someday" that had Clint’s name on it, the one that was chipped just like the sign in the corner there that looks like a produce box (and maybe it is), but it’s right there! She keeps walking around the room. She passes it twice. She shuffles the papers. It’s not about papers, or maps, or documents, it’s about what’s in there, Jade, and I can’t think for you, I can’t change the future passed, but I know he’d keep it in there.

Fifteen minutes have passed. The number aggravates her, and she leaves up the stairs, almost in tears again, furious she has to return home and relive the personality she lived a hundred-or-so years ago, but at least the food was savory. And at least the Chymaera hadn’t touched their walls, she thinks—probably since they’re connected to the terrorist group in the city.

I talk to myself in these words to hear my own voice, but I’m already starting to forget what it sounds like. My voice has become hers. This monologue passes in paragraphs, but the days pass like molasses.

She sleeps in an abandoned compound with the words CARMINE BROTHERHOOD etched in the walls, in the coziest room at the top of the main tower she found on the third day, or fourth. And wait—when did we start again? I recognize it’s Romin’s brother’s room: the same toys we stole when we were kids, when we came here after Seminary and the Sisters cooked for us since Clint said it was “free food and not on my damn dollar, you can eat their gumbo all you want.”

She sleeps there for twelve nights. She checks the basement two more times until she sees every crack of the cobblestone in the walls, but she still doesn’t see the chest. She looks towards the hills for a second one day, enough for me to see the Vermillion Estate, and it’s still intact, and I wonder why, but she looks away. I feel like I’ve become her. I wonder how many times she’s walked down these streets, and I see the faces of the survivors: sullen, exhausted, and it almost feels like I’ve forgotten everything about myself, just a second personality that echoes in her head, and maybe it’s months that have passed, I can’t keep track or write anything down since everything I own now is just my consciousness, in a world that’s so alien and unfamiliar that I’ve forgotten the feeling of the rope entirely, and I’m livid, and I’m angry, and the rage builds inside me like the gasps for breath in sleep paralysis that screams that someone needs to pay for all of this, but nothing compares to the day that I finally saw her—out of any part of myself I could forget, the sound of her strings were the only resonance of a past life that lasted longer than the sound of my own voice.

5

Three months passed since the generators died. Maybe even longer since the last voice graced her ears—her internal monologue is the only words I hear. I can’t be sure whether we’ve jumped through time, or if I’ve been a backseat stranger to her thoughts since that first day—time has lost its meaning. Her memory is spotty, but I can feel the breadth of time, what time feels like when it isn’t constant, what it’s like when it skips and accelerates and leaves the rider with whiplash.

I don’t know what happened here. Maybe it wasn’t relevant. Maybe she didn’t want me to see it. Maybe she forgot, but I doubt it, but all that lines the streets now are ashes, and all the stars in the night sky are so bright when the light doesn’t pollute them. Her fur coat keeps her warm. But she’s frozen: indecisive as that distant point on the horizon of time hasn’t even emerged, but she knows it’s somewhere beyond there.

She wonders what the Royal Family thinks. The last three times she returned so quickly, but now she doesn’t care, and she realizes this is the first time she’s thought of them. She can’t even remember her father, her mother, or her brothers’ voices: all the visages are replaced with her own, and even I can’t see them in her mind’s eye.

The number dances in her mind. Fourteen. And every time the golden daggers poke against her thigh, she wonders if it’s worth it: she takes them out to inspect, the last gift from her aunt, the chosen before her brother. The word HUNTRESS is etched in both of them, scratched and sliced with a thousand adventures of indentations, a thousand stories among the secret group she absconded with.

But the voices perk her ears, like the smell of the roast “King Father” demanded every month that drew her from her quarters: so tender and soft, and so it draws her from the compound. I notice in an instant where she’s going is familiar. It’s been so long since I hoped she’d cross paths with a familiar face, just to remind myself of who I was, but I can feel the worthlessness weigh her to the cot every single day, with the echoes of a single number dwindling every eternity.

She makes her run for the food stores. The voice is louder.

“Bullshit they haven’t found the Vessel. She should be dead by now! How long has it been?” a voice says. “What does it take to find a kid with mixed blood? There’s a ton of bastard children in this city, you don’t think one of our skinwalkers settled down somewhere?”

“But a kid with mixed blood AND the blood of the Gods, you try that,” the other says.

Jade turns her back with another week-or-so supply until she returns to the compound, but she notices the window glass is broken, and she knows the vagrants have been long dead. Her heart jumps for the first time.

“Hello?” her voice cracks, shaking the dust from her vocal cords. “Hello, is there anyone there?”

A flash flicks across the hallway. Small. Dark. And her heart jumps a beat.

She tries to slow the passage of time, but a bitter taste fills her mouth, and she wonders why she’s unable to, and the room keeps growing darker as dusk settles in the hills, and the furnaces decay inside the belly of the compound, no longer painting their light on the walls in flickers, and she waits for another glance, daggers drawn in her hands.

A high-pitched screech slices the air, but it’s not a monstrous shout: a faint squeak, and the sound of soft footsteps sprinkled across the stone, and she raises her daggers, waiting for the worst to turn the corner.

“Get OUT!” The girl yells. A bolt of amethyst energy erupts from her fingers, blasting through the entryway walls, and it erupts the back wall in purple flames, but Jade knows she didn’t mean to hit her.

She’s exhausted: crescents worn in her eyes, emaciated; skin consumed with dark swirls of absolute blackness where her soft, grey skin doesn’t reflect. And her eyes are amethyst. Maybe one of the ‘bastard children’ that survived.

Her hand is still raised. The tears flood her eyes. She sobs so lightly, but her hand is still raised and she refuses to wipe them or else a split second might kill her, so the waterworks stream down her cheeks. Her hand is glowing, trembling, whether from fear or exhaustion or an ungodly blend of all that and a thousand-yard stare, and she looks as if she’s going to collapse, nursing the twinge in her neck with her other hand as if she hasn’t slept on something soft in forever.

Jade approaches her, the same anxiety fluttering her heartstrings, a certain stinging sadness she hadn’t felt in forever, and she recognizes the pain behind her eyes.

“Stay back!” the girl yells, and her arm raises further: the further she tilts it, the more the tears escape from her eyes, and from her chapped lips Jade wonders when they’ll run out. Her hand trembles from exhaustion, her whole frame is on the verge of collapse, but then the girl sees the light in a stranger’s eyes for the first time in months.

Jade extends her arms.

The girl wails.

In a last gesture of trust, the girl collapses. Soon she’s asleep in Jade’s arms: the staccato of sniffles on her breath as she settles on the mattress, skin covered in black patches harder than obsidian, and then Jade finally realizes the feeling of warmth in her chest: the inkling of the slightest purpose to keep going.

She stays there for two weeks or so. Jade provides food for her, the strength for her, even though the entire world will be reset again as soon as her consciousness parts her body and she awakes again beneath the covers of her giant bed in the Castle, but it fills her with some kind of feeling she hadn’t felt in the longest time.

The Chymaerans pass every once in a while, but they don’t enter the building—but every time they pass she clutches her head, the faintest glow dragging the darkness even further across her body, all the way up until the last day when she fled.

The door creaks open. Jade hears the churning of rusted hinges. She grabs the girl and brings her into the next room, where the dark-skinned body is still sprawled across the floor, and even I still forget who it is. She hides in the closet, covering the little girl’s mouth as she convulses, the dark patches growing larger and larger, but she doesn’t stop screaming: for the first time, the patches touch, and it’s not long before her entire body is covered in blackness, save for glowing amethyst eyes that shine through the slats of the closet door.

A set of clicks. A distant shadow. A Chymaeran silhouette and a purple gemstone with a strange energy inside it, and the closer it gets, the more the little girl wails. Jade brushes her hair, but to no avail, and when the figure finally enters the room, her shaking turns to convulsions. She tears the locket from her neck and kisses it, balled in her fist so tight her nails almost draw blood, and in a single burst of energy she springs the doors open, but Jade is too late to stop her.

The four syllables of a forgotten name are the last words she mutters, and maybe the first.

Lightning erupts from her fingers. Jade shouts her name, but it’s too late: the Chymaeran dissolves to ashes, and the entire compound springs to life as if the generators had never died, and she knows every Chymaeran in a two-mile radius probably saw that.

The mission is more important, she reasons. This will all be reset, she thinks, but she still grabs the little girl’s hand because she reminds her too much of her little brother, how long it’s been since she’s been in a worldline where he was alive and she had someone to protect, and…

The girl tips over, the gemstone in her hands: she’s been reduced to nothing but an obsidian statue, the last glance of determination carved forever into her face.

The Chymaerans are coming. She hears their clicks, and wonders how good their echolocation is, and knows nothing is permanent, and knows everything lies on her survival, so she leaves her there, keeping herself from looking back or else she might turn to salt, too.

Twelve. The grass is so verdant and beautiful: the flowers are in bloom, and the rivers flood with the runoff from the mountains, the fresh pine air unadulterated by smoke, and the sun is out, and the clouds are white instead of grey. There’s so much life outside the walls: there are so many incredible creatures beyond the forest, and every time she makes camp, the fire crackles and coughs, spitting embers into the sky, and I sense the faintest sense of peace has returned to her.

Time skips, but the feeling of its breadth still remains. The days bleed together; they’re all so similar, and time takes steps from one, to two, to four, to eight, to sixteen, to thirty-two, to sixty-four, until the word ONE parts from her lips.

She looks in the mirror. It’s funny how all the salt-and-pepper gray hairs are all in the exact same place, and she wonders if predestination or free will is real.

But she doesn’t think too hard about it.

Zero. The dungeon is in the mountainside. She knocks at the door.

“What binds the fabric of time together?” the voice asks.

“The fiber of a hundred-twelve needles, guided by the Seamstress of the Gods.”

The door opens. She recognizes the faces, but not their creases. The comet is coming. She lays on the table.

“For a-hundred-and-twelve years we have waited,” a voice says. “But the mission is not complete.”

The sky is getting brighter. The comet is green: saturated with emerald energy, and it keeps getting larger.

She can hear the clicks in the distance. But just like every time, they’re too late. The stone door crumbles like stale bread, but the light is getting closer and closer, filling the skylit chamber until every single shadow has dissolved, every other life dissolves in the immense heat, every consciousness has transcended time, and Titus finally recognizes the two faces in the locket.

SECTION TWO

INHERITANCE

# 06. DIFFUSION

1

The

# 07. CONDUCTION

1

The