

# The Heartbeat of a Million Dreams

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HALO SCOT

BOOKS BY HALO SCOT

**The Rift Cycle**

*Edge of the Breach*

*Echoes of Blood*

*Eye of the Brave*

*Elegy of the Void*

**Standalone**

*The Heartbeat of a Million Dreams*

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THE HEARTBEAT OF A MILLION DREAMS

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*To the voiceless, and to the choirs.*

*If you see the world through a different lens, this one's for you.*

|

NIGHTFALL



# I

## Infinity's Sorrow

SLADE

**I**m not supposed to exist.

That's what I've gleaned from over two decades of running. I'm an error, a fluke, a mistake, a monster. Something about me is *wrong*. But I don't know what. I don't know how. I don't know why they've chased me since birth. All I know is they want to kill me. Or if not kill me, trap me. I scare them. I'm dangerous . . . apparently. Though I don't know who—or *what*—I am. Just that I'm a horror large enough to excuse infanticide.

That's what they tried. The ruthless ones. My trackers. My hunters. My nightmares. In the hospital, they slit my throat—my tiny, wobbly, infant throat. I still boast the scar from where the doctor sewed me back together. She saved my life that day and on so many days after.

I don't know her name. She won't share it, for her family's sake. She knows mine, though. Everyone does. It's printed on every billboard in every block of the city. *Slade Hawk: WANTED*. The only gift my parents gave me: a strong name, a superhero name, a name that damned me till streets claimed my salvation.

Only at the end do you recall the beginning with fondness. In the moment, it's a cage, but in retrospect, it's a sanctuary. Nostalgia's a vile drug, a wicked poison, an insidious parasite that feasts upon memory's charismatic lure. I remember music

first. A nursery rhyme filtering through filmy windows, a half-remembered melody, a hearkening of roses. Someone used to sing to me while I hid in dumpsters. Her aria cut through the thick scent of decay and made me forget that I, too, was trash. Harmony elevates demons to lofty ideals.

*Lofty.* There's my antithesis. All that waits for me above this cursed city's scribbled skyline is pain. They caught me once, those sadistic skyships with their corrupt justice, and unraveled me to infancy, to my first scrape with hell—death at birth, an oxymoronic paradox. No, best stick to the starforsaken subway and the underworld's vapid ignorance. Shadows help me fade.

Though shadows are harder to come by these days, and spotlights are even more bloodthirsty. "The Reckoning," that's what pensioners call it, souls who can still afford hope. The rest of us call it massacre—or genocide, if you're fancy. Whatever the reason, rebellion brews on the horizon, and in rebellion's wake, regret often follows.

A man brushes past me. I freeze. Explode. Synapses fire in artillery, and thoughts confetti as infantry. I breathe, count, stim, hum, but nothing re-centers my Fabergé-egg mind.

"Lady, you're blocking the doors."

A voice. Too loud. Too harsh. Too cruel. Too much. The Big Bang stirs inside my skull, and my universe readies to detonate.

"Move."

The same voice, accompanied by a hand. He waves in front of my face as if I'm a ghost. Again, too much. Too cruel. Too harsh. Too bright. I squeeze shut my eyes and strain to order my shotgun-blast thoughts.

"You can't just stand there. What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Every word is a bomb, and his anger slivers deep. I try to explain, to plead for mercy, but he huffs and leaves before I become human again.

A hand grabs my arm and tosses me into a corner, away from the oncoming train. Aggression destroys me, missiles through my psyche, and I curl in on myself, a fetus once more with no warmth from the womb. This world isn't built for me, and I'm not built for this world. My suffering lasts but a moment, yet it feels like infinity.



Are you a moment? Or are you infinity?

Because one day, you will die. One day, no one will remember your name. One day, the universe will forget your face, voice, hopes, dreams. Then what do you live for, when life is lost? What is the meaning of a voided existence?

Do you create echoes, ripples in time, impulses and emotions that string together generations? Or do you make your moment shine like a star, then hope it travels far and reaches eyes blurred by tears on a cold, dark, winter night? Do you pray your star lasts after you're gone, a ghost traveler, a reminder of what once was yet will never be again?

So I ask again: Are you a moment? Or are you infinity?

Is infinity a moment lost long ago that outshines the rest, but fades in the end, too? Or is the end a moment? Infinity? Destiny? Fate harvested from heartstrings to answer whys and hows? Does fear shape fate? Does dread paint destiny? Do we mold our own monsters from murder and myth? Does it matter? Do you matter? Or are you the only thing that does? Do these moments, these infinities, capture meaning from madness, a kiss on a balcony, a laugh on a train? Does love immortalize life in the transcendent metropolis of a trillion, selfless vows?

I don't know. No one does, despite fractured prisms of false promises and shredded hope. But what I *do* know—after a lifetime hated, feared, revered, destroyed—is that love renders life bearable, worthwhile . . . and its loss carves answers from pain.

Because you will love. You will lose. You will live. You will die. But you must endure mortality's ultimatum, or this gift will squander beneath terror. Fear of death wastes life.

But the moment passes. Infinity, too.

And in the subway's corner, inside my virtual womb, I pray away brokenness, jagged ends, shattered wine glasses leaking blood. I wish I were another girl. A fierce girl. A fiery girl. Fearless and ruthless, brimming with rage. The world forces her hand, her cruelty, her power, and when life damages her, she replies in kind.

# 2

## A Storm of Souls

KOA

“**S**he’s chaos, Mack. Can’t trust her.” I pace the high-rise, nervous, off balance. I hate this city. More so, I hate what it symbolizes.

“She’s *scared*, Koa. Give the kid a break.” Mack *tsks* me and shoots me a you-should-know-better glare.

“She’s a kid no longer, and you best remember that. If she ever discovers who—or *what*—she is, she’ll bring vengeance down on us all. She’s a weapon.”

“She’s a *wonder*, and she has a name.”

“A name that triggers every alarm in the city if spoken aloud. It’s too risky. I can’t accept your offer.”

Mack sighs and runs a hand through his golden dreadlocks. “There are two types of people in this world. Most evolve into dogs: friendly, compliant, typical, predictable. But some evolve into wolves: cautious, curious, fierce, powerful. And some of those wolves lead the pack. The kid’s a wolf. She’s their leader. If we help her, we give voice to the silent ones and strength to the shadows. She is the bridge between their world and ours, but if that bridge crumbles, time will never heal.”

I lean against the grimy glass and peer through my fingers at the rusty city. Solarcar headlights blink blood in the dust, burrowing between skyscrapers that grew too tall and spread too far in a concrete jungle, a storm of souls.

"There's a reason they chase her," I say. "There's a reason they're afraid. I've never seen them like this before. No one has."

"She is the voice for those who have none," Mack whispers. "Of course they're afraid. They should be. Her greatest power isn't what's inside her; it's what she represents."

"She's a symbol."

He nods. "A symbol, an icon, a brand, an eagle standard others will rally behind. And when they rally, we must stand among them, not opposite."

"You've grown soft."

"And you've grown sour. What happened to the fairy witch I stumbled across in the greenhouse moor, braiding heather and dancing with lanterns?"

She's still out there, but she's no longer me.

"Think on it," Mack says. "We have time. Not much time, but time enough. She needs you, and you're the only one who can help."

"Help," I echo and scoff. Mack's right. I've turned bitter, sweet wine to tart vinegar. "If help is what you're looking for, then I best stay far away."

Regret clouds Mack's gaze. "That wasn't your fault. You can't blame yourself for what happened."

"Oh, I can, and I will, till I'm buried in a grave," I spit back. "I failed, and I can't fail again. Find someone else, someone better."

"There is no one better. Slade needs you."

Alarms blare, as promised. Mack enters a code into a wall console, claiming "poor enunciation." The Bone Lords don't buy it. Within seconds, we're searched, scanned, questioned, and damned to a week-long watch list, tracking our schedules and routines. Shit. More time playing "nice."

On our way out of the building, as we adjust our goggles, airmasks, and dustsuits to combat the harsh, Martian clime, I whisper to Mack, "Was saying her name worth it?"

He grins, sparkles, with cunning and mirth. "Always is."

"But they're trailing us for a week."

"As planned. Time to plant false starts and fool's gold."

## 3

## Hope Should Be Heard

SLADE

On my way through the subway, I thumb a harmonica: my favorite one, the one engraved with a prayer. I can't read the prayer—it's Italian, or Latin—but its cursive hypnotizes me and calms my hummingbird heart.

They're close. I can sense them. Or perhaps I'm paranoid. Probably both. But if I don't play, I don't eat, and if I don't eat, my mind will mutiny . . . again. I *could* steal dinner. It's my usual bet. But the city's up in arms lately, so best play it safe. *Safe*. No such thing in Kasei.

Lucky for me—and luck is rare for me—rush-hour bedlam distracts the commuters. As they dive beneath the Martian surface, they rip off airmasks, goggles, and gloves, then unzip dustsuits to collarbone level, tossing solarcapas over shoulders as some would hair.

Mars is habitable—that's what Earth tells us. By "habitable," they mean lazily terraformed to feel less like prison and more like home. They filled Valles Marineris with water, then filtered and piped it northeast to Kasei, the sole Martian colony, the exodus of starchildren. Within an impact crater, our city stands, a smartglass overworld and an industrial underworld. The underworld is safer.

Inside buildings and subways, we can breathe the air, but outside in the cold, dusty desert, we must wear airmasks and

dustsuits to survive. Greenhouses struggle to make enough food. The days are temperate; the nights are frigid. Constant reminders we don't belong.

"Hey, kid, play our anthem," a white-collar type shouts.

I cringe at his outburst. Everyone's always so loud, and the subway's the loudest, but it's also the safest, a beehive to hide from wasps, the subterranean esophagus of the Martian beast.

"Yeah, play it loud," another adds. "You know it?"

Of course I do. Every starchild does. It's a forbidden tune, a stunning, musical string. But I can't attract more attention.

"Can't," I whisper, because talking burns my ears.

"Afraid of Bone Lords?" the first asks.

No, but they're afraid of me. They're afraid of us all. Humans evolved. Some of us, anyway. We starchildren can starshift: bounce between matter and energy at will, and stop time in the act. It takes immense effort, so we can only starshift a short while (hence, the lingering need for subways, solarcars, and skyships). But this miracle was enough for Earth to banish us here, out of fear, to this desolate existence.

Bone Lords are starchildren, too, but they're starchildren who work for Earth. They believe we're all slaves to control, to sedate. And if not for the Order of Roses, we would be.

"Come on, just once," a third commuter begs. "Hope should be heard."

The crowd billows—*too loud, too bright, too much*—and I dig my fingers into the harmonica, will it an anchor to see me through this storm.

"Can't," I repeat.

Someone scoffs. "Good luck paying for dinner, then."

I'm lost again. Forgotten again. One of the hive. One of the stars. A hazy constellation only ghosts can see.

Rage rises within me, a fire on the horizon. The world flares, and I weaken, a feathered shadow on a melting lake. People grow tall as titans, monstrous colossi with me as their pet. Every shoulder brush is a psychic amputation; every crowded surge is a volcanic undertow. I urge myself to think, breathe, move, escape, but human stench clogs my nostrils, and cottony panic coats my tongue.

Rusty dust smears the floor, a Martian threat in her city of

blood. Footprints mar this sandy path as boots shuffle through chalky metal. Naked pipes jut from titanium walls like arteries freed from a broken heart's chambers, and trains sleek as antique bullets roar through tunnels with time's eternal fury.

I collapse to a knee as this roar overtakes me, submits me, forces me to genuflect to all I'm not. Commuters ignore me, continue with their evenings. This place doesn't affect them as it affects me. The train is a train. The tunnel is a tunnel. But to me, it's a zoo of brutes, an orchestra at full blast, creation's strain against a symphony of struggle. Deafening is an understatement. Barbaric is more apt. Cruel is most.

The harmonica shakes in my hand. Or maybe the shaking is me. Chicken or egg, but cause can't change fate. I withdraw the instrument from my pocket, unholster my weapon, and blow through reeds with a whisper, with a prayer. The song is old—older than Kasei—a song called “Londonderry Air” to some, “Danny Boy” to others, a song with many names and lyrics and dreams. Each note calms the current inside me, and riptide slows to a steady, oceanic pulse. Wave in, wave out, brushstrokes upon a shore. But one thing yet jabs, a stick in the stand, and I'm stuck on this stick, in this sand, in this song.

Something is not right. I survey the usuals that stampede through the subway: Top Hat Jack, Chapped Lips Sima, the Bearded Drones, the Uptight Chiefs. Then I zero in on their dustsuits, scan for anomalous details: a broken zipper, a cracked airmask, a splintered lens, a scuffed boot. But besides a few undercharged solarcapas, nothing satisfies my hyperaware scrutiny.

What itches my subconscious? What tickles instincts earned from a lifetime on the run? I play louder, set the harmonica as my compass, weave through the throng in search of a poisoned needle in a toxic haystack. People toss starcoins into my solarcape's pocket, Martian currency forged with Martian iron, engraved with a nine-pointed star: our symbol, our brand, our emblem of doom. I don't notice them. Well, of course I notice—I notice everything with no filter, no reprieve—but I've trained my hyperspecific mind to chatter in the background as I focus and fixate on the odd, on the off.

There. To the right. At the subway's edge. Above a brand-new wanted poster of yours truly. My likeness shimmers on the

smartglass billboard; she glares at me, and I glare at her. Twenty-three years of fight-or-flight reflexes cram into a wiry, anxiety-ridden frame. Copper eyes with golden cores. Warm brown skin, ruby scarf around my scar. Silken, mahogany hair streaked with blonde, ponytail to tie me together. Loose hair frays my soul, unravels my identity. I could punch before I could crawl; I could kick before I could walk. And because of this monster, the monster they made, I spot the aberration above my poster.

It winks. I wink. It winks again, and when it does, I'm gone. The tracking beacon rotates on a hinge—disguised as a light bulb, but light bulbs don't move. Its indigo gaze hitches up, then down, as it hunts for my shadow, for my ghost.

Adrenaline floods my system, and my world narrows to this hidden hallway. Forward, onward, downward, into the entrails, beyond human reach. No blueprints reveal this corridor's location, but an accountant did on the way to his mistress. Years ago, that was, but you always remember your first. I didn't mean to kill him, but he meant to kill me, so I turned the tables on the sorry adulterer and learned how to win, how to cheat. Survival is my queen.

Now upward, backward, eastward, always onward. I loop over my path, braid a retreat, and their footsteps crescendo; they always do. I can pick a pocket, swipe an ID, hot-wire a solarcab, mask any persona, but they always find me, though they never keep me. I'm recognizable as the sun, yet slippery as the sea, and even with my heart in timpani, I run on, and I run far.

"She's here!"

*Shit.* Here we go again.

A Bone Lord screeches around the corner and points a white-gloved hand at me. Her dustsuit is pale as bone, the uniform of the damned, of imitation skeletons that haunt my every waking—and sleeping—moment. I turn on my heel and sprint opposite her accusation. But she screams my name, and alarms blare its curse.

*Too loud, too bright, too close.*

*Too much.*

I squeeze my harmonica, stim against its smooth shell, and charge toward a closet that once served as an escape.

Another figure blocks me, this one in scarlet, red as his

namesake. Odd. The Order out in the open? Roses usually play their cards close. He points at an adjacent alley and disappears across the subway.

It could be a trick.

It could be a ploy.

But I've neither time nor luxury for speculation.

I take the alley and plunge further underground. My pounding heart choruses my pounding feet as I charge through mystery toward freedom, or farce. Why would the Order of Roses help me here, help me now? And is the patter behind me them or Bone Lords?

*"Ssssslllllaaaaaade."*

Behind me. A hiss of my name. More alarms, and the alley bleeds red. No Rose to save me now. Two wraiths slither through the tunnel and starshift. Light sears in timeless swords as they pierce the universe and arrive near me—or near where I was. Because I've starshifted, too, further ahead, but I don't know where I am, so I can't go far. It's far enough for hope, though, and I shimmy sideways up a stairwell.

They starshift. I starshift. We ping-pong through the subway as a twinkling constellation. Breath burns my throat. Blood hammers my ears. Muscles shriek in protest, and nerves tighten to snap.

I fuck up. They don't. My latest starshift is too short, and they overtake me. Hands cuff my arms and shove me to the floor. My jaw cracks on metal, and air wheezes from my lungs. I thrash, flail, kick, scream, but I'm empty, no fire, drained to a fleshy husk.

A knee pins me down, and Mars crashes through my fragile brain. I overload. Explode. Twist and turn and break free. The Bone Lords throw twin punches; I grab their wrists and matchmake. Their knuckles crush each other's noses, pulverizing cartilage. Gory torrents gush from their nostrils, and they grab their faces, blinded by pain.

I cup my tender jaw and run, starshift, run, starshift, till I surface the subway and don my mask, spread my cape. It's dangerous to walk above, but a storm's stirring, and dust veils my escape. This is not my plan, schedule, routine, sanctuary—this is spontaneous sacrilege that drills through my norm. *Norm*. I'm the opposite. The antithesis. Its nemesis and rival.

*Breathe. Count. Calm. Repeat.*



I remember the doctor's words and attempt her instructions, but every breath is too loud, every number too wrong, every calm conquered, every repetition a gong. The tide rises within me, an electric surge, a boiling kettle, a threatening earthquake before the volcanic eruption. I can't function in daily life, never mind a life shattered with assassination attempts. What did I do? Why kill *me*?

Somehow, I wander through smartglass skyscrapers, around veering solarcars, through reddish haze, to where I always promise I'll never go again, to where promises always die.

"Come in, child. You'll catch cold in this storm."

Her voice soothes me, a grainy lullaby, and her kind, black eyes narrow in a soft, maternal scold. She's tall, bald, dark, regal, and stands in her doorway as queen of her domain, always waiting for me.

"But your family," I whisper. "I can't."

"You can, and you will," the doctor says—the nameless one, my salvation and savior. "Stay for dinner, and let me see to that jaw."

Guilty, I obey. I have no other choice. By now, Bone Lords crawl the subway, and skyships scan the surface. Inside is my only refuge.

"Here." I hand her the starcoins my harmonica earned. "It's not enough—not nearly—but it's a start."

She huffs, insulted. "Keep your money. Your company is overpayment."

"My company is a death sentence."

"Well, we're all a little wild, child. Now, come in. You're letting out the warmth."

## 4

## Ricochet Hypocrisy

KOA

The library is quiet this time of night; the regulars have gone home. On Earth and Mars, college life is much the same: burned-out days, blacked-out nights, dreams wasted as freshmen on Saturdays.

The University of Mars campus is airtight to allow staff and students free passage without airmasks. Smartglass walkways connect buildings, and all paths lead to the library—my library. It's the hidden headquarters for the Order of Roses, and as their leader, I take pride in its grace.

Darkly academic, the library bends and twists with titanium walls, arches, and spires in a surreal tribute to Dalí and Gaudí. Kaleidoscopic windows fracture Martian sunsets through smartglass panes, which all connect to the campus computer. My jade eyes catch my reflection, and I will the pale, curvy ghost forward, onward. Vaulted ceilings lend eerie echoes—with or without attending students—and rows of tables stretch through looming stacks of books and tablets. Chandeliers swing low on metal chains, bathing the library in a dim, flickering glow.

I tiptoe through the vast space, though there's no need anymore. After a week of constant surveillance, of Mack tilling tricks like some do gardens, the Bone Lords eased up in their pursuit. Annoyed, I should add. They don't appreciate ricochet hypocrisy.

"You're here late," my graduate assistant says. Miro Wize is

always stuck in a book—sometimes literally, like now. He pours over a small-printed text, dark fingers trapped between pages.

“Likewise,” I say as I sit behind the reception desk. “Not interested in the midterms party?”

“Interested in the exams, not the party,” he says. “Pointless to celebrate impending failure.” He frees a hand from his book, then tugs his black curls, nervous.

“You’re peachy.”

“I’m practical.”

“There’s more to life than studying.”

“Not on Mars,” Miro says. “Without passing grades, I’m doomed to Echus Chasma’s filter tanks.”

“Your grades are more than passing,” I say. “You’re top of your class. Relax.”

“Relax? With Bone Lords cracking down and Earth itching for an excuse to invade?” He shakes his head. “No, Professor Brye. We need to prepare, not relax.”

“And we *are*, but the Order can only do so much without arousing suspicion. We keep Bone Lords in check. We protect starchildren—”

“Do we? Heard a rumor that Mack Calloway helped *her* in the subway, but then he abandoned her to skeletons. Should’ve stayed.”

“Too risky,” I say.

And I can’t fail again. I tie back my wild, red hair, open a spellbook—Earth’s term for encyclopedias on the history and science of starchildren—and pretend at purpose. Miro and I wear matching dustsuits, rose-red uniforms with thorn-like daggers hidden in our sleeves. Earth forbids us weapons—they say we are weapons enough—but necessity mothers protection, even if Bone Lords confiscate most knives (and repurpose them, the bloody hypocrites).

“We should make a stand,” Miro whispers. “The Order is timid.”

“The Order is *cautious*,” I say. “And we will. In time.”

“Sl—” He almost triggers the alarms but stops himself with a grimace. “*She* thinks she’s alone. She thinks she has no one. We can at least—”

“No. Enough, Miro. There are more pieces at play than you know, and rushing the game could mean disaster for us all.”

I ignore my guilt and swipe the spellbook, scanning entries for this year, 2345. Miro lets it go, but I don't, because there are no pieces, there is no game. There is only fear, my fear, fear of failure, of failing *her*. She's not ready yet, anyway. I'm certainly not. And she has the doctor, the nameless one. That's good for now. That buys me time.

"If she is what we think she is . . ."

I was wrong. Miro hasn't let it go.

"... then the stories are true. Do you know what that means?"

All too well.

"Truth doesn't change reality," I say. "What course is hardest? Let me help."

Miro allows my sloppy segue with a tilted glance. "Modern History. Twenty-third century. The Starchild Diaspora of 2257."

"Mmm, that was a brutal period." I rewind the spellbook to its earliest entries and show Miro the smartglass tablet.

"That can't be right," he says, reading the glowing text. "Earth couldn't have done *that*."

"Earth did much worse. This is the watered-down version." I twist a silver earring, edgy, tense, as if speaking about savagery could summon it again.

"Watered down? Slitting our throats and fucking our windpipes as we bled out and suffocated to death is *watered down*?!"

"Shh," I say, skimming the library, but there's no one here. Still, sometimes walls have eyes and windows have ears. "Yes, very watered down."

Miro chews his lip and fidgets in his chair. "Then what *really* happened? The facts, Professor."

"Earth exiled us here with Bone Lords to supervise, and the Order of Roses grew to supervise the supervisors."

"Every preschooler knows that. Give me details. Give me more."

I sigh, pause, wish innocence eternal, but Earth stole our hearts, then Mars stole our souls.

"Massacre," I whisper. "Atrocity. Sins previously unseen. Earth broke us apart piece by piece, sharpened our bones to carve up our meat, then dangled our mangled carcasses from flagpoles and lightning rods in every capital city. They slaughtered the families of those who fought and raped the families of those who didn't. And the

survivors . . . Well, they kept some alive for ‘scientific’ pursuit, and they sold others to governments under threat of their loved ones’ deaths.”

Miro gapes, then gags. “That’s *awful*.”

“That’s only the start. Our history is bloody and barbaric, filled with child labor and baby farms.”

“Baby farms?”

I hesitate. “Acres of fetuses, rows of embryos, snatched from starchildren’s wombs and subjected to rigorous ‘analysis.’ In truth, our exile was a mercy. If not for the Diaspora, we’d be extinct.”

“What *caused* the Diaspora, though?” Miro asks. “Earth was fine, brutalizing us at will. Why the sudden fear?”

“Not fear. Terror. And no one really knows.”

“But you have an idea.”

“A guess.”

“An educated one. *Please*. I won’t tell anyone. Promise.” Miro beseeches me with his warm, brown gaze, and I bend. An inch.

“Okay, but this stays between us,” I say, and he nods. “It’s only a theory. Come with me.”

“Where?”

“To the sunloft. I assume you’ll want proof.”

Miro follows me, uneasy, as we wind our way through headquarters, footsteps weak against the library’s gravitas. Near the back, there’s a stairwell that spirals toward heaven, and I grip the railing, knuckles blanching with our ascent. It’s dangerous to tell Miro. It’s dangerous to not. If I’m the only one with this information, I’m the only one they’d kill. But if I am one of many, if ideas infest cities, that is a swarm even Bone Lords can’t stop.

I remove a pewter key from my dustsuit and free the lock, then open the heavy door.

“Here is where we keep the forbidden texts,” I say, waving my hand over the circular room. Tablets line the wall, and a ceiling skylight imitates the distant sun.

“Forbidden?” Miro’s eyes widen, and he straightens his dustsuit in witness to victory.

“Yes.” I withdraw a smartglass tablet and scan my thumbprint. The screen wakes, and I turn it toward my assistant. “If you read this, they could imprison you—or worse.”

Miro takes it without hesitation. Knowledge and he are close as twins. "What is it?"

"An eyewitness account right before the last bombing of Valles Marineris."

"Wait, what? I thought Earth filled the canyon with water, then left. What do you mean by 'last'? There were more?"

"Just . . . read."

His brow furrows. "Can we trust the source?"

I shrug. "It's anonymous, but it corroborates other events we wrote off as geological. Then again, 'reputable' sources are often government-funded propaganda mills, so who can you trust, really? But as I said, this is just a guess."

"A guess dangerous enough to risk incarceration?" Miro smirks. "Sounds real enough to me. Forbidden is often fact. People fear truth most of all."

He starts reading, and his smile fades. I follow along with him and squirm at the bloody words.

*"The Reckoning," that's what they've called Mars for a hundred years. But it's 2257, and war's no closer to over.*

"This is the year of the Diaspora," Miro whispers. "But a hundred years? I thought we came to Mars after."

"We've been on Mars much longer than records state," I say. "Keep reading."

*Kasei in the north is where Earth built our city, but Marineris in the south is where they built our cage. I'm sure my words will burn before anyone can read them, but I write anyway, a promise through pain that there is something more, that we will carry on.*

*There aren't many starchildren left here, on the canyon's ridge. They took Ma and Pa yesterday, and Jack-Jack followed soon after. It's only me now, me and Gram. Though she's five decades older, I'd bet on her.*

*The things they do to us . . . they're too cruel to tell. I thought I knew struggle, knew suffering, knew strength, but I was wrong as the Order was in their hope to stop the Bone Lords. If they run out of holes, they carve new ones. If bodies waste away, they pump waste back inside. We're less than animals, treated like corpses without the mercy of becoming one, until the final test when they set us all free.*

*They're looking for something. They're frantic. They're afraid. None*

*survive the final test, yet Earth's fear still remains. I heard them whispering once—about gods and titans, about stars and shadows. They saw me watching, then punished my curiosity.*

Miro dry-heaves, then breathes, then steadies himself as he scrolls to read the rest.

*But I passed their test. I wasn't supposed to pass their test. They think me a monster, call me a nightmare, want to kill me, and I want to let them. Bone Lords took me in a skyship to the center of the canyon, and myths came for me. Most are stars, but I am shadow—*

"No, no, no, no, no," Miro says. "That's it? Where's the rest?"

"Gone," I say. "Or never written."

"They killed her after this. But you have a theory. What is it?"

"It's nothing more than a wild guess."

"Knowing you, Professor, it's been cross-referenced by at least a dozen primary sources. You're the youngest Ph.D. on Mars, only twenty-five and leader of the Order. I trust your wild guess more than most dissertations."

I smile. "Only most?" Then I frown. "This stays between us. No exceptions. Understand?"

He nods.

"Okay," I say, then speak the sword I could die on. "Sl—She isn't the first. What she is . . . they're rare, but they're by no means extinct. This source . . . I think they were the same thing. And I think their final test caused the Diaspora. Then Bone Lords bombed Valles Marineris, closed the cells, and forced *all* starchildren to Mars, not only the guinea pigs. Earth left us alone—for the most part—thereafter."

"But what *are* they? What is Earth so afraid of?" he asks.

"A myth as old as the sun."

"About gods and titans?"

"About stars and shadows."

We exit the sunloft, descend the staircase, and re-emerge in the library's heart.

"What's the myth, Professor?" Miro asks.

I stall beneath a chandelier and straighten books on a table. "That our world is broken. That light and dark face the same mirror. That the sky is alive with a million whispers."

"And how does this relate to that source? To *her*?"

I pause, breathe, face the window, confront the city. “They’re the mirrors.”



# 5

## Waterboard Existence

SLADE

“Come in, come in,” the doctor says. “Before the storm thickens, child.”

She ushers me into her home, a three-level townhouse squashed among clones in a cookie-cutter community. We climb the stairs to the top floor, an office off limits to her four children, to save them from me. I’m a walking death sentence for all who help me, a consequence for kindness.

Walls unsettle me. They impede escape. I perch on the window seat and scheme getaway plans while the storm rages outside. If Bone Lords enter through the bottom floor, I could jump out the window or hide under the desk. If they approach from the air, I could shimmy down the stairs and dash for the nearest subway entrance. If they parachute from skyships—

“Noodles? They’re fresh,” the doctor interrupts. I hate interruptions.

“No,” I whisper. “Thank you.”

“You must eat.”

But this is neither the right food nor the right time. Dinner is one bagel in one hour with one pint of milk. Next, I’d read the same chapters I read every Monday night from the same book I read each week. After, I’d watch one hour of television on the smartglass panel near the janitor’s closet in the subway. Last, I’d find a dumpster and

cradle my harmonicas to sleep. *That* is the schedule. *That* is the routine. *That* is the god I worship, the one who's never abandoned me. Structure. Repetition. Rewind and repeat.

"Stomachache again?" the doctor asks.

"No," I lie.

She hands me noodles. Reluctant, I eat. I'll need fuel to run, to heal, to continue this waterboard existence of drown, gasp, drown, breathe. But my body buzzes, and my mind shrieks: *This is wrong, this is wrong, this is wrong, this is wrong.*

"I have an extra copy, if you'd like to read," the doctor says. She hands me the book that follows food: *The Martian Chronicles* by Ray Bradbury. I prefer his Mars to ours. Less blood. More hope.

She used this book to teach me to read, to speak, to function through fiction, to replicate reality. I've stolen many since to help craft my character, but Bradbury's words always shine supreme. He was the key that opened the door to the stars, and I'll never forget the freedom stories bring.

"I'll read it later, but thanks," I whisper, finishing the noodles.

The doctor leans toward me, and I shirk away. "I'm sorry, child. I'll be quick. I promise."

She grazes my jaw. Lightning shoots through my veins. Every nerve ending fires. Every skin cell melts. I'm a bomb ready to detonate. A grenade about to explode. Everything is *too loud, too bright, too close, too much*. The storm outside becomes the storm inside, and I suffocate on dust, touch, wind, wound, stifled by cruelty, buried underground with skeletons and beasts.

"Done," the doctor says after an infinite moment. "Your jaw is bruised, not broken, and you're almost healed. Lucky, I'd say, compared to the others."

*The others.* The times I limped to her doorstep with limbs attached by sinew, with organs spilling from my gut. Bursting external as I often burst internal.

"Not as broken as usual," I rasp.

"You're beautiful, not broken," she says. "Different, not damaged. A butterfly."

"Beautiful? Different? No. I'm trapped. Powerless. Worthless. Unvalued. Disrespected by society and her people. They're too strict, rigid, and bigoted to see me as anything more than dirt. I'm a moth,

not a butterfly.”

“You’re worth so much more than they make you feel. I wish I could change the worlds, but I can’t.”

*But I can.*

“I should go,” I whisper.

“I wish you could stay,” the doctor says, voice syrupy with regret. If she had no kids, she’d make me her own, but my very presence threatens all their lives.

I should thank her for all she’s done. Smile at her generosity. Assuage her guilt with falsehoods. Placate her shame with gentle understanding. But I don’t. My fuse is too short, and it’s been lit too long. Emotions rise inside me with a leviathan’s wrath, and I spit out the hard, blunt, unadulterated truth—my version, at least, the rendition of reality spewed forth by insecurity.

“No, you don’t,” I croak. “You wish I were someone else. Someone safe. Someone normal. Someone without baggage.” Never understood the term “baggage,” but I pick up things from passing conversations and paste them into my own.

The doctor gapes. “How could you say such things? You know how much I care about you.”

I shake my head. “You pity me, but you don’t care. Best to bite the bullet.” Another borrowed phrase, another copy and paste, but from her confused expression, I see I used it wrong. That’s the trouble with mimicry—masks can slip, and costumes can rip, revealing the angry distress in the raw, roiling core.

“If you need me, I’m always here,” she says, calm, in lullaby.

*I always need you, but I won’t risk their fear.*

“One day, I’ll repay you,” I rasp.

“You already have.”

“No, I haven’t. I tallied the cost of your services in starcoins, and I owe—”

“Child, stop,” she says with a chuckle. “Some things are worth more than money. If you want to repay me, *survive.*”

So I do. I leave her clean, smartglass home for a ditch I follow to a surface dumpster. Even with goggles and airmask secured, dust clogs my nostrils, iron’s sting on my tongue. The storm wails in protest: *You don’t belong here. Go back underground with the rest of the ants.* I would—and I should—but they’re still looking for me there.

Too many Bone Lords in the subway tonight.

I cut through wind, reach the dumpster, and dive in. Its lid shuts above me with a dull *click*, and I wriggle down through trash. My dustsuit protects me from the mess, but it doesn't protect me from the smell. Subway trash is stale, boring: crumpled newspapers and cigarette butts, passive-aggressive pamphlets and neurotically chewed gum. But surface trash is rancid, disgusting: sour bananas and moldy sandwiches, putrid undergarments and noxious fumes. I gag and adjust my airmask settings. It weakens the repulsion but erases nothing.

At least it's warm. The dumpster is sealed; between my body heat and the balmy trash, I should survive till morning. Martian nights are harsh as Earth's hatred, but neither is invincible. I've done this before, and I'll do this again, then I'll return underground to my blessed routine. I hate change. I fight change. But change chases me.

As I drift into a shallow sleep, I hear Bradbury's words in my head, see the doctor's smile in my mind, and yearn for this—for peace, for family. Though I've never stayed long enough on solid ground to learn how to stand without storm.

# 6

## Bleeding Melody

KOA

**“T**he time to strike is *now*. They’re scared shitless, making stupid mistakes. We wait any longer, and they’ll recover, as they always do. Then we won’t stand a chance.”

Mack paces the library’s conference room, restless, winding dreadlocks around gangly fingers—golden snakes around gnarled branches. The senior Order members trace his path with echoed unease, bristling around the table like anemone tentacles. The room belongs five centuries prior, with its dim lighting, imitation-oak paneling, and hodgepodge of antiques. Typewriters and fountain pens violate the bookshelves, along with brass globes, wind-up clocks, and stolen Renaissance sculptures. In spare bits of emptiness, windowless walls flash erudite quotes in rambling calligraphy, along with oil paintings from the Earth cities of London, Paris, and Florence. We remember our history—no, we *heed* it.

“*Sit, Mack,*” I say. “*You’re hurting my neck.*”

His hazy, hazel gaze challenges me, but he listens. Sits. Nods. Obeys. Because he must. I’m their leader, and I’ve secured my position with moral sacrifice and ethical surrender—mostly with fake blood and pig flesh, but they don’t need to know specifics.

Fewer attend today than usual. I want to blame their absences on midterms: half of campus (the studious half) drowns in caffeine to pull all-nighters, while the other half drinks, shoplifts, and lights

couches on fire to celebrate. I *want* to blame midterms, but I *know* it's more. They're afraid. Association with the Order of Roses risks more than death.

"Koa, *please*," Mack urges. "You've seen them. They lost *her* during rush hour. She slipped through their fingers with less than a scratch."

"They've pulled shit like this before, fucked up to draw us out," I say. "We have only this library, while they have the sky. I won't risk our people in an angsty attempt at rebellion. Be smart. Wait till the right moment."

"There is no right moment. Every day you wait, you put her in danger, and they grow stronger as we grow weaker. There's talk of an invasion. We *must* reclaim our world before Earth attacks."

The senior members fluster, rattled, whispering venomous rumors and hostility. Miro is here, too; he's the only one silent. Instead of joining the squawking, he watches me, curious, reclined in his seat. He agrees with Mack, that we must take action soon, yet he respects me and is a unique listen-before-you-speak type. His patience is a scarce virtue, as rare as Martian water, and for this, I respect him, too.

I raise my hands. After a few death glares at key instigators, the room quiets—for the most part. Murmurs pierce the wary static, and it takes several minutes to reduce the boil to a simmer.

"They control us with fear," I say, voice calm, face neutral. "*This* is what they want. Panic. Terror. They want you to react, not act, and make rash decisions based on hate. So if you want to play into their hands, if you want to follow their plans, by all means, continue your tantrums. But if you want to make a difference—an actual, substantial, permanent difference—then shut the fuck up for one stardamn minute, and listen to what I must say."

No one moves. No one speaks. Reptilian brains retreat, and heartbeats slow to *adagio*—thanks to airborne beta-blockers I pump through vents. Another trick up my sleeve (literally). I weaponized my red dustsuit with as many tricks as a subway prostitute, all necessary, all illegal.

I scan every attendee; all members squirm in their high-backed chairs. They don't trust me. Or rather, their fear of Bone Lords overshadows their trust. I worry about spies, but I worry more about

mutiny, so I must not fuck this up.

"We all took an oath," I say. "A *blood* oath. We are family now. No, we are more." I lift my sleeve and reveal the inside of my left wrist. The nine-pointed scar I cut upon initiation glimmers silver in the faint light. We all share the same symbol, the symbol of Mars. "Maybe this means nothing to you, but it means *everything* to me. It means I am a warrior of Mars. It means that, together, we are Mars herself. It means that, to build a beautiful future, we must use thorns against our past. We are Roses, red as our world, bright as our blood, and we are the last hope against Earth.

"There is power in silence, strength in shadows, and if we act too soon, we lose every advantage. I promise we will take back what's ours, that we will banish every trace of Earth from our rosy sands, that we will vanquish the Bone Lords and show them no mercy, but we must wait till we are ready. And when we are ready, I will give you more than vengeance; I will give you victory."

Most members relax and smile—thanks, in part, to my drugs. They permit ambiguity, the vague war speech and promise of pomp, because things are stable, things are steady. Not Miro, though, and certainly not Mack. But Miro has faith in me. He lends me a smile, then leaves with the others. They starshift away in ghost constellations, branding human afterimages onto the room. Mack stays behind. He disagrees, but he won't disagree openly about this—yet.

We trade red dustsuits for black to blend, then leave the library the old-fashioned way, through a smartglass walkway on foot with the rusty world outside. After passing academic buildings in the campus center, vintage-inspired dorms bloom in the outskirts, and students perch in windows like ravens. UMars overflows with cliques of book addicts obsessed with mortality. Most study Greek and Latin classics, parroting esoteric and existentialist studies in literature, theater, and art to passersby. I teach most at some point during their college careers, and I mourn all when Earth stifles their potential.

After a few minutes of strained silence, Mack says, "Great speech, shitty plan. Or rather, lack of plan. What the hell are you doing? She's as ready as she'll ever be. We are, too."

"Use a weapon too soon, and it backfires," I say.

"Use a weapon too late, and it burns out. It's time, Koa. We've

waited long enough.”

“Why are you in such a hurry?”

“Why are you not? Do you know what her life is like? She sleeps in *dumpsters*. She steals to survive. She runs for her life every day of her life.”

“That’s a safer existence than the one you have planned,” I snap.

“Safer?!” He blinks. “Is that what you think? That she’s safer chased, starved, and trapped in the subway?”

“Yes. It’s not the life I’d choose for her, but it’s a life she can fight through, a life she can control. You want to use her.”

“I want to save her.” Mack stops on the walkway and spins me to face him. “She’s depressed. Anxious. Obsessive and overwhelmed. Isolated and lonely. No one understands her, and she can’t communicate what she wants or express how she feels. She’s smart. Too smart. Smart enough to know she’s different. Smart enough to suffer because of it.”

“She’d suffer more with the weight of the worlds on her shoulders,” I say. “I won’t fail again.”

“You didn’t fail before. Ayaan wasn’t your fault.”

“Don’t say his name.”

“Don’t curse his memory.”

“He was my responsibility,” I say.

“And he made his own choice,” Mack says. “You can’t blame yourself.”

“Yes, I can. I pushed him too hard, and I won’t do the same with her.”

Mack sighs and shakes his head. “You know, for all that talk of fear, you’re the most afraid of all.” He pauses for a second, calms himself with a breath. “Have you ever heard her play harmonica?”

“No, and you shouldn’t have, either,” I say.

He ignores me. “It’s the most beautiful, heartbreaking sound. Every tear shed and every sob suffered bleed into her melody. I cried listening to her, and I never cry. She’s hurting, Koa. She’s hurting badly, and she needs you.”

Though my heart aches to help her and my blood pounds in answer, I pull on my airmask and goggles, then say, “I’d kill her.”

Mack copies my routine, slips airmask and goggles over his



face, as we breach the smartglass walkway and head into Martian streets. Smartglass skyscrapers rise around us as we skip around solarcars and dance with skyships' shadows. Our solarcaples ripple behind us, charging and absorbing the dwindling sunlight. Though our ancestors skipped in the low gravity, we've already evolved, adapted, even further than Earth feared.

This is *our* home. Kasei is *our* city. Rebellion brews in tunnels, in alleys, and if I don't act soon, Mars will crack along the fault line of past mistakes and future dreams in a bloody earthquake of destiny. They sent us here to die, but we survived, and to thrive, we must push harder, reach farther, and fight our fingers to the bones to become knives in Earth's twisted heart.

"Koal!" Mack shouts my name in harmony with another—a deeper, darker, more distressed scream. We race down the street to the nearest intersection, and the scream becomes a choir becomes mass hysteria.

The crowd seethes in cyclone as some rubberneck and others retreat. It's a human squall, a tempest of knees and elbows that floods Kasei with thunder. Mack and I push through anarchy toward a meaty splat at a junction between streets. Ice stabs my chest and frosts my thoughts as I greet the corpse at my feet.

It's Zeo. One of ours. A Rose. A senior. A member of the Order.

"No," Mack gasps and sinks to a knee. Tears streak his cheeks as he holds Zeo's lifeless hand. I haven't thawed yet, so I remain standing, thinking, drinking it all in.

Zeo wears his red dustsuit, limbs spread in a star, a ridicule of starchildren staged by Bone Lords, no doubt. His chest suffers a vicious welt, a two-inch-deep gash carved with our symbol, the nine-pointed star, a dozen times larger than those at our wrists. The wound brims with oil, slick and black, set afire only moments ago and left as an omen: a burning star, a blazing sun. They're close, then. Close, scared shitless, and making stupid mistakes, as Mack said.

But something's off.

"He should have changed," Mack sobs. "Why is he in red?"

And that's it. Because Zeo *did* change. I saw them all fade from red to black, blood to shadow, when they left the library. I always watch. I always check. So either Zeo starshifted back to change

again—unlikely, given his fierce loyalty—or a Bone Lord has access to headquarters.

“Koa?” Mack asks, sniffing, standing. “What does this mean?”

I scan the crowd, spot patches of white skeletons sprinkled through the writhing horde. “It means there’s a spy.”

Something pricks my shoulder, and pain spikes my arm. “Earth sends her regards,” the phantom hisses, then I fall.

# 7

## Karma's Backlash

SLADE

I wake a snowman. Ice crystals my eyelashes, and frost films my hair. I wipe my goggles and remember where I am. Surface, not subway. A dumpster stuffed with trash. But it's morning, and I'm alive. I've survived another night.

Stiff, I sit and listen to the outside street. It's quiet. Near silent. Odd. Different. Dangerous. But the dumpster is more so. I ease the lid open and cringe from the creak—*too loud, too harsh, too close, too much*. Martian sunlight flares through the crack, a glowing blade that slices my gaze—*too bright, too cruel, too close, too much*. The blade tinges blue, and the storm's gone. It's evening, then, near sunset. I slept through the night and most of the day.

*Shit*. Can't afford mistakes. Someone could have found me, should have found me, but no one did. Another rare stroke of luck. I grow leery of karma's backlash. Though I needed the sleep—I always do. Existing is exhausting, fighting is fatiguing, and walking through a world built against me drains my every fire.

Stretching, I lift the lid an inch higher—still no one outside—and slip through the opening, onto the street. In the distance, conversations buzz from a panicked crowd, a mob gathered around a hidden spectacle. Smoke rises from their center, and burning flesh stings my nostrils. I bury my worry, grateful for the distraction, and hurry toward the nearest subway entrance.

On my way through the rusty city, I clutch my harmonica and trace the cursive prayer with my thumb—steady, stabilizing, securing my psyche. The streets are empty, solarcars abandoned, all eyes on the bloody prize behind me. Skyscraper windows silhouette voyeurs, but I'm too far below for anyone to recognize me behind airmask and goggles. I pass a few corpses with less luck than me, frozen to death and forgotten in ditches. Martian nights rival Earth's barbarity.

My routine is shot. My schedule is slaughtered. In response, my emotions wind in turbine, wild as a solar storm. I reach for control, for calm, for command, but all three Fates laugh in my face. I try breathing. Counting. Humming. Twitching. But nothing can tame the tornado inside me. I am *broken*. I am *wrong*. I am an alien among humans, a beast among men.

*You're beautiful, not broken. Different, not damaged.*

If the doctor were right, pain would be power, and sobs would be strength. No. I'm no butterfly. I'm a moth. A mistake. A monster. An animal hunted since birth. Lonely. Starving. Tired and fried. But I must push on, push forward, push upward toward freedom.

On colder days, on darker nights, I thought about doing the Bone Lords' job for them. Well, I assume they want me dead—or worse—but I've never excelled at reading people . . . only memorizing them. Their death wish upon a star for me is all that keeps me standing. It gives me purpose, direction, questions that demand answers.

"Slade Hawk!"

Alarms. Sirens. Skyships. *Fuck*.

The crowd disperses amid shouts and shrieks, and my distraction rebounds. I lunge and leap and cross the street, hot-wire a solarcar, then zoom toward traffic. The radio clicks on with a deafening blast: *Murder on Main. One dead. One poisoned. Attackers at large. Drive with caution.*

*Fuck caution.*

I shake my head to reset my mind, then slam the stardamn radio off. Fucking people and their brutish blasts of suffocating sensation. Streets refill with congestion after the commotion, and solarcars clog Kasei's industrial arteries. *Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit.* This is not good. Skyships circle above me, following alarms, and traffic

evaporates, inviting them toward me. Nobody knows what I am—myself included—but most fear me more than the Bone Lords. So civilians do Earth's bidding, say my name, wreak their havoc to rid themselves of my curse.

I smash the joystick left and veer, screeching, over a sidewalk, through an entryway, into a courtyard. Smartglass scratches the solarcar's sleek roof, and I shrink from the nails-on-chalkboard, eardrum assault. Wheels bounce over fake cobblestones—everything's fake on Mars—as people dive inside offices, horrified. I stomp on the accelerator and escape the building in a glass rainbow of destruction.

The side street is blocked. Bumper-to-bumper traffic chokes the road, and thanks to my mangled roof, I stick out like a gangrenous toe. Solarcars beep and caw my name as traitorous crows. *I must break free.*

So I do. Usually, I scorn my hyperspecific brain, the way it sticks on superficial details. But now, when my keen awareness lands on a door, a detail held prisoner in my steel-trap memory, I thank the bloody heavens for my deficit—for my *difference*.

With another pedal pump, I charge through two solarcars, summoning swears, and dash through the door into the garage beyond. Alarms stop—a mercy—but the solarcar's charge light blinks red—its answer. I must go back outside, but sunlight wanes, and nighttime looms. A switch, then. A trade.

I starshift from one solarcar to another, a newer model parked on the garage's top level. This one bucks with torque and shoots like a comet across the roof. But I'm near skyships now, and they dive from the ether like hungry hawks.

A Bone Lord starshifts into my passenger seat, a burst of white in my periphery. I slam the accelerator and starshift out of the solarcar, onto the next roof. Behind me, the solarcar catapults off the building, but the skeleton appears at my heels. I ping-pong through floors, flare into and out of existence, pop between places with desperation, with disaster, while she chases with a menacing pace. Though skyships have stalled—perhaps we're both lost now.

I starshift onto the street, into a cab, onto a balcony, into a hospital, then find the gem, my diamond in the rough. Outside the emergency room, there's a hidden door to the incinerator, concealed

behind a massive mirror. Another accidental find, another undeletable detail. So I pause for breath, let her catch me, then pop into the room. The Bone Lord follows me, then I pop inside her, energy within matter.

She explodes around me. Blood showers the metal walls. Organs burst like balloons. Bones become shrapnel, and skin rips in strips as flesh drenches the incinerator in gory paint. I starshift outside the room, then smack the button to burn. My dustsuit is wrecked, my body shakes with exertion, and my mind malfunctions with a credit roll of holy-fucking-shit regrets.

I've killed before, but I've never killed like *this*. I've become the weapon Earth fears, the reason they exile us to this inhospitable wasteland, the horror in the hearts of every human child that we are too powerful to contain, to remain alive.

*Stop.* No time to linger. Alarms are silent, skyships gone, Bone Lords in retreat. They've lost me again. I've lost myself, too. But I must keep moving, changing, escaping to survive.

A monitor beeps down the hall. Fresh death. A new corpse. I starshift inside the room, and she's my size. So I steal her dustsuit and gear, then scam. I hate it here. My neck scar itches with their unfinished business, and my blood boils at the parents who damned me to this miserable life. I find a shower, take a shower, hate the shower, change, starshift, and finally reach the subway, my "home."

Relief grounds me as I navigate familiar hallways, stairways, alleys, and closets. I can be invisible here, be myself here, playing music for money for meals. But tonight, I'll steal. I've no energy for morality. So I slip behind a food cart, then swipe bagels and milk from the back. No one sees me. No one hears me. No one notices the most-wanted soul in the solar system beneath their noses. Skills learned from a life on the run. Though I still fuck up—hence, today.

I find my routine again, then I find me. One bagel for dinner with one pint of milk. Chapters from *The Martian Chronicles*, tattered and dog-eared. One hour of smartglass television near the janitor's closet. My favorite dumpster to fall asleep. I leave my harmonicas and scant possessions here, beneath the fake floor I installed. Surrounding myself with silent song, I drift into deep, dreamless dread.

# 8

## Moments of Weakness

KOA

**I** rise from the dark, and my head explodes.

“Easy, easy,” Mack says, helping me back down.

I recognize this bed—from a moment of weakness. I’m in his apartment. It’s blunt and sparse, like him, all angles and ledges and metal things.

“What happened?” I rasp, eyes squeezed shut against night.

“You were poisoned.”

“And Zeo?”

Mack tenses. “His ashes are with his family.”

Again, I try to sit, and this time, I manage, propped against the wall. “Fucking Bone Lords. Taking too many risks.”

“Us or them?”

“Them.” I pause. “You saved my life. I owe you.”

“You owe me nothing,” he says. “Just be careful. If we don’t act soon . . . never mind. You know.”

“I do. Help me up.”

“Where are you going?”

“To repay their gift.”

A smile tugs Mack’s lips. “Want company?”

“Sure.” I stand, uneasy, skull cracked in two, and brace myself against walls as shadows veil my sight.

There’s a hand on my shoulder. “Let me do this for you.” A

squeeze. "You almost died." A caress. "Take a break, for fuck's sake." A circling of my waist.

Shadows clear, and I snap around. "What the hell are you doing?"

Mack stumbles back and catches himself on his desk. "Misreading signals, apparently."

"Signals?" I ask.

"You leaned into me."

"To not pass out. I'm *hurt*, not *horny*."

"Well, now, I'm both, so let's go."

"Wear red," I say.

We starshift into headquarters, don dustsuits and airmasks and goggles, then starshift out, onto auburn streets.

"Sorry about . . . before," Mack says.

I ignore him. "You have a thorn?"

"A poisoned one. Where are we going?"

"To the sky."

"Koa . . ."

"Don't. They attacked me, so I'll attack her."

"I thought you were better than an eye for an eye," he says.

"Doesn't matter. The world's already blind," I say.

"If you attack their leader, everything will escalate."

"Everything already has escalated, Mack. They started it."

"Then end it." He throws his hands up, exasperated. "This isn't a playground grudge. The fates of billions lie in the balance."

"You were the one telling me to strike," I say.

"In a strategic way. Not like this. This is rage, pure and simple."

"Nothing's simple about war."

"Wait, Koa. Wait one fucking, stardamn second. I'd follow you through fire, but I need to know your plan. You can't kill her. Earth will invade."

"I don't want to kill her. I want to scare her."

With that, I starshift away, starshift up, and land on the bridge of their command skyship. Around me arcs an ivory cavern of Gothic columns and piers, arches and flying buttresses, smartglass windows faceted like diamonds, and ornate engravings pledging Earth their loyalty.

Silence greets me. Bone Lords are too skilled to scream,



skeleton souls with emaciated morals. An army of white rises from seats, their leader at the center of the floating palace. Marga Frei. White-blond hair tied in a straw-like nest. Ice-gray eyes swirling with hatred. Snowy lips, lashes, and brows. Deathly pale, scrawny as a sapling, washed-out features bleached by sins. She smiles a smile like the Grim Reaper's scythe.

Seconds later, Mack lands behind me and hands me the thorn. Marga laughs.

"Koa, darling, it's been too long." Her voice is tinny, whiny, the high-pitched screech of knives on glass.

"You killed Zeo," I snarl. "You poisoned me."

"So you've come for revenge?" She *tsks*, disappointed.

Mack glances between us, nervous, unsettled, and surveys the bridge. Bone Lords stand at ease among colorless panels—relaxed, bored, embarrassed for me. They're taunting us. Teasing us. Dangling catnip from their paws and calling me kitten. This was stupid. This was a mistake. But I've grown weary of sitting still, playing nice, and apologizing for existing.

With a fencer's lunge, I fling the thorn. Her Bone Lords don't move. They don't need to. Marga catches the dagger's blade flat between her fingers and tosses it to the floor, smug.

"Daddy'd be proud of you, sis," she says. "Glad you took his name and not Poppy's, like me. Then again, Daddy's not here now, is he? And why is that?"

Mack mouths, "Sis?"

I shake my head and mouth back, "*Not now.*"

Marga turns to her Bone Lords and asks, "Why are my fathers not among us?"

"Starchildren murdered them," one offers.

"*Rogue* starchildren," I say. "You can't judge us all by the actions of a few. You're a starchild yourself."

"And I hate myself the same," Marga sneers. "We almost caught her, you know. That pest you keep helping. But she escaped. She's become quite resourceful lately. I wonder why."

Mack gulps, and I chew my lip. She knows about Slade. She knows about our support. But if Slade escaped, if she eluded them yet again, maybe she is ready. Maybe we are, too. Bone Lords keep fucking up. Then again, so do we.

"Sisters on opposite sides," Marga says. "How poetic. How tragic."

I stomp on the milky floor. "Come after me or my own again, Marga, and I'll throw more than thorns."

She scoffs. "You'll miss the same. But come after *me* again, and the family card won't buy you freedom."

"We were never family."

"You're right. We were more."

I starshift away, and Mack follows. He leads me back to his apartment, slams the door, and shouts, "Sisters? When the fuck were you gonna tell me that you're sisters with the stardamn devil?"

"It never came up," I say, slipping off the Order's uniform. Beneath, I wear a simple tunic with leggings, exposed and vulnerable under the thin cloth.

"It never came up?! They're our *enemy*. We talk about them every fucking day. What the hell do you mean 'it never came up'?"

"And what if you *did* know? What would you think? Would you trust me? Follow me? Respect me? Pledge to me? No, Mack, you wouldn't, and the other Roses wouldn't, either."

"Yes, we would," he says. "I trust truth more than lies."

"No one else does," I say. "No one wants truth about starchildren; they want bloodthirsty myths, lustful excuses to scavenge our planet raw. I couldn't risk it before."

"Then why risk it now? Why starshift up to the sky to wag a stick at your sister and stomp your foot in sibling rivalry?"

"It wasn't sibling rivalry. The thorn was a decoy. I stomped a bug into the floor."

Mack stalls, then sinks into a chair, defeated. "Oh."

"Yes, *oh*." I roll my eyes and slump onto the bed. "I wanted to look like a failure, like a loser, to make her think she won. Marga always underestimates me. When she thinks she has the upper hand, she gives me space and rests on her laurels. This buys us time. I didn't risk it before, because . . . Well, it's a risk, isn't it? But this close to the end, it's worth it."

"If she finds out, she'll kill you," he says.

"She won't," I say. "She loves me, albeit in a sinister way."

"She tried to poison you."

"No, she tried to *control* me. Fear is her superpower."

"And cunning is yours."

"When necessary." It's not my preferred persona, but I wear it when required.

Mack senses my unease and shifts the conversation. "Why a bug? Why not a bomb?"

"Because the Bone Lords are more than one woman, one ship," I say. "To win, we must be smart, bide our time."

"You still could have killed her. Why not?"

Hesitant, I scan his face for judgment, but I see only encouragement. "Because I love her, too. I know I shouldn't, but—"

"You should. She's family. Fucked-up family, but family the same. And I'm sorry. I didn't know about your fathers."

I shrug. "It was a long time ago."

"Doesn't change the pain," he says. "I lost my parents, too. Bone Lord raid."

"Shit, Mack, I'm so sorry."

"I'm not. They gave me purpose, direction, a reason to keep living."

"Vengeance?"

"Victory, like you said."

Mack joins me on the bed; the mattress sinks beneath his weight. Head in his hands, he says, "I'm worried about you, Koa. After Ayaan, after Marga, with this spy... Take care of yourself, okay?"

"I'm fine," I say.

"You're not, and neither am I. Any ideas who it might be?"

"No. You?"

"No."

Silence settles between us, minutes of worries, moments of weakness. Life is a mess. Time is chaos. Disaster and destruction follow us everywhere. We've persisted as ghosts—planting windows, trailing mirrors—but ghosts have no substance, no strength, no world-moving power. The tide is rising; the wind is changing. Weather moves from calm to storm. Earth *will* come, inevitable as night, and when she does, Mars will send her regards, too.

"Hey." Mack tilts my chin toward him and parts his full lips.

"I told you, I'm not interested," I say, but I don't move away.

"Hmm, those weren't your exact words." He grins,

mischievous. "Perhaps you should be more explicit."

"Perhaps you should be less obnoxious."

"I prefer 'stubborn.'"

"I prefer 'asshole.'"

Reluctant, I withdraw. I want comfort, but not his. We've tried this before. We've *done* this before. And it filled nothing inside me—well, except for the obvious pun. I want intimacy, not entertainment, something to feed my soul. Mack's a great guy, a sweet guy, a gentleman and a gem, but he's not my diamond in the rough.

"Sorry, Mack," I say. "Not again."

Mack nods and smiles. "Got it. Not again. But if you change your mind—"

"I'll run through the library naked, on horseback, and proclaim my untempered desire for you in a three-part song."

"Horseback?" He wiggles his eyebrows.

I smack his thigh and chuckle. "Oh, *stop*."

"You put that image in my mind."

"Then erase it." I kiss him on the forehead, dress in my dustsuit, and leave.

# 9

## The Sun Shuts Her Eyes

SLADE

**M**ornings are finicky. I never know how they'll strike.

Some mornings are kind. Some are cruel. Some wrap me with roses. Some pierce me with thorns. Today, I wake in a whirlpool, drowning, suffocating, assaulted by currents. Miles of ocean bash my mind, and pressure threatens to erase me from this world.

I'm safe in the dumpster, but the dumpster's a cell, an abandoned prison, a cage to trap me as life has trapped me in every fucking way. I'm sick of living as a shadow. I'm tired of feeling lost. I'm burned out from breaking, bleeding, bruising, from being branded as an error, a monster, a demon, a traitor.

No one wants me. No one sees me. Well, except the Bone Lords, but that's a curse. The worlds are unsympathetic. They invalidate me, negate my struggles, override and condescend and belittle my dreams. I feel worthless. I *am* worthless. And I've worked my ass off for years running in circles, chased day and night, escaping to nowhere, because no one will give me a chance or reach out a helping hand. All the good in my life turned out bad, but I ignored this truth, this reality, to cope. Am I as small as the worlds make me feel? Or are the Fates taking their sweet-ass time? If everyone says no, but you say yes, are they right and you wrong? Or is destiny unbalanced, a seesaw waiting to tilt toward you? A vengeful pendulum waiting for victory?

As I said, it's a bad morning, so I lie in the dumpster in low-power mode. This isn't planned. This isn't routine. This isn't my sacred schedule. But today, I don't care. Concrete fills my veins. Lead coats my bones. My skin is iron. My limbs are chains. Every motion takes an armada's will.

Everything is *too loud, too bright, too close, too much, too hard, too sad, too mad, too futile*. Why fight when you always fail? Why fly when you always fall? Why try to defy the final goodbye?

Shimmying down the dumpster, I lift a corner of the fake floor. A six-pack of liquor. A much-needed escape. Martian beer is wicked strong compared to Earth's; it's the only alcohol allowed here, so we make it count.

I twist off the top—a shitty design—and chug the first bottle in the dark. Morning commuters bustle outside, but the buzz helps block everything out. I chug a second, then a third, then finish the pack. Six beers on an empty stomach, and for once, my mind's calm. For once, the storm subsides. For once, I am normal, human, controlled, satisfied.

For a moment.

But as the tide goes out, it crashes back in, buoyed by regret. Alcohol turns from salvation to damnation, a flammable beast sparking thoughts into wildfires.

And the sun shuts her eyes.

*Look how she dances.*

A finger in my mouth, a hand on my stomach.

No. Gods and titans and everything holy, fucking hell, *no*.

But they don't listen. They never do.

*She's so tiny. Think she'll sing for us?*

Knives in my joints, needles in my eyes.

*A feisty one. I like that.*

Electricity replaces blood.

*Free yourself.*

A mantra repeated through the darkest times, a fragile flare of an underwater candle, extinguished before anyone saw her blue heart. They stole me once, then chained me in a skyship under skeletal scrutiny. Bone Lords rewound me, tortured me, erased me, made me question everything I am and answer for everything I'm not. They tortured my body and raped my mind, shoved blame in my

soul and guilt in my heart. I was always wrong, and they were always right, always gaslighting validity with accusations of insanity.

They opened me up, then shut me down. Ordered I talk, then insulted my tears. Used me when convenient, then discarded me as a burden. Despite their violence, I was always too much, too wrong, too broken, too bloody, negated into oblivion. Fuck them. They have no idea what it's like inside my skull after decades of rejection and abandonment. "Others have it worse," they'd crow into the night, treating those others like gold and me like garbage.

*Free yourself.*

It was only one week, one moment, yet infinity. I was five years old, and I was cursed. They dismissed, diminished, dominated, and destroyed me, overriding me into obscurity, and stifling me into submission. Anxiety electrocuted my soul, then depression drowned my heart. They brought me to the breathtaking sky, then suffocated me in the underworld's basement, demanded I deal with their noise, with their schedule, with their searing hatred and vulturine rage.

*Such a pretty, little thing*, they whispered in my ear, ripping my clothes, then tearing me bare. *Wonder what it's like inside*. But I never let them inside—physically, at least—though they had their way with my mind. They cracked me, then forsook me, then threw me out like a whore. And they blamed my subsequent spiral on *me*, on the *victim*, on the mind bleeding confusion.

*You're broken, sweetheart. Let us fix you*, Bone Lords prayed while stealing my dreams, replacing my hopes, tunneling me into false care and fucked-up comfort. Yet they saw me first, saw my difference, forced my deference. If they wanted something, they needed it *now*. But if I wanted something, I had to defend it, so they could disregard it. Their freedom confined me; their spontaneity cornered me. Compromise was a myth, and everything was my fault.

My fault for being human. My fault for being a starchild. My fault for struggling. My fault for suffering. They spread rumors through wanted posters, blaming all on me, unjustly accusing me, guilting me into agreement, trapping me in every possible way. I tried to deny, but no one listens when I speak. My darkness is condemned, and I'm held in its place.

Since then, I've worked my ass off for years, but I got nothing while they got everything. Any blinks of happiness burned to ash. I

lost all I loved and failed all I found. Hunted, I'm masked with everyone, donning personas at random to fit in. My parents abandoned me at my lowest, and any fake family or friends followed suit—except the doctor.

*Free yourself.*

Mars is arrogant and unchanging, but I've changed universes—hence, we don't jive. Though harassed, belittled, patronized, and condescended, I've trudged through purgatorial mist, defending myself against every prejudice. Others can live without backlash, but my every breath stands trial. If my opinion clashes with the Bone Lords', I must yield to them to keep the peace, because they're always "right." They support what doesn't affect them and shun what does. I'm not good enough, never good enough, and any attempts to prove them wrong twist, then snap, then slice through my psyche. It's an unsympathetic world, and everything breaks, then falls on me, but I'm here, I'm real, and I have a fucking voice.

Though I rarely use it.

*Stop caring.* Mouth shut, mind empty, that's how I survive this apathetic escape. Pretend Bone Lords don't exist. Let them think what they will while I nod outside, scream inside, knowing I am right and they are wrong. So I do, I let go, let them speak, because they will never understand. But that doesn't mean I'm wrong. It means fighting is futile and only drains me. I can't let them affect me, or they will chain me, drag me down, *down*, *down* into inescapable depths.

I'm sick of being poor, stuck, trapped, masked. I'm not perfect, but I'm not always wrong, and I'm done apologizing for breathing, for being, for hurting, for healing. I don't want to die, but I don't want to live this train-wreck, dead-end joke of a life, of a lie, of a story I told myself that soured to fraud. Loneliness cripples me. Rock bottom smothers me. Time punches my face every waking moment, and catastrophe wastes my scraggly spirit. Life submerges me, exhausts me, so I stop fighting the current, discard hopes and dreams as they discarded me, and drift unto death a wraith.

No.

As I spiraled down, I now spiral up. I pushed in the wrong direction, swam against riptide, then slingshot to start. Time to flow



with the river. Years ago, after I escaped the sky, I made a game to cope. Every time I remain silent in the face of corruption, a point for me. Every time I remain calm in the face of cruelty, another point for me. I turn anxiety into joy, depression into peace. Their mistakes validate my complaints, and they no longer control me.

With a crooked knife, I cut every last tie to spread my tender, newborn wings. I'll lift myself till I find others—*better* others—to lift me. They say I'm a tragic case, doomed to darkness forever. Well, I will show them. I will attract the sun. I am a star, and I will burn brighter than the galaxy. I am strong. I am powerful. And I will climb free.

*Free yourself.*

In my drunken haze, I reach again beneath the dumpster's fake floor. Another remnant of that barbaric week, a reaction to brutality. It's a leather notebook, soft with wear, an anchor through my eternal storm. My "Write It & Leave It" list. All falsehoods and injustices, all blistering wounds and wretched pains and mortal terrors, lie within these pages. I write them down, then shut them up. When this notebook closes, the thoughts stay inside. I stop thinking about night and welcome daylight, use darkness to usher me toward dawn, to boost me instead of belittling me. Stand strong. Shoulders back. Chin up. Eyes forward. Condition calm. Train my brain. Channel pride into power. I can't change the world, but I can change myself.

*Free yourself.*

No more guilt. No more shame. No more wasted worry. Set your own rules. Ignore Mars's warped decrees. Because perfection fails. Costumes crumble. The weight of the universe cannot stand on glass. Sooner or later, all lies fall down. But truth is stronger than armies, braver than mountains. Even if at first you're cold, cramped, crying in the dark, stars will align once they recognize your shine. It will be hard at first, but each day, it will get easier. Withstand fire to emerge a phoenix. You can't fly if you live a safe life, an easy life, a life braced by guarantee.

*Free yourself.*

I cling to darkness, because I *am* darkness. I cope with darkness, and I define myself by darkness I've suffered. But security blankets are nooses. Safety nets are traps. Yet without shadows, crutches, casts, who am I? *What* am I? Does identity remain without

supports? Does identity exist with them? No. I cage myself with fear, same as Bone Lords, and I must break free to change my life.

I think I can do nothing, but I can do everything. So when the spiral starts, I replace dark with light, night with day, moon with sun. My damage, demons, darkness will trail me always, but I have the strength to clear the storm. It's exhausting to drown, but freeing to fall. Society craves burnout, another form of submission, but I will save myself. I will owe no one. And so begins my life.

*Free yourself.*

Then fly.

# 10

## The Moon Wants to Dance

KOA

**T**he bug was a bust. Mack's fake clues, too. My sister knows me too well.

The few snippets of information we received before Marga shit on the screen were trivial at best. We snagged a lunch menu, a laundry schedule, and a cryptic "The Moon Wants to Dance" message. We thought this last one was a clue, but it was only a drinking song, belted by Bone Lords five-deep in beer bottles.

*What the hell am I doing?* Mack asked me the same question. I'm running in circles, playing dress-up, procrastinating progress, and delaying the inevitable. *Slade* is the only answer. *Earth will come for Mars. The sky will burn with war. And if we're not ready, all hell will break loose in a much more literal definition than I'd desire.*

"Cheer up," Miro says beside me at reception. "It could have been worse. At least you got that song out of it. *The moon wants to dance, so get in her pants. It's musty and stale, but she'll shine your rail—*"

"Miro."

"Sorry, it's catchy."

"Glad you approve," I mumble.

"Why the long face?"

"Everything's shit."

Miro chuckles. "Knew you had more personality than you

project.”

I raise a red eyebrow. “Why, are there rumors I don’t?”

He shifts, uncomfortable, and focuses on the library’s arches and spires, on the Gothic mystery. “No, no, sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“Relax. I’m glad I come off cold. If I were real, I’d get fired.”

“You don’t come off cold.”

“No? Then what *do* I come off like?”

“Sad,” Miro says without hesitation.

A boulder drops in my gut. “Oh.”

He backpedals. “No, no, no, so sorry—”

“You did nothing wrong.” But I did. “Let me ask you something: If you were leader of the Order of Roses, what would you do now?”

“You better not leave. We need you, Professor.”

“I’m not leaving, but I could use a fresh perspective.” I’m *probably* not leaving.

“Okay.” Miro sucks air through his teeth, then chews his lip for a bit. “Well, if I have a tough test, I storyboard it, you know, find themes and patterns in information. Forest for the trees and all that shit.”

“Can you storyboard this?” I spread smartglass tablets across the desk, spellbooks of confidential data and details.

“I don’t think I have clearance—”

“You do now.” I tap all five of them, then stare at him, curious. His brain is different from mine, and he sees beauty where I see waste.

“Holy shit.” Those are Miro’s first words as truth breaches his skull. Then: “What the fuck?” And last: “Is this true?”

“Yes, all of it,” I say.

He scans the documents, graying with terror. “This is why they fear her . . . and us.”

“The experiments at Valles Marineris backfired, hence the Starchild Diaspora, the Reckoning, and this whole bloody Martian exile.”

“Backfired?”

“They wedged open the canyon and made starchildren stronger.”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

"I'm not sure I want to endanger you further."

"I already know about the eyewitness account," Miro says.  
"That's enough to throw me in jail."

"If I tell you this, jail is the least of your worries," I say.

He grins. "No one got anywhere without a little risk."

"This isn't a little risk. This is dousing yourself in gasoline and standing in a burning house."

"Then let's play with fire."

I pause for a much shorter time than I should, then explain.  
"Mars has a shadow, a mirror world torn from the chaos of an eons-old rivalry between gods and titans."

"Hold up," Miro interrupts. "A shadow? A mirror world? Gods? Titans? Eons?!"

"Yes. Few know this secret."

"Sounds more like a story than a secret."

"All the good ones do."

"Then why not tell others?" he asks.

"To keep the peace," I say. "Earth reacted to evolution by throwing starchildren in the celestial brig, here on Mars. If the public knew about this, there'd be mass panic, widespread hysteria, war like the worlds have never seen."

"Lovely. So what the hell is a mirror world?"

"Well, it's not only one world; it's an entire shadow universe filled with dark matter beings. These humans evolved in parallel with our own universe, following similar—yet not identical—patterns. Some can starshift, too, into dark energy instead of true energy. Their starchildren were exiled to shadow Mars, same as our starchildren were exiled to true Mars."

"True Mars?" Miro asks. "Who says we're true and they're shadow?"

"Scientists," I say with a humorless chuckle. "It's for convenience, to label from our perspective."

"Right, that *never* caused problems before. Anyway, continue. Gods and titans created this . . . split?"

"I know it sounds crazy, but it's true."

"It doesn't sound crazy; it sounds batshit insane."

"Truth often is."

Miro smirks. "So I'm to believe that Zeus and Kronos had a

spat, then ripped reality in half?”

“Not our gods and titans,” I say, “*real* gods and titans, stars and singularities, suns and black holes. Celestial bodies rose out of chaos, then created and now connect the true and shadow universes.”

“Wait a fucking second, I’m drowning in infodump.”

“The sky is sentient. Gods are stars, and titans are black holes. There are two universes, true and shadow. In Valles Marineris, the divide between them is weakening. Shadows are slipping through the cracks, time is breaking, and if we don’t act soon, if we don’t reunite the halves, both universes will perish.”

Others I’ve told—the scant others—have broken at this point, eyes wide, lips parted, mouths open in stupefied awe. Not Miro, though. He raises his brows, tilts his head, and says, “Well, why didn’t you say so? I love a challenge, a problem to fix, though I think you already know the answer, Professor. You don’t need me to storyboard; you need me to validate that there is no other way.”

Damn him and his insight. “Yes,” I admit.

“This eyewitness account...you said Sl—*she* is the same? They’re both mirrors?”

I nod.

“A myth as old as the sun,” Miro mutters, remembering what I told him in the sunloft. He searches the smartglass tablets before him. “Renewal cycles to conquer chaos: Enūma Eliš in Babylonian myth. A cosmic night: Kumulipo in Hawaiian myth. Ancient floods: Sumerian myth. Gods and titans: Greek myth. Professor, is *she* the link? The link to all truths?”

“She and her kind, yes, but she’s the only one of her kind alive.”

“Then, I’m sorry, but she’s the only answer.” He points at a line on a tablet. “The voice for the silent ones, the strength of the shadows, the bridge between worlds.”

“The heartbeat of a million dreams,” I whisper.

“A million Martians, a million shadows. She can save us. She can reunite Mars.”

“I know.” I’ve always known.

“Then, respectfully, why didn’t you help her sooner?”

Because of Ayaan. “Past mistakes. There was another.” Another

I failed, and I can't fail her. She's different. Special. Beautiful. Divine. "Never mind. Thank you, Miro."

He reads my thoughts. "You won't fail her, and you didn't fail him." At my surprise, he adds, "Mack told me."

"Fuck him," I say, then smile. "Guess you both gave me the kick in the ass I needed, though."

"Always happy to kick your ass, Professor . . . in a professional way, of course."

"Of course."

We both laugh, and the sound echoes through the dark library, bouncing off kaleidoscopic windows, vaulted ceilings, an army of books, and an air force of chandeliers. Slade's ready. The Order's ready. I'm not ready, but I'll never be. There's something dangerous beneath duty, a risk beneath responsibility. Because Slade isn't only the Chosen One to me. She isn't only a tool, a weapon, a sword through the Bone Lords' reign. No, she's more—*too* much more—this startling star, this fragile flare, this brilliant phoenix with fiery wings.

I watched her for years, spied from shadows, and broke every time I couldn't interfere. Because if I did interfere, they'd find out, find her—Marga always keeps chains on me, chains I can finally break. But I couldn't then. I wasn't strong. I wasn't powerful. And I couldn't climb free when she ruled the sky.

*Free yourself.*

It's time.

# 11

## Life Is a Long Goodbye

SLADE

I give myself a day—sober up, rest up, calm down—then pack a bag. One harmonica, two bagels, ten bombs. It's a risk, a flammable idea I've ignored till now, suppressed with it-could-fail and what-the-hell placations. They call me a monster, and I tell them no, but I'm done reacting and not acting, so if they need a beast, I'll play the part.

Wrongs must right, and rights must wrong, and I'll ensure none follow in my cursed, tortured, starforsaken footsteps. This is for the others, if any others exist, if there are any others anywhere like me. I vowed to change my life, and if death resets this bloody balance, so be it.

"I don't like that look, child," the doctor tells me in her top-level office. It's just us; her family is out, safe from me.

I squat in her window like a bird of prey, scouring Kasei's smartglass skyscrapers, rusty streets, desert valley, and waning dust storm. Phobos and Deimos droop in the sunset sky, Mars's misshapen moons of panic and fear, hungry for night. "I don't like this world."

"Nothing's wrong with Mars," she says, voice grainy yet soothing. "Her people? Maybe. But Earth forces our hands."

"Blame is weak."

"Hatred more so."



"I don't understand abstractions."

"Yet you just used one. You understand more than you think, but you take a different road to reach the same place." Her kind, black eyes twinkle, and she inclines her dark, bald head toward me in jest. She should be a queen. She's mine, at least. Regal and strong. Warm and wise. My neck scar itches in salute to all she's done.

"Why are you here, child?" the doctor asks. She waves a resometer over my latest scratches. I arrived via solartruck, emptied from one dumpster into another. Not the classiest transportation, but I can't risk starshifting till absolutely necessary. The medical device beeps on its smartglass screen, accelerating my healing and patching my armor.

I gesture at my wounds, mending as we watch, but the doctor doesn't buy my bullshit.

"You have a plan, and you want my permission," she guesses, and fuck, she guesses right.

"I trust you," I whisper, "but I can't tell you."

She sighs. "You don't need my permission. However, if you want my blessing, you must explain."

"You'll find out soon enough."

"Then I ask again: Why are you here?"

"You ground me." After a life at sea, I need every shore I can find, every beach to brace against before the next storm.

"Well, good luck," she says. "Don't cause too much trouble."

"I'm above trouble." I want chaos instead. Time to fly. Time to burn. Time to *free myself* from *too loud, too bright, too close, too much*.

"Stay safe."

I'll stay true. "Thank you, Doctor, for everything."

She narrows her eyes. "This feels like goodbye."

"Life is a long goodbye."

"Another abstraction. You're growing."

Because I'm reading more, absorbing more, studying characters and soaking up scripts. "Till next time."

"There better be a next time."

I leave without reply—down the stairs, out the door, onto the street. Black dustsuit on. Solarcape loose. Goggles and airmask over my scowl. I walk a few blocks—dodging solarcars, skipping sidewalks—till I distance myself enough for the doctor's safety.

At the UMars campus's edge, I cry, "Slade Hawk!" My voice scalds my ears. I rarely speak louder than a whisper, but this time, the burn tingles with pleasure—the resounding alarms, too. The city rises in fear of my truth, and I smile a snake as sirens wash the desert. I starshift a block away and cry my name again. Another starshift. Another shout. A pop. A howl. A wreaking of havoc.

It's euphoric. Exhilarating. The trap sprung free. I summon my enemies, their weakness my weapon, and engulf Kasei in uproar. Fear of failure stifles success, but I'm not afraid anymore, though they sure are. I did everything "right," but everything went wrong, so now I'll do everything "wrong" to reset all the rights. Another spiral beckons—a spiral into misery, hopelessness, despair—but I stop its start, its drawn-out ending, because I *will* survive, and I *will* find peace.

After a few minor detours.

I starshift again. Call "Slade Hawk" again. Savor the sirens and relish the alarms. *See me. Hear me. Want me. Need me.* Show me your fear, and I'll show you my power as I cut out and let go of all darkness to fly. Leaving the safe life, the easy life, the life on the run, I quit my past and embrace my future, close the door behind me and open the roof above me. Each today is better than yesterday, and tomorrow leads me free.

*Free yourself.*

"Slade Hawk!" Sirens. Alarms. *Me.* Let them listen. Let them see. I *free myself* from my cave, leave dirt for pavement, road for highway, change course to intersect with brighter horizons. I focus on fire, release the sea, crest its waves to forge triumph from its depths. My breaking point turns blastoff, and I shoot for stars, launch toward heaven, pop aboard the skyship that caught me, ruined me, tortured my child self and liberates me now.

"Slade Hawk!" Them this time, the Bone Lords who burned my spirit so I could emerge a phoenix. They panic in their ivory palace, their floating dungeon in the Martian sky. I'm their monster, and I escaped my cage. They leap from their stations, cry for security, shriek louder than the alarms. The bridge erupts in chaos, *my* chaos, as I blink in and out, planting bombs to grow brilliance. They thought me static, but I sprung from their dirt. Because people can change. Dreams can change, too. So I focus on what I found, not what I lost,

to find balance through breach and victory through vengeance.

“She’s here!” they cry, an SOS to the ground. Let them cry. Let them freak. Let them think what they want about me. They have no sway, and I’ll be gone before backup arrives. For I am an island, a fortress, a star—stable and steady with internalized faith. I know myself. I trust myself. Silenced for years, my shadows unleash a storm of souls, a burst of belief. Pain empowers, and I use mine to shine.

One last bomb, then I leave. Down to the ground, to the red-dusted city, to *home*. No longer am I an invisible shadow beneath an iron reign. Stronger than fear, fiercer than nightmare, I hold the force of the sun, the heartbeat of a million dreams, and I can ignite galaxies. For I am a moment. I am infinity. And everyone will remember my name.

# 12

## The Sky Is Burning

KOA

**T**he sky is burning.

Mars's rouge zenith pulses with explosion. Bombs. Bursts. Blasts of redemption. A lone skyship tips, then falls, a comet with an angry tail.

"She called her own name," Miro whispers beside me. "Holy shit, she called her own name."

We peer at the wreckage through the library window, at the plummeting corpse, at the crumpled, smoking ship. Slade broke herself free. She called her name, set off alarms, wreaked havoc to starshift up and bomb Bone Lords down. It's only one ship—not their command, not Marga (a breath of shameful relief)—but it's enough to light the final fuse, enough to threaten everything. She cracked. Or crested. Either way, we're too late. I waited too long, they pushed her too far, and now, like Ayaan, she's damned to destiny.

"Get Mack," I say.

Miro stays, stunned. "We need to save her."

"Hence, Mack. Go. I'll meet you at the edge of campus."

We split, grab red dustsuits, and reconvene outside the UMars border, veiled with goggles and airmasks. I check the thorns in my sleeves, scratch the scar on my wrist, remember I am a Rose, I am Mars, I am a Brye. Before he died, Daddy always told me, "Keep the fire on," when he went into Kasei's streets. "I'm going out, but I'll

always come home.” He didn’t, of course. He’s gone now, gone with Poppy, disappeared into danger, forgotten casualties of this gory feud.

But still, I say, “Keep the fire on,” to Mack and Miro, then pray Marga is merciful, that she can change. For she’s looking, too. The whole city is. Slade is gold, and we are greed, and this game will end in blood.

“Can we track her?” Miro asks.

Mack shakes his head. “No, but we can follow the fires.”

“Sorry?”

I point at the sidewalk, at the steaming carcass of a solarcar.

“Ah,” Miro says, understanding. “Trail her wake. Quick question: Why?”

“Why what?” Mack asks.

“Why’d she do it? She knew the Bone Lords would retaliate.”

“She was done waiting.”

“No,” I say. “She was done being trapped. She’d rather die free than live caged. Let’s go.”

As we weave through Kasei, Mack murmurs in my ear, “Is red the wisest choice, Koa? People are starting to stare.”

“You like when people stare,” I murmur back. “And wise isn’t on my mind, Mack. She blew up a fucking skyship. I’d rather people know we’re here, that we haven’t abandoned them.”

“And the Bone Lords? We make easy targets.”

“Well, so do they.”

An explosion startles the three of us into fighting stances. A block away, a skyscraper shatters. Smartglass splinters glitter and rains hail upon the street. Bystanders scream while its structure gives, and the building rattles then collapses in a surge of dust. We crouch as the red tide washes over us, as the crowd screams bloody murder at the bloody murder.

Miro gapes. “*She did that?*”

“No,” I say, “Bone Lords did.”

“They blew up a building, killed innocent people, just to catch her?”

“Especially to catch her. They’ve chased her for twenty-three years, and she’s slipped through their fingers at every turn, embarrassed them senseless, caused Earth to question their very

existence. Even as an infant, she escaped their claws, so of course they'd blow up a building to catch her. They'd blow up much more, in fact, but let's hope this doesn't escalate."

"Because this hasn't escalated in the slightest," Mack says, sarcastic. He gestures at the smoky sky, the smoldering skyship, the skyscraper spurting flames.

"It could be worse."

"No, Professor, it couldn't be," Miro says. "This is Mars."

"This is home," I say.

"This is hell," Mack says.

Mars doesn't like the nickname and replies in kind. Clouds charge from the horizons and spiral over Kasei, blotting out moons and sun. A mile-high dust wall billows toward the city, encircling us in siege. Night falls in a premature lie, and the temperature plummets to death. Rain falls in downpour—brought north from Valles Marineris—and lightning branches overhead while the sky sprouts tornadoes. Dust storms are common, but thunderstorms are rare, and both together are once in a generation.

"Shit," I say. We have an hour tops to find Slade, to find shelter, before everything fades to black. "Both of you, back inside. I'll find her alone."

"The hell you will," Mack says. "We're coming."

"You're *staying*. The Roses need a refuge, and you will provide it. Gather the Order in the UMars library."

"We can't all fit in headquarters," Miro says.

"Find a way," I say. "Use the sunloft, if you must."

"But the forbidden texts—"

"Fuck the forbidden texts. It's time they knew the truth, anyway. Go, boys."

Mack swallows hard. "Find her."

"I will," I promise.

We break, and they disappear in the thickening dust. Visibility wanes, but I can still see the streets, so I cover my face from the pelting rain and crouch, brace myself, from the assaulting wind. A gust shoves me into a building, and thunder rumbles the sidewalk. The slain skyscraper lies close, but the Bone Lords have moved on, and so has Slade. *How the fuck can I find a shadow?*

No time to answer. A Bone Lord grabs my shoulders and throws

me down. I tilt, roll, bounce back up. They swing a wide punch. I starshift away. They follow—energy hop in, hop out—and mirror my phase jumps. We spar for a time but quickly tire—it’s a massive effort to change from matter to energy, never mind in rapid succession. Plus, we can’t interact in starstate, so the game dwindles to punches and kicks.

I land a right hook. They land a gut kick. I double over, feint down, lurch up, and bury my thorn in their abdomen. They grunt, flail, choke on their own gore. I cringe, and—call it mercy, call it cruelty—release them from their misery. With a sharp jerk, I yank off the Bone Lord’s airmask and watch them suffocate on the street.

“Now, Poppy’d be proud.”

Blood curdles in my veins. “You’re down from your tower.”

“You’re out of your cage.” My sister approaches in a bone-white dustsuit, a skeleton amid the rising storm. “She killed people, Koa.”

“So have you.” Stardamn hypocrite.

Marga ignores me. “She’s dangerous. Help me find her. Help me end her.”

I shake my head. “You backed her into a corner. You gave her no other choice.”

“No other choice?!” she exclaims. “She rose from the sewer to strike down one of my skyships. And today, I’d hoped to leave her alone.”

“You’ve chased her since birth. You’ve tortured her for decades. She was bound to snap.”

“Snap, yes, because she’s lost it, and a faulty weapon is no use to me.”

“She’s a woman, not a weapon.”

“Well, I’m both, so help me or fuck off.”

I peer at her, erase the Bone Lords’ leader, find my big sister. “You’re desperate. And you know I’ll never help you, so you should kill me where I stand, but you won’t, because you still care, because you’re still *you* under all that treacherous baggage.”

Marga steps forward, and we’re inches apart, white to red, bone to blood, Earth to Mars, damnation to destiny. “I will *always* care about you. You’re my sister. You’re family. You’re more. And today, you’re right. I’ll let you go. But there will come a time when I can’t,

and you can't, and the sides we've chosen become the swords we die on."

Tears sting my eyes behind my goggles. "Remember our fathers, Marga. Remember what they taught us. It doesn't need to be like this."

She hesitates a second. "But it does, Koa. Because she's not the only dangerous one. We all are, and Earth won't stop till we're no longer a threat."

"We're the threat? They slaughtered us, raped us, then exiled us to this wasteland."

But she doesn't hear my retort. No one does. Marga fades to dust, absorbed by the storm, as wind howls in urgency and thunder roars in madness.

A tornado sets down in front of me, a blaring column of nature's wrath. I fall and shield my face from twisting debris, start to starshift, then stop. It's her. She came to me. Or fate finally answered. And there it is again, that danger, that risk, that fire that unites all Martians at their core—or something more, something I can't permit.

Haloed in havoc, she kneels before the storm's beast, ragged hair whipping in her ponytail, serpents of mahogany and blonde. Rain batters her black dustsuit, armor over her tall, wiry frame, and a ruby scarf flutters around her throat, the throat they slit, one of an atlas of scars.

"Wait!" I cry, but she doesn't; she jumps. Her afterimage sears my mind with want, with need, with something more, and I sprint toward the tornado, opposite reason, before logic finds me and blinks me away.

No.

She was so close, so raw, so real, now gone. *Where?* Where did she go? Where did she escape after her scream into the void? The void. The sewer. The subway. Her home. Of course she'd flee there, to her cage underground. So I find an entrance and spiral down.



# 13

## Horror Immortal

SLADE

**T**hey chase me.

I knew they would.

I bombed one of their birds, though I wish I could bomb the flock. Yet each ship I steal forks two heads from its stump, a gift from Earth, the inescapable Hydra, horror immortal. And if I stole them all? An army would replace their ranks.

So I jump. *Freedom*. So I run. *Fire*. So I thread my way through streets, through alleys, starshifting into and out of skyscrapers, leaping from building to building. *No longer an invisible shadow*. And they follow. *Blame me*. And they chase. *Guilt me*. And they lose me at each turn. *I belong to me now*. Their frustration grows with my elation. If only for a moment, I am free, and this freedom, this power, is worth all the pain.

*Free yourself.*

Within minutes, the sky turns, darkens, obscures with clouds and dust. *You held me down, punched me to pulp, forced me into submission*. Storm coils around Kasei, and rain strikes its first attack. *Release*. Then wind. *Unleash*. Then lightning. *Unshackle*. Then thunder. *Implode*. Then tornadoes. *Explode*. Nature's symphony erupts overhead, and I dodge destruction as Bone Lords keep pace. *I am not your fucking pet*.

They burn buildings in my wake, slay skyscrapers and slaughter

solarcars. *Unvalued, unappreciated, unfulfilled, backlash.* Bloodthirst boils in their veins as liberty flows through mine. *I'll find my sun.* And even if this is the end, if this is the only scrap I see, it's enough, and I'm enough, and for one sliver of time, I am *me*.

*Free yourself.*

I don't want this life, so I steal another: a fierce life, a fiery life, a fearless and ruthless infinity. *Melt the chains, break the cage, define my destiny, forge my fate.* Painful memories plague my past. *Shut me down, and I'll grow wings.* Ghosts of those who left or hurt me. *Stifle me, and I'll break free.* People and dreams I lost along the way. *Suffocate me, and I'll breathe underwater.* But this is the point of no return, to become *me* and leave *her* behind. *Drain my fire, and I'll emerge stronger.* It hurts, it stings, it kills, it bleeds. *I have a voice, so I deserve a choice.* But this is the only way to own my life. *And I'll pave my own way after this storm.*

Behind me, a skeleton appears, so I pop away, land before a tornado—a roaring column of timeless fury, a fury I reflect. *Feed my soul with freedom.* And before me stands a Rose. Red dustsuit, thorns in her sleeves, hair a scarlet aura. She masks her face, but I feel her warmth, spot pale petals through her cracks and curves. A thrum between us. A beacon. A bonfire. But the storm roars louder, and Bone Lords will soon follow.

"Wait!" she cries, but I don't; I jump. Though her melody's echo dances through my mind, I wish for time to turn her soul into song—time I don't have.

I pop into the subway, the cage that created me, and sprint through familiar veins. *Cling to nothing. Embrace everything.* People panic, as they always do, animals cawing for mercy. *Called a burden, I'll float to the sky.* Above, the storm bellows, muted, dull thuds and brushes against the surface. *Conditioned to cave, I'll smash the cave sky-high.* I lift my goggles, lower my airmask, and dive into Mars's leviathan.

*Free yourself.*

But they find me, and they bring backup. *Their hate is my strength.* Footsteps bang against titanium as skeletons charge with tornadoes' fury. *Their gaslighting is my glory.* I skid around a corner, catch my spin on an exposed pipe, and race a train down the nearest platform. *Their pain is my power.* Past brothels, dumpsters,

billboards, past industrial reminders of exile, I hurtle forward as fumes fade.

*Reach for potential. Stretch for impossible.*

My spark dims, and I slow to a jog. *Empower*. They catch up; I starshift. *Escalate*. They catch up again; I starshift again. *Enable*. It's exhausting. *Embrace*. And I'm empty. *Surrender*. Because I abandoned routine. *Strengthen*. My crutch. *Sacrifice*. My restorative repetition in the face of freedom, of choice. *Succeed*. But I can't choose what I am. *Conquer fear*. I can't run from fate. *Rewire reality*. And the strings I snapped reform as snakes—venomous and deadly.

*Gain momentum. Learn to live again. We are our only restraints.*

I find a shadow and curl into a ball. *Focus on the exhale*. They'll find me again—they always do—but I have a moment, I have infinity, and so, I breathe. *Breathe out the trash*. I count. *One, two, three, four*. I clutch my harmonica in prayer. *Five, six, seven, eight*. I lost my bombs and bagels, but not my music, not my heartbeat. *Use the darkest hour to summon the brightest dawn*. And though everything is still *too loud, too bright, too close, too much*, this is my world. This is *me*.

*Free yourself.*

I did. I have. I made one choice that was *mine*. Not a reaction. Not a reply. Not a response to *their* cruelty. It was me. It *is* me. And I won't lose myself again. I hate change, yet I *am* change. I get trapped, yet I set traps. Wherever I stand along humanity's spectrum, I am still a stripe of rainbow.

"Slade Hawk," someone says.

There should be alarms, sirens, chaos, but without the sun, their power drained—same as mine.

The Bone Lord smiles. I smile back, for once myself, for once at peace. "Yes?" I whisper.

"What trouble you've caused." His face is veiled, but he's tall, tense. "And trouble tends to ricochet."

"So do threats."

He grins. "Do you know what you are, Slade?"

"I'm a monster," I answer.

"Exactly. Would you like to see what your monster can do?"

"No," I say, but he doesn't wait. He blinks out, blinks in, starshifts before me. A needle jabs my arm, a shot of adrenaline, and

I sink.

...

*Where am I?*

Here. Nowhere. There. Everywhere. It's Mars, yet it's not. They're humans, yet they're not. The sight is familiar, yet foreign: a dusty subway, a mirror of home, crowded platforms, starshifting commuters, bullet-sleek trains. These people roam a related Mars, one similar to mine, but it's not mine. It's a twin.

Something's different, and I don't belong. Then again, I don't belong home, either, but there's a strangeness to this place, a dissonance of perception. Violet limns every surface, and water pounds in my ears. I am flying and drowning, dancing and falling, straddling worlds and ripping at the seams. I wish it hurt, but it doesn't, it warps. Like the discomfort before a yawn prolonged.

...

Then it's over, and I'm back. It lasted one second, one moment, yet infinity. The Bone Lord scowls with loathing.

"I'd hoped it wouldn't work," he says. "I'd hoped, for your sake, the rumors false. But they're true. And you're you. And you now understand why you must be stopped."

"I understand nothing," I whisper. "Where was that?"

"Somewhere cursed, like you."

The skeleton stabs me before I can react, and pain splinters through my core. I keel over to his laughter as the void invades. Darkness smothers my vision. Blood drums my skull. Copper stings my nostrils. Panic strangles my lungs. Each breath is too shallow, my pulse too loud, as my heart threatens to burst through my ribs. *Too much*. Terror drains my limbs of strength, and I flop, a sock puppet, against the metal floor. My moment of freedom turns tragic flaw as I bleed, break, sweat, and burn into numb, faint, uncontrollable doom.

*I should have stayed silent.*

*I should have stayed put.*

*I should have let shadows hide me from this ironclad world.*

Dread peppers my pain, yet pride scorches through. I *did* something. In a society that praises stress and punishes change, I took a running leap, flung myself off the cliff, and grew wings—if only for an instant. But that instant outweighs all else I've done, and if it's the last thing I'll do, I can die with dignity.

“Farewell, trouble,” the Bone Lord says. “Earth sends her regards.”

The phoenix boomerangs.

## 14

## Farewell, Trouble

KOA

**L**ess than an hour to find shelter, to find *her*.

I starshift down, into the subway, along with many others. Above, the storm thunders in plagues of dust, scourges of lightning, and Kasei's people burrow beneath ground or within homes. Panic attacks, infests as ignorance, while society fractures along infrastructure's basement.

Children cry for their parents. Parents shout for their children. Bone Lords fight for order, and I stick to shadows, shimmy out of sight. Away from the crowd, that's where Slade would flee, so I bounce from the chaos that will lead me to her.

Sure enough, I hear a whisper, a question, then a voice of blistering rage. Words sharpen, clarify, and I catch: *Farewell, trouble. Earth sends her regards.* I turn a corner, spot a Bone Lord and *her*, goggles up, airmask down, power on full display . . . beauty, too. Her eyes fade from violet to copper as she returns to herself after he forced her truth. Sweat beads her warm brown skin, and she hyperventilates, clutching her gut. *Blood.* Too bright, too harsh, too cruel, too much. Red slicks her hands as she holds herself together, and agony contorts her face. *Shit. No. Not again.*

The Bone Lord turns toward me and chuckles. "Professor Koa Brye, if you weren't Marga's sister, I'd afford you the same fate. You know, all your strength is from her mercy. All your power is from her

pity. Without her, you'd be nothing."

"You're right," I say, stepping forward, eyes on Slade. *Too much blood, red as Mars.* "Without Marga, I'd be weak. I'd be soft. I'd be nothing I need to be, and everything would fail."

The Bone Lord opens his mouth to taunt me, tease me, pick me apart, but I slip a thorn from my sleeve, slice his tongue, skewer his skull. The blade buries in his brainstem, hilt between his teeth, and he slumps to death, sputtering stupidity.

I kick him aside and kneel before Slade. "Slade," I whisper. No alarms. No notice. Power's drained. Small mercies. "Slade," I say, louder now. "Slade Hawk, it's Koa Brye, leader of the Order of Roses."

But Slade melts down, then shuts down, overwhelmed by hate, by pain, by her burgeoning power. She blazed bright, a blinding torch, a beacon to those lost at sea, then burned hot, burned out, burned any hope of release. Her thin fingers loosen, lifeless beside her wound, and she slides down in surrender.

"Slade." I unveil myself, reveal my face, my eyes, and lean over her head to beg forgiveness. "I'm sorry I wasn't here before, but I'm here now, and we need to go."

She blinks one, twice, and I spot gold around her pupils. Her gaze intensifies as she scans my face. "Where were you?" An accusation. As expected. As deserved.

"Waiting," I say, a sliver of an answer. I lay my pale hand on her darker wrist, but she snatches herself away . . . in all ways.

"Don't touch me," she whispers, then hisses in agony. Blood spills from her—a broken dam, an unleashed avalanche—as her face sallows in struggle.

"I can help you," I say, voice calm, "but we must leave *now*."

"And if we leave, what next? More hiding? More running? No change? No escape? No, Koa . . . I'm done . . . living . . . this life." Words squeeze from her dying soul, each one a knife through my guilt, through my heart.

"Your life has just begun," I whisper. "Come with me, *please*."

Slade squints, suspicious, and shakes her head. "Your eyes are green. I don't trust green."

"A smart assessment. Green is often associated with envy and greed," I say, pause, restart. "But green also symbolizes balance and

rebirth. Let me heal you, Slade. Let me show you the stars.”

She tilts her head, shocked, surprised by acceptance instead of judgment. *I see you, Slade. Now, let me empower you.*

“Okay,” she rasps. “One condition: If you are lying, I kill us both.”

*Ayaan. Shame. Regret. Retribution.* “Okay,” I say. It’s all I can say. Birth linked us with an iron chain. She’s the shadow, and I’m the sun, and together we show each other direction.

I hoist her up, swing her arm over my shoulder. She cringes—breathes, fidgets, steadies, adjusts—as contact overloads her fragile state. The rest is a blur. Swarming corridors. Teeming mobs. Bone Lords bordering all doors in and out. We can’t stay here, too many skeletons, but we’ve no time to reach the library, either. Slade’s too hurt to starshift. The storm’s too brutal to survive. But there is a place, a sacred place, a place raw and formative and forgotten, where we could escape, where we could heal.

“Trust me,” I murmur as I drag Slade through alleys, up staircases, killing a couple Bone Lords on the way.

“Where are we going?” she asks.

*To a ghost, to the fairy witch reflection who braids heather and dances with lanterns. To a greenhouse moor lost in time, to a jewel amid the desert of Mars. To a gentle, sloping, foggy land. To a storybook prayer. To my childhood home.*

“Home,” I whisper.





MIDNIGHT



# 15

## Show Me Your World

SLADE

**“I** want answers.” I try to sit, fail, try to turn, fail, settle for weakness as Koa tends my wound.

“In time,” she mutters, dabbing my stomach with poultice. It’s worse than it was a few days ago, when we arrived, but that’s expected, given our circumstances. We’re both in tunics and leggings, dustsuits thrown aside.

The thunderstorm stopped; the dust did not, and it will not for a while. Planet-wide, it covers Mars whole. People cower in skyscrapers, in subways, but without direct sunlight, solar power dwindles, cold and dark spread, and food and water wither. It’s a disaster. If I weren’t dealing with my own psychological shitstorm, I’d have the proper level of panic. As it is . . .

“Shit,” I hiss as Koa binds gauze over gunk, at the brink of sanity from *too close, too much*. “No, *now*. You told me to trust you, and I did, but you’re making it hard to continue that trust. What the hell is going on? What the fuck am I? You’ve ignored me for years, let them torture me for decades, and if you want to earn back any meager belief in your people, then I need answers *now*.”

Koa sighs. She tucks a wild, red curl behind her pale ear, pierced with a silver ring, same as her nose. Her eyes shimmer like gemstones, like jade—those distrustful, green eyes that calm me with warmth. *No*. She abandoned me. They all did. No matter what

she says now, it changes none of the running, starving, bleeding days, the days that damaged my soul. She doesn't understand, because she's too soft, curves instead of corners, while my every bone is a scythe.

I broke free and landed here, in yet another cage. But I can't return to that dark place again. I can't return to that void, to that abyss. Though I can't help wondering if good outweighs bad, if I self-sabotage success, if fear blinds understanding, if doubt deafens awakening. I'm trapped again. Chained again. Because society markets to the majority, and I will never be a majority. My voice will always be a solo, not a choir, and I will always be a Renaissance soul, not a specialist. But if the rocket's still grounded, that doesn't mean it won't launch. Momentum takes time to build. Plant seeds, and let them grow. It will take years, but it will take hold. Though it's already been years. It's been *decades*. A lifetime of slammed doors and shattered windows.

No. Stop. Don't go there again. Don't be afraid. Don't cling to the past. Don't yearn for the future. Stay in today. *Live* for today. Live. Breathe. Do. Be. Focus on what *I* want, what *I* need, what *I* love, not on the brainwashed path. For I *will* find my forever. I *will* find my peace. Doors may open for others, but buildings fall for me. Listen to the universe; she's right in front of me.

"Show me your world," Koa says, her voice a melody.

Infuriated, but off guard, I ask, "Sorry?"

"Show me your world, then I'll explain everything."

"Why?"

"Because I need to see, Slade." She flinches, waits for alarms that won't come. A temporary sanctuary. Dust masks the sun, and only emergency systems have power. For once, I'm not an emergency.

"Again, why?" I rasp.

"Because you are infinity."

Another non-answer, but it strikes me as true. Another thing I do not, cannot, will not understand, so I take a risk and talk.

"There's a crack in that window," I say and point. "When you light that lantern, it turns into a rainbow. And this is a redhouse, not a greenhouse, because it's red, not green. Outside on the hills, the heather clashes with the red grass. I don't like it. Inside, the soil walls

are practical but distracting—too many uneven surfaces. It's warm in here, like inside a mouth, but these blankets are too fuzzy, too ticklish. And all the white furniture is glaring, too bright and too disordered. But most disturbing is you."

"Me?" Koa asks, confused, as she removes the blanket from my legs.

"You," I repeat, then tighten my ponytail, tie myself together. "Since our arrival, you've been a..." The word won't come, so I substitute an image. "... solarcar engine."

"Sorry?"

"You know... revving."

"Anxious?"

"Yes."

Koa sighs, and I know I've crossed the line, the invisible line everyone can see but me. Some think me cold, think me callous, think me numb, but it's a reaction, not an action. Others overload me, overwhelm me with their energy, as Koa does now. Her emotions assault me—too many and too complex—so I distance myself to stay afloat. It does not mean I do not care. It does not mean I do not feel. It means I care and feel *too much, too close*. At this point, I usually appease others, do anything to defuse their displeasure, to limit my input. But I don't with Koa. I endure her relentless deluge and swim on.

"Why does this place make you anxious?" I ask. "It's your home." Though, as someone who's never had a proper home, I'm well outside my area of expertise.

"It was my home," Koa says, jaw clenched. "My sister is the Bone Lords' leader, Marga Frei. Maybe you know her. But she wasn't always this way. When we lived here, before our fathers died... Well, we had some memories in this house."

"Bad memories?"

"Good memories. That's why they hurt."

My trust in her should shrink, being Marga's sister, yet it grows—with a tentative increase. "Sorry for your loss."

"She's not dead," Koa says.

Shit. Wrong snippet. "My condolences. My regards." I try two more sayings, but both lift her red eyebrows with intrigue. "Sorry." I use words they want me to speak in ways they want me to speak

them. But all masks have cracks, mimicry reveals the stage, and borrowed phrases must be returned. Fiction is not fact. Though I absorb stories to fake function, though I imitate strangers to copy gestures, to swipe expressions like starcoins from pockets, normalcy learned is not normalcy innate.

"How do you feel, Slade?" Koa asks, then shirks, my name ingrained as fear.

"Feel?" I ask. I can't express how I feel. "I feel . . . purple. Out of tune. Up, then down, but never between."

"Are you happy?"

"If by 'happy,' you mean a joyous, content, satisfied state, then no, I am not and have never been 'happy.'"

"I see," she whispers as sorrow dusts her face. That emotion I know. Too well. Too much.

"You see nothing," I snap. "How could I ever be happy being what I am? I'm broken."

"You're beautiful."

*You're beautiful, not broken. Different, not damaged.* Something the doctor said. I hope she's all right.

"And you're strong," Koa continues. "And sensitive, specific, passionate, and aware, with a power in patterns and a remarkable memory."

Memory I use to mask difficulties. Patterns I use to support daily functioning. Awareness I use to weather "what's next." Passion I use to reign my attention. Specificity I use to anchor myself during change. Sensitivity I use as my compass. Every strength grew from weakness. Every crutch grew from fault. My powers lie in parroting, in pirating, in stealing others' souls for my glitchy mind and ill-fitting body.

"Everything's a spectrum, and you're part of it," Koa says.

I ignore her, the guilt, the pain, the rising tide within me, and stoke the fire till I burst. "You abandoned me for years, then swoop in as a 'savior' when it's convenient for you. But you should have helped me sooner. You could have saved me, hid me, pretended you give a damn."

"I give more than a damn," Koa says. "And I'll give you everything now. I would have helped sooner, but I was afraid. Afraid you weren't ready. Afraid I wasn't ready. Afraid you'd turn out like

another I lost. Afraid my sister would find out before we were strong enough. Afraid her Bone Lords would catch us before we could fight back.”

“I’d rather fight than flee, but you gave me no choice.”

“Because *I* didn’t have a choice. None of us did. A life on the run was better than a life behind bars, and that was the only way to keep you alive—to trust you to save yourself. If we were involved, we would have slowed you down, painted a target on your back. The Order is scrutinized and attacked, kept under constant surveillance. We couldn’t risk you by association.”

“Bullshit. I was a burden, too much to handle, so you threw me away.”

Koa’s green eyes—her *distrustful* eyes—widen. “Is that what you think? That you’re a burden? That you’re too much? No, Slade. No a thousand times. You are brilliant. You are our wings. You are the heartbeat of a million dreams. *We* are the burden. And without us, you flew.”

I can’t believe her. I can’t *allow myself to* believe her. For I am hell, and she is the sun, and however could a demon lift an angel? The walls encroach. After a life of running, days of sitting shred me apart, stir me with turmoil. A stomachache throbs below my gut wound, and I notice Koa staring at my bandage, so I ask why.

“Sorry,” she mumbles.

“That’s not an answer,” I say.

“You’re right. It’s not.” But she says nothing further.

“Speaking of answers, you owe me them all.”

“After you rest.”

“That wasn’t the deal,” I object.

“You’re sick,” she says.

“I’m not sick. I’m injured. And I’m fine. Tell me.”

So she does.

## 16

## Each and Every Truth and Shadow

KOA

**I** tell her everything: about gods and titans, about Earth and Mars, about the sentient sky, about truth and shadow.

Slade listens, eyes shut, as I watch her, eyes glued. She's breathtaking. Beautiful. Brilliant. She's *here*. A marvel, not a monster. An elite, not an error. This is another reason I held back, a reason I'll never tell her: She's my magnet. The reason I stare. The reason I fret at every fall of her chest, as the bandage sinks, as her wound reddens, as her stomach worsens and drags her into the abyss.

I want to touch her. Hold her. Hug her. And yes, this is ridiculous. I've known her a moment, yet I've known her forever. Infinity knots my fate and tangles our strings. Slade won't let me, though. She thinks she's too much, but it's me who's too much, too close, too cruel, harsh, bright, loud. She is right, and I am wrong, and if I can't save her, I don't deserve Mars.

"So, in short," I finish, "gods and titans ripped reality in two, a true Mars and a shadow Mars, in their respective universes. After Earth exiled starchildren to Mars, this rip—this *divide*—in Valles Marineris became more apparent. The canyon is destabilizing. Time is breaking. And if we don't reunite the halves, both universes will perish."

It's a copy-paste of what I told Miro, but less academic, more succinct. Slade's attention span is small but intense, so I adapt to her



lens, to her window of the world.

"Where do I come in?" Slade whispers, eyes still closed. She usually whispers. Most usually shout. "Is this about what happened in the subway? With the Bone Lord?"

Hesitant, I say, "Yes. Perhaps we should pause here."

"Perhaps we should not." Her eyes flutter open, and she pierces me with distaste. "I knew that already. Most of it, anyway."

"Then why let me speak?"

"I like your voice. It's . . . clear sky." She blushes, then barrels on. "But you promised me answers, not lectures, so tell me the rest."

Fine. *Fine*. Time to tear off regret. "You're a starchild," I say.

"I know," Slade says.

"But you're also a shadowchild, the only one alive."

"A shadowchild?"

"You can starshift . . . and darkshift. Turn into true and dark energy. You can see both worlds, *reunite* both universes. What you are is extremely rare, a mirror of sorts, a human prism. There were only a few others like you throughout history."

Slade furrows her dark brow. "So I saw shadow Mars?"

"Yes."

"Why hasn't this happened before?"

"It's hard. Nearly impossible. But with enough adrenaline—as the Bone Lord gave you—it can sometimes be forced."

"Can you teach me to control it?" she asks.

"I can try," I say.

"What if I don't want to? Learn how, I mean."

"Then everyone we know will die. Everything will perish. The divide will destroy this existence, and all stars will fade forever."

"So you want me to save worlds that hunted me and people who tortured me?"

"No," I say. "That would be foolish—selfish, even. I don't want you to save the worlds or their people. I want you to save hope, to save dreams. Don't save what we are. Save what we could be. And we could be so much more than what we are."

"I'm too damaged," she says, and I burn inside.

"You're different, not damaged," I say.

She startles, then shakes her head. "You could never fix me."

"You don't need to be fixed. You need to be seen."

This silences her, and slowly, she nods. "My condition still stands."

"Yes, if I'm lying, you may slaughter us both in the most horrific fashion imaginable."

Her lips quirk, and I think I've earned a smile, but not yet. Not quite. Not enough sacrifice.

"Rest now," I say.

But she's already asleep. I tiptoe toward the window, toward a smartglass pane, and tap an access code to open an encrypted channel. *Finally*, a signal.

"Koa, thank the stars," Mack says as we connect. Miro squishes beside him, and the Order overflows behind him as Roses cram into the jam-packed library. "Are you safe?"

"Yes. Are you?" I ask.

"Yes. We're all here. What about *her*?"

"She's here."

"And . . . ?" Mack asks, then catches my concern. "Miro, fetch some water, will you? There's a reserve in the back. Should last for a bit." Miro leaves, then Mack continues. "What is it?"

"It's bad. She's dying, Mack," I say. "A Bone Lord forced her to darkshift, then stabbed her—"

"Hold on a fucking second—*what*?"

"I sent you a message."

"I don't read my messages."

"Well, you should start. I'm too tired to explain."

Mack pauses, breathes deep. "Okay. *Okay*. Where are you?"

"The greenhouse moor," I say. "My old . . . home."

"Fuck. The city's covered with dust. Visibility is shit. Even if I could reach you—"

"It's too dangerous."

"But if I starshifted along the way—"

"You could get stuck. Too risky. Let the storm clear a bit, then we'll see."

"And till then?" he asks.

"We wait and watch. We have food and water, at least for now."

"If she dies, we have nothing."

"You don't need to remind me," I snap.

"I'm not reminding you; I'm offering to *help* you. What do you

need?" he asks.

"A resometer. From a doctor, preferably."

Mack calls behind him, but no one has the device. "Let me go out."

"You'd never make it. And if anyone's going out, it's me. Believe me, Mack, if there were a chance, I'd already be halfway there. But the dust . . . but the air . . ." I sigh. "We're trapped."

He purses his lips, grim.

"Tell me some good news," I say to distract us.

"Marga's stuck in her blimp," he says. "Most of the Bone Lords are. Their skyships are losing power, so they're squatting on skyscrapers like skewered turds."

"Such a way with words."

"Too busy for poetry."

"The pen's mightier than the sword."

"Unless you have a big-ass sword."

I smile a hair. "I'd say I miss you, but—"

"I'd misread the cue." Mack winks. "Miss you, too, Professor. Stay safe. Keep in touch."

"You, too."

The library fades, and the window clears. As I gaze over the crimson moor, unwanted memories overlay the scene. Marga skipping through heather. Daddy swinging us in his arms. Poppy rolling his eyes, then joining in. A family, a quartet, hidden in the hills. A fairy tale turned fury when death destroyed our hearts.

*Don't return to that dark place again.*

*Don't return to that void, to that abyss.*

If only wishing made it so.

Slade gasps behind me but does not wake. So much rests on her narrow shoulders. So much weighs on her fate. But for now, she's only human, and I'm only human, and it's time to make new memories here.

# 17

## Structure Is a God

SLADE

No routine. No repetition. No saving grace.

Time dissolves while we wait out the dust storm, and as someone who worships each tick of the clock, this upset undoes me. Structure is a god. Stability is a titan. Yet I have neither here, so I unravel.

"Slade, come back. Slade, I'm here. Talk to me. Let me help you."

Koa tries . . . and fails. Because I can't talk. I can't explain. I can't express what I need and why. She sees me, though. She analyzes, observes. Soon, she may understand.

"Everything's loose," I say. "Sloppy. Messy. Overcooked spaghetti. I need structure."

"What's your usual routine?"

"When I'm not running for my life?"

She grimaces, embarrassed or ashamed. Too fried to tell which. "Yes."

"Days are chaotic," I say, "but I re-anchor myself at night, in the subway. Dinner is one bagel with one pint of milk. Then chapters from *The Martian Chronicles*. Then one hour of television near the janitor's closet. Then I sleep in a dumpster, preferably my favorite one."

"A dumpster?" she asks.

I can't read her expression, but her pale skin blanches further.

"You know this," I say.

"I do, but . . . never mind." Koa sighs, shakes her head. "What do you keep in your favorite dumpster?"

"The Ray Bradbury book, a six-pack of beer, my 'Write It & Leave It' leather notebook, and my harmonicas. I installed a fake floor and hide them underneath."

"What's a 'Write It & Leave It' notebook?"

"If anything bothers me, I write it in the notebook, then I don't let myself think of it again."

"That's brilliant," she says.

"It's necessary," I say.

"How'd you learn to write, to read?"

"Books. The doctor taught me, starting with Bradbury."

Another mystery crosses her face, but even if I weren't injured, I couldn't decipher it. So I let it go.

"What would make your time here easier?" Koa asks.

I stall. No one's asked me that before. No one's stopped hunting me long enough to care. "Consistency," I finally say. "Predictability." Two words the doctor lent me in case this situation ever arose. At the time, I said *this* was impossible, but here I am, and here she is . . .

"How about I serve meals at the same times each day, give you books to read in the morning, teach you how to cope and darkshift in the afternoon, and change your bandage before bed?" She eyes me with uncertainty, but whether she's uncertain about me or routine, I am unsure. Regardless, she's given me a new anchor, a new shore.

"You have books?" I ask.

"Hundreds," she says.

A smile's shadow twitches my cheeks. "Okay. But you don't need to do any of that. And no offense, but I doubt you can help me cope."

"I *want* to, Slade. And maybe not, but I'd like to try."

"Then try," I challenge. "If I'm not broken, as you say, then how can I feel whole?" I wince as agony twists my gut, but I ignore the wound, the blood, the draining pus.

Koa notices but says nothing, though worry contorts her features. "Structure. Routine. Consistency. Predictability. Those

things you already know. Also, practice transitions. Breathing and stretching techniques. Translate abstractions into clear, simple, concrete language. I can help with those, along with social stories, social cues, interaction rules, and visual aids.”

“You sound clinical.”

“I *am* clinical. I have a Ph.D. in Psychology and teach classes at UMars.”

“What else?” I ask, eager for escape, starving for solutions after all these years.

Koa continues. “Build in explicit flexibility and adaptability through time management. Use high-level, conceptual structure instead of a low-level, detailed one (less potential for upset with fewer rules). Self-monitor to limit sensory overload, and take a break *before* you reach your threshold. This will help with emotional regulation. Most of all, give yourself realistic standards, with high expectations but without pressure.”

“It sounds impossible.”

“I have every confidence in you, and I’m here.”

“I have too many weaknesses for this to work,” I say.

“Everyone has weaknesses, and everyone has strengths,” she says. “We all must find ways of supporting our weaknesses and enabling our strengths. You’re no different.”

“I’m *too* different.”

“Or perhaps you’re the next step. Humanity is changing, evolving. In time, maybe we’ll all be like you. Count your difference, your divergence, as a strength, not a weakness. There is power in the way you view life. Don’t appease others to avoid their overwhelming reactions. Don’t sacrifice yourself to submit to them. Don’t stifle yourself to ‘fit in,’ because the truth is that no one fits in. Yes, your contrast is bolder, but take ownership of your identity. Communication is about connection, and there are many ways to connect.” She points at my harmonica, the only one I have here. I’ve been stimming during our conversation, but she smiles at the act instead of shunning it. “Do you know what it says?”

I glance at the harmonica, at the engraved, cursive prayer. “No.”

“*Finché c’è vita, c’è speranza, perché la speranza è l’ultima a morire,*” Koa says. “While there’s life, there’s hope, because hope is

the last to die. It's an old Italian proverb. Makes sense for you."

Something rises within me, an understanding, a key.

"Play something for me," she says.

Where words fail me, music consumes me. I play a song. I play my soul. I play beauty and heartbreak, sobs and tears. I play what I want, not what I must, and power ruptures fear. Harmony bleeds through soaring melodies as I build wings from sound and fly myself free.

I play consonance and dissonance. I play choruses and cadences. I play crippling loneliness and desperate dreams. Certainty roots in my conscience as I commit to this path, to this hope, to this promise. Let me be an inspiration. Let me help others like me. Let me leave something behind, something better, something more. *This* is my future. There is no other way. So I surrender. I yield. I start forever with a song.

I play grief and rage, annoyance and frustration. I play my past away. Bang a door long enough, and the opposite one opens. I can't think how I used to. I can't *be* who I used to. Or I will not survive. No more outs. No more excuses. No more regrets. No more doubts. Good things happen—maybe not now, but eventually. We all want to be needed, and this is where I'm needed most.

The song flows, then ebbs. Everything is an ocean, fading as sand in a midnight tide, structured to leave, spontaneous as storms. Time is a rainbow, with every moment an infinity. As I play my last notes, Koa's last tears fall.

At her sorrow, I say, "I'm sorry."

But she laughs, and I see I've misjudged. "That was *stunning*, Slade. Absolutely, remarkably *stunning*. And you look *happy*."

"Happy?" I thought happiness foreign, but it was here all along, lurking in shadows, boosting my song. I was too far underground to notice the distant light. "I guess."

"Joy is an instinct, not a thought. How do you feel?"

"Low tide," I say. "Afternoon sun. A sky full of stars."

Koa smiles. "That's happiness. Music makes you happy."

"Hmm, I didn't think it did."

"The head doesn't know what the heart wants. Remember that. Use music to restore after a hard day."

Everything recedes as waves on a beach. I'm not used to this

life, to slow or still, to resting instead of running, to feeling instead of fighting. Instead, I'm used to striving every second to survive. But this moor quiets me. *She* quiets me. And with a clear mind, sheltered from the aggressive city, I realize I can never return to that life.



# 18

## Follow the Ruby Hills

KOA

**D**ays pass. Dust remains. And Slade wanes, worsens.

Infection festers within her wound. I need a doctor, a resometer, but Kasei's still unsafe for travel. I've distracted her with teachings—methods to cope and darkshift—but she spends more hours asleep than awake.

"Mack, give me some good news," I say into the smartglass window. Beyond, fog fuzzes the moor, and ruby hills swoop into nothingness. Mist veils the surrounding dome, and for a breath, this feels real, not a mirage. But it is a mirage. It's fake. It's forged. This greenhouse is yet another reminder that we don't belong, that Earth enslaves our future.

Mack braids his dreadlocks in a golden rope and squints his hazy, hazel eyes. "Good news? Isn't that an oxymoron?" Behind him, Miro wrangles the crowd, unruly from hunger and thirst.

"Then lie to me. Or tell me some gossip."

"Um... the sunloft has turned into a brothel. Well, not a brothel, because no one pays, but 'orgy den' doesn't have the same ring."

I try to chuckle. I can't.

"You're going out, aren't you?" Mack asks, guessing the reason for my call.

"I need to," I say. "She's almost gone."

Mack doesn't argue. He nods, then sighs. "Okay. The air is still clogged with dust, so you should be safe from Bone Lords in the streets. But for fuck's sake, Koa, be careful. I can't run this madhouse without you."

"Hence, the orgy den?"

"*Brothel*. We yet have dignity."

Now, I can chuckle. Once. Awkwardly. "I'll stay safe," I lie. "Keep the fire on."

"Don't burn out," Mack says, then cuts the call.

I allow myself one last look at Slade, write her a note, don my dustsuit, and leave.

...

Mayhem. I can't see my hands, my boots, or the streets. I followed ruby hills to rusty sands, but though I've walked for an hour, I've gotten nowhere. My airmask filter whines in protest at the dust-clogged air, and filth coats my goggles. Over my shoulders, my solarcape flutters, useless without direct sunlight, as I trudge into oblivion.

I wear red, but it doesn't matter. The target becomes camouflage as I blend into the residual storm. Instead of panicking, I focus on direction; a compass on my wrist leads me blind. Slade mentioned the doctor, the nameless one, and I'd forgotten about her till then. But she has a resometer—she's healed Slade before—and she knows the urgency of these secrets we savor.

Mars is rouge lipstick smeared across my eyes, blood distilled in winds, in walkways, iron incantations strewn as incense in the air. Gusts buffet me against buildings, batter me against solarcars, against vehicles abandoned in a fight-or-flight flee. No people, though. No Lords. No Roses. I'm the only lost soul amid these ravaged streets.

An hour passes. Boneless, I fall. Muscles spent, limbs jelly, lungs aching, will breaking. I'm close but done. Exhausted and drained. *I must push on*, I remind myself. If I don't, she dies, and if she dies, we all die. There is one path. One way. One direction. One choice. *Forward*. The harder darkness pulls me down, the harder I push up. This storm will not drown me, because I am a force of nature, too. Something better is coming, and Slade will sculpt a new Mars for all. But first, she must survive.

To move forward, to move on, you must let go of everything behind you. So I do. I release fear, panic, nerves, regret, and focus solely on *now*. I needed what I had to get here, but I won't need it where I'll go next. Let what will come, come. Let what will fall, fall. Let what will rise, rise. Let all unfold in time. The past didn't work, so I'll find a future that does.

My wrist beeps. The compass points. Once, twice, I try two knocks.

The door cracks. "Hello?" asks the doctor, dark and tall.

Behind the doctor, a piccolo voice: "You know a Rose?"

"In the kitchen, all of you," the doctor says, then ushers me inside. With her children gone, she snaps, "Who the hell are you, and what the fuck are you doing here?"

I remove my airmask and goggles, then say, "Slade." She's the answer to everything.

The doctor cowers, but alarms don't sound. Kasei is worse than I thought. "You know her?"

I nod. "She's with me, but injured. Do you have a spare resometer?"

The doctor's black eyes widen. "She's with you? She's alive?" She runs a hand over her bald head, then squints, suspicious. "How can I trust you?"

"She told me about *The Martian Chronicles*, and she played a harmonica, the one engraved with: *Finché c'è vita, c'è speranza, perché la speranza è l'ultima a morire.*"

Relief relaxes the doctor's stance, and she smiles, then frowns, then gathers the device. "You know how it works, I presume?"

"Yes," I say.

"What . . . When . . . How is she?"

"Hurt, but healing."

A delicate tension settles between us, one churning with questions. But we shake hands, then I leave, like a ghost, like a dream. The return trip is grueling, but with the resometer, with *hope*, it passes faster. When I arrive in the "redhouse," in the hillside home, I strip to my tunic and leggings, then cross to Slade.

She's barely here. Ashen and gray. Waxen and gaunt. A mummy embalmed. Without pause, I remove her bandage and work the resometer over the wound. Reluctant and cranky, infection fades and

skin knits together. The process is slow—damage runs deep—but after an hour, she's complete. Though there's a scar. So many scars. From this wound and countless others. I trace their silvery paths over her brown torso and bite back a sob, a howl, a shriek. They did this to her, and I let it happen. Well, not again. *Never* again. The past dies here, now, with who I was killed by who I became.

"Koa?" Slade rasps. She blinks, frightened, as she remembers her surroundings.

I hand her my copy of *The Martian Chronicles* to re-anchor her in routine, and she softens.

"You saved me," she whispers, clutching the book as a buoy.

"Of course," I whisper back.

"No, not of course. You went out in the storm, risked everything for me. Thank you. No one's ever done something like that for me before. But how?"

"The doctor. *Your* doctor. She's well. And she asked about you."

Slade pales and tenses. "I'm glad."

She cares about the doctor, but the doctor always kept her at arm's length to save her own family. I can't blame her; I did, too. Slade has the power of stars and the strength of shadows in her soul. We all worry about her impending shock wave, but we all need her supernova, too.

"Can you . . . Could you . . . Would you mind . . . reading to me?" she asks.

Tears sting my eyes as she finally lets me in. "Always. *Always*."

So I read Bradbury's words on his world to his daughter within the swirling dust of change.

# 19

## A Montage of Collage

SLADE

**L**ife is a montage, a splice and dice of images and themes, as hours blur by and days combine in collage.

Koa healed my wound and now mends my soul. Her warmth and kindness and colossal patience, along with her explicit way of teaching, fix things inside me I didn't know broken and strengthen powers buried. I darkshift daily, wade in shadows, see both worlds at once. It's the start of the unstoppable, and like subway trains, once underway, my path will follow through. Every day, I talk, and learn, and recover, and grow. A lifetime underground smothered me from light, and relentless abandonment conditioned me to escape.

But I don't need to escape anymore. Koa takes a chance on me, and I take a chance on her. I no longer blame her for waiting to help, because I *am* a weapon. If she had interfered earlier, I would have backfired, or burned out, harming all in my wake. And I did backfire. I did burn out. I did wretched things to survive, turned heroics into villainy, so I can't condemn others for fearing my truth. But I am changing, as are we all, and I must let that change manifest.

Koa enables instead of erases. Between therapy and training, I finally feel like *me*. I'm calm, not chaos. Free, not frantic. Still, not stormy. At peace, not at war. Routine helps—wake, breakfast, books, lunch, therapy, train, dinner, bed—but more than structure, *she's* my heartbeat. I know it's dangerous, risky, unhealthy. Or rather, doubt

tells me so. But I can't help falling, and she can't help catching me.

"Dinner?" Koa asks as I return from shadows.

"Dinner," I say, famished and fatigued.

She warms up beans on the stove and squeezes ketchup over the meager meal. Scooping slop into two bowls, she hands me one, then sits opposite me at the table. Our food supply shrinks. Our water, too. Lanterns dim as power drains, the sun masked with storm. It's the same all over Kasei, as we've learned from Mack's and Miro's updates. If the dust doesn't lift soon, we may welcome Earth's invasion out of desperation. *No. Not yet. Finché c'è vita, c'è speranza, perché la speranza è l'ultima a morire.* While there's life, there's hope, because hope is the last to die. I thumb the harmonica, remember the prayer.

"I'm proud of you. You've come so far in such a short time," Koa says, then blushes. Her pale cheeks redden, and she eyes her beans. Pride is no reason for embarrassment, so there must be more...

"Because of you," I say. I've used this script before. After a compliment, deflect the same. Doesn't always work. Take birthdays, for instance. Wishing someone a "Happy Birthday, too" after they've attacked you with praise summons furrowed brows and upturned chins. Not that many wish me a "Happy Birthday." The doctor used to, but I asked her to stop. What's so happy about the day Bone Lords slit my throat after my parents abandoned me?

The spiral beckons, but I swim toward the sun—my sun. We light each other's shadows. Well, Koa lights mine, and I intend to return the favor.

"You've done so much for me," I continue. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

Koa smiles a sunbeam. "No, Slade, you already helped more than enough."

I stim between mouthfuls of beans. "I've done nothing."

"You've done everything. You've given me hope."

"Hope?"

"Hope. And that's priceless."

Everything has a price, and we'll pay ours in time, but for now, I rest, and breathe, and eat.

"What was it like?" I ask. "Growing up here, I mean."

Koa stiffens, drops her spoon, and I see I've fucked up. "Sorry, I didn't—"

"No, no, it's fine." She pats her lips with her napkin and rebuilds herself with routine—like me. "It was beautiful . . . before everything went wrong."

"You don't need to talk about—"

"I want to talk about it." Koa inhales, exhales, holds her breath. "I want to share this . . . with you."

I have no words, no suitable ones, and though her green gaze is fierce and intense, for once, everything is not *too close, too much*. "I'm here," I whisper.

"Our fathers were wonderful," Koa starts. "Their love was true, and I've never seen anything like it. They raised Marga and me as if we were gods, pouring their hearts into our hopes and dreams. Childhood was idyllic in many ways. Sure, there were fights, but they were squabbles, bickering, always resolved in minutes. Nothing stuck but happiness, and kindness overflowed. I often wonder what Marga would be now if they were still alive."

She stirs her beans, lost in memory. "But they aren't alive, and she's not that person. We were close, you know. Tight as twins, thick as thieves. For a time, we told each other everything, every silly thought and vulnerable idea. Marga was the one who encouraged me to pursue a doctorate. In many ways, she set me down this path. When Daddy and Poppy brought us to the UMars campus, she saw how my face lit up, said school was my soulmate, and it was—then, at least."

Flush creeps to her roots, but Koa continues. "Then everything changed. There was a freak attack by a rogue cult, which Earth used as proof that 'all' starchildren are dangerous. Marga and I were out in the hills, weaving heather in our hair, when we heard double screams. We raced toward the house, and the rest was a blur of blood, rage, shock, and anguish. The attackers spared us, told us to remember that 'only believers deserve Mars.' Then they hacked off my fathers' skulls, stuck them on pikes, and paraded them through Kasei.

"I'll never forget Marga's face that day. Something inside her changed. No, something inside her *died*. I cried till my tears ran dry, till my throat became hoarse, till my eyes puffed closed, but she

remained still, determined. ‘We are monsters,’ she said, then she abandoned me, too. The Bone Lords strengthened with her grief, and the Order of Roses strengthened with mine. We’ve always been too alike, mirror replies to misery. She views us as a plague to contain; I view us as a power to hone. But sometimes, I fear she is right and I am wrong.”

I cock an eyebrow, afraid to upset the conversation. I have few words to use in predictable circumstances, and this is eons away from predictability. Between us, bowls lie empty, smudged with ketchup, spoons lounging on rims. After a few beats, my silence encourages her, and Koa begins Act II.

“Ayaan,” she breathes. “He was like you, a shadowchild, someone who could darkshift, who could *see*. Such potential in him. Such pain, too. So much like you, indeed. But he didn’t like what he was, didn’t want the strength, and the harder I pushed him to stay true to his path, the further he withdrew till he withdrew all the way.” She chews her lip and bites back tears. “I found him, Slade. I found him broken, buried in sand. He starshifted up to a skyship, then jumped—no airmask, no goggles, no dustsuit. Mars shredded him to a husk, skin flapping in strips, eye sockets empty and haunted. I couldn’t save him. He couldn’t save himself. And I don’t want the same thing to happen to you.”

Koa eyes me with agony, with torment, and I realize this is a risk, an attempt at connection. I wish I could arrange my features into comfort, but this is beyond my realm of mimicry. I’m in new territory, so I try something new: the truth.

“I’ve tried to give up on myself before,” I whisper. “I’ve tried to quit. I’ve tried to leave. But each time, I hung on by a thread, found a fragile excuse, and waited another night. When you found me in the subway, a change had started within me. Instead of drowning, I learned how to swim, and the higher I rose, the more I saw. I’ve already been to rock bottom. I’ve already launched from its stormy depths, and I can never return to that awful place, because I’m different, and I’ll never be the same person who sunk that far. I’m not Ayaan, but Ayaan wasn’t your fault. Only he could have found his light in the dark. Though it’s tragic he didn’t, you can’t blame yourself because he didn’t bring a candle.”

Koa smiles through a string of tears. She reaches across the



table to grab my hand, then remembers, then retreats. But instead of relief, as I'd often feel at evading touch, I feel . . . regret? Longing? Disappointment? Confusion is the only one I know for certain.

"Thank you," she says. "You don't know how much that means."

I chance an epilogue. "Sorry about what happened to Ayaan, about what happened to your fathers. They'd be proud of you." I cringe, worry it's tacky, a phrase reserved for elders or mentors, but Koa smiles and cries again, reaches again, retreats again.

"I hope so, Slade," she says. "I hope so."

Because the moment's frail, because walls lower and windows crack to allow honesty's invasion, I say, "I know they would. I wish I had yours."

"Had my what?"

"Your parents."

Ice paralyzes Koa's face, and I'm surprised her tears don't freeze on her cheeks. She wipes them away and, shaky, says, "There's something you should know about them, about your parents, but only if you're ready."

"How can I know I'm ready if I don't know what it is?" I ask, apprehensive.

She chuckles, humorless. "Good point. True point. I guess we never know if we're ready till after. Do you want to hear it?"

"Yes," I say. If there's a reason they'd abandon their child, throw out their baby, discard their infant as vulture trash, then fury demands an answer, though no suitable answer exists. Still, an excuse could suffice, if sob-worthy enough. Doubtful, but possible.

Koa pinches the bridge of her delicate nose, then speaks: cautious, careful, tentative, and bleak. "You didn't have parents, Slade."

I feel nothing, because nothing makes sense. "Pardon?" A borrowed word, a loaned disbelief.

"The divide divined you," she explains. "The conflict conceived you in a woman. She was on her honeymoon with her new husband at Valles Marineris, and they thought you were theirs till your eyes glowed violet at birth. That's why they ran. That's why they left you. They knew you were different, feared you were dangerous, and when threatened by Bone Lords, they saved themselves instead of you."

Hence, the slit throat. Hence, the doctor's salvation.

"Okay," I say.

"Okay?" Koa asks. "You're okay about this?"

"Yes." To her bemusement, I add, "I thought I was theirs, that they disowned me, but if she was only a vessel, if I belong to nobody . . . Well, that's a type of freedom, isn't it? They didn't leave me; I left them. Though I'm a bit skeptical of the 'immaculate conception' bit."

Recovering, yet unsteady, she says, "So am I, to be honest, but your DNA matches the shadows that slip through."

"Wait, those shadows have DNA?"

"The sky is alive. The void, too."

"Sentient stars and black holes . . . Am I a god? Or titan?"

"No, you're human, but maybe they are, too."

I shake my head. *Too loud, too bright, too close, too much.* Revelation overwhelms me, and I'm glad Koa waited till now to tell me, till after I changed, till after I healed. Though we first feared each other, that fear fades to trust. She's helped me more than anyone, seen me more than I thought showed, but as with all confessions, unburdening leaves me unbalanced.

"Rest," Koa says, noticing my unease. "It's a lot to take in. Though now that we've established I wasn't lying about darkshifting or you, I think we can remove your dual-slaughter condition."

"I could never kill you," I say. Though it's not a romantic statement, it sounds like a ballad in this moment, in this infinity.

Koa grins. "That's the sweetest thing someone's ever said to me," she teases. Though knowing her, and knowing Marga, I worry there's truth to her jest.

We part, then drift toward sleep, and I feel Mars spinning, stirring, a million souls with countless dreams. They need me. No one's needed me before. Feared me, yes, but never needed me. And this need is akin to belonging is akin to prayer. I have purpose for once, purpose and direction, a comet streaking a broken sky.

# 20

## Skeletons Without Souls

KOA

**T**he dust finally clears, but a new storm emerges, a storm of souls.

“No,” I say to Mack over the channel.

“I’m sorry,” Mack says, face pained. “They got her.”

“This will break Sl—*her*.” I stop myself. I can’t speak her name. Power’s back, so alarms are, too, and the brief respite from chaos evaporates like desert smoke. Traffic crowds with solar cars, food and water are restored, and citizens spill from skyscrapers and subways as “normal life” resumes. Marga’s no longer stuck in the sky, and her first order of business is *this*.

“Tell her, then come home,” Mack says. “The library is safe.”

“Nowhere’s safe.” I cut the call and turn toward the girl who’s come so far and must fly even farther. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Slade says, curled in a chair with my copy of *The Martian Chronicles*. Nostalgia stabs my chest. *This is over. This is lost.* Though the future beckons, I miss the storm.

“We should head to headquarters,” I say.

“Okay.”

“And there’s something else.”

Slade squints with suspicion, with trust, and it’s the trust that hurts.

“When I got the resometer, someone saw,” I say.

“That’s impossible,” Slade says as panic grips her body. She

breathes, as I taught her, then counts, as I taught her, and calms herself down to ask, “Who?”

I hesitate. “Marga.”

“No,” she says, re-gripped by panic. “There’s no way she could have seen through that dust.”

“That’s what I thought, but Mack said the Bone Lords have new scanners . . . I don’t know.” Something nags at my mind—Zeo’s mismatched death, the poison, the spy—but Slade’s expression melts logic to mush. “Regardless, they did see, or find out, and fuck, I’m so sorry.”

“She’s dead, isn’t she? She’s dead, because she helped me.”

“No, she’s dead because of Bone Lords. It’s not your fault—”

“I’m a fugitive,” Slade says, tears brimming her copper eyes. “If not for me, she’d be alive. What about her family?”

I try to speak, but my tongue is chalk.

“Gone,” she says, understanding. “Your sister killed them all.”

In that “your,” I hear accusation. Because *I* let Marga live. I let her survive. I let her steal Slade’s only family. My mercy enabled her crimes.

“I’m so sorry,” I say again, and again, it does nothing.

Something snaps in Slade, same as it snapped in Marga. Darkness washes across her gaze as stillness ossifies her body. She is bone. She is stone. She is undone. She is a skeleton without a soul. Marga left me to a corpse-laden road, then Ayaan left me to the dark beyond. I will not let Slade go down the same path, but as I look at her, as I see her ruined heart, I know I cannot stop her descent. She must find her own candle now.

“I’m here,” I say.

“So are they,” she says.

“What—”

A knock interrupts me.

“Suit up.” Slade tosses me my red dustsuit and dons her black one. Airmasks and goggles snap over our faces, then I see what she already knew.

Bone Lords.

At the door.

They found us. Marga led them straight here, as I worried she would once the dust cleared. After all, it was her home, when she was

someone, when I was, too.

"Go," I say. "I'll distract them."

Slade waits for one second, for one moment to say: "I don't want to be this anymore."

My heart ruptures. "We can't always be what we want, but we'll always end up where we're meant." A shiver of anxiety. A perch on a cliff. "And . . . I want you . . . as *this*."

She frowns. "I think we . . . we as people, I mean . . . I think we're all searching for someone who makes us feel something." A mirrored shiver. A commitment to the fall. "Koa . . . you make me feel something."

Then she starshifts outside, then runs, back in her routine, used to this, to the hunt, to the chase. I wanted a different life for her—a better life, a quieter life—but while skeletons own skies and blood soaks streets, this is the only way. If Slade can go out into a world that's too loud and too bright and too close and too much, then I can, too.

The Bone Lords don't knock. They don't starshift, either. They rewind to brutes and blast the door off its hinges. Childhood destroyed.

"Where is she, Koa?" Marga asks, masked by ivory garb. She stands amid a skeleton army, a robotic devastation of humanity.

"Who?" I ask, the sole red flare, the single red rose amid a glen of graves.

"I've been too soft on you," she growls, then starshifts before me, pins me with her forearm. I squirm against the wall, the soil wall where we used to notch each year of height. She was always taller, as she is now, but I always lied to make us even.

"Mmm, yes, you're the epitome of nurturing," I say.

Thorns slide from my sleeves, and I lunge forward . . . into thin air. Behind me, Marga appears and wraps herself around my neck. "Tell me, Koa. Tell me, and I'll let you go."

I starshift out of her grasp and land on the table. "I'm sorry." *I'm sorry death broke you. I'm sorry I couldn't fix you. I'm sorry you hate what you are, what I am, what Slade is, because of our societal jail.* "I'm so fucking sorry, Marga."

Then I do what I must, what I should have done years ago. I throw a lantern, and it explodes on Marga's chest. Flames flower

from her heart, and shock roots her to the floor. Again, I starshift, throw, starshift, throw, till each Bone Lord blazes in sacrifice. Fire scorches furniture, and tears scorch my cheeks, and shrieks scorch the air, as they try to starshift, to escape, to run, but fail at all three. Because these lanterns are special, laced with oil, flammable and fierce and unstoppable, like me.

Marga spared me. She always spared me. But I can't spare her. Not this time. Not again. I don't want to do this, but I must do something. So I breach our unspoken promise, that we're sisters, that we're safe, and light Mars on fire with vengeance, with victory. Home is gone. It died with my fathers, when Marga died, too.

With one last look at burning books, curling pages, smoke-drenched air, and embers of *The Martian Chronicles*, I leave to the stench of my sister's burning flesh.

# 21

## Something Old, Something New

SLADE

I spent so long escaping in fantasy, but now, I'm searching for something real, something I found in a redhouse, in a moor.

A moor that erupts behind me in flames. *Koa*. She did this for me, to help me, to save me, so I sprint, starshift, sprint, starshift, then leave the moor, blink down streets, and reach the subway to save myself. It's the same old song. But it's also something new. A harmony winds with my melody, boosting my tune.

It starts with the end of a dream, with a crossroads of fates. I saw the life I wanted, and it was a beautiful life, full of passion and peace. Then Mars snatched it away in a cruel show-and-tell, in a sinister, cackling tease. But I found a reason to live. I found a reason to fight.

And I want—I *need*—to live for something. I need beauty. I need passion. I need peace. I need *Koa* to feed my soul, to birth purpose from burnout after the darkest part of the night. What comes next? I worked so hard for so many years and got nothing back till her. Now, I finally have answers, answers that spawn questions, questions that weave mysteries from madness. I am a shadowchild, divined by the divide, burdened by duty to unite the impossible. It hurts to hope. I'm not allowed dreams. But if this makes sense of sorrow, I have no choice but to change.

I hate change, I resist change, but I *am* change, so I follow

change and let it manifest, course-correct, stop one cycle, then start another. Moving, always moving. Analyze, then adjust. Though I pine for who I was, that old me is gone, dissolved, into a newer, better, stronger shell. *Don't regret who you are, and don't fear what you can achieve*, Koa told me one day when I was delusional with pain. Then, I shunned her, but now, I'm ready, and I must let go. I am a butterfly at the brink of forever. Though I grew wings, I can still fall.

But I must try. For me. For Koa. For the doctor. *The doctor*. She's gone. Her family, too. Stolen because of my mystery. Grief is new. Since I never knew my parents, since they were never my parents at all, I've mourned nothing but my loss of self. This loss, though—this emptiness, this nothingness—stabs my gut and carves a fathomless void. The doctor could have done more, but she could have done less, and she was the only one who did anything during these lonely, bloody, barren years. *Those years, not these*. They're gone. Over. Finished. Done. My future will *not* reflect my past.

I should cry. I want to cry. No, I *want* to want to cry. But I don't. So I listen to what I actually want, not what I *want* to want, and run faster, leap farther, starshift between trains, fight back as hard as they've suppressed me. I boil over, then break cover.

Everything falls away. I'm me. I'm truth. I'm finally free.

A smile curls my lips despite the Bone Lords, despite the chase. I dash past my favorite dumpster and pause. This was my home. No. This was never a home. This held my heart, but my heart grew wings. So I leave. And I don't look back as I run, jump, dance, grin, then ditch the subway after stopping a train. Behind me, brakes screech, smoke hisses. Bone Lords double, then triple. It's not safe underground anymore, and I'm no longer a spider, so with tender unease, I take to the streets.

The empty streets. No solarcars. No solartrucks. Skyships high, out of starshift reach. They cleared Kasei to catch me. Never before were they this desperate, this distressed. I can't pick a pocket, steal a vehicle, cause a commotion, because the commotion is me. Only skyscrapers keep me company, glassy trees in an industrial forest. Around corners, abreast intersections, Bone Lords creep from shadows. They're afraid, I realize. No, they've always been afraid. Now, they're mortified. They've seen what I can do, and I've seen what I can do, and it's time for a reminder.



Remembering Koa, I breathe, count, steady myself while skeletons swarm me. This is easy. This is the truth. So again, I breathe, count, blink, unleash. My eyes burn violet as I span worlds—one foot here, one foot there—and I welcome chaos into Mars. Fissures spiderweb streets. Pavement crumbles along fault lines of revenge. Some high-rises shake, while others shatter, as I prelude the cosmic night.

Bone Lords fall in newborn canyons. Citizens scream from wavering homes. Workers evacuate violated buildings, and families cower behind curtained windows. I retreat from the darkshift, become myself again. Though I hurt no one—well, no one innocent—I should feel guilt, but I don't. There's something inside me, a rage that justifies everything. When this rage retreats, I don't regret what I've done. Instead, I crave more.

I call chaos again. Summon shadows. Quake Kasei. This time, I am *too loud, too bright, too close, too much*, and they finally see what it's like to be me as they scream, sob, trip, fall.

"Slade, stop!" someone shouts, that someone who is something real, that someone who makes me feel. Alarms should sound. They don't. I've broken Mars, though once I stop, I'm sure they'll start.

But because it's Koa, I stop. Then alarms recover. Then they roar. I am so sick of this bullshit. Let me out. Let me free.

"Don't become *this*," Koa says. Her red silhouette balances on the cracked street, a superhero's stance, or a fallen angel's. "You're supposed to reunite Mars, not ruin her."

"Mars is beyond redemption," I say, though I know it's wrong, that it's not my story.

"But you aren't." Her fiery hair haloes her plea. Skeptical, I trust her as she ushers me inside an undamaged skyscraper.

"Where are we going?" I ask in reception, but Koa has no time to answer. Bone Lords pop behind us, and we run. If we starshift now, we could lose each other, and we can't lose each other when we've lost everything else. So, as I said, we run.

Koa grabs my arm. I flinch from the suddenness, then relax at her touch. Relax? *Relax*? She's supposed to be *too much*. But no time to think. She whips us both around a corner, down a hallway, and into a stairwell. Feet pounding against metal, hearts pounding against

ribs, we climb, *climb*, *climb*, then body-check a door. It opens, slams into an innocent wall, as we dive down another hallway, soles squeaking in protest.

The next intersection is empty, then not. Bone Lords flare into being, sprint once they're formed. I shove Koa sideways, through a supply closet, out the other side, one of many Easter eggs I found from days and months and years on the run. But this is where it *ends*.

More Bone Lords.

*Or not.*

And more.

Then *more*.

We're cornered. To the left, skeletons. To the right, wraiths. Behind us, walls. Before us, a balcony. I stall. Koa stalls. A shared glance. A communal nod. Then we lunge and dash and clear the balcony in defiant leaps. The floor rushes up to crush us, but we starshift once, land together, then race across the atrium as Bone Lords pursue.

"We can't escape," Koa gasps beside me.

She slows, unused to the chase, to iron-hot muscles and smoldering lungs. I could run for hours more. I've done that before, wasted childhood underfoot, but I'll waste no more years, so I stop. She stumbles a few steps, then faces me with worry.

"Koa," I say, "duck."

She opens her mouth to object, realizes she can't, that it's the only way, then falls to the floor, fetal, arms over her head. I turn toward the Bone Lords. They starshift, cut the distance in half. Again, I burn violet, reach across the divide, greet chaos with open arms. I darkshift for one moment, but one moment yields mayhem. The floor ripples, then crumbles in a shadowy tide. Windows shatter into salt, sucking atmosphere into Kasei, and crushed glass glints with broken rainbows.

Pillars fall as severed trees. Statues fracture into pebbles. The ceiling yawns open, and walls wrinkle from the shock of a ripped reality, with the promise of a looming, brewing, cosmic night. I'm human again; they're corpses, skeletal as their reputation. Koa rises as everything falls. Together, we charge across the disintegrating floor, beneath the collapsing skyscraper, faster, *faster*, *faster* to a swooning doorway.

We don't know what lies beyond, so we can't starshift, in case we land inside the street. Eyes closed, hands together—again, a touch that binds and does not break me—we pierce the exit, twins from a bloody womb, then skid into nothingness as stairs give way.

Falling, I curl and shout for Koa to do the same. We land on the street. Roll. Stand. Debris clogs the air. Dust coats the street—not only the dust of Mars, but the dust of destruction, the dust of *me*. Eyeing the wreckage, the slaughter, the destruction, I swallow hard. *I* did this. I released madness, the monster they made. No. They didn't make this. *I* made this. And I'm no monster; I'm the future. Koa faces me. In her stance, I see change: her change, my change, Kasei's change, Mars's change. It hurts for an instant—the dull throb of an old wound, the re-sprained muscle of a childhood fall—then fades. I grieve who we were and celebrate who we are, and to the soundtrack of sirens, we vanish into smog.

# 22

## Phobos and Deimos

KOA

**T**he UMars library overflows with panic, with fear, as Phobos and Deimos mock us through kaleidoscopic windows. Alarms have stopped outside, but Kasei is in uproar, and Earth threatens war. Slade and I strip off dustsuits, return to tunics, and weave through the crowd.

Mack finds us in seconds. “Koa, what the hell?” he asks, heated. Then he notices Slade beside me and freezes.

“Mack, meet you-know-who,” I say. Then to Slade: “This is Mack. When he’s not an asshole, he’s also a Rose.”

“One of the best.”

“Assholes?”

“Roses.” Mack thaws and extends a hand, a hand I bat away as Slade tenses from *too close, too much*. “Pleasure to meet you.”

Slade dips her head and steps backward. Headquarters overflows with what-the-fuck and holy-shit comments as the Order scrambles to make sense of the mess. Voices bounce off arches, and walls rebound hysteria in titanium-tinted echoes. Ceilings vault toward the sky, and rows of tables stretch toward the horizon. Between flickering chandeliers, amid mounds of books, bleached with glowing smartglass diagrams, Roses hunker together in mania. It’s overwhelming to me. To Slade, it’s crippling.

“Go upstairs to the sunloft.” I wave over Miro. “Miro will show

you the way.”

Miro’s brown eyes widen as he approaches. “Is this . . . ?”

“Yes,” I say.

He motions at the destruction outside. “Did she . . . ?”

“Yes. Now, go.”

Impressed, Miro nods his black curls and points a dark finger at the sunloft’s staircase entrance. Thankful, Slade follows him with frequent backward glances toward me. I nod in encouragement, and they soon disappear.

“Guess you’ve disbanded the orgy den,” I say once they’re gone.

“Brothel,” Mack says. “And yes. Koa, what happened out there?” His hazy, hazel gaze scrutinizes me as he twists a golden dreadlock around a gnarled finger.

“She happened.”

“I know, but *how*? She destroyed buildings and streets. She murdered people. It wasn’t supposed to be like this.”

“No?” I challenge. “Then how was it supposed to be, Mack? After a lifetime hunted, abandoned by all, did you think she’d have a fairy-tale ending? Their fear shaped her fate. Their dread painted her destiny. They molded her into a monster.”

Mack grimaces, lips pursed. “So you taught her, then.”

“As you’ve insisted for years,” I say.

“What now?”

“We end this.”

“End this *how*? We’ve boosted the library’s defenses, but it’s only a matter of time before Bone Lords attack. To be honest, I’m surprised they haven’t attacked already.”

“That’s because of me.” I cringe, remembering my sister’s screams, her burning flesh, betrayal’s wounds. “I killed Marga. Well, I think I killed her.”

Mack stops breathing. I do, too. “Shit . . . I’m s—”

“You’re not sorry, and neither am I.” *I am.* “I should have done it sooner, but . . .” I love her. We were family. We were more. “How did they find out about the doctor, by the way? No one could have seen me through that dust.”

He pulls me aside and mutters, “Careful, Koa. This spy has access to *everything*.”

I survey the horde. "You think they're *here*?"

He shrugs. "If I were a spy, it's where I would be."

"And how do I know you're not?"

Affronted, he frowns. "First, I'm hurt by your distrust. Second, if I were a spy, I'd have much better pick-up lines than 'take a break, for fuck's sake,' and I wouldn't have misread your signals."

"So your excuse is you're horny and blue-balled?"

He laughs, and I laugh, and tension dissolves.

"Yes," Mack says. "Spies have game; I do not."

"Sorry, I shouldn't have asked, but—"

"No, no, you should have, and it's fine, but I'll ask you, too: Are you a spy, Professor?"

"I wish. It'd make things easier to align with Earth."

"So your excuse is you're a masochist?"

"Precisely."

Mack segues into comfortable territory. "Did you see how they looked at *her*?"

I nod. "Like a god. I should check on her. Need me for anything?"

"Nope, you insulted my character, so you're free to go."

"Glad I've been of use."

I leave Mack to the masses and climb the spiral staircase. In the sunloft, I spot Miro in silent prayer, eyes fixated on Slade with obsessive reverence. "Miro, I'll take it from here."

He nods, then leaves.

"Sorry," I tell Slade. "They've heard about you."

"No, I'm sorry," Slade says. She turns, and tears sparkle her copper eyes. "I've disappointed you. I've let you down."

Her sorrow crushes me. Agony and anguish wring her striking face. "No, never. Not in a hundred years," I say.

"I hurt people," she gasps. "I... *killed*. I did it before, but I had to, and I thought I could leave that 'me' behind."

Before I can talk, before I can understand, she rushes me and drowns in my arms. I push her away, afraid of *too much*, but she pulls me near, beyond *too close*. Slowly, I embrace her, and that risk, that *danger*, solidifies. Within me spreads wildfire. My heart drumrolls in warning. Breaths stop. Thoughts stop. Even Mars stops for a beat.

Everything I lost—every heartbeat, every dream—realizes in

her, in this woman against me. Then breaths restart. Then they quicken. Enliven. Force me to confess there is no retreat.

"I'm sorry," Slade sobs against my forehead, taller and stronger and more powerful than me. "I never wanted to hurt anyone."

"It wasn't your fault," I say, stroking her hair, mahogany and blonde. Strands revolt from her staple ponytail, and I sense the earthquake within her awakening. "You had no choice."

"We *always* have a choice. I could have surrendered."

"Then they'd kill you."

"Maybe I deserve it."

I stiffen and clutch her tighter. "You deserve the *stars*, you hear me? Nothing less, everything more. If you die, we all die. Mars is cracking. Our universe is breaking. Without you, nothing will survive."

"What if I can't do it?" she sniffs into my hair. "What if I fail?"

"You've already won. Look how far you've come. You're what you were always meant to be. The rest is easy."

She scoffs. "Easy."

"Easy," I repeat. "You already did the hardest part."

"What's that?"

"You changed."

And she has. As she leans against me, forehead to forehead, tangled in arms, I sense rebirth in her breathing, in her calm. She scripts what she can and improvises what she cannot. Though her routine is upset yet again, she adapts—*she adapts*—and digs anchors in new shores. We practiced transitions, abstractions, and unpredictability in the moor, but applying skills in the "real world" rewinds most to start. Not Slade. She assimilated all I taught her—cues, social stories, and interactions—to learn flexibility and regulation. Her emotions are still powerful, at constant risk of supernova or black hole, but she embraces, monitors, and channels their force, sensing her threshold and restoring when need be—like here, now, recovering out of reach. Well, out of reach of most, but not of me. *Danger. Risk. A silent alarm.*

"I'm proud of you," I whisper, ignoring the red flags. Or are they white? Flags of surrender instead of sacrifice? Are those two exclusive? Or does peace always demand pain? *Finché c'è vita, c'è*

*speranza, perché la speranza è l'ultima a morire.* While there's life, there's hope, because hope is the last to die.

"Thank you," Slade whispers back, "for everything."

"You did all the work. I only showed you the road." *The road home.* For fuck's sake, I'm falling. Or flying.

"How did you escape?" she asks. "In the moor, I mean."

Grief knots my gut. "I did something I should have done years ago."

"You killed Marga." Slade immediately understands. She sees things others don't, entertains ideas others fear. Unlike Mack, she doesn't apologize. She doesn't say "holy shit" or "it's okay" or "my heartfelt condolences" or "let me know if you need anything." She knows those scripts, those snippets, those scenes, but she doesn't use them now. Instead, she cuts through customs and pierces truth with blunt force. "That was brave, Koa. That took everything."

Here, some would tell Slade to mince her words; they'd say her straightforward sentences are too harsh. But I've never tried to change her nature; I've only helped to encourage her nurture, to sail her own ship in alien waters. And in this moment, in this infinity, Slade's words are a gift, because they're pure. They distill my turmoil to courage, to sacrifice. She doesn't judge murder; she sympathizes loss. As I comforted her, she now comforts me.

Marga was cruel, but she never would have hurt me, despite her threats. Our fathers forged her, then their deaths melted her, welded her into a bleached, washed-out, self-loathing shell. I pitied her, though she wanted no pity, and she controlled me, though I wanted no chains. We were sisters. We were soulmates. We were a mirror cracked down the center, facing opposite sides of the same room. Even though it was right, even though her death buys us time, I pine for our firefly days under the Martian sun.



# 23

## Soap Bubbles and Dragonfly Wings

SLADE

**I**n the sunloft, Koa cries in my arms.

This should overload my synapses, fry functioning to a crisp. It doesn't. Instead, it soothes. Sates. Answers a question I didn't know how to ask. Finds a key I didn't know I lost. Opens a wall I didn't know was a door.

"I'm sorry," Koa whispers as she leans against me. Her tears are glass snowflakes against porcelain cheeks. Her sobs are a symphony, a weeping *adagio* between peaks.

"Don't be," I say. "I want this." Though the words are bold, they are also true. Koa dissolves while I draw strength from her confidence that I can help when I never thought myself capable.

After a few minutes, she pulls herself together, shedding honesty for duty. "So how do you like headquarters?"

"The library is...big," I admit. "I'm used to...Well, you know." Dumpsters. Closets. Subways. Each and every underworld cage.

"You can stay up here, if you like, if downstairs is too much."

"Thanks, but I'll go where you want."

"No, go where *you* want. This is your home. Make yourself comfortable."

I'm never comfortable, not even now, always blinded, deafened, drowned, lacerated by a world amplified through my

soap-bubble, dragonfly-wing lens. I'm a flower petal held over a blue-fire match. A spiderweb in a tornado. A dandelion puff in a river. No words nor actions can comfort my tissue-paper nerve endings, my wafer-thin armor, but discomfort defines me, strengthens me, fortifies my purpose to embrace my fate. If Mars is broken, and if Koa is on Mars, then there is one way forward, one path to take.

"What do you think of the Roses? Any first impressions?" Koa asks with levity, but I sense a deeper aim.

"Miro's great," I say. "He stares too much, but his eyes are warm, not cold, if that makes sense. And he told me he likes books, too, so I trust him."

"Because he reads books?"

"Because he explores minds."

Koa smiles. "I never thought of it that way."

"Sorry," I say, thinking I misspoke, that I mis-humaned.

"No, no, no, don't be sorry. I love it, and you're right. Reading is like exploring minds, make-believing souls. I like Miro, too. He's my grad assistant, and he's worshiped you for years. What about Mack? He's the first one you met."

I pause, filtering firepower for warning shots. "He likes you intimately, but you don't trust him. I don't, either."

Her red brow crinkles in concern. "Why do you think I don't trust him?"

"He always leans toward you," I say, "and you always lean away. It's what I do when it's too much."

"What about you? Why don't you trust him?"

"His wrist."

"His wrist?"

I take Koa's hand—a jolt of contact, then a greeting of touch—and flip her palm up. On the inside of her wrist is a nine-pointed star, the symbol of Mars, on starcoins and Roses. The scar shimmers over her delicate skin and faint veins.

"Did you carve this yourself?" I ask.

She nods. "Why?"

"It's good, precise."

"And Mack's is . . . ?"

I chew my cheek, search her gemstone-green eyes, eyes I distrusted, eyes I now crave. "Fake," I say. "Yours is raised. His is

flat. Scars have substance, topography. His does not.” I stretch my neck, and the scar beneath my red scarf tightens—red for blood, for Mars, for revenge. I know scars. I *am* scars. Skin made stronger by wounds and mends.

Koa pales. “Are you sure? Are you *absolutely* certain?” Her urgency alarms me, and I recoil, so she calms herself and regroups. “Sorry, love. I didn’t mean to overwhelm you.”

“No, no, it’s fine,” I say, then calm myself, too. “Yes, I’m sure. He extended his left hand to shake mine, instead of his right, and the switch confused me, then the scar caught my eye. But it doesn’t shimmer, like yours. There are no shadows.”

“Shadows?” Koa asks.

I twist her wrist, turn it beneath the ceiling skylight. Thumb up, the glow summons shadows beneath the nine-pointed scar, a melting star dripping down her arm.

“Shadows,” she says, understanding. “You’re a genius.”

I’m not, but for once, my differences feel like strengths: my addiction to details, my lack of filter, my sponge-like perception, my candid way.

With this realization, with Mack’s betrayal, we should leave, rush, shuffle down the stairs, but we both pause, her wrist in a nest of my fingers, and breathe. This isn’t too much. This is too little. And I need more of *this*, more of *her*, more of a warmth that sparks a revolution inside me. But upon our exhale, we hear panic downstairs.

“You’re right,” Koa says.

“I wish I were wrong,” I say.

## 24

## It All Falls Down

KOA

**I**t all falls down.

Downstairs is a nightmare. Already, the library is destroyed beyond recognition as Bone Lords smash windows and breach doors. Frantic, I grab dustsuits as Slade and I strap airmasks and goggles over our faces. This time, she wears red, too. Behind us, the staircase spirals into dust, and the sunloft caves in, buckles, crumbles to the floor—forbidden texts forgotten forever. I push Slade sideways, beneath an arch, as rubble rains down with Ares's rage.

Smartglass splinters into prismatic knives, hollowing husks from windows. Skyships swoop low and become aerial battering rams, toppling spires and smashing ceilings like stomped-on skulls. Titanium splits, shreds—weak as tumbleweed—and metal joins the industrial downpour. Dalí's and Gaudí's ghosts cry in dark eternities while starry-eyed surrealism yields to star-crossed realism. Emancipated chandeliers plummet as torpedoes and spear the escaping crowd. Tables bend then break beneath the fleeing stampede. Spellbook tablets explode in human lightning, and book stacks avalanche in skeletal thunder, angelic echoes replaced by demonic shrieks.

Slade is on the verge of meltdown, and so am I. It's *too loud, too bright, too close, too much* for everyone. I touch her arm, and she doesn't shirk away. Instead, she leans closer as I whisper, "Focus

only on me.”

With a death-rattle breath and a tense, murmured count, she nods and follows as I skim the edge of the breach. The library is dead. Headquarters is a carcass picked clean by vultures, then swallowed by time. It’s gone. Everything I worked for. Everything I built. Gone. *Gone. Gone.* Survivors flood through UMars, and Bone Lords pursue as bloodthirsty sharks. Amid the chaos, they don’t notice us. I find the conference room, somehow still standing, and pull Slade inside, then sit against a wall. She joins me, and we catch what little breath remains inside our shell-shocked, defibrillated souls.

High-backed chairs wait at the vacant table, filled with empty promises and faithless vows. Windowless with imitation-oak walls, dim lighting boosts the gloomy resolve. Turbulence knocks art and antiques to the floor in a mass grave of clocks, globes, paintings, and sculptures. A fountain pen stabs a typewriter, the old killing the new, Lords against Roses, Earth against Mars.

“I...I can’t do this...Koa,” Slade hyperventilates. She trembles herself into a blur.

I adjust her airmask and shimmy sideways, shoulder to shoulder. Her shaking slows, a slight decrease, and her breathing steadies to normal.

“You can, because you already are,” I say. “No more doubts. No more worries. No more questioning yourself. This is your path, and you’ve already traveled halfway.”

Slade shakes her head. “It... hurts. No matter how hard I fight, I always... rebound... to start.”

“Muscle memory takes time. Mental memory, too. But each day, you’re stronger than yesterday. Practice paves new roads, and soon, those roads will become natural. Don’t forget how far you’ve come.”

“But there’s farther... to go.”

Miro interrupts us, barging into the conference room. “Koa! Thank the bloody stars.” Ash coats his dustsuit and curls. His goggles are askew. He tightens his airmask, then folds his long, lean body into a nearby crouch. “Let’s go. I found a tunnel.”

He offers his hand, and Slade takes it without question. She trusts him, and trust overrides her programming, but I mourn that programming. She sees, hears, lives *everything*, and that is an

incomparable gift.

I stand. They take one step forward, and this distance spells the end. An orphaned skyship wing slices between us. The floor shudders, then sags. Thrown down, I grasp table legs as the room settles in ruins.

"Koa!" Miro shouts from the other side. "Koa, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I cough, standing again.

"Starshift over."

"I can't. Too much debris." Dangerous debris I could pop inside. "Go. I'll find another way."

"Koa—"

"Go."

"No!" Slade croaks, her voice hoarse with despair. "I can darkshift. I can—"

"No, I won't risk anyone else. Keep her safe, Miro," I say.

"Of course," Miro says.

They leave to the fleshy sound of kicks against skin, of fists against arms. Slade fights Miro as he drags her away, but her noises of resistance fade amid the roaring wreckage. I turn and meander the opposite way, spot a crack in the wall, then stumble into a collapsed hallway. The Martian sky spotlights my exit, and waiting, smug, is our spy.

"Koa," Mack says.

"You fucking piece of starforsaken shit," I spit.

He raises his arms, clothed in a white dustsuit. "Hear me out."

"There's nothing you could say that would change my mind."

"You were right."

Or maybe there is. "Sorry?" I ask.

"She's chaos," he says. "You saw what she did to Kasei."

"Because *you* chased her."

"Because *she* is a bomb."

I sigh and seethe within the library's dying whines. "How long, Mack? How long did you lie to me?"

He retreats a step and braces himself on a fallen pillar. "Forever." A whisper. A confession. The first truth he's told.

"So that whole speech about her being a symbol—a wolf, a bridge, the voice for those who have none—was bullshit?" I ask.

"Not bullshit," he says. "She is all those things, and that's why

she's dangerous."

"You Bone Lords are the ones who destroyed a library."

"Because of her."

"Because you're afraid."

"Because we're practical."

"It was you," I realize. "You poisoned me, then saved me, to fake loyalty to the Roses. No one could see through the dust storm, so you must have told Marga about the resometer, sentencing the Doctor and her family to death. You pushed me to act fast to reveal the Roses, to expose us before we were ready. You had access to headquarters and told them *everything*. Why, Mack? Bone Lords killed your parents in a raid. Why sell out to them?"

"My parents were Roses," Mack says. "They made their fate."

His betrayal cuts deep. His brainwashing, too. He thinks his parents deserved to die, and their deaths solidified his belief in Earth. So much like Marga. So much like grief.

"So what happens now?" I ask.

"Join us," Mack pleads. "We only want to keep the peace."

"You want to keep the segregation. Mars is breaking. Our universe, too. We can't stay apart much longer."

"There won't be a shadow universe for much longer."

Understanding hits me like a train. He wants to destroy it.

"Mack, you can't."

"Koa, we must." He starshifts forward; we're heartbeats apart. "And we will. Earth sends her regards." A pinch. A sedative. "Marga does, too."

# 25

## Too Loud, Too Bright, Too Close, Too Much

SLADE

*Too loud. Too bright. Too close. Too much. Too loud. Too bright. Too close. Too much. Too loud. Too bright. Too close. Too much . . .*

"Hey." A voice.

*Too loud. Too bright. Too close. Too much. Too loud. Too bright. Too close. Too much. Too loud. Too bright. Too close. Too much. Too loud. Too bright. Too close. Too much. Too loud. Too bright. Too close. Too much. Too loud. Too bright. Too close. Too much. Too loud. Too bright. Too close. Too much . . .*

"Hey." Louder, but not harsh, not cruel. Miro, then. "Breathe with me."

"If . . . you . . . want," I wheeze.

"No, not if I want, if you want," Miro says. "You can be real around me."

*Real.* That's new. Koa removes my masks, but everyone else wants the carnival. *People come into your life for a reason*, the doctor once told me. *Seek change, not comfort. We get what we need when we need it.* With memory comes a pang of guilt, a stab of grief. Though she's gone, her words ring true. She was what I needed then; Koa and Miro are what I need now.

"Thank . . . you," I say.

Then I breathe with him, count with him, wind down to Mars, and land in a high-rise penthouse. There's no furniture, no curtains,



no carpets, no sense of belonging whatsoever. Just a slab of metal floor, a wall of windows, and a pile of supplies beneath stark, bleak lighting. Outside, skyships circle Kasei and loop through rusty streets, patrolling dust for runaways and survivors.

There are a dozen Roses here, including us—a *dozen*—with an array of injuries, resometers waving like wands. Dustsuit parts litter the floor, cracked like eggshells, dented and scratched. Goggles dangle from necks, from wrists, lenses glazed with grime. Airmasks lie in a corner, thrown in defeat. Bone Lords found us. Attacked us. Destroyed us. The library is gone. Koa is—a *cottony swallow*—gone.

“What happened?” I whisper.

Miro frowns. “Mack. He betrayed us all.”

“Where are the rest?”

A stuttered breath. A dark frown. “There are no ‘rest.’ This is it.”

A dozen Roses. Twelve people. Thirteen with Koa. Koa. “I’m going out.”

Miro opens his mouth to object, closes it to reconsider, then inhales and starts again. “I won’t stop you. I won’t tell you no. But if you go out there, they’ll catch you, and if they catch you, you’ll die . . . or worse.”

“I’ve dodged them for twenty-three years,” I say.

“But they’re desperate now,” he says, “desperate and dangerous.”

“Well, so am I.” I start to rise, but he interrupts me.

“They’ll kill her. Go after her, and they’ll kill her. She’s bait. They’re drawing you out. Just wait till we have a plan, then I’ll go with you. I promise. But let’s regroup first.”

“I’m not hiding anymore.”

“I’m not asking you to hide. I’m asking you to think. It was a massacre, Sl—” Miro stops himself, frustrated. “We can’t react till we have a direction. Throw yourself at them, and it’s suicide. No, it’s genocide. Because if you die, we all die, and I don’t know about you, but I’m not ready to die yet. I haven’t even started to live.”

Miro’s warm eyes beseech me with something strong, with something like fire, like flames. Black curls droop over his dark forehead, matted by sweat and filth from battle. Nervous but brave, he gazes at the floor—not out of fear, but out of respect for me. He

doesn't only accept me; he understands me, too. And to him, I'm not odd or strange or too loud or too much. To him, I'm human, and he treats me the same.

"I love her, Miro," I whisper.

He strokes the Rose scar on his wrist and smiles—a slight crack in the clouds. "I know. She loves you, too."

My breath hitches, and my stomach twists, and I hope for all the stars he's right.

"So I must go after her," I say. "I couldn't save her before, but I can now. I know it."

"And you will, I promise," he says. "But first, we make a plan."

# 26

## My Sister's Hostage

KOA

**M**arga is alive, and I'm my sister's hostage.

Coughing blood, I blink reality into existence and scan my latest cell. But it's not a cell; it's the bridge of her command skyship, a Gothic cavern of ivory arches and columns with diamond-faceted windows and pro-Earth engravings. I'm strapped to the captain's chair, surrounded by bone-white soldiers, all eyes on me.

"Koaaaaaaa..."

A hiss. A whisper. A threat. A promise. Though they wear dustsuits, I wear nothing, bound to armrests with twine. My pale thighs blur in my foggy vision, toes curled against the blinding floor. Sedative lingers in my mind, a sluggish glue that sticks thoughts together, dissolving and softening reason into gummy, runny globs. But I killed Marga. Then Mack betrayed us. Then Mack kidnapped me. Three prongs of a bloody trident spear me with ruthless truth.

*Earth sends her regards. Marga does, too.*

Wait, one prong is wrong...

"Your pet's causing trouble, darling sister."

She's *alive*. Marga's *alive*. But I burned her, maimed her, left her to smoke in the moor. Hesitant, I lift my head and freeze—relieved first, horrified second, ashamed third. Relieved because she's alive, she's family, she's more. Horrified because her skin is a scar, melted like wax, molded in fleshy clumps over missing eyes, ears, nose, lips,

and hair. Ashamed because I did this to her.

"Marga," I whisper, ash in my throat.

She tilts her expressionless head: a blank, featureless slate waiting for an artist to add details and identity. But I wiped hers. I erased everything. Resometers fixed what they could, but they're not magic wands, despite the resemblance. Marga is an amorphous blob, a gooey slab of meat who survived Dante's inferno because of sheer will and shrill hatred.

Hatred aimed at me.

"You always knew I'd never hurt you," Marga rasps through a crack in her face. "Not permanently, at least, not like this." She gestures at her pulpy demise. "I always saved you, always let you go, but *you* crossed *me*. And you have the gall to call me immoral."

"Where is she?" I ask. Slade is the only thing that matters now. I'll grieve and repent later.

Marga's face twitches in an attempted and abandoned smile. She quivers in her dustsuit, like batter stuffed in a muffin tin, her humanity lost in recognition and reaction. "Hopefully on her way."

They're using me as bait. This shouldn't warm my heart, but it does. If I'm bait, then Slade cares, and if Slade cares, then I can persevere to see her again.

"She killed so many," my sister continues through her mouth flap. "She wrecked the city and sent countless civilians to their deaths. How is she so different from me?"

"Because you kill to subjugate, while she kills to survive," I say.

"Is her survival worth the lives of others? Did you see what she did to the streets? Did you see how she vandalized Kasei? She's a monster, and she must be stopped before she becomes too dangerous to control."

Anger heats my words like irons, branding each letter to memory. "Everything she did was because of *you*. If you left her alone, if you helped, if you cared, she never would have hurt anyone. But you abused her, tortured her, chased her, and hunted her since birth, forcing her into a role she never wanted to play."

Marga sighs, a puff of air from a broken accordion. "Perhaps, perhaps. It's the same old argument, and we'll never agree. But you're a hypocrite, Koa. Though you left her alone, though you cared, you never helped her till you needed her."

"That's not true," I snap, infuriated. "The Roses are a target. If I'd helped her sooner, I'd have put her in more danger, and I could never risk her life like that."

"Like how you risked Ayaan's?"

I scowl and glare, but she's right. Fear was my driving force, a force I've overcome. "I'm not perfect. No one is. I've done shit I'm not proud of. I've fucked up and fucked over people I love." I stare at her, but she can't stare back, blinded by my traitorous hands. "Please, Marga, let's end this, stop this, surrender this war. Mars is dying. If we don't heal the divide, no one will survive."

"The cosmic night," Marga murmurs. Her Bone Lords rustle around us. "You want to reunite the realities."

"Yes," I beg.

"To save Mars."

"Yes."

"Hmm." Marga pauses and taps her scarred fingers on a console. "See, here's the thing, Koa: To heal the divide, to save *our* Mars, you don't need to save *their* Mars, too."

"You want to destroy the shadow universe?" I ask, appalled. "That's genocide."

"That's evolution. It's us or them."

"No, we can *both* survive."

"Then we still disagree."

"Daddy'd be ashamed of you," I spit. "Poppy, too."

"Good," Marga says. "They were too soft. That's why I framed them."

Glaciers root in my gut. "Framed them? Starchildren killed them. *Rogue* starchildren."

"Because they thought Daddy and Poppy were Earth spies." Marga grimaces as much as she can grimace while missing a face and a soul. "It was me, Koa. It was always me."

Rage sears my throat. "You *killed* them," I rasp. She killed them. *She killed them. She killed them. SHE KILLED THEM.* "Why, Marga? Why?"

"You know why. To prove starchildren are dangerous."

Pieces form a puzzle I've shunned since our childhood. I thought her hatred for starchildren stemmed from our fathers' deaths, but it didn't. She's always hated herself and us and what we

symbolize: change. Earth holds power; Mars holds promise. She chose the former, and I chose the latter, and no bridge can breach our twin towers with common ground.

"And we *are* dangerous," Marga adds. "We are lethal. We are fatal. We are a death sentence for the human race."

"No, we are the future," I say, but my words weaken, wither, whistle away as dust in the wind of an eternal storm.

"It's the end," my sister says. "Your library is destroyed. The Order is done. Only thirteen Roses remain, including you, though I wouldn't include you much longer."

Thirteen. *Thirteen*. Failure on all fronts. So much death. So much destruction. So many dreams trampled underfoot. And Slade's coming *here* to die, too. I can't let that happen, but I can't stop the happening.

"You can still join us," a new voice says: a clear voice, a strong voice, a voice unmarked by fire. Mack steps forward from the ranks, then removes his airmask and goggles. He smiles—the *nerve of him*—and extends his hand.

No. I could never join them. Perhaps before, but not now. I thought Marga and I shared a trauma, a breaking point in our lives, a formative crossroads of grief, but we didn't. When our fathers died, we didn't suffer together; I suffered, and she celebrated. What was a shock, a strain, an upheaval to me was only her first step toward aerial autocracy. The Bone Lords didn't strengthen from her grief, as the Order of Roses strengthened from mine; they strengthened from her bigotry, her victory, and I'm too late for vengeance.

"You know I cannot and will never join you," I say.

Mack shrugs, nonchalant. "Shame."

"Shame is right," Marga says. "So much wasted potential. You were always the smart one—smart and soft, like our fathers."

Mack hands Marga a lantern, one from our home, from the moor. She must have rescued it from the flames, and those flames now spiral within its core. Without the sedative, I could starshift away, but drugs and twine anchor me here.

"Tell me how to find her," Marga says.

"No," I say.

"Tell me how to find the last Roses." A step forward. A lantern swing.

"No."

"Tell me the locations of your safe houses." Another step. Another swing.

"No."

"Koa, darling, I don't want to play this game." Marga kneels before me and suspends the lantern between us. "But I *do* want to burn you. I need to see your bones."

This is revenge. She wants to burn me as I burned her, to turn me into a skeleton, to win with a final torch, to turn me into a naked lantern, an embarrassment, a mortification of utter defeat. In response to her fire, my nude body reddens, and she chuckles as much as she can chuckle with nothing left.

"Blame me all you want," she says, "but *you* started it."

A sibling taunt, pulled from tainted memories: *But she started it, Daddy!* Then Daddy: *I don't care who started it. Both of you, end it now.*

*End it, Koa.*

*End it now.*

Now, I can. Before, I tried, but pity restrained me—pity and sympathy because of my false view of her. I thought her a mourner. A griever. An orphan. Like me. But she's not like me, and she never was. She was a murderer, not a mourner. A criminal, not a casualty. The lie melts away like flesh in flames, and I know what I must do.

"I'm sorry, Marga," I whisper.

I *am* sorry, but I don't love her. Not anymore. Or perhaps I never loved her at all. Perhaps I loved the idea of her, the thought of a sister, a sibling, a soulmate, of a titanium-tough friendship that could triumph any test. Except ours was thin as tissue, and we were none of those things. Family is choice, not chance. Bond, not blood. Sometimes, those intersect, but not always, and not with us. The Roses are my family, and Slade is my home.

"I'm sorry, too," Marga whispers back.

And she *is* sorry, too, but like me, she understands what this means. We're enemies now, through and through, no more saves or rescues. As I see her, she sees me, and the mirror that made us forms into swords.

*End it now.*

The lantern lowers, warming my thigh. I welcome it as confirmation. I can't starshift. I can't escape. But like Slade learned,

like I have innate, I can adapt. Biting my lip, I beckon Marga closer, feign fear, pretend myself powerless. As she leans forward, wheezing through the slash in her melted-flesh face, I don't see what she is; I see what she could be. White-blond hair and ice-gray eyes, swirling with wind and passion, instead of hate. Scrawny features filled with health. Ashen cheeks dotted with roses. Tinny, whiny voice calmed into a soprano, and ambition honed into philanthropy. She could have been more. *We* could have been more. But we weren't, we aren't, and like Slade, I must leave my past behind.

"Keep the fire on," I whisper into the hole that was Marga's ear.

She remembers Daddy's saying and scoffs. But that scoff buys me a second, a second where I adapt. Though I can't starshift my whole body, I can starshift part. With jolting terror, with dregs of strength, I vanish my arms from beneath the twine and conjure them free. Shaking with relief and exhaustion, I grab the lantern and smash it on the ground. Glass shatters, oil greases the ivory floor, and fiery tongues lick across the bridge. Chaos erupts. Mack stumbles backward. Bone Lords scramble through thickening smoke, coughing and choking as Mars sends her regards in return.

Blind and bewildered, Marga swivels her featureless head. Then she feels the hellish heat of the broken lantern and shrieks. Flames crawl up her butchered legs. I curl on the chair, languid with sedative and fatigue, as smoke and fire churn in a vortex of hate, of fate, of doom.

"Koa!" Marga shrieks as I end what I started. "Koa, you traitor. Koa, you fool."

"That was for our fathers." I grab a glass shard from the floor, eyes watery, body feverish. "And this is for Slade." With a swift, savage strike, I slit her throat as Kasei fumes with alarms.

Blood bubbles from the gash in her neck, and the gash in her mouth falls open in agony. With a meaty, unceremonious slump, she tumbles to the floor, and flames devour their queen.

I killed my sister. No, she wasn't my sister anymore. Perhaps she never was. Still, I grieve and repent, boil over with sobs, with screams, with fist-clenching anguish. Then—without pity, without sympathy, knowing what she did to Daddy, to Poppy, what she promised to do to Slade—I let her and everything go. The moor died in fire, as does Marga. While flames eat her skin, meat, organs,



bones, I silently salute her blazing skeleton, a Bone Lord till the end.

The bridge is empty; the crew escaped. Only a ghost and I remain. Crunched in the captain's chair, fire rises around me, and smoke stings my eyes, blurs my vision, itches my limbs. Lethargy settles over me like a well-worn blanket. There's no way out. No way free. I can't starshift, not even a part, my energy sapped by sedative, by slaughter. If I run, if I jump, if I leap, I burn. So, as fire drinks oxygen, as asphyxia drains strength, I sink in smoke to hope, pray, and dream of a million heartbeats, of a girl with warm brown skin and mahogany hair and copper, sunburst eyes.

*Finché c'è vita, c'è speranza, perché la speranza è l'ultima a morire.*





DAYBREAK



# 27

## Shimmering Jade and Fright

SLADE

“This is a crazy idea,” Miro says.

“Yes,” I say.

“Let’s do it.”

“Okay.”

We leave the Order in the penthouse, despite their protests to help, but if we fail, if we die, only ten Roses will remain, and that’s still enough to grow a garden. However, if we all go, fail, die, disappear, Bone Lords will wreak havoc, and Earth will slaughter Mars. We are the last gate, the last defense against chaos, so with a tearful farewell, we part.

Miro and I grab red dustsuits, airmasks, and goggles, then descend to Kasei’s streets. Night fell hours ago, dropping the temperature, and gusts throw dust against every skyscraper and starchild. Frigid and windblown, we cross to an alley, but within our first steps, alarms roar.

“Shit,” I swear, already at my limit. *Too loud, too harsh, too cruel.* Sirens flash red and blare bloodlust in the dark. *Too loud, too bright, too close, too much.* But I remember Koa. But I breathe. But I count. And an idea surfaces in my writhing mind. “Miro, your watch. Can you track the alarms?”

“Sorry?” Miro asks, ducking into the alley with me.

“The origin of the alarms. Can you track them?”

He exhales victory and pumps his fist in triumph. “You’re a stardamn genius.” His fingers move over his watch. Within seconds, a map glows on smartglass with a blinking dot, and he tenses in defeat. “She’s on the command skyship. We can’t go there.”

“We can, and we will,” I say. “The plan stays the same.” Climb a skyscraper, hack a feed, remote-pilot the skyship to a rooftop landing.

“The plan must change.” He points in Koa’s direction, toward the sky, and I now tense, too.

The sky is burning, but this time, it’s not me. Smoke leaks from the smoldering ship, and flames peek through cracks. A rib cage of skeletons. A carcass of corpses. Charred, bone-white wings and broken-tooth propeller blades. Escape pods buzz from hidden chutes, but I know in my heart that Koa’s still inside.

“Fuck the plan,” I say.

Miro nods. “Fuck the plan.”

We’ll wing it, fly by the seat of our pants—literally. Before, I wouldn’t have let go. I would have clung to routine, to structure, to our premeditated plan. Then, as it fell apart, I would fall apart, too. I still feel the itch. The pull. The addiction. The call to order. The yearning for a scripted existence. But life is messy. A story, not a stage. Improvisation, not imitation. Adaptation, not assimilation.

“We need a ship,” Miro says.

“I’ll get us one,” I say.

Hair tied back, gut roiling, I channel my anger, rage, frustration into a burst of power. Eyes burning violet, shadows at my command, I reach across the rift and rip chaos across Kasei. The street cracks at my feet, and a chasm slithers into being. People scream. Buildings shudder. The city dissolves in panic.

“Um . . . Slade?” Miro asks.

My name unleashes more alarms, sirens, chaos. As I fade from violet, I grin. “Wait for it,” I say.

In a breath, a skyship sets down before us. Then another. And another. Again, I darkshift, reach across shadows, and damn all but one ship to branching chasms. Miro eyes me with wonder—or horror—as he follows me while I hijack the remaining ship. Most Bone Lords flee in fear, and the remaining two on the bridge retreat at our arrival.

"Can you fly?" I ask Miro.

"No," he says.

"Me neither," I say as I take the helm. With a jarring, stuttered start, I lift off from the ground.

"Then how?"

"Books."

Years of reading. Decades of loneliness. A childhood spent escaping through each and every door. When I ran out of fiction, I read nonfiction, and the doctor, my savior, was a hobby pilot—rest her soul. Even in death, she yet helps me soar.

"That way," Miro says, clutching the captain's chair. He sways, uneasy, but trusts me in a way I've never trusted myself till now.

"Can you starshift aboard?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "Too much wreckage. Get us close, and we can catch her."

"Catch her?"

"Catch her."

"Okay.

I push the thrusters to max and dive after the pluming ship. Though I've never piloted before, it's easy, natural, mirroring what I imagined alone in those wretched, cursed, underground dumpsters. My mind is a map, and I race toward the ruined ship as it capsizes and sinks.

"She's on the bridge," Miro says, reading his watch.

"Does this ship have weapons?"

"Yes, lasers."

Hypocrites. *No weapons on Mars*, that's what Earth claims. It's all a steaming pile of festering bullshit.

"Shoot off the top," I say.

"The top of what?" Miro asks, frantic.

"Their bridge. And I'll open our ceiling." It's a detail I caught in my steel-trap memory when I bombed their bird out of the sky. The bridge can open in times of emergency, if escape pods fail. But their pods succeeded, so their ceiling is closed, though if Miro aims where I tell him, if I line up our tops . . .

Night invades, and wind ravages our dustsuits. Above us curls Koa in the captain's chair amid a seething inferno. Gravity yanks her from their ship to ours. I cling to controls as Miro catches her

unconscious form. With a button slap and lever slide, I close our ceiling. Behind us, the command skyship plunges and explodes. The ensuing debris cloud hides our escape, and we leave Kasei with alarms in our wake. I input a southwestern course and let autopilot guide us away from the industrial city, through the red-desert night.

“How is she?” I rasp.

Koa lies naked on the ivory floor, filthy with soot, eyes white in her skull. I choke on her beauty and gasp at her ghost. No. No. **No. NO.**

“Save her, Miro,” I plead, I pray. “Save her, *please*.”

We remove our goggles and airmasks, then kneel beside Koa’s stone-still form. Miro waves the doctor’s resometer over her coral lips, and I squeeze her limp fingers, tears painting my cheeks. This should be *too close*. This should be *too much*. And it is, but I crave more. Koa breaks through my walls and ignites my soul with a passion and spirit I thought lost to me. She’s my home, my sun, my rawest dream. Though we’ve known each other for a moment, she is my infinity, and she consumes me. But this chaos I embrace. For once, I welcome my aware, sensitive, porous mind. It lets me experience this. It lets me experience *her*.

“She has asphyxia,” Miro says, “but no bleeding or broken bones.”

He fits an airmask over Koa’s mouth and fiddles with settings. I open a floor tile and remove blankets from an emergency pack—another detail, another fly in my web. Wrapping charcoal fleece around her curvy frame, I lean over her head and breathe in her wild, red hair. *Open your eyes. Let me in. Let me tell you words I didn’t have before but found just for you.*

Miro grimaces, and his warm eyes chill. “Slade.” He pauses, but my name brings no alarms. We’re outside Kasei. We’re loose. We’re free. “Slade, I’m sorry, but she’s—”

“No,” I snap. “She’s not. Try harder.”

With a sigh, he does. A sharp puff of oxygen. A tightening of the blanket. But still, Koa lies frozen.

“There’s sedative in her system,” Miro says. “It’s keeping her from waking up. Is there anything else in that medkit?”

I dig around and find a syringe—the same type of syringe a Bone Lord used to show me my dark reach. He stabbed me after, and Koa saved me then. No, she saved me before, because she believed in



me. She always believed in me before I believed in myself.

I toss the syringe to Miro, and he pierces her shoulder with the needle, then depresses the plunger. For a second, nothing. Waiting and weeping. Then Koa's eyes fly open—her gemstone eyes, shimmering jade and fright. She glances at Miro, grateful, then at me, relieved.

"Slade," she whispers, and again, no alarms. "Slade, you're here. You're safe. You're free." Her eyelids blink, slow and heavy, and she smiles through her soot-smeared face.

"I love you," I blurt out. "I love you, and I need you, and . . . and I love you so much. I . . . I'm sorry I . . . I'm sorry I didn't know how to say what I felt, and I know it's soon, but—"

Koa kisses me. She wraps her arms around my neck and locks our lips in promise. I've never been kissed. I've never been touched in this way, with this beauty. I flare with fervor, every synapse a torch, and stagger beneath the weight of shared feeling. Clumsy, I kiss her back, spill to the floor, entangle our limbs. Miro grins and withdraws across the bridge as Koa pulls back, face flushed and panting.

"Shit," Koa says, scanning me with concern. "Sorry, I didn't think. Was that too much?"

She leans back, and the blanket falls from her chest, from her thighs, revealing everything I always wanted before I knew what wanting was.

"Yes," I say. "That was too much."

She frowns, and I smile.

"I need you too much," I continue. "I love you too much. And I'd suffer this 'too much' every day . . . if you felt the same."

Uncertainty soils the moment, a thunderclap of doubt. I see everything, but I don't always understand what I see, and I can't always express how I feel about others, never mind how others feel about me. What if I'm wrong? But she kissed me. Maybe she pitied me. Maybe, *maybe*, *maybe*—

"If I felt the same?" Koa asks, breaking the build of insecurities. "If? If? Slade, if I haven't been clear . . . if I haven't . . ." She stops and swallows, breathing deep. "I love you, Slade. I will tell you every second, if you need to hear it, but I love you, and I've loved you since I first saw your stars. I should have said it sooner, saved you sooner, but I'm saying it now, and I'm here now. I won't leave you again. And

again, sorry about before. I didn't mean to overwhelm you."

"Well, some things should be overwhelming." Then I kiss her, embrace her, accept the deluge and burn in our fire, on a skeleton ship within the Martian night.

# 28

## Stop My Heart, Open My Eyes

KOA

**I** shower, then find clothes and a dustsuit—from a lost Rose tortured and discarded on this ship. But instead of drowning in despair, I swallow fury, then join Miro and Slade on the bridge.

Slade stops my heart and opens my eyes no matter how many times I see her. But I don't stifle risk. I don't smother danger. I welcome the power of this connection we share. Yes, it's soon. Yes, it's fast. But with some things in life, you just *know*.

"Koa," Slade whispers.

Her brown face lights in glee, and she looks so young without her fear. Blonde streaks her long, mahogany ponytail, and it swishes like a tail down her tall, wiry build—a glimpse of freedom, of awakening. She flashes me her copper eyes, then turns away, shy, tugging at the ruby scarf around her first and oldest scar. Rage boils within me, then memories of revenge, of slitting my sister's throat as her skeletons slit Slade's. But it was vengeance, not victory—a moment, not infinity. My violence solved nothing in the end.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"Valles Marineris," Slade answers, "to heal the divide. We'll be there within the hour."

"Within the hour?"

"Yes," Miro says. "The ship is solarcharged from the day, and we have enough power to make the trip during the night. Bone Lords

are following, but they're far behind, for now."

"Are you sure?" I ask Slade.

She nods. "I'm ready. You taught me all I need to know. The longer we wait, the stronger Earth becomes." Her words are steady, but her lips quiver, and she clutches the harmonica that traveled from dumpster to moor to sky.

"Miro, can we have a minute?" I ask. He smiles, then makes himself scarce. Turning to Slade, I say, "You don't need to do this. We have time."

"I do, and we don't." Slade fidgets, chews her cheek, looks anywhere but me.

I sigh and, reluctant, squeeze her arm. Instead of tensing, she relaxes, then leans forward, resting on me.

"I killed Marga... again," I say. "She survived the moor... somehow... but I... Let's just say she won't return again."

Slade raises her eyes to mine, and in our bridge, I see the future. "I'm so sorry, Koa. That had to be... Well, I don't have the words, and I doubt anyone else does, either."

"Marga deserved it," I say to her surprise. "She set us up. She told a group of starchildren that our fathers were Earth spies, then the starchildren killed them. She used that event to 'prove' our danger and excuse our enslavement." I inhale rage, exhale regret. "My point is, you're right. I wish you were wrong, that we could wait, but we can't, and you're our last chance. Without you, hope is lost, Earth will invade, and Mars will continue down the wretched, bloody path Marga paved all those years ago."

"It's not fair to pressure you like this, to burden you with the weight of the worlds, but I know in my soul that you *can* do this, Slade. You're the only one who can reunite Mars and bring our people home." A pause. A blink. A ragged breath. "You are the voice for those who have none." A space. A smile. An eye-locked vow. "You are the heartbeat of a million dreams."

Slade drinks in my words, brow furrowed, then whispers soft as dawn, "Am I a moment? Or am I infinity? Will anyone remember my name?"

Stunned by her poetry, by her abstraction, I smile wider and draw her close. "You are infinity, love, and no one will ever forget."

# 29

## Blood in Dusty Veins

SLADE

**W**e're almost there. It's almost over. Where the Reckoning began, retribution will end.

In a stolen skyship, we soar our skeleton shell over miles of Mars, toward the equator where a deep, brutal gouge scrapes our world. Valles Marineris glows on the horizon, a mirage of memories, a shimmering of shadows. Earth filled the canyons with water, slick as blood in dusty veins. To the west, dunes roll across the red desert. To the east, chaos ravages the auburn terrain. The volcanic plateau stretches across a fifth of the planet's circumference. It's massive, violent, angry, rugged, the vicious symbol of a suppressed race.

"This is the divide," Koa says. "The rip in reality. Mirror universes torn from the god-titan feud. If you look at the canyons, you can see shadows slipping through."

I follow her aim through the skyship window and freeze. Within the water, amid the canyons, darkness dances beneath constellations. Horror latches onto my lungs, stealing breath and summoning understanding. *This* is the end. *This* is what I must face. *This* is what I must right.

"Over there are the cells," Koa continues. "Abandoned now, but Earth and Bone Lords used to experiment on starchildren there, before the Diaspora."

A chalky swallow. Another reminder. Unity or destruction.

There is no middle, no compromise, no ceasefire, no other chance. Either I succeed, or everything fails. From chased to chosen, I rise. Don't look back. Don't fall down. Don't drown in an ocean I only just crested. But fathoms beckon, and leagues whisper threats. Everything is *too loud, too bright, too fucking close, too bloody much, too—*

"Hey," Koa says beside me, and I remember the steps I've taken, the literal and figurative miles I've come. "I'm here, Slade. I'm here till the end."

I turn toward her, and what was once a tornado of sensation softens into comfort, into home. She pulls me close, and I pull her closer, and I wonder how I ever lived without her warmth. Well, I didn't. Not really. I never lived till I met her.

"So what exactly do we do now?" Miro asks.

Before Koa can answer, the skyship bucks and rolls. Thrown to the floor, we scramble for purchase as lights scream, alarms shriek, and Mars roars. Within seconds, it stops, but fear draws Koa's features.

"What was *that*?" Miro asks, staggering to his feet.

"A gravitational shift," Koa says, helping me stand. "Time is breaking; the earthquakes are worsening."

"Koa, look at the sky."

She dims the bridge's lights, and we all fall silent. Constellations rearrange as stars move—actually *move*. Foreign suns pirouette across the heavens as patterns mutate into alien pictures.

"How is this possible?" Miro asks. "Light takes years to reach us—sometimes centuries or more. For them to appear synchronous, to move in tandem . . ."

"The cosmic night," Koa whispers. "It was foretold. They've been planning this moment for millennia."

*The sky is alive. The void, too.*

Koa told me in the moor. Stars are gods. Black holes are titans. And divinity dances above us in bloodthirsty steps.

"They're at war," I say. "The sky is at war."

"So are we." Koa points toward the moons. Between their glow, an armada of warships breaches Mars's atmosphere. Beetle-black with slimy wings and tentacled gun ports, they descend on us with primal fury. Every ship is thrice our size; we are outnumbered and

overpowered in every possible way.

“Earth,” Miro breathes.

“And Bone Lords,” I say as a skyship fleet appears behind us.

“We’re surrounded,” Koa says. “Slade, take an escape pod and get down to the surface. We’ll pretend you’re still aboard and hold them off up here.”

“No,” I protest. “You’re one ship against dozens. I can stay. I can help—”

“By fixing *this*.” She points at writhing shadows in the canyons. “*That’s* how you help. Now, go.”

“Koa, I—”

“Go, Slade. I’ll be fine.”

She won’t. There’s no way they can hold off two fleets alone. Tears burn my eyes, and I let them, embrace them. I fought so hard to feel so free, but in the end, strength fades as blood in the sea.

“I love you,” I whisper, jaw tense, lips trembling. “I love you, and if you die, I will find you on the other side.”

Koa yanks me forward, then kisses me for one, two, three, four seconds, then releases, then allows herself a single tear. “*Finché c’è vita, c’è speranza, perché la speranza è l’ultima a morire,*” she says. “While there’s life, there’s hope, because hope is the last to die.”

I grip the harmonica in my pocket, the one engraved with the prayer, *our* prayer. “No,” I say. “Hope doesn’t die. Hope is reborn.”

# 30

## Broken Birds and Fireworks

KOA

“With all due respect, Professor,” Miro says, “when I signed up to be your graduate assistant, interplanetary war wasn’t what I expected. Do you have any ideas?”

“No good ones,” I say, eyeing the encroaching fleets. Slade slipped through their scanners with an escape pod, and we hover near the canyons, luring them away.

“Well, what are your bad ones?”

“They mostly involve explosions.”

“Explosions can work.”

“Not yet. We need the ship in case Slade can’t...in case she...” I can’t finish the thought, never mind the sentence.

“Wait, you want to explode the *ship*?” Miro exclaims. “We can’t. If Earth gets past us, they’ll head to Kasei next. You can’t throw away the ship like that.”

“I won’t throw it away,” I say. “I’ll weaponize it. As I said, it’s a bad idea, but if we need it, we have it.”

“And till then?”

“Helm or guns? Fly or fight? I’ll take the other.”

“Neither,” he objects. “I’m a student, not a soldier. I can’t pilot or shoot.”

“The lasers have automatic tracking,” I say. “You’ll be fine.”

“I’ll be anything but fine.”



Yet he takes weapons, and I take helm, and together, we begin our batshit-crazy plan. Black warships and white skyships combine, then swarm us. Their gun ports spark, and the first volley charges our hull.

“Hold on,” I say, then drop the ship, a bird shot from the sky. Lasers collide above us in fireworks. We escape—this time. I veer a sharp left, and harnesses dig into our shoulders as whines escape Miro.

The fleets regroup and rearm.

“Shoot something!” I cry.

“I’m trying!” Miro shouts.

A warship dives and scrapes our hull; the metal whimpers and chatters my teeth. I bank right, and Miro shoots but misses. Four skyships converge on us, weapons hot, and laser off our nose. Tattered metal smokes red in the window. The engines strain, and the bridge creaks, as I force us into a nosedive.

The fleets follow.

Miro lands a shot and takes out two warships; they careen into each other and cartwheel toward the craggy land, crashing in twin clouds of ruin. I pull up and arc out, dragging the fleets with me, then circle around and allow Miro three shots into their center. Two skyships fall, joining their Earth brethren, but a warship clips our left wing and saws through half before I break free.

Crooked, with a half-amputated wing, I double our left thrusters and fly somewhat level. Miro misses three shots, lands two, and two more ships fall—one from Earth and one from Mars. But each step forward slaps us three steps back. In revenge, a warship slices off the rest of our left wing, then we spin, spiral, corkscrew toward death.

“Professor,” Miro calls over the wailing ship. “Now might be a good time for your bad idea.”

“Soon,” I call back.

*Give Slade another few minutes.*

*Give her a fighting chance.*

I grab the controls and steady the ship; she wobbles toward her missing limb, but I tilt us far enough to glide on one. Miro shoots a warship, downs a warship, then a skyship blasts off our roof. Oxygen whistles out. I tighten my airmask, my goggles, and ensure Miro does

the same. We grip panels with bunched-up gloves and hook our boots around console legs. Our solarcapas flutter above us, urging us out, to escape, but I slam the nav and flip us as Miro takes out two more skyships.

"There are too many," Miro shouts, hanging upside down.

I right us and shout back, "Just another—"

Lasers invade the bridge. They cut through consoles and hack panels apart. Miro jumps back a second before decapitation, and I leap from the helm, then roll into a corner. Without thrusters, missing nose and wing and roof, the ship tips back, tilts left, and we slide along its deck, then slam against an ivory wall.

Sparks assault my vision, and darkness beckons me down.

"Professor," Miro whispers. "Koa."

"Not . . . yet," I breathe.

Slade won't survive if we surrender now.

A flash tears over our heads as lasers slash the bridge to shreds. As she dies, our ship bawls into the waning night, while I crawl toward the helm and Miro crawls toward weapons. We barrel roll, split, feint, fall, and Miro lands a few more shots. But there are too many of them and only one of us, and every shot backfires, and every dodge rebounds. We will the ship together, but she slips, then we slip, and Mars rushes up to claim us as martyrs while Earth chases to try us as traitors.

# 31

## Truth and Shadow

SLADE

**T**he sky is burning, breaking, boiling with wrath. Behind me, fleets fume with pent-up hostility released in a ballistic blitz.

In the center, one skyship suffers the end of the Reckoning, the iron-hot hatred of a generations-old feud, of a rivalry of sister planets, of an unspoken war. I can't do this. I can't leave them behind. I can't reunite what wants to remain separate. Earth and Mars cherish their enmity, relish their enemy status. But this isn't only about them; this is about both universes, both realities, about millions of stifled souls, about truth and shadow allied in strength. The weight of duty unravels ropes I tied to hold myself together.

*Too loud.*

My heart is a hammer. The pod is a bomb. As I hurtle away from gunfire behind me, from lasers cracking lightning across the wounded night, chaos amplifies every fear, every pain.

*Too bright.*

My eyes sting with stars. The pod shakes, then lurches. Fireworks war with shifting constellations as light splatters and spills over Mars.

*Too close.*

Breath pops from my lungs. A shot whizzes past my hull. Violence invades every thought, every moment, as I white-knuckle controls and dive.

*Too much.*

My body tenses and tingles with fraying nerves. Wrecked ships fall like comets with flaming tails, banished from the broken sky.

*Too tough.*

Debris rains down, loud as hail on my metal shell.

*Too harsh.*

Dying birds fly without wings, and blood fills the dusty air.

*Too crude.*

Damaged chunks of mutilated ships cascade like severed tongues.

*Too cruel.*

Destruction violates armor, melts shields, and every defense withers from within.

*Too loud, too bright, too close, too much.*

Who I am masks what I must do, and every step I've climbed stabs me back down. I buckle, cower, collapse beneath doubt. But I committed to this. I vowed I'd never retreat, never become that person again. Stop the back and forth. Stop the ebb and flow. Pledge an oath to the future, to forever. So I soar, and they ignore me, the fleets oblivious to my path.

The escape pod huffs as I land beside the canyons, humming with relief. I open the hatch and leap from the cockpit onto the rusty cliff. Breathing through my airmask, looking through my goggles, protected by my red dustsuit, I'm reminded that, to Mars, I'm a stranger, a traveler. No, I'm an adventurer, a colonist of a new and better world.

Night lifts, and a hesitant glow creeps across the rosy planet. Before me, shadows dance over water as spirits on the River Styx. Whispers fill my ears, and warnings fill my mind, but I walk forward till I rest on the rim between our world and theirs. Above me, battle rages in flashes and flares, in bursts and blasts and bombs. I think of Miro, and I think of Koa, and I grit my teeth to reach past fear.

Burning violet, I break. Darkshift. Into shadow. Into shade. A dark-energy blade that stretches across canyons, letting them in, letting them free. Chaos arrives, but souls don't. Though Valles Marineris growls with pain, I remain alone . . . and divided.

*No.*

This is my purpose. This is why they fear me, chase me, hunt

me, hurt me. This is why they broke me. I am a monster, and this is my magic, unleashed inside the cosmic night. The place is right. The time is now. This is my phoenix, my reason for rebirth.

I try again. Fail again. Truth and shadow stay apart. I sense their souls, taste their outlines, smell their silhouettes and shapes. They're there. *Right fucking there.* They're there, and I can't bridge the gap. But I *am* the bridge. The last hope. The voice for those who have none. The heartbeat of a million dreams.

Another dozen times, I try, I fail, as war ravages the sky and shadows squirm in the divide. It's my worst nightmare. My deepest fear. My darkest dream come true. I cannot help. I cannot heal. My life serves no purpose at all. It's a waste. *I'm* a waste. A useless breach of space.

The ground shakes with earthquakes, with battle, and I sink to my knees. I came so far, and I fell even farther. I'm sorry, Koa. I'm no heartbeat, nor voice, nor hope, nor bridge. I'm only an error, a fluke, a mistake, a monster. Something about me is *wrong*.

## 32

## Too Stubborn to Die

KOA

The bridge creaks. The windows crash. The ship snaps. The sky attacks.

We're in two pieces, Miro on one raft and me on the other. Our stolen skyship splits in two, thanks to the latest Bone Lords' volley. Across the gap, I shout, "Okay, it's time!"

"Thank the fucking stars," Miro says. He skids along the sinking vessel toward the same controls I mirror. "Ten seconds?"

"Ten seconds."

We press twin buttons, then run. As we fall from the sky, our ship fragments drift apart, but we're still close enough for this to work—it *must* work. All warships and skyships trail us, charge us, sharks drawn to blood, vultures drawn to death. As I sprint through bleached corridors, I send out a distress call with Slade's DNA. They think she's still here, so they follow without thought, and this "without thought" is our only and last chance. Deep in the ship, I no longer see Miro, but I say a silent prayer, then strap myself into the escape pod. With one second to go, I burst from the chute, a heartbeat ahead of the ship's self-destruct.

The shock wave bashes the pod, and I'm a surfer in a tsunami. Consoles flare and blare as the cockpit rattles with fury. I ride the tide, the swollen surge, and somehow land in a red puff of dust. Beside me, another pod lands—albeit with a clumsy, awkward splat. I

sigh with near-death giddiness as we unlock and jump from our pods, then embrace with dizzy relief.

"With all due respect, you're fucking insane," Miro says, "but it worked." He points toward the sky, at the floating graveyard, at cremated ships and incinerated crews. There's no wreckage, only smoke, and this murder storm swirls itself clear. Soon, only Martian night covers us, and above that, dancing stars.

I should feel guilt for killing so many, but I feel only freedom and peace. Perhaps it's Marga's spirit, or some defect we share, or some conditioned response from a lifetime in shadows, but at this moment, I don't care. I'm broken, and I broke them, and I saved the one I love.

"Slade . . . Where's Slade?" I ask.

Miro nods toward the canyons, toward a seated silhouette. "I'm sorry, Professor, but she didn't do it."

"No, she didn't do it yet."

But as I walk forward to help Slade, a baritone voice chains me from behind.

"Koa, doll, loved the drama. Lure our fleets, then self-destruct. Cunning. But you were always cunning, even if you hid it."

I turn toward the skeleton and freeze. Golden dreadlocks cascade down his back, and his short, gangly frame twitches with rage. "Mack, dear, too stubborn to die?" I glance around his escape pod, but there are no other survivors. Still, Mack alone is a city-sized threat.

"It's only me," Mack says, confirming my suspicion. "And congratulations. The Bone Lords are in retreat, and Earth won't send another fleet. They were already hesitant about the first, and with your sister gone, they won't risk another invasion. Classy, by the way. Burned her alive twice. If that ain't sibling love, I don't know what is."

I whisper to Miro, "Go to Slade, and help her. I'll hold him off."

"He's going nowhere," Mack says. "And neither are you."

He cracks his neck in his Bone Lord uniform. The white dustsuit still looks odd on him. I know he's a spy. I know he betrayed me, ruined me, burned the library to the ground. But there's something duplicitous about his nature, a nomad who belongs nowhere at all and everywhere at once.

"Mack, let it go," I say. "It's over."

"Far from it," he sneers. "Slade can't do it, can she? Heal the rift? Reunite the worlds? If she failed, if shadows still slip through, then we must destroy it. Do the same thing you did up there. Self-destruct the pods inside the divide. If Slade opens the bridge, it will work."

"No more will die today."

"Yes, I suppose one massacre is enough for you."

"Massacre?!" I exclaim. "You attacked us. Earth enslaved and killed us for centuries." I sigh. "You know what? I don't care. Think what you will, but we won't help with genocide."

Mack removes a remote from his pocket, and behind him, his pod powers on, weapons hot and aimed at Miro. "Then he dies."

Lasers slit the dawn. I starshift and tackle Miro. We fall to the ground, panting, fire smoking the air above. Mack fires again. We roll and evade. Another shot. Another starshift. Dust fogs tender daybreak as the distant sun creeps above the horizon.

"Koa, wait—" Mack starts, but he splits apart. With a whip-like crack, with a scythe-like shadow, the ground fractures beneath him. Both Mars and Mack rip along the newborn chasm. Blood mists the air as two halves of a man straddle the widening canyon, then fall into the gorge. Bile scorches my throat, but I force myself to watch as organs topple from his bisected corpse and blood reddens the infant river.

"Slade," Miro whispers.

Near us, Slade nods. With a calm voice, she says, "I didn't want to kill him. Well, I did, but I didn't *want to* want to kill him, and I couldn't let him kill you." She watches me, and behind her goggles, her gaze intensifies. "I'm sorry, Koa, but I can't do it. I let you down. I let everyone down. No matter how hard I try, they don't listen."

*Listen.*

That's it.

"Because they can't listen," I say. "They can only see."

Slade tilts her head in question.

"You are a shadowchild, so you can darkshift," I explain. "But your power isn't force; it's communication."

"Communication is my weakness," she says.

"Our communication puzzles you, but not theirs. It's part of



your identity, part of the window through which you view the world.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Talk to them with light, not language,” Miro says.

“Exactly,” I say. “Use images to speak, not words or sounds.”

In the forbidden texts, I read a vague reference to rainbows of silent music. Here and now, it finally makes sense.

“How?” Slade asks.

“Visual telepathy,” I say. “Reach across the divide in the same way, but with pictures, not power. You are the voice for those who have none. So send them your light, and let them use your voice.”

## 33

## The Silent Choir

SLADE

*Let them use your voice.*

It's simple, obvious, and everything clicks. As daybreak honeys the red planet, the warrior planet, the planet split by truth, I surrender myself to the dark divide. Instead of beckoning them toward me, I reach toward them to show pleas and prayers.

The first image is Valles Marineris: simmering water, dancing shadows, sentient stars, shifting sky. This is where it started, where gods and titans clashed, then ripped reality apart. On one side stands truth; on the other stands shadow. But which side is truth and which is shadow depends on the stander.

The second image is Kasei: industrial underworld, smartglass overworld, dingy dumpsters, shabby subways, sparkling skyscrapers. Our colony. Our exile. A starchild prison reflected in their mirror world. I show them fear. I show them panic. I show them flashing lights at every mention of my name.

The third image is Bone Lords: ivory skyships, skeletal dustsuits, suppressing starchildren, serving Earth, hunting me. I show them subway raids through titanium tunnels. Solarcar chases through rusty streets. Years of running, decades of fleeing. A lifetime banished from comfort and warmth. An existence of stealing, of struggling, of playing harmonicas for starcoins to survive.

Last, I show Koa: wild and red hair, gemstone-jade eyes,

porcelain skin, nine-pointed scar, coral lips. The universe is in her smile. I project an image of her in uniform, short and curvy in her Order of Roses dustsuit, then I project an image of her unmasked. We're in the redhouse, in the moor, nestled inside her hillside house: a relic of childhood, a revival of dreams. Outside, scarlet grass and heather fleece the gentle, sloping land as fog rolls through valleys. Inside, lanterns light soil walls, smartglass windows, white furniture, and book piles on fuzzy blankets. She saved my life inside those walls, then she burned it down to save me again. That was home. No, *she* is home. My reason to fight. My reason to live. My moment. My infinity. My love.

With this final image, I linger on her flushed cheeks, on her lopsided grin, on her hand in mine on her couch. Our fingers entangle; within this weave lies everything. I show them love, and I ask for help—that is the purpose, after all, to humble myself for this last, fated step. *Save us*, I show through scars. *Help us*, I beg through sunrises. *Join us*, I ask through storms. I show them moments. I show them infinities. I show them universal truths in life, love, and loss. Then, after a deluge of our Mars, of us, I wait for their reply, and soon, it comes.

Their first image is Valles Marineris from the other side: same water, same shadows, same stars and shifting sky. Then they show me their Kasei, a twin of ours, and their Bone Lords, also mirrors. However, last, instead of Koa, they show me a graveyard, a city of stones. Roses stab violet-tinged dust, and pictures grace headstones, instead of letters. I send them confusion, and they send back despair. Within the graves lie starchildren, none more than two, bones branded with nine-pointed stars. Above their skeletons, Bone Lords chain their parents in a line. With a few more images, brutal realization latches onto my brain.

The children. They killed them. They killed them all. And any who created them suffered a worse fate. I squint and notice all silhouettes are adults. Shadow Earth escalated the exile; they sent starchildren to shadow Mars to die off, to become extinct, and if they made children, Bone Lords murdered those children. Their mirror is a beat ahead of ours, a warning bell of fate.

Another image filters through, and it's Koa, my Koa, sent from them to me. She braids heather and dances with lanterns in the

redhouse moor. Around her, they add themselves to our story, and I understand their request.

“They want to come here,” I say. “They want to stay with us.”

Beside me, Koa and Miro squeeze my arms. “Let them in,” Koa says.

I input myself into the image and wave them forward. *Come. Be with us. Live with us. Together, we'll rise higher than we ever fell.* With my permission, our worlds collide, merge, fuse, and the cosmic night ends. Air shimmers with mist. Dust shivers with mirage. The sky stills with new constellations. Canyons quake with ghosts, with energy, as we starshift and darkshift and seal the celestial wound. Shadow heals truth as time mends and universes unite.

The silent choir arrives.

# 34

## Mars Is Ours

KOA

**M**ars is ours.

After the cosmic night, the Bone Lords fled to Earth, and Earth is too afraid to invade or attack after our victory at Valles Marineris. One ship against two fleets, followed by Slade's display of power, horrified true and shadow Earth (now one) into a war-ending ceasefire. This ceasefire prevents what happened there—genocide, infanticide—from happening here. They feared our evolution into starchildren, but they fear the shadowchild more. Slade's legendary status—along with hyperbolic stories of her godlike power—keeps the peace across planets. While she's alive, we're safe.

It's been months since we merged, since the silent choir joined us, and Mars overflows with change. Shadow Martians look like us, but they don't talk like us; they only communicate through visual telepathy. Slade translates for them, speaks for them, and they adore her for it. She found her tribe. Despite Mack's betrayal, he *was* right about her. Slade's a wolf, a leader of the pack. She bridged the gap to give voice to the silent ones, strength to the shadows, and overcame suppression to revolutionize Mars.

Speaking of revolution, Kasei is reborn. The Order of Roses has regained those lost times ten, no longer a secret society, but a true Martian government. We repaired street cracks and crumpled buildings from Slade's violent escape, then repurposed abandoned

skyships as our own. Buried beneath the subway, we found Earth's terraformers and have begun the slow process of making Mars a proper home. The land will take longer, but the air is done. We can breathe everywhere now, no airmask needed, no suffocating reminders of Earth's stranglehold—a choke we broke.

Integration with shadow Mars was surprisingly easy. As starchildren, we bonded over shared struggle, and differences dissolved in the face of progress. We carved a new world that reflected us both and crafted an identity from our hopes, not Earth's fears. The most difficult part was divulging knowledge of gods and titans, of sentient stars and black holes, to the public. But after a minor panic, they accepted it in stride. Well, mostly in stride. There was fuss over new constellations for zodiac zealots, but we calmed astrologers with copies of no-longer-forbidden texts, rewritten from Miro's exceptional memory.

"Don't you have somewhere to be?" Miro asks. He points up at the roof of our new headquarters, a modern skyscraper in the city center, brave and bold and loud and proud, nothing like the whispering library.

"One minute," I say, peering at a tablet. "I'm busy." Always busy as leader of the Roses, as a UMars professor, as—

What am I to Slade?

"I'll take care of it," Miro says. "Go ahead."

"One minute," I repeat.

He steals my tablet and scrutinizes me. "You're nervous."

"Am not."

"Are too."

"Am not."

"Are—" Miro stops himself and runs a hand over his face. "Professor, please. You've waited years for freedom, and you finally have it. 'I will give you more than vengeance; I will give you victory.' That's what you said, and you delivered. Mars is ours, so take a break. You deserve it."

"I'm not used to breaks, victory, or freedom," I say. "I'm used to fighting tooth and nail to survive every moment of every day."

"Then get used to something new," he says. "And, personally, I think you're using your past as an excuse."

I narrow my eyes. "I'm supposed to be the psychologist."

"Well, you taught me well, so let go of the past and embrace the future. She's waiting for you."

I sigh. He's right. I *am* nervous, nervous because of the weight of this moment, because of the force of infinity. Though Slade and I share a penthouse upstairs, we haven't made it a home. Over the last few months, we've rarely seen each other. There's been much to do, much to adjust and adapt. I focused on helping Slade settle into a new structure, a new routine, and forgot myself . . . forgot *us*.

"Okay," I tell Miro, "but you go, too. No more paperwork today. And no more studying. Go live a little."

Miro grins. "I plan on living a *lot*. Thanks, Professor. Later."

"Later."

I inhale courage and exhale doubt. It's time. As I climb the steps to paradise, a forbidden anthem beckons me skyward with a harmonica's intoxicating prayer.

# 35

## I Cannot Die Alone

SLADE

**“Hi,”** I say.

“Hi,” Koa says.

We stand opposite each other as strangers, as lovers. Across the penthouse, my fear reflects in her eyes, in her face, copper against green, sand against snow. We’ve delayed, distracted, postponed, procrastinated, but I want her, and I need her, and I long to turn this moment into infinity.

“I...I once...” I close my eyes, tug my hair, clutch the harmonica, then let it go. I trust Koa, and I want to show how much, so with shaking hands, I undo my ponytail. Mahogany unfurls down my back, a sail set free in a foreign ocean, on a distant shore, with only Koa’s anchor to steady me. “I once asked you if anyone will remember my name, but that was the wrong question. Truth is, I don’t care if *anyone* will; I only care if *you* will. Let wind steal my words, and let time erase my triumphs. Let seas drown my success, and let fires burn my failure. What use is a stranger’s memory if I’m forgotten by yours? I had it all wrong—life, its meaning. Nothing means anything if it’s not shared with someone. I used to worry I’d die forgotten, but that was a foolish fear, a childish concern. Because I don’t care if I die nameless, but I cannot die alone.”

I pause here, raw and unguarded and unchained. “Sorry. It’s hard for me to explain, to find words where no words exist. I guess



what I'm trying to say, Koa, what I've been trying to say since the moor, is that nothing matters if I don't matter to you."

Tears warm my eyes, and I let them fall. This is me. This is what I want. This is who I need. We've exchanged I-love-yous, but this is greater, this is more. This is an intimate pledge to share forever. This is a soul-binding vow. My skin prickles with flames, and my heart beats with thunder, as everything brightens and loudens into *too close* and *too much*. No. Not too close. Not too much. I feel everything, and I want it that way, because everything includes her.

"Matter?" Koa rasps, lips trembling. "Matter? Slade..." She flinches, frowns, conditioned to fear my name. But no alarms sound, and they never will again. With a shivering breath, she continues, stepping forward. "Slade, you don't only matter to me; you *are* me. Your name is my name. Your heart is my heart. Your soul is my soul. You won't die forgotten, and you won't die alone. Mars will always carry your spirit, and I will always carry your soul. I lost my way, then I found myself in you."

Another step, another shaky breath. "And I don't want to come off too strong," she says, "but what I feel is too strong, too close, too much, too right. You overwhelm me as the world overwhelms you, because you are wild—a wildfire, a wildflower—this bright and brilliant and beautiful star. Don't ever apologize for who you are, because as you can see, I can't explain this feeling, either. I worry I'll explode from this power, from this storm, and I worry you'll leave, and I worry if I can't have you—have all of you, all the time—the agony of losing you will haunt me till the end of time."

"Losing *me*?" I ask. "I'm worried about losing *you*."

Koa shakes her wild, red hair, then closes the distance between us. "You'd never lose me unless you let me go."

"So you feel the same? The same as I do?"

She blinks her jade eyes, and tears bead her lashes. "I do, and I'll tell you how I feel, but in your language, not ours. You're so brave, Slade, always compromising yourself to speak our words. It's time we translate for you.

"I love you to the stars, to the new constellations above. I love you heather and soil and hillside homes, reading *The Martian Chronicles* over tea. I love you stubborn lanterns in sloping valleys and sunlofts in libraries. I love you from ocean-deep chasms to

sky-scraping mountains to kaleidoscopic windows in galaxy-bound ships.

"I love you thunderclaps and lightning crashes, tornado gusts and dusty squalls. I love you sunrise haloes and sunset crowns, in skies red and black and blue. I love you full and crescent moons, in ancient floods and future fires, over dunes and deserts and canyons and chaos and quiet moments in between.

"I love you everything eternal. I love you all infinity. I love you impossibility. I love you immortality. I love you magic and music, beauty and glory. I love you deathbed wishes and childhood dreams. I love you, Slade, everything you were, are, and will become. If this is how you feel, then yes, I feel the same."

Tears warm my cheeks. Stifling a sob, I nod. Koa sees me. Instead of changing me, she empowers me, speaking in pictures for me. For once, I understand without struggle, without guessing, without dissecting every word into letters and meaning.

"Yes," I whisper. "Yes to everything. And I'd never let you go."

Tentative, I untie my scarf, the ruby silk that hides my neck. Red flutters down and pools at my feet like my first blood spilled. Koa leans forward and brushes my scar with her lips. My body ignites, heart bursts, mind explodes, breath stops. This is a new kind of intimacy, the dangerous and soul-binding kind.

"Is this okay?" Koa asks, lingering over my jaw, my pulse.

I swallow hard. In response, I grab her wrist, kiss her scar. She gasps and glows, and everything comes undone. Clothes drift to the floor as rose petals plucked in spring: *she loves me, she loves me not, she loves me, she loves me not, she loves me*. Curvy and cut, crystal and gold, we meld together in full surrender. She is me, and I am her, and we cry our names in harmony.

Our hearts merge as one, and it overwhelms me. I buzz with sensation and burn with storm, so I cede to Koa and let her bring us home. Surrender becomes forever as our tongues dance in silent promises. And when it's over, when it's done, when hair sticks to flushed faces and chests heave with glittering skin, she smiles my smile, and I smile hers.

"You are my heartbeat," I whisper.

Koa beams. "And you are my dream."

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## About the Author

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**H**alo Scot is the author of *The Heartbeat of a Million Dreams* and the Rift Cycle: a grimdark, science-fantasy series with psychological horror, mental illness, and LGBTQ+ themes. As a murderer of characters and destroyer of (fantasy) worlds, Halo spends too much time scheming and not enough time adulting.

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