



THE MORTALITY EXPERIMENT

HALO SCOT

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The Mortality Experiment

A Grimdark Science-Fiction Novel

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First edition

ISBN: 9798352353363

This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy.

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To anyone who reads my weird-ass books, this is for you.

Thanks for indulging my insanity.

The Outpost

Kaj: 2 Weeks to Launch

Do you want to hear a secret?
What about *see* one?
You already have. As shadows, as mirages, as ghosts. The secrets you whisper to the dark *become* the dark. On land, that is. Offworld, it's a different story.

In the bowels of deep space, secrets become sentient. Rumors become reality. Nightmares become night monsters. Darkness gives voice to all your fears, all your guilt, all your fractured memories. No. Not voice. Gives body. Gives soul. Corporeal regret—that's the demon who festers in the void between stars. The ship is haunted. Not by ghosts, but by secrets. Secrets we brought aboard. Secrets we hid from even ourselves. Secrets that poisoned us in the dead of space till the only souls left were purest gold. Because secrets are sentient, are mortal wounds. And if we had known sooner, we would never have agreed to this mission.

I almost don't make it, as it is. Two weeks before launch, the Ward recruits me with the sole purpose of recruiting RJ. No one knows what the letters stand for. No one dares to ask. The last one who did ended up on a stretcher. She's RJ. *Just* RJ. For all intents and purposes, that's more than enough. In most cases, she's too much.

However, RJ is a brilliant holosurgeon. Best the Outpost ever had. I'm a mediocre nurse, but they need me to control her, to keep her in line. And I can. Most of the time. Problem is, she and I fell out years ago after some shit neither of us can fully remember. So when I appear at her bunk a minute to midnight, her reaction is just as violent as my imaginings.

"What the fuck are you doing here, Kaj?" RJ hisses in greeting.

She arrives at the door, blastgun in hand, barrel trained on my forehead. Villain-red eyes strike me with fury, fringed by spider-leg eyelashes and kohl. Twin lasers bore through my skull and pierce me with loathing. *Fuck off*, they shriek, bright as a siren. *Fuck off, and leave me alone*. Would that I could, RJ. Would that we both could leave everything behind.

I raise my hands in surrender. "Listen, RJ—"

"You know what? I don't give a shit. Get out before I paint you." She pumps the blastgun and jams the end against my nose.

I stagger back, trip, catch myself against the wall. "What the hell is your problem?"

"That's cute. Play dumb. Didn't work before, and sure as shit won't work now."

I told you. Rage doesn't begin to cover it.

"It's serious this time," I say.

She removes the gun from my nose, reluctant, and itches her head with the end. The muzzle tousles her buzzed chestnut hair. Everything about her is stark, angular, from her face to

her wiry build. The antithesis of a teddy bear. The archenemy, really. The nemesis of all things cute and cuddly.

"It's always serious," she says, "and there's always a next time. Not interested. Don't care. Night, Kaj."

She tosses the blastgun in a corner as one would a blanket and slams the door in my face.

Fuck.

"Five minutes," I call through the door. "Give me five minutes, and I'll—"

The hallway sprinkler turns on, interrupting me, soaking me.

"*Night, Kaj,*" RJ repeats from the other side.

"It's the Ward." I shiver as my clothes drench and skin prickles. "There's a mission. We could get away from this shithole."

At that, the sprinkler stops, and the door cracks. RJ lingers in the opening, hesitant. She should be. Hell, we all should be. The Ward's reputation is even worse than RJ's.

"The Ward?" she asks.

I nod. "They want you. They'll pay anything."

She narrows her eyes. "You already agreed. Idiot. A blank check is a fool's salary."

"Money is money."

"Said the paper to the gold."

"I'm in no mood for riddles."

"I'm in no mood for assholes."

She slams the door, but I catch it with my boot. "Please listen," I say. "I'm sorry for...well, for whatever you're pissed about, but we're a team. A good one. And whatever the Ward has planned, I'll need you by my side. I don't trust them, RJ."

"Then why'd you sell them your soul?" she sneers.

I shrug, embarrassed. "I need the money."

"What happened to your last paycheck?" she asks. "You

should have enough cybs for the rest of the year.” She peers closer with those eerie red eyes. “You’re lying. It’s not about money. It’s about adventure. A bit young for a midlife crisis, aren’t you?”

Not when life expectancy on the Outpost is shit.

“You don’t understand,” I say.

RJ seethes. “No, *you* don’t understand. I can’t...I won’t...shit, I have...never mind. I can’t risk...you know what? Just leave.”

She kicks my boot, but I wedge the door open further. My clothes drip in the entryway.

“You can’t hide here forever, RJ. Live a little.”

“That’s the problem, Kaj. I’ve lived too much.”

“You could use the cybs.”

“Shut up about money.”

I appeal to her baser side. “Whores are expensive.”

“Clean whores even more so, but as I said, I am *not* interested.”

“Come on,” I plead. “There must be somewhere you want to go, someone you want to see. Isn’t there anyone you care about?”

Darkness storms her gaze, and I realize too late I’ve made a massive mistake.

RJ yanks open the door and launches me over the threshold. I fall to the floor and crack my head on metal. She kicks my gut, and the world spins. Blood fountains from my mouth as I stand, dizzy, and hold up my hands.

“RJ,” I slur through a mouthful of copper, “I didn’t know...I didn’t mean—”

And she doesn’t care. She grabs the blastgun from the floor and swings the barrel at my head. I duck and rush her stomach, but she elbows my temple, and I go down hard.

“You don’t remember.” She pads toward me with a feline gait.

I try to sit, but my vision tapers over, and my limbs wriggle like jump ropes. “You don’t remember what we did.”

“No, I don’t,” I admit, “but it doesn’t warrant this.”

RJ disagrees. She kicks me again, in the shin this time, and I double over as pain splinters up my leg. The cool metal of the blastgun rests against my jaw as she tugs back my black hair to expose my throat.

“A patient *died*,” she whispers, “because of us. Someone with a family, with kids. He was all they had, Kaj, and we killed him. We *orphaned* them.” Her voice wavers, and the blastgun digs deeper into my neck. Agony spikes up my skull in anticipation.

I shake my head, unable to focus. “That? No. There was nothing we could do. The gloves malfunctioned. I logged it after. Didn’t you read my report?”

“I don’t give a shit about reports,” she snaps. “I could have saved him.”

“With working equipment, yes, but the techs fucked up, not us. You’re a holosurgeon, not a god.”

“Excuses are for pussies.”

“For Net’s sake, it’s not an excuse.” I recover enough to shove the blastgun out of my face and roll to my feet. “You can’t save everyone, RJ, especially not here. You want to help people? Leave the Outpost, and join me. Ward tech never malfunctions.”

“That doesn’t make you suspicious?” she asks.

“Everything about the Ward makes me suspicious, but it’s an opportunity. An opportunity that pays a fuckton of money.”

“I don’t care about the—”

“And money means freedom.” I tread carefully, keenly aware of the blastgun still in her hand. “Freedom for you...or for...or for someone else.”

Emotion melts her expression, and her face slackens. It’s far

more terrifying than her threats or guns or rage. Only now am I afraid. Shit, I fucked this up.

“Leave,” RJ says, mechanical. She releases the blastgun and walks past me into her kitchen. Routine controls what her mind cannot.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I don’t know what happened, but I heard a few stories—”

“No,” she interrupts, but there’s no malice behind the word, no passion or soul whatsoever. “You heard the fairy tales. Fix yourself up, and I’ll see you next shift.”

“RJ, wait—”

“Go, Kaj,” she barks with a shadow of her thunder. Then the storm retreats, and she continues cooking dinner.

I obey and leave, soaked from the sprinkler, bloody from her wrath.

You’ve now met—and suffered—my best friend. The worlds hurt her, so she hurts the worlds harder.

The Empty Path

RJ: 2 Weeks to Launch

The Ward.

I should say no.

Then again, I should have done a lot of things, and now, I'm alone. I have no one. Well, I have Kaj, but Net knows why he sticks around.

I sit before the synthetic fire. Flames pop like knuckles cracking. Everything is stress and release, ever-winding, ever-easing, spinning without end. The life I led became the lie I clutched. My world capsized, and the ground crumbled. Everything I leaned on collapsed beneath my burden of truth.

But *I* moved out. Left my ex, my family, my friends. Turned “we” into “I.” Learned to sleep alone. Live alone. Most likely die alone. I know you hate me. Well, don't worry, because I hate myself more. I have enough baggage to fill a freight train, yet coworkers call me free and unchained, call this a second chance.

How am I free with my wings hacked off at the roots? How am I unchained when demons haunt me every night? How is this a second chance when it's a bomb in my heart?

They're wrong about this, and you're wrong about me. You wonder why I moved out if it burns like hell, hurts like a bitch, wrenches my heart from its strings. Well, darlings, that is a reason I'm not ready to admit to myself, never mind you.

Because secrets are mortal wounds. They rot from the inside out, weaken bodies, poison minds, harvest souls, vivisect spirits. Then why do I bury mine beneath my ribs, caged by guilt, imprisoned by regret? Why do I smoke when I know it's lethal? Why do I drink when I know it's toxic? Why do I live when I know I will die?

Everyone's running from something. I'm just running away faster.

This part of my journey I walk alone.

Organic Order

Mazha: 2 Weeks to Launch

It's my birthday.
I'm one year more, but I feel one year less, one year beaten, one year removed.

When do birthdays become apologies instead of celebrations? When do we start counting backward from death instead of forward from birth? When does the chime of each year become a dirge instead of a fanfare? Why isn't every day weighted as the same monumental accomplishment?

Go on. Call me idealistic. All my patients do. But I can't help it. I see broken things, and I fix them. Or rather, broken people. Labels can limit, but they also show us where we belong. It's my job to provide the right label, to order the organic, to sort souls into nice, neat, clean categories.

"Doctor Mazha, are you listening?"

No. I'm reliving memories, memories of him, of the him who left in the night with dirty dishes as his goodbye. Gone before

the moon, a ghost before the stars, chaser of the sun as he fled far from my heart. Shit, that rhymes. Can't be predictable now, can we?

"Doctor Mazha?"

Ah, yes. Duty calls. Duty by the name of Garrett.

"Garrett, I apologize." Now, what label did I give him?

With my gloves, I summon his holographic chart. I love order, organizing, categorizing people and places and things into buckets of sense. That's why I became a holopsych, to comprehend the incomprehensible. Light patterns the air, and one word buzzes, suspended in nothing.

"Panic disorder," I read.

Hyperventilation. Perspiration. Heart palpitations. Disorientation. Nausea. Tremors. Headache. Chills. Dread.

These symptoms earn Garrett that label. He's one of the easier ones, straightforward to categorize—

"You're wrong," he says.

I'm never wrong.

I pause, purse my lips. "Garrett, if you'd like me to explain my reasoning, I'd be more than happy to—"

"No," Garrett interrupts.

He pants, starts to sweat. As I told you, *hyperventilation, perspiration*—

"You're too young to understand," he says. "I want a *real* doctor."

I don't react as you might. I have no temper anymore. My fire burned out with the last hundred patients who said the same. So I repeat the answer I've given dozens of times, boredom dripping from each syllable.

"I assure you, Garrett, that my age has nothing to do with my competence. I hold a degree from the most prestigious

MedAc in the Protectorate, and I am fully licensed in interstellar holopsych procedure.”

Garett scrunches his bushy eyebrows, continues to huff and sweat. “You look like a kid.”

“I am not.” I twist my wrist, and the hologram flowers into a diagram. “Now, to manage your panic disorder: deep breaths, focus, close your eyes, relax your muscles, repeat a mantra—”

“Stop reading the bloody textbook,” Garrett snaps, failing to complete any of the tasks assigned. “You’re so...clinical.”

I blink. “Yes. I’m a doctor.”

He rolls his eyes and clutches his chest. “I want someone... with a heart...not a Net-damn...robot.”

If he intends “robot” as an insult, then he doesn’t understand me at all. Most don’t.

“Perhaps you are right,” I say. “If my prescriptive style is incompatible with your needs as a patient, then I am happy to recommend other holopsychs within the field.”

“Forget it,” Garrett says. “I’ll find one myself.”

He lurches across the room and slams the door behind him. I have that effect on people. My mind slides back to the dirty dishes.

No. Not now.

“Dr. Mazha?”

It’s my secretary. Spineless, but big-hearted. A waste of ambition, if you ask me. At least he never comments on my youth.

“Yes, Alix?” I ask.

“You have a neurocall,” he says. “It’s retinal-encrypted.”

Not Protectorate, then. Ice winds my heart. Only one organization has that breed of security, but why the hell are they interested in me?

"Ignore it," I say. Best not get involved. They're criminals, after all, in actions if not law.

Alix gulps. "Ignore...the Ward?"

Definitely spineless...possibly castrated.

"Yes." I turn away, but his whine turns me back.

"Doctor, with all due respect...I don't know how things were on Midica, but even your family can't protect you from the Ward."

I glare at him. "My family is dead. I need no one's protection. And with 'all due respect,' Alix, you have no fucking idea 'how things were on Midica.'"

Alix gulps again. If he wasn't castrated before, he is now. "Understood, Doctor. I will ignore it, per your orders."

He turns on his heel fast enough to melt rubber off his soles and squeaks out of my office.

My next patient isn't for an hour, since Garrett left early, so I have no distraction from the dirty dishes or Midica or this Net-awful slump.

No.

I won't go down that rabbit hole.

So I do what I always do to cope.

I make a list.

Immortal Cicatrix

Jace: 2 Weeks to Launch

“**B**ut, dude, *you* were the one who led me on,” Meatbrain says. “Then you ghosted me.”

He trails me up the engineering shaft. I move like a spider. Meatbrain moves like a drunken octopus.

“I’m an attention-seeking tease, not a fuckboy,” I say. “Drop it.” Should’ve been more upfront about that.

“But I bought you flowers.”

“I didn’t ask for flowers.”

“And chocolates.”

“Same answer.”

“But the way you moved your hips—”

I stop, and Meatbrain collides with my ass. This doesn’t help matters. I have a tight ass. “Listen, M—Darrel, I’m not ready for any type of relationship at the moment, however casual. Find yourself a nice guy, someone sweet and sensitive, someone who can appreciate you.” There must be at least one person in all

the worlds who can.

"But I don't want anyone else," he complains.

But, but, but, but—

"I'm not interested," I say. And I'm not worth it. Too many broken pieces to cut yourself on.

I move again, but Meatbrain grabs my arm. Panic ribbons my limbs, and instinct possesses me. I twist out of his grasp, elbow his diaphragm. He cries out, silent, wheezing like a busted accordion.

"Next time, it'll be your dick," I snap.

I crawl down the duct. After a few seconds, Meatbrain's clumsy movements reverberate through the metal tube.

"You're an asshole," he says behind me.

"I didn't ask you to come," I say.

"When I fuck up, I own my mistakes, unlike *some* people."

"Well, you're right. You were a mistake."

"You little shit," he says. "Why don't you head back to base before I break something you can't fix?"

"And leave you to recalibrate the sensors alone?" I ask. "Not a fucking chance."

"You think I can't handle it?"

"You're the reason they're misaligned in the first place."

"I used *your* program."

"For *nukedrive stabilization*." I breathe deeply, like the holopsych prescribed. And like the holopsych, it does jack shit. "Darrel, it's obvious your talents lie elsewhere. So go elsewhere, and lie low for a bit."

Meatbrain scowls. "I don't know what your deal is, kid, but keep acting out, and you'll have real problems."

Oh, Darrel, you adorable, oblivious boy. How little you know about me or my landfill of "real problems."

I fake a sigh. "Sorry, love. I'm going through some shit."

The universal code for: *Everything's on fire, but don't ask me why.*

Darrel takes the hint. Or he's thicker than I thought.

"No worries, Jace." He hesitates. Thinks. That's not a good sign. Meatbrain rarely thinks. "So you wouldn't be down for... you know?"

Yes, I know. Yes, he's a coward for not asking outright.

"What part of 'I am not a fuckboy' don't you understand?" I ask.

He blushes candy-apple red. "No, no, not like that. We could do it, you know, as friends. Friends with benefits."

Naive fool. There's no such thing in my experience, and I've had a *lot* of experience.

"Darrel, let me make myself perfectly clear. I am *not* your friend, I do *not* want to fuck you, and if you ask again, I'll ensure you never fuck anyone else. Okay?"

Meatbrain slams his fist against the metal shaft; the sound rings through my skull like an anvil. "Okay." He turns and shimmies back the way we came. Actually, "shimmies" is too graceful. "Lumbers" is more apt.

"Where are you going?" I call after him.

"Elsewhere," he mocks, "to lie low."

Finally. Now, I can wank in peace. I mean work. Well, you know what they say about killing two birds with one stone...

Several minutes later, I'm at the sensor configuration panel swearing at fused circuits. Fucking Darrel and his fucking incompetence. This is the third time this month I've covered for him. At least it gives me an escape from the blundering wannabes.

Jacccccccccccccccccc...

I freeze, paralyzed, as *she* returns. Her scent, her voice, how she hisses my name like blades across whetstones.

Hissed. She's dead. Gone. A ghost. She can't hurt me, and I won't let her haunt me.

Idiot. As if I have a choice.

I clutch the vent's sides as scars reopen and memory ravages my wounds. What she did to me and what she asked of me avalanche my soul with self-pity and regret. No, not regret. Something stronger. Guilt? Shame? There isn't a word.

Jacccccccccccccccccc...

Jace, my sweet Jacccccccccccccccccc...

I convulse with remembered trauma. My mind blanks to save my soul. Screams echo off the metal prison, and my mouth fills with blood.

"Jace."

Meatbrain reappears. He's pale and sweating and way out of his comfort zone. His voice rips me back to reality. Well, back to the *present*. Because what happened with her is more reality than I can bear.

"Dude, what the fuck happened?" he asks.

At first, I think he's asking about *her*, then I realize he doesn't know. No one does, and no one ever will.

"Sorry," I say, wiping blood from my lips. "Bit my tongue."

"So you screamed?" he asks, skeptical.

"Told you I'm an attention-seeking tease." My voice wobbles on every word. Meatbrain doesn't believe any of them, but he wants to, so he nods and tries a nervous laugh.

"That you are," he says.

"Thought you were elsewhere," I say.

"I was, but I heard you...and I thought..." Another nervous laugh. "Well, I thought you were dying."

In a way. Again and again. With each passing day.
“I’m good, Darrel.” I refocus on fused circuits. Meatbrain
takes the hint and leaves.

This can’t happen again. She’s gone. Forever.
But memories aren’t.

Jacccccceeeeeeee...

Let me inside, Jace.

Sidon

RJ: Age 8

I was happy once. At least, I think I was. Or perhaps dreams churned false memories of a life I desired.

No.

The love was real.

The grief is real.

So the memories must be, too.

They say start at the beginning to find your truth. Well, it did jack shit before, but I could try again.

I was an only child, born on Sidon to loving parents I adored. I wish my story ended there. It doesn't, but theirs does. I remember those raw, early years in the way of a child. Swaths of color. Blurs of emotion. Vignettes of nostalgia. Dad banging around the kitchen in the morning, making crêpes on the stove or muffins in the oven. Mom inhaling books at lightspeed—real books, not holo shit—ink on her fingers and parchment in her hair.

A roomful of toys, stories, and make-believe, bright and bold with the inconsideration of youth.

A couple goldfish in a crystalline tank, circling captivity, pretending at escape.

Vacations to Gao, Yuan, and Hattusa where all I wanted to do on foreign, magnificent worlds was swim in the hotel pool. It drove Dad crazy, but Mom shrugged it off, as she did most things.

Those were the only happy moments in my life, and I claw for them as a cat would a mouse. But the mouse fades with each deepening scratch as memory yields to time.

Dad calls from the kitchen. "R—, come here."

Fool. Did you really think I'd let it slip? You haven't earned my true name yet. Kaj told you what happened to the last one who asked. Best listen to him.

"It's time for dinner," Dad says.

He's always early. I'm always late. Mom is the bridge between us.

I'm eight, awkward, lanky, stuffed into a body I can't quite control. Down the stairs I tumble in a tangle of limbs, and I barge into the kitchen, sit for supper. For our last supper.

Damascus

Kaj: Age 9

They're in the hallway. I hear them right outside. So I scrunch myself further into the janitor's closet and close my eyes, will them away.

"Kaj. Ka-aj."

They sing my name with two syllables. A taunt. A curse.

"What's wrong, stinkwad? Why aren't you with your girlfriend in detention?"

There's a vomit of laughter, and I sink further into shame. Jeje asked me to do her homework, so I did, then she got detention for cheating while I got suspended for a week. I only wanted to help, and I shouldn't even be here, but *they* won't let me go.

"Come on, pibsqueak," one of them says. It doesn't matter which. They're all the same. "Take your beating like the good little boy you are, then you can scoot on home for dinner."

I don't move. Don't breathe. Don't even think.

"This isn't fun anymore. Get your scrawny ass out here so we

can leave.”

“Go away,” I shout. It’s stupid. They won’t. They never leave me alone till they’re done with me.

The closet door rattles, but the lock holds.

“Get out here, Kaj, or you’ll be real sorry you didn’t.”

I’m always real sorry I didn’t. Real sorry I did. Real sorry I earned the attention of the Mount Damascus bullies in the first place. I don’t remember what started it, but they always make time for me.

Bloody elementary school.

The lock busts, and the closet swings open. Four bullies topple inside. In less than a second, I’m yanked up, tossed out, and thrown to the ground. The biggest one kicks my stomach, and I yelp like a pup.

“Please,” I whisper, “let me go home.”

One of them grunts. “Thinks he’s special. Heard his dads are bigwigs or something.”

Another kick in the gut. Punch to my jaw. Knee to my groin.

“They’re...not,” I spew, losing consciousness, awareness, as I rapidly spiral toward the welcoming dark.

“Then why do you think you’re better than us?”

“I...don’t.” Pain crystallizes through me like winter’s first frost.

“Yeah, you do. That’s why you did Jeje’s homework. To prove you’re smarter.”

“What?” Confusion cuts through agony. “I wanted...to help her.”

“Then why didn’t you help us?” the scrappiest one asks.

I cock an eyebrow. Or rather, I try to, but bruises stiffen my face. *Why do you think, genius?* “If you quit beating me up, I *will* help you.”

They pause. Small mercies.

"He's lying," one says.

"Kaj never lies."

"Too much of a wimp."

"Maybe we should let him."

"Yeah, if I don't get my grades up, my moms'll murder me."

As the bullies argue, I slide through the cracks in their attention and roll into an adjacent hallway. Half of me aches, and half of me numbs. I sprint home, face-plant twice, and stumble into my dad's cottage. Their features morph in horror, but I shake my head and settle their fears.

Because the bullies are wrong.

I *can* lie.

In fact, it's the one thing I'm good at.

Excuses.

Stories.

Making things up.

Though I'm sure I'll pay for it later.

Carthage

Jace: Age 10

“Let me inside, Jace.”
My sister bangs on the metal door. The clang echoes through the tunnel, through my skull. Agitated, I unlatch and swing it open. Saia trips from the suddenness, barrels through the entrance, and shoots me a glare that could wither an army.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” she asks.

Saia stands opposite me, bony arms crossed. We’re in an abandoned magtrain tunnel, far beneath Carthage, her icy city trapped in eternal twilight. For some, this is a place of quiet, of peace. For Saia, it’s a place of secrets, of possibility, of experiment and curiosity.

“Well?” she presses.

“Shut up.” I tighten my parka. It’s always so bloody freezing on this Net-damn planet.

“You little shit. Come on, we got work to do.” Saia starts

down the tunnel, dives into the dark, and procures a soggy sandwich from an inside pocket. "Hungry?"

She's always starving after a beating.

"No, I just ate," I say, and I did. One piece of pumpkin bread, one hundred calories max. Chased by seltzer, zero calories. My breakfast and one of three—*only* three—meals I allow myself per day. Today is unique, however. I also let myself chew half a stick of cinnamon gum for exactly two minutes to celebrate. It's Independence Day, the anniversary of when the Protectorate freed Carthage from the Ward. We're still on "friendly" terms, if the notorious entity deserves such a benevolent word.

"You're too skinny," Saia says, reading my thoughts. I hate that, out of all people, she's the one who knows me best.

"You're too sociopathic," I return.

She smiles in the only way she can, a lion drooling over her prey. "No such thing."

"Where is he?"

"At the chargers."

"Do Mom and Mama know we're here?"

"Such a good little boy, Jace. No, they don't, and if you tell them, you'll regret it."

That's what she always says: *You'll regret it*. The ambiguity worries me more than the threat.

We continue down the magtrain tunnel, toward the magnetic chargers. It's silent, save for the click of our boots against metal. Red emergency lighting borders the dark titanium tube, ushering us straight into the forges of hell.

I smell blood before I see it. A copper tang stings my nostrils, waters my eyes. Scarlet streams from behind a cargo crate, and I stifle a gag.

"Pussy," Saia mutters.

"I'm going home," I say, coughing back bile.

This is too much. She's gone too far. Bullying was one thing, but this...shit, I don't want to know what this is. I should tell someone, but Saia would beat the crap out of that someone. You see my dilemma. I save those I can and mourn those I can't. Probably why I feel the constant need to punish myself.

"Come on," Saia says.

She grabs my parka and tugs me the rest of the way. My feet shuffle against the tracks in a spastic attempt to keep up. She's bigger, stronger, and faster, while I'm a spindly, half-emaciated pretty boy ignoring self-induced starvation. I always think about my next meal, yet I always regret thinking about my next meal. I'm so Net-damn hungry, yet every bite brings a guillotine of shame. I should focus more on my severely damaged sister, yet hunger throbs with urgency, and my head pounds with dehydration. This is my fault as much as hers.

"Please help me." The voice is a shadow, the boy a wraith. He faces me, eyes swollen shut, face a pustular glob of flesh. I freeze and fall to a knee.

"Saia," I whisper, "what have you done?"

"I forgot about Lio for a day or two, and he turned all squishy." She describes the boy as if he's rotten fruit. "Anyway, I need your help to move him. Well, threaten him first not to tattle, *then* move him out of here. You know, the usual."

I gape at her and stagger to my feet. "Do you feel...*anything*?"

She stares, confused, then annoyed, then enraged. "Yes, Jace, of course I feel. Right now, I feel very fucking cold, so hurry up."

I shake my head and retreat. "No. Not this time, Saia. Do it yourself. I'm going home."

"Fine," she says, nonchalant, and I tense. "Run back home like

the coward you are. I'm sure Mama will understand...*this*." She gestures at my scrawny frame. "Mom, on the other hand? Well, let's just say I take after her, and neither of us likes pity trips."

I grit my teeth. "It's none of your business."

"No, it's not," Saia says. "I don't care if you starve yourself to death—more cybs for me in the will—but for some inexplicable reason I can't understand, I venture our mothers will. So if I tell them you're withering away on a self-destructive path, I further venture they'll interfere. And when they interfere, you'll lose control—that's what you value, isn't it? Control? Imagine a holosurgeon force-feeding you till your innards burst with unwanted nutrition, fat bubbling on your limbs, your body a sack you no longer fit inside. Because that's where they'll drop you as soon as I tell them: a hospital. They think this is natural, that you're fine-boned. Just wait till I tell them the truth."

I quake in the tunnel, hands wound into fists, raw and aching as she exposes my deepest fear. "They won't believe you."

"Yes, they will. You're their Jace, their adorable boy. They'd do anything to save your life."

"I'd lie."

"I'd lie better. Come now, baby brother. You know how this ends. You're no fighter. I'll keep your secret, and you'll keep mine."

Guilt. Shame. Remorse. Regret. Why does language fail when it matters most?

"Okay," I whisper.

Judge me. You should. But Saia knows me better than you do. Control over this—over my body, my food—is my only anchor. And if I lose my anchor, I lose my sanity. Besides, I'm only cleaning up Saia's messes, not making them.

But messes can turn into murder.

No. I won't let it get that far.

"Now, Jace," Saia orders.

Go away. I don't want you to watch this part.

Midica

Mazha: Age 11

Seven moons peek through abbey arches and anoint Midica's Gothic spires in heavenly halo. Monasteries entangle through the sky city, indistinguishable and undefined. My world of worship stretches toward the stars, toward starships we built, yet I remain in this floating dungeon.

"You always did like it here," Mother says. She gestures around us at the Moon Vault, and her robes billow as she does, silk the shades of galaxies.

"I don't," I say.

"Then why do you visit so often?"

"To remind myself why I want to leave."

Mother tsks and writes me off as naive. "Come now, Mazha, you can have any world you want, any star, any system. Our empire is at your disposal. There's no reason to be glum."

I frown. "I don't want your empire. I want my own."

She laughs at me. I don't like being laughed at. "In time, love.

In time.”

“You don’t take me seriously.”

“Yes, I do. But you take everything *too* seriously. Relax. Live. Enjoy. Youth is the greatest treasure poorest spent.”

“I hate philosophy.”

Mother sighs. “You hate everything.”

“Not everything,” I chance. “A holopsych came to class—”

“No, Mazha. I don’t trust nanotech. It’s too...invasive.”

“It’s safe. You can only connect to the Net using gloves, and it’s programmed with safeties that—”

“Safeties?” Mother scoffs. “Your *brain* connects to nanites. How on Midica is that safe? The Net is an omniscient god that harvests souls.”

“That’s a gross exaggeration,” I say, annoyed. “There are myriad encryption methods for privacy, and there’s never been a reported case of sabotage.”

“A *reported* case, Mazha. And with entities like the Ward running amok, that does nothing to settle my nerves.”

“But holopsychs help people. They use simulations as exposure therapy and can cure—”

“Enough.”

Mother sighs and twists my ice-blond locks. We share the same hair, the same starlight skin, but my eyes—the pale blue-green of glaciers—are my father’s, and his ambition possesses me.

Fear not the worst scenario, then nothing in the worlds can hurt you.

Wise words, Father. Wise, but inhuman.

“This is about the diagnosis, isn’t it?” Mother asks.

I tense. *Diagnosis*. She doesn’t use the label, because the label is a life sentence. *Obsessive-compulsive disorder*. I count powers

of two to settle myself.

2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256...

"No," I say. "It's not."

"Because I'm sure the other kids—"

"Fuck the other kids."

Mother retreats a step. "Mazha!" Then she shakes her head, always pious. "Never mind. Come. It's time for prayer."

I take a deep breath, reset.

2, 4, 8, 16, 32...

"Go without me," I say. "I have studying to do."

"For what?" she asks.

"I told you. Holopsychology. I'm already behind."

"Mazha..."

Condescension laces her voice. I'm always patronized. Always belittled. Always squashed like a bug beneath the heel of my almighty legacy.

"It will help me understand." I motion to my head, where my demons reside.

"Midica will help you," she says. "We do not open our minds to blasphemy."

"It can cure me."

"It will ruin you."

Fury shoots down my limbs, and I coil my hands into fists to prevent its expulsion. "What the hell do we worship, anyway? Earth? It's a myth."

"It's our past," she says.

"It's nothing."

"It's our home."

"It's lost, and so are we."

I storm away, across the Moon Vault, away from the place I despise in the city I hate on the planet I loathe.

“It’s not lost,” Mother says, quiet.

I pause but don’t turn. “You’re right. Earth is not lost. It’s worse. It’s forgotten.”

Irreverent Exposition

RJ: 2 Weeks to Launch

By now, you have questions about our worlds, our people, our way of life, and we've had enough atmosphere to warrant exposition. I could also use the distraction before this clusterfuck holosurgery.

Show. Don't tell.

I hear your whines. But you don't know what I've been through, what I run from, what I try to escape, so I'll do whatever the hell I want, *because I can*.

Let's see. Where should I start?

What the fuck is the Ward?

Yeah, and what the fuck is the Protectorate?

Ah, good intro. I can't tell you about the Ward yet, because pacing and shit, but I don't know much about them, even now. However, I can and should start with the Protectorate.

Long, boring, snore-worthy history lesson short, the Protectorate is an interstellar government created after we invented

the nukedrive (faster-than-light space travel—cool, I know). Earth is a distant memory, a lost world, worshiped only by the shithole, backwater colony of Midica, by some fundamentalist assholes who think they're better than the rest of us. And no, there are no aliens. The author and universe aren't cool enough for that. Life is...complicated. So complicated and so reliant on the perfect ingredients in the perfect circumstances in the perfect environment that humans are all this universe could muster. We're its magnum opus.

Anyway, we're on the Outpost, but I'm originally from Sidon, and Kaj is from Damascus, as I'm sure he's told you. There are tons of other colonies I don't feel like listing, so do yourself a favor and take some Net-damn notes. Gravity is the same throughout the Protectorate. The colonies chosen are uniform, familiar worlds. How could an ambassador adjust to weighing half then double several times a week on business trips? No, we *certainly* wouldn't want people to adapt, and we *definitely* wouldn't want them to try new things.

Speaking of stagnancy, language is also uniform. Makes things easier. Lazier, if you ask me. Culture reached a breaking point generations ago where complexity led to homogeneity, and progress backpedaled to the beginning. One language. One culture. One mind. The Protectorate thinks this inspires, unifies, though to me, this terrifies.

But enough politics. Let me teach you some cool shit. The Net. Nanotech. Holo...everything. Technology is divinity. The Net replaced God long ago, and nanites plague every planet, every person, every bloody Protectorate ship. Sounds freaky, I know, but the only way to activate the Net is by wearing gloves. Without them, your mind is your own. With them, reality augments, extends, virtualizes into anything you can

imagine. By thought alone, you can summon holograms and force fields. Everything is smart, connected. It's an Internet of Things where we are the things and the Internet is alive.

But what about privacy?

But what about security?

If you could play God and conjure fantasy from thin air, would you give a flying fuck who watched? Here are your deepest, darkest, dirtiest dreams right in the palm of your hand. Oh, and we need your height, weight, hair color, eye color, birthday, and DNA sequence. But look at the pretty lights! Guess how fast the Net became omniscient?

I should worry more than I do. If someone hacked the Net, they would own us all. I doubt this is that kind of book, though. Revolutions mean planning, plotting, outlining, and Halo's a fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants-and-see-what-the-fuck-happens-maybe-even-necrophilia type. Still recovering from that scene.

"You're late."

The segue trope. Predictable? Yes. Do I give a shit? No.

"Kaj," I greet. I walk through the detox cell, strip, and throw on black scrubs.

"Have you reconsidered?" His face healed since last night, but he flinches as I approach.

"No," I say.

"RJ—"

"It's the Ward, Kaj. My answer will always be no. If you need cybs, I'll lend you some, but I am *not* getting in bed with that STD-ridden crime whore. Is the patient prepped?"

"Yes." Kaj snaps a surgical mask around his ears and pulls on gloves while I do the same. "Compound fracture of the left shin. Patient tripped over a bench on his way to work."

“Seriously?”

“Yep.”

I sigh. Boring is a euphemism for my level of disinterest. I cross to the hospital bed where the anesthesiologist waits. Shit, it's Gina. She sends patients to the astral realm with the avalanche of drugs she pumps into their systems. I told her to ease off after Conolly slept for a month post-op, but it's her passion. Sure enough, she stands over the IV drip with a manic grin.

“I call this one the Narcotini,” Gina says.

We ignore her. Kaj shoots me a sideways glance. “This is the Outpost,” he mouths, but what he means is, *Nothing interesting ever happens here, and nothing ever changes*. The Outpost is a lifetime of boring: broken bones, ruptured appendices, kidney stones, respiratory viruses, urinary tract infections. Nothing challenging. Nothing fulfilling. Nothing out of the ordinary. Holosurgery at peak tedium.

It's safe. It's secure. It doesn't matter.

That's why I'm here. For stability. For reliability. For steadiness. I need the biweekly pulse of a Protectorate salary. Sure, the Ward pays better—okay, *much* better—but for how long? And at what cost? No, the Protectorate is the only logical solution.

Pathetic. You used to crave the stars.

And look where that got me.

“Incision below his knee,” I say.

Kaj raises his gloved hand. Blinding light arcs from his fingertips, slicing the patient's flesh in an angry red line. He summons a force field to hold open the skin flaps. Chalk-white bone juts out of the calf, a knife thrust in rebellion at the fluorescent ceiling. I activate my gloves. With half a thought, I

set the bone with a force field, then fuse the tibia and cauterize the wound with hololight. It takes only a minute.

"Wake him in thirty," I tell Gina.

She won't, and I don't care. I leave the operating room, exit through detox, and head toward my next appointment, a hemorrhoids consultation. My job is a literal pain in the ass.

"RJ, wait."

Kaj jogs up behind me. He's my head nurse, on the same schedule. There are days when I'm grateful. This is not one of them.

"Stay here, and this is the next seventy years of your life," he says. "An endless stream of boring, insignificant, meaningless dribble. You're better than this. Don't you want more? Don't you want to find some higher purpose off this barren rock? You have *so* much potential, yet you relegate yourself to first-year MedAc bullshit. You left the medical academy long ago. Make something of your life. Do something amazing. Go on an adventure, for Net's sake."

I whirl around and pin him to the wall with my elbow. He pissed me off at "dribble"—terrible word choice—but "amazing" set me over the edge.

"I've had my fill of adventure for twenty lifetimes," I sneer, my forearm against his throat. He wheezes, black eyes wide. "You don't understand me, and you have no idea what I've been through, so back the fuck off before I decide to make my higher purpose beating the living shit out of you."

I let him go, and he coughs, rubs his throat. "You know," he rasps, "the normal reaction in these types of situations is to open up, to confide. I'm your friend, RJ. You can tell me anything. Just don't push me away."

I freeze. "Damn you."

Kaj blinks, confused. "What? Why?"
Because you sound like him.

Past-Walker

Mazha: 2 Weeks to Launch

“**D**octor, there’s a neurocall for you,” Alix says, nervous. He fidgets in my office doorway. “Retinal-encrypted again.”

“Ignore it,” I say.

He pants in a way that makes me question his impotence. “*Please*, Doctor. They’ll get their answer one way or another.”

“For all we know, they could be holomarketers,” I say.

“They’re not.”

I roll my eyes and turn toward him. “You think it’s the Ward?”

“I *know* it’s the Ward,” he urges.

“Then they can call the polite way,” I say. “And when they do, I’ll answer.”

“This isn’t a joke. They’ll come after you.”

I narrow my eyes. “You mean they’ll come after *you*. That’s why you’re concerned, isn’t it? Punishment by association?”

He pales. “I meant no disrespect.”

"Intention means nothing. The drunk pilot doesn't mean to crash into another starship, yet they do and slaughter millions. Murder is murder, Alix."

Fear slips his composure. "You're so Net-damn rigid. Everything isn't clear-cut. They *will* find you, Doctor. If they must, they'll hunt you down. This is the *Ward*. The mafia of the stars. The only organization that can overpower the Protectorate. There's no running away. There's no saying no. There's no turning your back on the mob that boils infants in their hospital beds."

"That's a myth," I say.

He throws up his hands, exasperated. "For fuck's sake, if that's a myth, then they've done as bad, if not worse."

"Which is why I'm ignoring them."

"If you don't care about your life, then what about those you love? Ignore the Ward, and you threaten them all."

I tense, grit my teeth, try to breathe.

2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128...

"I don't love anyone," I say, voice soft as rain.

Alix tilts his head, baffled. "Don't you have friends? Colleagues on Midica?"

"I don't love anyone," I repeat. Especially not Mr. Dirty Dishes. "So, as you can see, I have no one to save. I only have my life to worry about, Alix, and I take my own risks. If you would like to resign and protect yourself and your loved ones, I understand."

But he doesn't understand. I've yet to meet someone who does. Instead, he stares like a diarrhetic buffalo, opening and closing his mouth as if chewing cud.

"I'll stay," he whispers.

Because he feels sorry for me.

"Then let in my next patient," I say.

Alix nods and leaves, mumbling something to this extent: "You're the type of freak who worries if you should hyphenate 'fucked up.'"

Of course I do. It depends on sentence structure. Pre-noun adjectival use warrants a hyphen (it's a *fucked-up* world), whereas post-verb (the world is *fucked up*) and verb (we *fucked up* the world) uses do not.

Anyway, a wiry, twitchy woman replaces Alix. PTSD. That's her label, her category, the treatment I'll lose myself in for the next hour so I can ignore my own traumas.

"Gercia," I greet with a forced smile. Alix would call it clinical. "How have you been?"

She shakes her head. "Just do your...thing." She waves her hands at my gloves.

That's why Gercia is my favorite. Her hatred of small talk rivals my own.

I slip on my gloves and, with a thought, layer the room in a holographic projection of the office where she was attacked. Exposure therapy. Bit by bit, I recreate her nightmare. It's taken us weeks to get here. When we started, the mere sight of window panes sent her into an episode. Now, she can maintain composure, albeit tense and with bated breath.

"Good," I say. "Whenever you're ready, lead us through that evening."

Gercia squints her eyes, opens them. "I was...um...I worked late. Security patches for our stake in the Net. That's my desk over there...that's where she..."

Every muscle in her body tightens. Fear strangles the words from her mouth.

"It's okay, Gercia," I say. "Take your time." I alter the

simulation lighting to make it less accurate. Sometimes, distance lets patients work through pain.

It helps Gercia. She breathes in, holds it, continues. "She was my boss. Paden. A complete cunt, I might add. She picked on me. Singled me out. Made that job a living hell. Anyway, I worked overtime on those patches, but she decided I wasn't doing enough, even though I was the only one hired for that job, and the bigwigs said they couldn't be happier. So Paden came into my office after the rest of the company went home, and she...and she..."

Gercia freezes as a shadow appears in the room. Her secret. The fear she can't overcome.

"She can't hurt you anymore," I say gently. I tune the hologram to Paden's DNA file. It's an exact likeness.

Gercia eyes me, disgusted. "She can't hurt me anymore? With all due respect, Doctor, unless you can erase memories, then she can hurt me every fucking day for the rest of my Net-damn life."

I cringe. My bedside manner lacks finesse. Okay, it's abhorrent.

"Sorry, Gercia. I never meant to be insensitive. I'm here with you now, and I promise to help you through this."

Gercia looks as convinced of my abilities as I feel. I'm drowning in everything lately.

"She walked over to my desk," Gercia whispers, saving me from my shadows, "and yanked off my gloves. I disconnected too fast. The Net jumbled my perception, and it took me a few seconds to recover. While I was disoriented, Paden...Paden... well, she fired me, then she stabbed me to death."

Paden jerks across the room, wraithlike. Tears paint Gercia's face as horror unfolds. The knife plunges into her holo-likeness,

spewing blood across the desk, floor, walls, windows. Her mouth stretches in terror, and Gercia twitches in time to her ghost's demise. Under Paden's wrath, she convulses, then spasms, then screams. With several more stabs, she lies still.

Gercia watches her hologram on the floor. She's still. Stony. So I say nothing. Neither of us knows exactly what happens next. Someone came in, knocked Paden out, and resuscitated Gercia, but we don't know who, and Gercia didn't want to learn till now. I access nanosurveillance data that building stored in the Net. Perfectly legal. Perfectly creepy. As I download it, there's a rhythmic whoosh as Gercia practices the breathing exercises I taught her.

"Let it continue," she whispers.

I flick my glove, and the projection resumes. After a few seconds of eerie silence, Paden stands over Gercia's mangled body as victor while Gercia stares into the dark with a vacant gaze. Window light wanes with a passing cloud, and the wall clock ticks the heartbeats Gercia misses.

The office door slams open and flies off its hinges. Both humans and holograms jolt. I chance a look at Gercia, but she seems all right, or as all right as she can be. In the simulation, Paden startles, then lurches forward, but the visitor fells her with a swift crack to the temple. Paden crumples, out cold, as the visitor swoops over Gercia. Light splinters from their gloves, and in a blink, Gercia gasps back to life.

Now, *I* startle. I've never seen someone work hololight with such fast, natural talent. This visitor uses it as an extension of their body, as easy as waving hello. But they leave as fast as they arrived, and I only glimpse their trench coat.

I raise my hand to rewind the simulation and turn the visitor toward us. The image is a blur, a cloud, a hololight smudge,

indistinguishable and unidentifiable. However, lucky for me and for the plot of this book, I studied image manipulation in school because of the aforementioned exposure therapy (at times, OCD comes in handy). Beside me, Gercia remains silent, intrigued, and after a few tense moments, the image sharpens.

I stall. Forget where I am. Who I am. What I'm supposed to do. The woman before me is a force. A vision. A golden-bronze goddess. She's the cliché tall, dark, and handsome in a long trench coat with a wiry build and a thin, angular face. Buzzed chestnut hair caps her head in an aggressive, uneven fashion. Her eyes glare a violent red, and she locks me in a cage of fear, lust, and desire. She captivates me. No, she *bewitches* me. I need her in an unhealthy, poisonous way, and this logical alarm returns me to reason.

"Who the hell is that?" Gercia asks. She's more curious than afraid.

I scan the visitor's image and run it through the Net. Facial recognition fails, then retinal, then fingerprint. That's impossible. No one escapes the Net. There must be a record somewhere. I try a vitals search as a last-ditch effort. The Net matches her breathing, heartbeat, height, and weight to an incomplete log from the Outpost in the Protectorate boondocks.

RJ.

That's all the file says. *Just* RJ. There's no history. No connections. No records whatsoever. Who is she? And why the fuck do I care?

"Doctor? Doctor Mazha?"

Gercia is still here.

I clear my throat and close the hologram. RJ's afterimage burns my eyes.

"Sorry, Gercia, it seems you had a guardian angel," I say.

Gercia nods, disinterested.

"How do you feel?" I ask, fighting for professionalism. "You reached the end of the simulation. Excellent job."

Focus, Mazha. Fucking focus.

"I feel...better," Gercia says, tentative. "Thank you."

I monotone routine bullshit, refill her prescription, and retreat into my office a zombie, alone and emotionally castrated.

What the hell was that?

No one takes me off guard. *No one*. Not even Mr. Dirty Dishes.

So how can a pair of initials from some remote, barren colony cause complete system malfunction?

Broken Mirror

Jace: 2 Weeks to Launch

I ate too much. I don't fit in my skin. I thought I was past this, that it was done and over, but some skeletons refuse to remain buried.

I excuse myself from Engineering as panic sets in. A few glance my way, but a console's flashing lights distract them, and they forget about me and humanity.

In the hall, I pass Mhod, my manager, and he holds up a hand to stop me.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" he grunts, the role model for flat characters.

"Bathroom," I say.

"You've been twice in the last hour."

"I have a bug, sir."

He grunts again, disgust mingled with reluctant approval, then lets me pass. I'm always such a bloody pushover.

I crash into the bathroom and lock the door behind me,

sweating and heaving and wheezing, heart pounding. I punch the mirror. Glass shreds my knuckles. Pain exacerbates my panic, and I eye my reflection, dangling by a thread. Lithe frame, dark skin, buzzed head, frantic hazel eyes...Saia always called me her baby dancer.

Jacccccccccccccccccc...

Let me inside, Jace.

You already are.

It was one biscuit.

Just one more biscuit than usual.

I was hungry.

I eat when I'm hungry, stop when I'm full.

I listened to my body.

It's okay.

Everything's okay.

I needed it.

I listened to my body.

I eat when I'm hungry, stop when I'm full.

I was hungry.

It was just one more bloody *fucking biscuit*.

I drop to the floor and do fifty push-ups, desperate to burn it off. Sweat seeps through my uniform, so I tear off my shirt and lean bare-chested against the counter. Dips next. Sets of twenty. Skin jiggles with each descent, fury reflected in the broken mirror. It's not enough. I sprint across the bathroom, boots squeaking on metal tiles. My body is a sack of ill-defined flesh. It trails me like a parachute as I whip to and fro. Others call me skinny, even scrawny, but I see the truth. I'm too big. Too loose. Too out of control.

"Dude, what's wrong with you?"

I stall mid-sprint. It's Rath, a fellow engineer, one on my team.

Shit.

“Fuck off,” I say.

I could puke. Not my style. I prefer to suffer for every mistake. Yet I might—

“Seriously, man, are you okay?” Rath asks, because he’s supposed to. But he’s not concerned. I, on the other hand, am very fucking concerned.

“Just working out,” I snap. “Water main’s busted in the barracks, so I’m doing it here. Now, piss off.”

I face away, but he rests a hand on my shoulder, and I freeze. I want to fuck him. I’m too gross to fuck him. I don’t deserve anyone in this state. I’m too big. Too loose. Too disgusting. But it’d burn more calories—

“When’s your next shift?” I back into him, and he hisses with desire.

“Whenever I want it to be,” he murmurs in my ear.

“Well, then,” I say and motion to a stall, “shall we?”

Let me inside, Jace.

You never leave, Saia.

Blank Slate

Kaj: 2 Weeks to Launch

“Have you spoken to her yet?”
The neurocall cuts in and out, a sputtering hologram only I can see. A hazy image silhouettes a man...a woman...it doesn't matter. The background is static, perhaps a ship's bulkhead. Wherever they are, it's not Protectorate.

As the Outpost hits lunch, I veer into a narrow corridor to hide from the swarming, ravenous crowd. “Yes.”

“And?” they ask, impatient.

“She won't come,” I say.

There's a pause that fuses my nerves.

“She's essential,” they say after a long, painful second.

“I can't force her.” No one can force RJ to do anything. Even you've learned that by now.

“Then persuade her,” they say. “If it's about cybs—”

“She doesn't care about money,” I say.

"Everyone cares about money, Kaj."

"She's not materialistic."

"Money isn't materialistic. Money is freedom. Money is power. Money is protection. Money is support and security and opportunity, the realization of imagination. You haven't applied the right pressure yet."

If I apply any more pressure, she'll kill me.

"I don't know enough about her," I say. "She lets no one in."

"You're her best friend," they say.

"And it means jack shit," I snap, annoyed at them, at her, at this situation, at my desperation. "Why don't *you* hack her record? I'm sure the Protectorate has something you could use."

They're silent, and I realize—

"Holy shit, you did, didn't you?" Dread trickles down my spine. The Ward is notorious, but I thought the Protectorate manufactured most horror stories to keep the sheeple in line.

"We found nothing," they say.

I gulp, bury my fear. "There must be—"

"No, you don't understand. We found *nothing*. Her record's clean. Wiped. A blank slate."

"By whom? Protectorate?"

"Something or someone else."

"That's impossible."

"We know."

RJ keeps her name secret, but I never thought she *erased* it. No one has that power. Well, no one's supposed to have that power. I don't know if I should fear her or the Ward more...

"We'll give you an extension, but you *must* bring her in," they say, jolting me from one nightmare into another. "If you don't, the mission will fail."

The mysterious mission I know too little about and pledged

too much toward.

“I will,” I squeak like a pubescent boy.

The neurocall clicks off, sans goodbye, and the hologram fades. Sounds of normalcy, of lunch, seep into my periphery, but I can only focus on her.

RJ. The ghost of the Net. A woman without a record. The ingenious holosurgeon who saved countless lives. That last part I must remember. I don’t know who she is, but I know what she’s done, who she’s helped, the people who’d be corpses if not for her. *That* matters. *Only* that.

Right?

But how can I convince a ghost, a phantom, a secret to join a mission as cryptic as her?

World of Worship

Mazha: Age 14

“**M**other Earth, keep us. Mother Earth, guide us. Mother Earth, watch over us. Though we’ve wandered far from our holy home, your heart travels with us, and our souls are yours.”

I twitch as the nuns finish their homily. Ignorance echoes through the abbey like a shit explosion in a toilet bowl. Sorry, I mean the acoustics are pristine. My mother chants along, and my father nods his head. Disgusting.

I tune out Mass and focus on holopsych readings. Mother forbids it, Father ignores it, and I take both as confirmation that I am on the right path.

Exposure therapy requires a unique set of skills. Holopsychs hold images in their heads while accessing the Net for patients’ diagnostic and historical information. It’s exhausting, both emotionally and physically. The images are often traumatic, even horrid in nature, and accessing so many at once causes

brain damage in more doctors than the Protectorate cares to report. This is why most parents disallow their children from practicing hololight arts. But not mine. Mine refuse on notions of antiquated pride.

Shit, I *do* sound like a textbook. The kids at school are right. Speaking of...

While the nuns drone on about Mother Earth this and Mother Earth that, I don my gloves and summon a tiny readout. In my palm, glowing letters assemble into a data table. Mother and Father don't notice. They're too absorbed in the auditory diarrhea.

I scroll through names till I reach the infamous Mei. She's the worst bully in school, skinny and sharp, quick with words and fists. If she can't insult you till you cry, she'll punch you till you bleed. Last week, she aimed her wrath at me, and I'm still healing from the beating. The school wrote it off as "you know teenagers," but that conclusion never satisfied me.

I open her file and read the notes. Her disciplinary record is a bloody dissertation, stuffed with victims. But why? There's a person here somewhere, a person I can practice on...

There. *Acute bipolar mania*. My conscience twists as I realize Mei struggles, too. Then again, of course she does. Everyone has something, some more than most. I could help her, could help those like her. If I use her record to access the Net, summon a calming image—

Hololight ruptures the room. Nuns scream. The congregation screams. My parents scream. Hell, *I* scream. Burning hair fills my nostrils. *My* burning hair. And flesh. Seared like steak. Then pain. White-hot, blinding pain.

Someone yanks off my gloves, and I disconnect from the Net too fast, a rocket disemboweled mid-flight. Images, letters, and

numbers scream through my head till someone, somewhere, brings me back.

A holosurgeon stands over me. Even on Midica, they allow necessities. I slide my gaze above him and freeze. The abbey ceiling is split in two. Stars tumble through the chasm, and seven moons mock me with disdain.

"What on Midica do you think you're doing?" Mother asks. Her voice is the low menace of a predator at night. The congregation watches us, anxious, huddled in the pews.

"Learning," I croak. My throat aches from screaming. My head pounds from the disconnect. My limbs sting from the energy. Yet I wouldn't trade it for all the worlds.

"You stole classified student records," Mother says, "accessed the Net, and endangered these people with your foolery. *Now*, do you understand why you must abandon this dream?"

I narrow my eyes. "*Now*, I understand why I must pursue it at all costs. If you had allowed me proper training, that never would have happened. *This* is the future, Mother."

"Blasphemy," she says.

"Blasphemy?" I scoff. "Earth is the dream *you* must abandon." Gasps ripple through the abbey.

"Mazha, repent," Father says, nervous. "Repent, or they'll punish you." He eyes the bolstering crowd.

I set my jaw. "I believe what I believe."

"*Please*, Mazha," Father begs. Mother watches us, indifferent. She thinks I deserve this.

"I don't care if you agree," I whisper, "but one day, even if you don't believe what I believe, I hope you will believe in me."

Father shakes his head. Mother rolls her eyes. The crowd begins to chant.

"Repent. Mother Earth forgives. Repent. Mother Earth

forgives. Repent—”

“I will not repent,” I call to the fractured abbey. “I believe in the Net, and you do, too, when convenient, when you use holosurgeons and holopsychs. You *need* the tech, whether you admit it, and I will not yield to hypocrisy, Mother Earth be damned.”

If I was in trouble before, I am now in a galaxy of shit. Nuns ululate, arms stretched in crucifixion. The congregation cries, “Save her. Purge her. Bring her home.” In other words, beat the curiosity out of me till ignorance prevails. Like Mei. Some people never grow up.

“We can’t help you,” Father laments.

“You made your choice,” Mother says.

Their reputations are on the line. That’s all they care about.

“I don’t need your help, nor anyone else’s,” I spit. But my drama is short-lived. The crowd sweeps me from the floor and rushes me to the front of the abbey where a cross awaits.

This will hurt.

The congregation squawks like chickens, clucking words with blind and dangerous devotion. All the while, I shriek.

“There is one God...”

They tear off my robe.

“...Mother Earth Almighty.”

Tie my arms to the post.

“There is one way...”

Drive a nail through my feet.

“...toward Our Holy Lady.”

Break my kneecaps with a candlestick.

“Though she is lost...”

Shove a cloth down my throat.

“...may she be found...”

Snap my wrists like twigs.

"...in a bath of blood..."

Scratch their claws across my chest.

"...by the light of her sins."

Pain is all I know, all I am, all I taste. Copper gags my throat, and my body pulses with agony. I search for my parents in the crowd, but I can't focus. Heretics cloud my vision, and from their heart leaps a flame.

Hololight. Hypocrites. They use it when convenient (to save their sorry asses) or to make a point (aka punishment). Light arcs toward me in a scythe, and I brace myself for the brutal message they wish to carve into me.

"There is one God, one path, one way."

A shadow blocks my shame.

"Enough."

I sway, breathless and shocked. It's Mother. Mother who fed me to the wolves. Mother who stands against all I believe. Mother who fights me at every turn. Mother who saves me.

"Mazha has learned her lesson," Mother says. "It won't happen again."

I scowl, enraged. There she is. Controlling me. *Grooming* me. But I'm not a Net-damn robot. She can't program me.

"Cut her down, and bring her to the medic," Mother says. "She will heal *our* way."

No holosurgeon. No thwarting consequences. No instant erase.

I open my mouth to object, but I'm too far gone to form thoughts, never mind words. Yet a warmth, a calm, spreads through me in agony's wake. Pain balances me. Orders me. Organizes chaos. I'm at peace, a peace borne from war, but peace nonetheless.

The harder it hurts, the longer it aches, the stronger you become. Is that my key? My key to freedom? To life? To escape interminable lists, labels, numbers, and repetitions? A sacrifice for sanctuary?

“Rest, Mazha,” Mother whispers as I drift unto dusk. “Rest now, and rest in peace.”

And for once, I do.

Urchin Rat

RJ: Age 11

Revenge is a tough bitch. It's been three years since I lost them, yet I'm no closer to justice. Who killed my parents? Why? How? The Protectorate ruled it an accident, but death is seldom a mistake. Eight years old, and I woke from a dream into a nightmare. Two bodies butchered like deer. Blood-drenched walls. Gut-stained floor. Mom and Dad turned mushy corpses.

So I screamed.

Then I ran.

Cops found me, dragged me into the system, but I ran again and *again* and **again**. I left every foster home and drove every orphanage mad, so this last escape, they let me keep running.

I'm a gutter rat. A street urchin. Sidon's lowest trash. I avoid gangs, stalk offworld tourists, and make my profit from their oblivion. It's a raw life, full of thieving and hiding and sleeping in dumpsters, but it's a free life, and it's mine.

Yet times change. Energy shifts. Waves withdraw the tide, reveal something new, sand ready to shape into castles.

Still can pick a pocket, though.

“Yo, kid, what’s your name?”

Or not.

A kraken of a boy lurks toward me. He’s larger than most adults. A behemoth. A beast. A brute. I spin on my heel, start to run, but the fucker is fast. He catches my arm and twirls me to face him.

“I asked you a question,” the boy says. “What’s your name?”

“None of your fucking business.” I spit in his face. He doesn’t even blink.

“Where are your parents?” he asks, unfazed. His grip on my arm tightens.

“Dead,” I snap.

He smiles, and in that smile, I see I’ve misjudged him. He’s not a brute. He’s kind. Concerned. Shame on me for assuming otherwise. Or I’m still naive...

“Seems we have something in common.” He releases me and walks away as I stand, dumbfounded, on the roadside. “Well? You coming?” he asks.

In my years on the streets, no one has ever noticed me, asked if I was okay, or offered to help. My guard rises against this stranger. Kindness melts the best of us.

“Where?” I ask, cautious.

“Home,” he says.

My skepticism grows, but I follow him, because I’m hungry, *starving*—that’s the only reason why. He’s gigantic, so he must have food. But after I eat, I’ll scam. Nothing good comes to those who wait, fuck the saying.

“So,” he says as we drift through the crowd, shoulder to hip,

“what can I call you?”

“RJ,” I say. I gave up my real name after my parents died. New life, new name. Initials suit me better now. A shell of a word, a shell of a person.

“What’s it mean?” he asks.

“RJ,” I repeat, pissed off.

He chuckles. “You’re a prickly one.”

“And who the hell are you?” I ask.

He shrugs. “Don’t have a name. Parents died offworld before they could log a birth certificate. Foster parents didn’t care enough to name me. Orphanage gave me a number, 579. Some call me Five. Some just point.”

“Kraken,” I say.

“Sorry?” he asks.

“Kraken,” I say. “There. That’s your name.”

Another smile dusts his face, a smile I distrust, the smile of friendship. “I knew I liked you, RJ.”

“No, you knew you needed me,” I say, guessing his intentions, “but I can’t for the life of me figure out why.”

He chuckles again. Too much joy. Too unnatural. “You’re too smart for your own good.”

“No, I’m too smart for *your* own good.”

A grin carves his face. “I fear you’re right.”

Kraken leads me to the city’s heart. It’s a shithole here, a fluorescent metropolis of building-block high-rises smashed together like a toddler’s tantrum catastrophe. Everything is too bright, too humid, too cramped. We live on top of each other in skyscraper mazes, climbing between layers of our onion world. It’s a tough place to live, a tougher place to grow up.

There are no role models here, no heroes in shiny capes, no goals to pursue, no hope to comfort. The only beacon in

technicolored Sidon is the star cluster she orbits, but in a cruel twist of fate, our suns are too blinding to witness during the day. We venture out in the neon night, amid gangs and jellies and twilight debauchery.

“Got any cybs?” Kraken asks as we shimmy through an alley. A we-think-we’re-cooler-than-the-worlds flock sneers at us. I crave the day when they wouldn’t dare. But for now, I’m a scrawny, mangy orphan feeding off scraps of a gangrenous society.

“No,” I lie.

“Good,” Kraken says. “You sound convincing.”

I scowl.

He laughs. “Easy, kid. One day, the worlds will fear your name. Till then, you need a bodyguard.”

“I don’t need fame or a fucking bodyguard,” I say. “I can look after myself.”

Kraken raises a scraggly eyebrow. “My left nut is bigger than you.”

“Size doesn’t matter.”

“Bullshit. I could throw you to Midica.”

“I wouldn’t be caught dead on that hellswamp.”

“You’ll be caught dead here if you don’t buddy up, sugar tits.”

I knee his groin, wait for the gasp, elbow him in the nose, then run. After two steps, a wall of light erupts before me. Hololight. Force fields. The Protectorate cash cow.

“Point...taken,” Kraken wheezes. “But we have...bigger tricks...sweetheart.”

I whirl around and glare at him. “And what exactly are ‘we,’ *sweetheart*?”

He bites his lip, stands, and twirls his gloved hand. The hololight fades. “Von Rei.”

"Never heard of it."

"Good. Our name belongs to members or ghosts. Sometimes both."

"So you're a gang," I say, "trying to scare the little orphan into submission."

"Not submission," Kraken says. "The opposite. We want to make you boss."

I snort with laughter. It's an odd sound, a rusty squeak, creaky and unused. "My turn to call bullshit."

"It's the truth. You're smart. Too smart, perhaps. Nobody'd suspect you."

"Because I'm small and unassuming?" I snap, offended.

"Because you're fierce and brilliant. People'd assume you're a rich bitch, destined for holosurgery or some other shit. Under all that dirt, you got class, kid. You'd throw off our scent."

"No," I say and walk away. Another light wall blocks my path.

"Member or ghost? Which'll it be?"

Fear slithers up my throat. Kraken asks with such calm, such warmth. I knew I was right to distrust kindness.

"Member," I say. "Make me your boss."

Cry Ink

Kaj: Age 11

I'm in the elevator this time, between levels, stalled mid-flight. They can't find me here, and here, I can write.
I'm alone. I'm always alone. No one wants me, and no one sees me.

Ugh, too angsty and cliché. I scratch out failure and try again. Fantasy this time. Best distance myself from truth, or perhaps approach truth from a different angle.

Mica knew two things better than anyone in class—how to lie and how to sew. Both were the same, patching holes with weaker threads.

Hmm, better, but still shitty. I bang my head against the elevator wall, and frustration rings through me. Why is this so hard? Writing is the only thing that releases me, yet everything I write sucks. Sometimes, I prefer bullies. At least hatred is predictable.

Mica never knew himself till he met Raja. Their relationship was symbiotic.

Dammit. This isn't biology. I throw the notebook and bury my head in my hands. Too loud. Someone hears and restarts the elevator. A teacher, probably. Hopefully.

I don't bother standing as the doors slide open. Let's get this over with.

"What the hell is this?" someone asks, rescuing my notebook from the floor. She snorts and guffaws. Not a teacher, then. "Dude, you suck at everything."

Jeje. I recognize her now. Victim turned villain. Wait, we did that book already.

"I bet your dads are so embarrassed," she says.

"Yeah, unlike you, they're wicked cool," another chimes in.

No, they're wicked ordinary, corporate, and careful, climbing a ladder that never moves. I want to learn how to fly upside down.

"How the hell did they raise such a douchewad?" a fellow douchewad asks.

"Just do whatever you're gonna do," I say, defeated.

I yearn for punishment to make sense of things. Though writing is what I want more than anything in the worlds, it oftentimes tortures me. When it flows, it fulfills me, but when it jams, I redline till I explode.

"As you wish, fucknugget," Jeje says.

Rewind and repeat.

Bows or Knots

Jace: Age 14

"I like bows. Do you like bows, Jace?"

I shiver in the tunnel, rub my arms to keep warm. "I don't care for them."

"So you like knots, then," Saia says.

"What?"

"People like bows *or* knots, never both. It doesn't surprise me that you like knots—you're boring, predictable. Me? I like bows. Bows make things pretty, don't you think?"

"What the fuck are you talking about, Saia?"

"Bow. Knots. Ways of tying things together, broken things."

I stop moving. She's been better lately, but—

"Saia, no. Not again. I'll tell Mom and Mama if—"

"You look skinny, Jace. You look in control."

I shut up. Guilt's the best noose.

Saia skips down the tunnel, and I follow, a coward.

We trudge down the chrome esophagus, boots scraping,

parkas whispering. Blood-red lights guide our path, their glare sharp as canines, their grind tough as molars. Control boxes flash as we pass, pretend they're useful, that anyone's listening. Idiots. Carthage listens to no one. The ice city forgets all in her maw, cracks them beneath her fanged cage, feasts upon their meat, then throws their scraps to the vultures—in other words, the Ward. That was the price of freedom, for freedom always carries a fee. "Give us your trash, and we shall make treasure," they said atop skulls of infants and thieves.

"Whale entrails spell slimy tales," Saia belts, "and beaver ears hear the longest years."

And you thought I was off.

"But a moose and a goose will shake them loose," she yodels, "when a bat and a cat pat the winter gnats. Marry the beast that caws in the night. She won't go down without a fight. Her voice is gold; her eyes are light. Follow her to greater flight."

This is the strangest shit I've ever heard, and hanging with Saia, I've heard my fair share of strange shit. She's in a weird mood, and that worries me. It should terrify you.

"Here we are, baby brother," she says. "He looks like the desiccated carcass of a wildebeest. Or the moist flap of a marinated duck. Speaking of moist, I hereby declare that period blood shall thus be referred to as lady wine."

I don't want to look. Her last catch was rather...spongy.

It's a phase. That's what I tell myself. She'll grow out of it. At least she hasn't killed. Then I hear my excuses and fear for my soul. What have *I* become? Never mind her. Saia's a lost cause.

Then fucking do something.

And relinquish control? Because if there's one thing I know with absolute certainty, it's that Saia *will* break free of any cage, hunt me down, string me up, and spill secrets from my

disemboweled sanity. If my moms knew of my crutch, my tether, my anchor, my joist, then my foundational cracks would split continents and shipwreck me upon mortal shores.

I shiver from cold, from fear, from shame, and cocoon myself within my parka. Through my thermal, I count my ribs, sharp as picks. Taut flesh calms me. I've done well this week. Down two pounds. No binges. No cravings. I clutch this thought as, reluctant, I eye Saia's prey.

And heave.

For once, her absurdist comparisons apply. Desiccated. Carcass. Moist. Marinated. How many times did she punch his face? Is that even his face?

Saia laughs at my reaction. "You're so cute."

Call the Protectorate.

Then they'll know about me. Then I'll lose control. Besides, they have worse to worry about. Primitive Damascus. Radical Midica. Crime-ridden Sidon. But rebellious Carthage is just under leash. No reason to fuck it up when fucking it up would fuck me up, too.

Saia hasn't killed anyone.

Yet.

Groans bubble from her prey's throat. Gelatinous globs of blood and pus ooze from his ragged lips. Whispers edged in agony scrape past his teeth, and he howls the howl of a wolf at dusk. Night is nigh. At least for him.

"Saia," I gag, "he needs a hospital."

"Nonsense," she coos. "He's broken. We need to tie him back together. Bows or knots?"

Oblivion Rewound

RJ: 1.5 Weeks to Launch

Many a night I spend with whiskey's sole company.
Yet no matter how much I drink, Kaj's offer rattles
around my skull.

The Ward.

The money.

The security.

The opportunity.

No.

It's not worth it, especially after all they've done.

And yet...

When one door closes, another opens, and this is the only door that has opened in a *long* time. Paths faded, roads narrowed, and I'm at a dead end, the cul-de-sac with the haunted house.

The audience—that's you—screams, "For Net's sake, don't go inside! Don't you see the ghosts? Don't you see the blood?"

But through the hologram, you can't see the desperation. I'm trapped, and I *must* escape. The Outpost holds nothing but bleak prospects and an empty future, while the Ward *could* offer—

No.

It's not worth the risk.

And yet...

There's anger. *So* much anger. And hatred. And betrayal. Mountains of guilt buried me alive; oceans of shame drowned me to death. I lost *everything*. Everything I built became insignificant. The steps I climbed created an escalator down. My home crumbled to ash and dust. Trust fractured, family buckled, and friends vanished like ghosts in a nebula. Invisible. Erased. Never there in the first place.

The lies they told me crippled my spirit, but the lies I told myself destroyed my soul. I broke. Fell apart. Detached. Dissolved. Disintegrated. Rewound to infancy, back through the womb to the harsh, dark, cold, endless, bleak midwinter of oblivion. A carol, a baptism, a funeral dirge all rolled into one fated moment of truth.

I *hate* who I am. Always have. Always will. That's why I resisted for so fucking long. Even now, I fight mirrors, Moirai, as they follow me down every hallway, on every starship, to every planet where I plan my escape.

But there is no freedom from this feral cage, from this primal rage against the dying of the light. For night is not gentle, nor is it kind, and the longer it stretches, the harder I suffer. I'd end it all with a bullet or blade, but ties yet bind me to these worlds, ties I cannot break.

Tears spiral down my cheeks.

And whiskey spirals with my thoughts.

Time Acrylic

Jace: 1.5 Weeks to Launch

Why do they always fuck us with shaft work?" Rao asks. He's relatively smart when compared to the others ("relatively" being the keyword).

"They whore out the tight ones," I say.

"Really, Jace?"

"You started it."

My shoulder bangs against the vent, and I bite back a swear. I hate confined spaces because of—

Jacccccccccccccccccc...

Let me inside, Jace.

—yet every day is exposure therapy as an engineer. It's excruciating. I filed a complaint with my boss, cited the holopsych, yet one question led to another, and I can't blame Saia for all my sins. So I suffer in silence. Well, relative silence (look, a theme). Instead, I mutter curses, ramblings of a madman attached to sanity by a sinew, the limb of reason hacked near

clean. This thread, fragile as a spider's, waves in any wind, snaps in any storm. Carthage consumes me no matter how far I run.

"Who's Saia?" Rao asks.

Again, inner turmoil boils over.

"Someone I used to know." It's the safest answer. And the worst. A sliver of a shade of a shadow of truth.

Two shadows.

On the wall.

Impossible.

I shake my head, my truth away, and crawl through the duct. My jumpsuit scrapes against the floor. Metal snags cloth, then skin, and pain beckons me back to now.

"Dude, you're bleeding," Rao says.

That's the whole bloody point.

"I'm fine," I say and shuffle on.

"No, wait, you're caught. Let me help."

He grabs my leg. I stiffen in fear, then desire. Fabric deflates against my bony calf, and I sense the question in his mind. I've relapsed again. A minor one. A skipped meal here, a midnight jog there, and I'm already down five pounds.

Rao doesn't ask, though. He untangles my suit from the ragged floor and withdraws his hand, wipes it on his leg as if disorder is contagious. Desire flees, but not fear. Never fear.

Let me inside, Jace.

We crawl the rest of the way in silence. I have that effect on people. Make them as uncomfortable in their skin as I am in mine, in these itchy, gooey balloons of flesh, in our oozing packets of pustular entrails, loose and floppy and sloppy and grotesque. I am never small enough, strong enough, tight enough, hard enough. I am never stone. If I were stone, I would never hurt. If I were stone, I would never break. But I'm

just a man. A soft, soggy sack of a man. Built to rot. Doomed to disappear.

“Jace? What’s with you, man?”

Rao scans me over the busted console, more leery than concerned. I have that look in my eyes, same as she did—the frantic, wild, hazel fear of one who has seen hell and asked for seconds.

“Sorry,” I cough. “Haven’t been sleeping.”

It’s the adult answer. *I’m tired, I’m busy, I’m broken* absolves all after a certain age. No one asks why. No one wants answers. No one needs reminders that nobody has their shit together.

I pop the panel off the console and shield my face against a smoky hiss. Stingy fucks. I told them to reimage the system, that it needs a complete overhaul, but they won’t dish out cybs now to save cybs later. Shortsighted idiots. This fix is a bandage over a hemorrhage. Sooner or later, the whole Net-damn Protectorate will bleed out.

But I hold my tongue, tuck my tail between my legs, then listen and obey like a good little boy.

Jacccccccccccccccccc...

Let me inside, Jace.

Two shadows. Hers and mine. Entwined forever. Unable to sever. She’s a curse of fate I can never escape.

“So...where are you from originally?” Rao asks.

“Don’t do small talk,” I say.

“I’m from Pi-Ramses.”

“Don’t care.”

Let me clock in, clock out, and leave.

“You’re a real cunt,” Rao says. “Got a problem with the rest of us or something?”

I twist a wire and glare at him. “Would you shut up so I can

concentrate?”

“This is intern work. You could fix this in your sleep. Answer the question: What’s your problem?”

Oh, sweetheart, there are many more than one. I punch the keyboard so I don’t punch his face.

“I don’t socialize,” I say, voice tight.

“From what I hear, you socialize often...and extensively.” He cocks an eyebrow, and yes, that’s a pun.

“There’s nothing social about it,” I say. Quick in, quick out, and quick getaway.

Two shadows.

Again.

Or maybe two of me.

“Keep pushing people away, and one day, you’ll be alone,” Rao says.

If I wanted clichés, I’d go to Damascus, that fairy-tale world.

“Exactly,” I snap.

There’s a crackle, then a spark, and the system reboots. I return the panel to the console, and at least I fixed one thing out of infinity.

Jacccccccccccccccccc...

Let me inside, Jace.

Rao grips my arm. I tense, swat him away.

“What the fuck, man?” He rubs his shoulder where I slapped him. “I was trying to help.”

“Let me be, Rao.”

Threats lace my words, threats learned from *her*, and for a moment, her ghost echoes my scars, shadows, secrets she keeps. I coil inside, breath a tornado, blood a tidal wave, bones a vise. Squeezing. Suffocating. Pulverizing me into the same pulp she rendered all those innocent skeletons. Panic flares in wildfire,

and I gasp on instinct, gulp from terror, glare at Rao to turn, *turn*, **turn** away from the melting man. I am too big. Too loose. Too soggy. Too weak. A torn paper bag left in the rain, limp as a corpse, wrinkled and delicate. Two shadows. Two souls. Two sinners. Too sick. Smitten and damned to the lowest circle of hell.

“Jace!”

Rao’s scream punctures my fugue. Fight drains out of me, leaves me breathless and mute.

“Jace?”

His question is a weapon, a lion in a cage. Answer one, then answer two, then drown in interrogatory undertow.

“Allergies,” I rasp.

“Did you go to the holosurgeon?” Rao asks.

I shake my head. “Already used my deductible.”

“Shit insurance.”

“Shit, indeed.”

Silence swallows lies. We retreat through vents, tunnels, esophagi, and memories till space is synthetic and time is acrylic, and no footstep forward nor turning back can shake the double vision of fate and mistakes.

Reality Ruptured

Mazha: 1.5 Weeks to Launch

Intimate moments reveal intention. How do we enter the world each morning? How do we breach dreams and rupture reality? Is it chaos? Control? Rush? Routine?

For me, it's routine. It *must* be routine. It's how I rebuild, regenerate, pluck pieces of psyche up from last night and string myself back together again.

Waking is hard. I'm closest to infancy. Fleshy and vulnerable with no tether to obsession. Because obsession roots me, reforms me, splints my arms and stilts my legs, provides crutches to navigate existential sludge.

First, strip. Peel skin from fruit; reveal the raw, rotten core. Clothes litter the floor as pine shavings from a once armored tree, struck by lightning through rings it earned via decades of abuse. I check no mirrors, seek no reflections. If I see, I think. If I think, I obsess. If I obsess, I waste hours spinning out of sanity's orbit toward something far more magnetic.

Compulsion's gravity tugs my leash, and I ease into the shower an alleyway pup, abandoned by her parents at the first sign of a bark.

Parents...

Lead nowhere.

So second, wash. Usually thrice, for I don't trust myself. Exfoliate and slough death from my carcass. Shed and shear follicles from my mind. Shave and slice the animal from my armpits, my calves, till I'm fashioned a bald monkey, a specter of primates buried in our befores. I step from rain into towed desert and pat a rhythm, a sequence, a series of madness. The clock ticks asynchronous in syncopated mockery, and my lungs threaten mutiny as time cackles at my fall.

It's a hard morning, and I'm not doing well, so I hurry to—

Three, dress. Seamless socks, spandex leggings, a fiber-optic tunic to hold me whole, to bind me to my body. Fabric itches my skin, and I wriggle, disjointed, against folds and imperfections. I doff it, don it, repeat the pattern, a sine wave unto the end. Minutes worry the morning away till, with a silent scream, I breathe, "Enough."

Four, teeth. Whittle enamel, and molest gums. Powers of two heartbeat my rhythm as 2, 4, 8, 16 circles around canines and molars imprison me with numerical urge, with categorical doubt, coerced and seduced to repeat with exigency a schedule variety vilifies.

Five, hair. Strands of time. Threads of regret. Wires of ice-blond vapor, magicked fairy dust into human form. I comb through the past, brush away the present, untangle the future from matted split ends. Knots of guilt twist as I unravel. Even when I shine like silk, a spider's magnum opus, nothing lasts forever, and nothing's left undone.

Six, makeup. Painted starlight around glacial pools. Pale canvas around carnation-pink lips. I am watercolor. I am a doll. My father's eyes peek through my mother's hair, and an avalanche, a flood, a storm of ghosts sieges my fortress of routine and retribution. Memories flake like petals in the wind, burned to crisps in conquest's wake, villages in ruins, roses trampled by corpses. Mirrors make fools of us all.

Seven, pack. My anchors for the day. Food, water, nanotech, gloves. Withdraw cybs. Log into the Net. Become an Internet of Things, of persons, of worlds united at the smallest level for the largest reach. Midica fears its power. I fear its absence.

Routine. *Routine*. It winds and wounds. Heals and harms. Makes and marks. Seven bricks to build my strength.

But today, there's an eighth, and it's nameless and mute. A pair of letters. A couple eyes. RJ. Red. Ghost. Guardian. Savior. Hero. Protector.

Who saves someone's life, then leaves without credit? No one's that humble, even Midican nuns—*especially* Midican nuns. Heroism and glory are drugs, same as murder. Get a taste, juice the ego, and you'll thirst for hits every day of the week.

Unless it wasn't for glory.

Unless she's no hero.

Unless she saves for redemption, to absolve past mistakes.

Years of grueling holopsych training kick in, override hormones, and I reluctantly glimpse the painting's corner, a canvas blood-drenched, gut-stained, and smeared with irreconcilable greed. The picture gleams garish with shadows, and I turn away before reason lights the rest.

Let candles burn her tapestry of secrets. Without a name, a file, a history, a record, all she is—and all she'll ever be—is a ghost to me.

About-Face

Kaj: 1.5 Weeks to Launch

There's no more time. The Ward neurocalls twice a day, and if I don't deliver RJ's answer by noon, there will be far worse than hell to pay.

Why is she essential to the mission?

Why is she a ghost of the Net?

Why does she have no record?

Money. Everything starts, everything ends, and everything soils with money. Money is power and protection—power to choose, strength to protect. That's the only way through to her. It didn't work before, but you know what they say. Try and try and try again. Fail and fail and fail again. But try more times than you fail.

Wish me luck.

RJ walks ahead, prowls the cliff, shimmies the ridge between life and death. She's an animal caged, a monster dormant, the impetus for change, the potential for chaos. Electricity sizzles

beneath her movements, an oceanic current at threat of boiling over. At any moment, I expect her to leap, kick, punch, flip. She's unsettled. Uneasy. Always on guard.

She never talks about her past, and I never ask. RJ doesn't take well to unsolicited curiosity. And though I don't know her answers, I see their echoes in her actions, in her words, in her fear and fury. She is her secrets, and they are her. In body, in mind, in spirit, in soul. Shadows cling to her, and reflections follow her. She is a prism multiplied, amplified through time from the birth of her fire till her moment of truth.

"Spit it out, Kaj." Her husky voice cuts through my worries, ignites my nerves, and I clear my throat, once more the bullied child.

"Come with me, RJ," I say.

She pauses on the path and surveys the Outpost, the Protectorate's oft-forgotten colony. The ground crumples like a giant's unfinished jigsaw, cliffs and landslips, jagged and mountainous. Fog curls through valleys as clouds hug peaks, and powder-blue lakes fill the craterous wasteland. There's a beauty to the barren, a wonder to the windswept. It's glacial. Volcanic. Raw as a newborn and vast as an empire. I tighten my coat as it starts to rain, but RJ welcomes cold into her bones. Only a slight twitch of her laser-beam eyes proves she feels the change.

"One job," I beg. "One job, then you walk free."

"If that ain't a trope as old as Earth," RJ murmurs.

"Please, R—"

"See that cloud?" She points at the overcast sky. "Behind it is the sun, a white dwarf, and behind that sun is a nebula with unimaginably vivid colors—or so I've heard. And somewhere over there are five moons, supposedly misshapen, but I've only glimpsed them twice."

"I don't catch your meaning," I say, cautious. It's never wise to play RJ's games.

"You don't see it," she says. "Any of it. It's all wasted beauty. Elysium is at our doorstep, yet we only see its shadow." She pauses, wrestles with emotions she usually strangles. "That kid today, the one we saved...if he...died...then this would've been all he'd ever know." She gestures at the sky. "He would've thought the universe ends here."

So it *did* affect her. The holosurgery was tough. Ruptured appendix. Hemorrhages and hernias. The kid's torso was a mess. His parents crashed their pod on their return from vacation, and it took RJ seven hours to fix him. She worked slowly, steadily, and showed nothing on the outside, yet I've worked with her long enough to know that the stiller she is, the worse she's struggling, and she was still as stone.

"But it doesn't end here, does it, Kaj?" RJ pins me with her red glare.

"No," I say, unsure of her point. "Does that mean you'll come?"

Her gaze intensifies, but her fight evaporates, and she doesn't hesitate. "Yes."

Leery, I ask, "Why now? What happened?"

"Nothing," she says. "I was always gonna come. I had no choice from the beginning, but I wanted to pretend I did. Because this changes everything, more than you realize."

Dread settles in my gut, flaring as a warning. "You have no record," I blurt, then blush a deep red. "Sorry...just if I need...if we must—"

"Trust each other?" She narrows her eyes. "And running background checks on me is such a great way to start."

"It wasn't me. It was the Ward," I say.

"What'd they find?" she asks.

“Nothing.”

“Good.”

“But how, RJ? How are you wiped clean? The Net knows everything.”

“Well, I am nothing, so it can’t know me.”

“You aren’t nothing,” I say softly.

“Don’t you dare turn sappy on me, or I’ll beat the living shit out of you.”

I can’t help but smile. There’s the RJ we all love and fear.

“And if you *ever* research me again,” she continues, “I’ll chop off your legs and shove them so far up your ass that you’ll eat your own toes for dinner. Understand?”

“Shit, RJ, a tad extreme,” I say, amused and nervous, the usual dichotomy with her.

“*Understand*, Kaj?” she repeats with venom.

“Yes, yes, calm your fucking tits.”

RJ punches me in the arm “playfully,” and I bite my lip to stifle a yelp.

“Great,” she says. “Then let’s go make some major life choices we’ll soon regret.”

Between

Kaj: Age 12

“Running from something?”
My dad’s glance over to survey the stranger. Dad lingers a second, trusting me, trusting her, but Pa takes convincing to not interfere. With some choice words from Dad, Pa turns half away, reluctant, but he keeps an eye and an ear on our interaction. Stars stream behind them as the nukedrive engages. The cafeteria shines with the light of a million suns, the metal of the cafeteria set aglow.

“Pardon?” I ask.

The stranger chuckles. “Seen you on this ship a dozen times this past month. Don’t you have school?”

“I’m accompanying my fathers to fulfill my work-study requirement,” I recite.

She laughs again. “This ain’t exactly a bring-your-kid-to-work type gig. You know what your daddies do, don’t you?”

“They negotiate peace treaties on behalf of the Protectorate in

the wake of anti-Ward revolutions on newly acquired planets.”

This time, she bursts into hysterics. Pa glares at her, but Dad puts a hand on his arm, steadying him.

“And I’m a bloody babysitter.” She hoots and slaps her thigh. The floor thunders with her strength.

I look at her now, take her all in. My dads taught me not to judge based on appearance. *The bee stings quicker than the bear bites*, Pa told me once. But with this stranger, I fear she may be exactly what she seems.

She’s over six feet, muscled and vascular. Tri-plated armor covers her neck down, and a helmet rests on the back of her skull, half on, half off, ready to snap to attention along with the armory at her hips. Knives, guns, lasers, grenades—her belt is more weaponized than this entire spaceship.

“Then what *are* you?” I ask, cautious. “A space pirate?”

“Mmmm, that’d be hot,” she murmurs. “Dated one once. Scrappy little shit, but a damn good lay. She was finer than Carthaginian wine but icy as fuck. Most of them are. No, I’m not a space pirate. Try again, Mr. Work Study.”

“Bounty hunter,” I say.

“Another good lay, another wrong guess.”

“Mercenary.”

“Used to be. Saved all the bad guys, banged all their chicks. Try again.”

“Smuggler.”

“Once upon a virgin. Didn’t work out. She was from Midica, that dogmatic douchetopia. Any more guesses?”

I shrug. “No idea.”

“Security for rich twats. Like I said, babysitter.”

“Oh.”

“Disappointed?” she asks and grins. “Me, too. Don’t worry.

I'm sure I'll make loads of shitstorms before one of my exes catches up to me. There's a lesson, kid. Change your name when the marriage is over. Took me twelve divorces to figure that one out. Change your name, burn your fingerprints, trade in your retinae, and scour your DNA. Might as well get a new cunt, too, while you're at it."

Shell-shocked, I ask, "What's your name?"

"Now? Then? Between?" she asks. "Most call me Ela, but does it matter? People remember my face or my tits, but rarely my name. I'm surprised about my tits, honestly. My nipples are too long for aesthetics, like two tiny French-fry dicks. Tried to fuck someone with them once, but their ass was too tight."

At my blush, she shakes her head, a crooked smile on her chapped lips. "Haven't popped your cherry yet, have you, Mr. Work Study?"

"I'm *twelve*," I snap.

"Yeah, you're a late bloomer; I could tell. Popped my own back home on Muscat with the end of a crowbar. Drove it in too far and ruptured my cervix. Couldn't walk for weeks. Holosurgeon gave me hell, though, and my dads bitched that *I was only eight*, yadda yadda yadda—"

"Okay, that's enough," Pa interjects. He stands behind me, hand on my shoulder, and glares at the stranger with enough malice to melt metal. Dad hasn't moved from his seat near the window. A flicker of amusement plays across his features.

"I don't know who you are," Pa threatens, "but I kindly ask that you remove yourself from this cafeteria. Your presence is disrupting negotiations."

The stranger tosses her raggedy hair. "And that's all you care about, Mr. Protectorate, ain't it? Keeping the peace? Heard some shit about your 'negotiations' on Shiraz that would hairy

even your son's prepubescent balls."

"That's *enough*," Pa growls, but the stranger raises her hands in surrender.

"Okay, okay, Daddy Fat Cock, I get your point. But between revolutions, pay attention to your kid. He's clearly being bullied. Ain't that right, Mr. Unpopped Cherry?"

I pale and gulp.

"Is this true, Kaj?" Pa asks.

I don't answer.

She smirks. "When they hit you, hit them harder."

I shake my head. "I don't want to hurt anyone."

"Even them?"

"Even them."

She makes a sound like a whale's blowhole. "Your loss, kid. I'd beat them up for you, but child laws and all that bullshit. Anyway, nice talking. Thanks for the pointless conversation. I'd say something trivial like 'till next time,' but I'm sure we'll never see each other again."

She rises from the table with the force of artillery and stomps out of the cafeteria. Before she goes, however, she turns back toward me and hollers over her shoulder.

"But don't use a crowbar, sweetheart. Use a broom."

Demon Stars

Mazha: Age 14

“**M**other Earth, accept this offering,” I recite.
 My own mother watches me, taut as twine.
 I lift the knife to my wrist and cut before the
 congregation. Blood brims over my forearm and rains into
 the sacrificial bowl. It drips like stardust in an unforgiving sea.

“Mother Earth, accept her offering,” the nuns chant in
 response.

I squeeze the wound, and rain turns storm. The congregation
 gasps, in awe of my gift. But I do it not for their radical
 ignorance. I do it for pain. The numbers slow.

2, 4, 8, 16..

No longer do I need their heartbeat.

“Mother Earth, keep me,” I sing.

“Mother Earth, keep her,” the nuns and congregation echo.

“Mother Earth, guide me.”

“Mother Earth, guide her.”

"Mother Earth, watch over me."

"Mother Earth, watch over her."

All together now: "Though we've wandered far from our holy home, your heart travels with us, and our souls are yours."

They made this monster.

I stagger back to my pew, faint and lightheaded. Father catches my arm and wraps cloth around the gash. Mother simply nods. I sink against the bench and close my eyes. They think I'm praying, but I'm actually memorizing.

Depression. Anxiety. Bipolar disorder. Schizophrenia. Anorexia. Agoraphobia. Obsessive-compulsive disorder...

Ad infinitum.

As many demons as stars in our skies.

I *will* be a holopsych.

After Mass, we wind through abbey corridors. Walls gleam amber, like liquid rock, or a pond at first light. Shadows breathe with each footstep, and hymns caress staircases as nuns return to their chambers. My arm throbs in tempo, but pain dulls, and numbers return.

2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256, 512, 1024...

"Have you reconsidered our work-study option?" Father asks. Mother walks in front, head tilted, ready to pounce her unwelcome opinion as soon as I offer mine.

"I'd prefer to focus on my schoolwork this semester," I say.

"But you have a vocational requirement," Father presses, "and we build the finest and fastest starships in the Protectorate. Who better to study under?"

Shit. I futz with my robe, crush silk into flowers.

"My interests lie elsewhere," I say, though my voice sounds fourteen, and my body screams *teenager*.

"Elsewhere?" Mother scoffs as we spiral a stairwell. "You are

heir to a multitrillion-cyb empire. Do you know how many people would sacrifice their eldest child to stand in your shoes?"

"The same people who shouldn't have children in the first place," I mutter.

"Mazha," Mother gasps.

Father calms her with a look. "We only want what's best for you, Mazha."

"No, you want what's best for *you*." I whirl around as we reach a landing and pierce them both with truth. "You don't care about me, and I doubt you ever have. I'm just a tax write-off. Human insurance. A shred of immortality. I don't want you, your pathetic legacy, or this whole Net-damn planet. The other colonies *laugh* at us, because we're full of *shit*."

They're both quiet. Too quiet. Still than the stone that lifts this Gothic sky city.

Mother clears her throat and begins her tirade. "You spoiled, rotten, insolent, ungrateful *fool*. We give you the stars, yet you whine for scraps. *Fine*. Live on a skyraft for a night alone. We'll see if you still want to study heresy after."

Tense, Father says, "Dear, she's only fourteen. The clouds are turbulent, even for an experienced helmsman."

"Contradict me again in front of our daughter," Mother snaps, "and I'll make it a week."

"Make it a month," I whisper and approach a step. "See if I care."

Her silver eyes widen. She crunches words like icy pebbles, then spits hail with gale force. "Do you know why we fear the Net, you dastardly brat? Or in your juvenility, did you think reason lacking? That our lifestyle warrants slander and abuse? Have you ever lifted your nose from the bowels of blasphemy and stopped to consider your own incomprehension?"

"I know the stories," I say.

"You know the *fairy tales*. Fit for the child you've failed to outgrow."

"No respectable society tortures their young."

Mother snorts, derisive. "Something you heard from Damascus? If you met their ilk, I'm sure you'd see why. Feeble, the lot of them. You're built from stronger stock."

Father steps between us. "Let's all calm down. The suns are setting; the moons are rising. We'll discuss this more tomorrow."

Blue starlight silhouettes his broad frame, haloes his robe with an angel's borrowed grace. But we're all demons here.

Mother chews her lip till it bleeds. She relishes pain, as do I.

"No," she says. "It's over. There's nothing more to discuss. If you won't find truth, truth will find you. When it does, it will be neither gentle nor kind, and you will regret the day you laughed at destiny. The Net is a curse, a plague, a pandemic. Nanites are parasites disguised as the cure. They're viruses. Worms. Contagions designed to short-circuit your soul. You will discover this yourself, when the time is right, and when the time is right, don't say I didn't warn you. I cannot impose understanding on a child, and I shall waste no further time on a brain thick as rock. Just promise me one thing: *Never* catch the attention of the devil called the Ward. They will mutilate your spirit and vivisection your conscience till you are little more than a hollowed-out husk."

"I promise nothing," I say.

"Then you will lose everything."

Von Rei

RJ: Age 13

“**N**ow, what did I do to deserve Von Rei for company?” Kraken and I sit across from our target, Goliath and David on the same side. Neon throbs through the gambling den, arteries of fluorescent incantation. The floor is cramped, the air humid. Tourists try their hand at poker, and locals try their hand at pickpocketing. We’re two hundred levels up, abreast the modular skyline, amid the polychrome smog. A ceiling window would show the night sky if the night sky could permeate decadence. Since we cannot witness the blinding days, we recreate them with garish, vulgar imitation.

“Where’s your boss, doll?” our client teases me.

It’s okay. I’m used to age jokes. Though I’ve been boss for two years, my reputation has yet to precede me. I normally send others—*larger* others—in my stead, but when a juicy opportunity presents itself, who am I to refuse?

Our client glances from me to Kraken, and I use his misstep

to draw. I unholster my holopistol before his smile turns frown, and a laserbullet burrows through his shoulder and chair. Kraken clamps an oven-mitt hand over the client's mouth, and releases him only when shrieks turn sobs.

"You're...the Florist," the client yelps.

I roll my eyes. I hate that name more than I hate flowers, and I hate flowers with a feral scorn. But it does the trick. *A lily in the bed means a bullet in the head.* That's the nursery rhyme Sidon's orphans gifted me. And I'm running out of lilies.

"But you're just a kid," he protests, wincing.

"Age can be deceiving," I say, then glance at his shoulder. "Don't worry. It's cauterized. Now, business. Your name?"

He scrunches his eyebrows. "You don't know?"

"Of course I know, but I want to test if you'll lie."

A bluff. I don't know his name, but this ensures he'll tell me.

He breathes a ragged breath. "Heo."

Kraken grunts. Still getting a read on him. Can't decide if he's a gentle giant or dormant beast.

"Heo," I repeat. "So, like Theo, but weird."

Hipster parents. Too bad we don't have second names anymore. Read about those in a history book, but the Protectorate rid themselves of nepotism long ago. It's a tough-love, tough-luck culture. One name, one chance. Make your own destiny, separate from family or blood. *Reward given is reward stolen.* If I had a cyb for every time I heard that barfed from the backs of parades...well, I wouldn't be the Florist, then, would I? Not everyone agrees, though. There are still Midican idiots jacking off to dynasties or some other bullshit.

"What do you want?" Heo removes his hand from his shoulder and shudders across from me. His skin is clammy, jeweled with sweat. His eyes well with tears from pain, twin prisms in the

neon night. Across the den, the crowd whoops as someone wins, then boos as someone else loses. I use the noise blanket as cover to press our offer.

"Blastguns," I say. "What do you know about them?"

Kraken grunts again. Helpful.

"They're illegal," Heo rasps. "*Highly* illegal."

I scoff. "So am I. Go on."

"They emit force-field blasts that incapacitate at close range."

"Great, and what about jellies?"

"Jellies? The drugs? Kid, you're fucking with fire. Super addictive shit. They latch onto the base of your skull and attach directly to your nervous system. Ain't nothing to mess with."

I nod at his wounded shoulder. "Do I look like I'm messing around? Call me 'kid' again, and we'll play some real fun games. Blastguns and jellies—we need two shipments of each by tomorrow latest. Wanna earn extra credit and retain some dignity? Get it for me in an hour."

He flusters, a rabid goose. "But...but...that's impossible. I can't—"

"Do you or do you not work for the Protectorate's Trade Division?"

"I do, but—"

"And do you or do you not embezzle money from their offworld accounts at the rate of 0.638% a month?"

Fight drips from him like candle wax. "Two shipments each of blastguns and jellies in one hour, I promise," Heo says. "Meet me at the stardocks, section 725."

I smile. Kraken smiles. Heo does not smile.

"Pleasure doing business with you, Heo," I say.

Heo shivers. "Pleasure surviving business with you, Von Rei."

Eagle's Blood

Jace: Age 15

It's always dark. Always cold. Always ruthless. Eternal twilight with no relief. Carthage is an ice pick through the Protectorate's heart, a winter world, a concrete city, a cruel and glacial metropolis. I hear of warmth on other planets, of warmth and softness and curves. But it's all sharp here, all glass, metal, and misery. Our sky boasts the only beauty—from chance, not fate—the Northern Lights in stark relief against this man-made facade. There is no moon, only stars, and a faint, bloody tinge on the horizon from the sun who never shows her face. A red dwarf, my mothers say. Dying like the rest of us.

My parka butterflies behind me as I hug the hoverbike. I whip through streets like a hangman's noose. It's a taste of freedom. A taste, but not a cure. Crimson flickers against synthetic urban, a hall of mirrors where reflections don souls. I'm running away. We're all running away. The stardocks aren't far, and I have enough cybs for a hopper. I don't care where I go as long as it's

far from here. I'll miss my moms. I'll even miss Saia, but she's the reason for this escapade, after all.

I'm half a coward. Half lion for leaving, half mouse for silence. Why not report her to the Protectorate? I'll be gone. I'll be safe. Saia can tell anyone she wants about my demons, and I'll be none the wiser. *Just tell the fucking Protectorate, Jace.*

But I can't.

So I don't.

If they know, Mom and Mama will know. It would break their hearts to discover their baby girl morphed into a monster. Or perhaps Saia was always a monster, and the monster morphed into a baby girl. Regardless, it's the hope I'm wrong, that Saia can change—yes, we've been here before, but I have a reputation to uphold—and the fear of unleashing my secret that glues my lips and ties my tongue. You'll call me weak and stupid and pathetic, and you should.

But there's security in secrets.

And she hasn't killed anyone.

Yet.

I brake hard, and the hoverbike swivels into park. One pit stop before my exodus. One mistake before the end.

"Jace, buddy," a gravelly voice calls from the shadows. "You transfer the cybs?"

I nod. He can see me, though I can't see him.

I hear a tug of fabric, a rip of electricity, then hololight sears the alley. Shadows disappear, and a man takes their place. Short. Curly. Scrawny. Stolen gloves fit awkwardly around his thin fingers as he taps into the Net and verifies my payment. I spot a few things I shouldn't—forged Damascus immigration papers, shipments of Sidonese jellies—before the hologram wilts, a lily in acid. It's dark again, sin's afterimage lasered on my retinae.

All I can see is regret.

There's an elbow around my throat, and my mouth cracks to shout. A hand clamps my lips, and fear panics my heart.

"Shh, shh. Easy now, big shot," the man says. His gloves are gone, his hands naked against my skin. "I'll give you the ID, but I need a few promises first."

He strokes my cheek and presses himself against my back. I ignore both his attraction and my own. Maybe Saia's not the only monster in the family.

"Promise," he hisses, "you'll *never* return here, for as long as you live." On *live*, he places an emphasis that insinuates the contrary.

"I p-p-promise," I stutter, eyes squeezed shut despite the dark.

"Promise you'll forget everything we've said and done."

"P-promise."

"And last, promise you'll give me a night to remember."

At this, I scream. Through lips and fingers and shadows. My desire falls as his rises, and I buck against the elbow that wraps my throat, thrashing into the void.

"No, no, no, no, no," he coos, restraining me with ease. He's stronger than most men twice his size, and I'm weaker than most men half mine, starved and suppressed. "That's not how this works. You promise this last thing, then I'll be in and out quick. Cooperate, and I'll be gentle, darl—"

Light splits shadows. A laserbullet whizzes past me and catches him square in the gut. He shrieks, gurgles, and slides off me as a bloody sponge. Saia stands in the alleyway mouth, cocks her head, holsters the holopistol, and harrumphs.

"Trying to escape?" She nods at his pocket. My fake ID glimmers with cityscape constellations.

I freeze, horrified, worse than before. My contact twitches,

still alive and still conscious, and for one shameful moment, I wish I agreed to his last promise.

"I get it," she says, not getting it at all. Each word grates against her teeth. "I'm too much for most to handle. But what would you do offworld? You can't even protect yourself here, in your own backyard. Carthage is a playground compared to planets like Sidon. You'd be ground beef in a week. Where would you go? How would you live? Who would you fuck to survive?"

Saia kneels beside the shadow—my contact, her victim—and trails a finger through his bloody gut. He yelps but doesn't dare scream. There's something in Saia that erases all will. It's impossible to win against chaos.

She digs her finger in the man's welt, and he passes out from pain. "He won't hurt you again. He knows what will happen if he does."

I don't move, praying she stops here.

She doesn't.

"I know your secret." She paints eagle wings on his cheeks. "But that's not the only reason you don't report me, my baby dancer. You want me, Jace. *Badly.*"

I blink and stumble against the alleyway wall. *No*. A trillion times *no*. I did *not* see this coming, and in *no* way is that true. But to tell Saia *no* would shatter the thin ice we traverse. I'd free-fall into a cave, never to return, buried beneath magtrain tunnels with only rats as company.

"You're beautiful, Saia," I say, timid, nauseous, "but you're my sister, and I need you as my sister."

Saia reclines, turns toward me, and spreads her legs. *No, no, no, no, no*. She sweeps her parka aside, and I shut my eyes to save my soul.

"Look, Jace," she snaps, "or I'll kill him."

I shouldn't look. I shouldn't care if she kills the man who almost raped me. I shouldn't keep all her secrets so she keeps my one. I shouldn't do any of the Net-forsaken shit you'll read in this book.

But I do.

So I open my eyes and squint, preserve the last shred of dignity I have left.

I have none left.

"That's it, sweetheart," Saia says. "There you go, baby boy."

She tosses back her head and lowers a bloody finger to her flower. There, she traces circles, then moans as they become spirals.

Bile burns my throat, but I watch and weep, obedient if nothing else.

"This could all be yours," Saia says.

She plunges inside herself and gasps. I vomit on my boots and shiver as it freezes. She grabs the unconscious man's hand, then spastically fingers herself with it. Icicles form on her dusting of hair, but she doesn't notice the cold. Her back arches, I vomit again, and her release sets off the hoverbike's anti-theft alarm.

Her chest heaves as she regains cognition, and she grins, a succubus born.

"One day, I'll have you," she says as the alarm deafens. "Danger leads to desire, sweetheart, and you have plenty of both inside that skinny ass of yours."

"Saia...please," I mumble around chunks of sick. I ate hardly anything today, but hardly anything still makes a huge fucking mess. "Not...*this*. You're my sister."

"A label." She closes her legs and bounces to her feet. "A label made for the infringement of pleasure. Don't let categories box you in. You're better than that. What I wouldn't give to have

you inside me.”

I heave, but there’s nothing left.

“It’s incest,” I rasp.

Saia shrugs. “Everyone’s related in some way.” She punches the hoverbike, and the alarm stops. Ironic. Be subtle, and it sounds. Be strong, and it submits.

“It’s wrong,” I say.

“It’s sex. Don’t complicate shit. Now, shall we return home? Nutting makes me hungry.”

I am *so* fucked up. Why? Because the thought of returning home fills me with *relief*. Because my incestuous, psychopathic, borderline-homicidal sister *comforts* me. Because Saia saved my soul and life tonight, and it *calms* me to be near her. Maybe that’s the real reason I don’t report her. Maybe I’m no better than she is. Maybe I’m conditioned to break, doomed to fail, fated to hell from the moment I held my tongue.

“Okay,” I whisper.

“Okay.” Saia glances between my legs. “You sure?”

“Net-dammit, *yes*.”

“Because I can go again right now. A dozen times in an hour is my recent record—”

“Please just *stop*.”

She straddles the hoverbike and pulls me on behind her. I wrap my arms around her waist and beseech this cruel, cracked, crumbling city for mercy.

“Hold on tight,” she says.

If that ain’t a tagline for my whole fucking life.

Icebreaker

RJ: 1 Week to Launch

“This is pointless,” I say.

“For once, can you follow the rules and behave?” Kaj asks, exasperated. “Do the job, bank the cybs, and get out.”

“I won’t play *Never Have I Ever* with people who’ve done nothing,” I say. “I swear I win that game every Net-damn time.”

“I don’t think the purpose is to have done *everything*,” he says.

“Regardless, team-building is bullshit. Trust falls are bullshit. Would-you-rather questions are bull-fucking-shit.”

“You’re peachy today.”

“Fuck you.”

We walk down the corridor, side by side, footsteps echoing regret. A hopper flight from the Outpost landed us here, a Ward-run space station on the outskirts of Protectorate space. I shouldn’t have come. I shouldn’t have agreed. But when you’re trapped in a hall and only one door opens, that’s the door you

must take.

"Here we are," Kaj says.

I know he's nervous by the way he breaks the fourth wall. He knows we're here, and I know we're here, so his announcement's only use is to enlighten you, the reader, sitting there safe and sound.

How are you, by the way (not that we care)? We haven't spoken much this book. Kyder and Rune tended to ramble, but we play our cards close to our chests. Annoying, I know, though so were they. Fates and prophecies and daddy issues, oh my! What? Don't like when I poke fun at them? If they were here, they'd do the same and worse to me. Hell, they'd probably kill me. Kyder would, at least. Then he'd fuck me, the sick bastard.

But I digress...

Kaj and I push open the double doors and pause in the entryway, confused. The room holds a table with no chairs, a kettle with no mugs, and a bookcase with no books. A fucking riddle, for Net's sake.

"I told you," I murmur. "Team-building is bullshit."

"I don't understand," Kaj says.

"That's the bloody point. We need to figure it out."

"Figure what out?"

"The answer."

"But what's the question?"

"Exactly."

Kaj surveys the table, the kettle, the bookcase. I see his cogs whir, hear his brain misfire. He tries to puzzle together a puzzle with no pieces. What does it *mean*? What is its *purpose*? I am so done with this existential mockfuckery.

I tug on my gloves and flood the room with hololight. Kaj squeals, and I smile. There's the glimmer of spirit I yet possess.

The hololight fades, and with it, the riddle, holograms erased. The room is empty, except a flustered intern. She falls through the doorway, scrambles across the metal floor, her mouth a puppet and her arms a mime. Soundless, spastic, by all accounts useless.

Before she regains coherence, I raise a hand to stop her. "Let me save you the trouble, sweetheart. I won't play your games. I won't solve your riddles. And I answer only to the Ward."

She purses her lips, juts out her chin. "I *am* the Ward, and you are in direct violation—"

"No, no, no, no, no," I interrupt. "You're a decoy. This entire room is a decoy. That's the real puzzle, to see if we can recognize Ward from not, and you, my dear, are nowhere near notorious. In fact, I doubt you're even real."

I summon hololight again and delete her, too. Kaj stands beside me, helpless and mute.

"So you don't trust us," I shout at the vacant room.

There's a moment of silence where I fear I've misjudged, but the quiet cracks, and with it, the room.

"Can you blame us?" A throaty voice cuts through the wall as the walls melt and reveal a larger chamber that houses the simulation. "That's the fastest anyone's ever figured it out."

A woman walks toward us with a bun of black hair and crustacean legs. Quick, beady eyes dart in dark skin, and she extends a lobster claw in greeting.

"Captain Heid," the woman says. "Pleasure to meet you, RJ." I let her hand hang between us, a flag of parley.

"It is proper to shake the hand of one's superior," she says.

"Superior?" Kaj asks.

"Yes," Heid says. "I am captain of this mission, and I expect you to respect me as such."

I scoff. "People who expect respect rarely receive it, *Captain*." She grimaces. "They told me about you, and I hoped the rumors false."

"They are," I say. "I'm much more charming than the rumors."

"RJ," Kaj hisses.

"I'd listen to him if I were you," Heid snaps. "He seems to have far more sense."

"Oh, he does," I say, "but I have far more fun."

I grin, and a sliver of my old self returns. A spark of passion. A flame of hope. But it's dangerous, desperate, unstable. This is the past. This is a lie. This is a road that leads off a cliff into a fathomless ocean of blood.

"I'll forgive your manners today," Captain Heid says. "We have pressing matters to attend, and I won't waste any more time on insolence. Come. You must meet the others."

"Let's pray they have pulses," I murmur.

Every person is a puzzle, but some have more pieces.

Orientation

Kaj: 1 Week to Launch

I hate to say it, but RJ's always been a pain in the ass. Keep your head down, tongue tied, legs closed, ears open. But no. Just fucking no. She spreads them, then vomits every thought from her Net-damn skull. And now, she's pissed off Captain Heid. The Ward will have my balls on a platter if she doesn't dance the steps, sing in tune, and wear the same costume as everyone else.

I blame her, yet this is my fault. I dug myself in too deep. Hollowed a hole with passion and purpose. Left the Outpost only to glance back with regret. The space station corridor limns angels from shadows, and our footsteps mark the start of our dirge.

"The crew is already briefed," Captain Heid says while we walk. Her gait is a march; ours is a hearse. "They arrived days ago from all over the Protectorate." She emphasizes *Protectorate* to insinuate its lack of control here. We are hostages of the

Ward now—the myth, the legend, the nightmare, the monster, the slayer of babies in the vacuum of space.

I gulp. RJ side-eyes me, amused. Fear is fun for her. Not me. Too many memories of bullies and beatings to enjoy my looming dread.

“They all passed the test, same as you,” Heid continues, “though some were less agreeable.”

“Less agreeable than RJ?” I ask before I remember protocol. I am Ward now. They hold my strings.

But the captain only smiles. She wants this question. She wants to answer. “Yes, quite. Those we took by force remained stubborn at first, but our incentives for obedience turned them all within hours.”

I screech to a halt. My shoes blacken the floor, and dissonance shrieks from my soles. “By *force*? You mean they didn’t sign up?”

Captain Heid blinks. Her beady eyes shutter, and her features sharpen. “This mission is vital. There is no room for error.”

“So you tortured them into submission,” RJ says.

I wish I heard remorse in her voice, but I heard only recognition. She *understands*, I realize. And with realization comes a jolt of fatal curiosity. Who is RJ, and what has she done?

“Tortured is a harsh word,” Heid says. “Encouraged is apt.”

“You threatened them,” I say. Blood drains from my head to my feet, an hourglass of lament.

The captain kneads her lobster-claw hands. “Semantics.”

Then she’s off, and I’m off, and RJ’s the only one fine.

At the end of the corridor, we turn into a room—a sweaty, metal cube with buzzing, blue electronics. Glowing veins slice the walls, dappling our colleagues with effervescent gleam. It’s hard to read features, identities, and this is what the Ward wants,

to unsettle us, unbalance us, unsteady our first impressions with facade.

“Welcome to the team,” Captain Heid says.

RJ gags at the corporate speak. I clamp my mouth and mind shut. *Keep your head down, tongue tied, legs closed, ears open.* This is my idea. This is an escape. This is an adventure. *This is a mistake.*

“Please sit.” The captain gestures at the table ringed by the Ward’s freshest meat. “Crew, welcome Ensign Kaj and Doctor RJ, our holosurgeon, the last members of the team. Kaj and RJ, meet Commander Sadhir, my XO.” He’s a Ward Commander with warm skin, brown eyes, a stocky build, and salt and pepper curls.

“Lieutenant Mik’valo, our pilot.” Pale and lanky with ocean eyes and beach-bum hair.

“Lieutenant Dunavard, our lead Science Officer.” Pale with white hair and violet eyes.

“Lieutenant Javik, Operations.” Wiry and freckled with frazzled red hair and algae eyes.

“Lieutenant Idony, Communications.” Bronze with wavy silver hair and milky eyes.

“Lieutenants Rasmus, Madsen, Dagmar, and Stromberg—all Tactical.” Identical warrior poets with olive skin, brutish builds, shaved heads, and gray eyes.

“Doctor Mazha, our holopsych.” Rigid with glacial eyes and ice-blond hair tipped with blue frost. She skims over me but fixates on RJ, perplexed, confused, aware more than a stranger. RJ notices, ignores her, as Heid barrels on.

“Last, Lieutenant Glar, our Chief Engineer, and Ensign Jace, his Executive Assistant.”

Glar is unremarkable—small, skinny, and ashen with mousy

hair and watery eyes. I bet he's a dick. He looks like a flaccid one. Jace, however...well, Jace is...

Jace is everything. He's gorgeous. Captivating. A wordless poem. A human song. Evolution's masterpiece. He's lithe with dark skin, a buzzed head, and frantic hazel eyes. His slim legs tap an agitated tempo, and his fingers fidget in restless rhythm against the table. Why is he so anxious? Did they hurt him? Did the Ward force him to come? Did they threaten him?

Stop it, Kaj. Just fucking stop.

Not everyone needs saving. Most don't want it.

Jace glances at me and stalls for half a breath. Then the tapping resumes and Glar shoots him a withering glare. This doesn't help my hero complex.

"There are others on the crew, but you'll work closest with this group," Captain Heid says, popping my save-the-day balloon. "So why are you here?"

No one answers, because no one knows. The Ward kept details vague as an adulterer's whereabouts. The only constant was the exorbitant money, enough cybs for us each to bankroll a small moon.

Heid grins, pleased. She wants intellect, not intuition, and the fewer connections we draw, the better for the Ward. Our heads are down, our tongues tied, our legs closed, our ears open.

"Your mission is simple," she says. "Outside the galaxy lies a stellar nursery—a rogue nursery, if you will. In its nebula awaits a high-density concentration of Diogen. Do you know what Diogen is?"

Again, no answers, no knowledge, no unnecessary speculation.

"Diogen is a rare and renewable energy source found only in deep space," the captain says, once again pleased with our lack of

mental incision. “The Ward will use it to power its interstellar navy. Our job is to fly our starship, the *Icarus*, to this rogue nursery, harvest the Diogen, and return. As I said, simple.”

Yes, because extragalactic space travel, rare energy farming, and cooperation with hostile strangers are all so very *simple*. Fucking Net, what the hell did I sign us up for?

“Any questions?” Heid asks.

Millions. But Halo is lazy with exposition, so we’ll skip all that jazz.

“Great,” the captain says. “We’ll prep *Icarus*, then launch next week.”

Icarus

Mazha: 1 Week to Launch

I know you wonder why I'm here. I wonder, too. It wasn't my choice. I was adamant about avoiding the Ward, as I'm sure you remember (or if you don't, there's your refresher). They pestered me, an endless swarm of requests, retinal-encrypted neurocalls that panicked Alix's spineless soul. Ironically, he's my reason for compliance. Join, or my secretary dies. Well, "die" wasn't used explicitly, but it was implied. It's always implied. This is the Ward, after all.

I'm not a killer, so here I am, praying cybs are worth stress, tiptoeing through the windowed stardock, a bridge between the space station and our starship, the *Icarus*. Constellations mock our progress, and my fellow crewmates make boring company. They're all scared shitless, as am I, and they want to get in, get out, and get the fuck on with their lives. Few are notable. I try to not psychologically analyze them—really, I do—but before I can shut up my brain, I'm rattling off one-word labels.

Captain Heid is a tyrant. Commander Sadhir is impulsive. Mik'valo feels guilty. Dunavard feels indebted. Javik is kinky. Idony is an addict. Rasmus, Madsen, Dagmar, and Stromberg—or Razz, Mads, Dag, and Berg, as they prefer to be called, if Heid had done any research—are driven. Kaj is a hero. Glar is a dick. Jace is a wimp. I'm a mess. And RJ?

I recognize her. She's the two-letter riddle. The ghost of the Net. Guardian. Savior. Hero. Protector. A tapestry of secrets. No name, file, history, or record. Exposure therapy revealed her wraith, hidden in Gercia's PTSD. The hololight sorcerer—tall, dark, and handsome with chestnut hair and villain-red eyes. She fashions technology into magic, into effortless bliss, and bewitched me at first sight. And now, in person, she hypnotizes my core.

How did she end up here? Does the Ward know who she is? Does she even know anymore?

Stop it, Mazha. Just fucking stop.

Not everyone needs saving. Most don't want it.

But I still hear "RJ" bubble from my lips. *Net-dammit.*

She swivels her head toward me and strikes me with that gaze. I've never seen eyes so red, nor a face so fierce. The others follow Captain Heid down the stardock while RJ drifts back to match my pace.

"What?" she asks, no manners, no bullshit.

I stumble. "Nothing. I just...um...I just...well...I recognize you."

Her vicious gaze narrows. "From where?"

"It's confidential." And I'm an idiot. I try to recover, but I've already fallen flat on my face. "I mean, I've seen you before, in recordings at MedAc." I can't divulge Gercia's relation, her diagnosis, her trust, so I backpedal with ambiguity.

"No, you haven't," RJ says, tense, voice husky.

"Sorry?" I ask.

"If you want to keep that pretty head attached to your shoulders, you haven't seen me before."

I should focus on the threat, but instead, I focus on "pretty."
Fucking ditz.

"Never mind," I mutter and hurry forward.

But RJ slows me with a hand on my arm, a hand that electrocutes my reason to ash. "If you're going to be passive-aggressive, you should be more passive about it. I don't know who you are or who you think I am, but the more you dig, the deeper the grave. Got it?"

I nod. Her grip tightens. Then she releases me, and I miss her violence. This is every definition of toxic.

"Good," RJ says. "I don't expect you to understand, since you're like ten, but you don't want to make enemies with the Ward, and you certainly don't want to make enemies with me. Watch your back, kid, because no one will watch it for you, and this mission isn't as 'simple' as they say."

I should be offended. Morbidly so. And I am. But I'm also something else. Something I bury. "Are you patronizing me?" I ask, but my question holds no injury. "I'm a holopsych, a doctor. My age doesn't matter." Still no agency.

"RJ, behave," Kaj whispers in front of us.

RJ doesn't. Instead, she glares at him. "Fuck off, Kaj."

Kaj ignores her and turns toward me. "Don't mind her. She threatens those she likes."

My cheeks warm, despite my morals, and only now does RJ fall silent.

Before I can dissect what that means, Captain Heid leads us through the final door. "Welcome to the *Icarus*," she says.

Also known as the *Hunk of Junk*. Or the *Piece of Shit*. For something so important, the Ward hides its value. Perhaps that's the point. Can't look all bright and shiny on our way to fuel a bloodthirsty empire, can we?

Anyway, *Icarus* is the bouncer of starships—bulky and oblong with misshapen chunks of metal. A nukedrive powers her exploits. Once engaged, the ship rockets through subspace via a barely controlled explosion that smears stars into streamers. There's a jigsaw of rooms—the Engine Room, Mess Hall, Rec Room, Flight Deck, Infirmary, Hydroponics, and Bridge, among others—but I can't focus on the captain's tour while I'm hyperaware of the ghost at my fingertips.

No.

I deserve nothing.

After all I've done, routine is retribution.

2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256...

Hotel to Home

Jace: 1 Week to Launch

Yes, I notice Kaj. I see how he looks at me, and it frightens me. Not for the usual reasons—Kaj is no predator—but for an outlier, a nuance, a surprise. He’s *concerned*. He’s *worried*. He *cares*. But I’m too raw, too fragile, to let kindness weaken my resolve.

Though I notice him, too. His shoulder-length black hair is shiny as obsidian. His intense dark eyes upturn at the sides, and his olive skin glimmers in the cosmic glow. He’s quiet, cautious, as he navigates these hallways, his slight build soft yet steady. He’s everything I need and nothing I deserve.

Jacccccceeeeeeee...

Let me inside, Jace.

Never again.

Kaj sneaks a glance at me across the corridor, but the tour’s over, and duty cracks. He’s off to the Infirmary, and I’m off to

the Engine Room, and *Icarus* moves from hotel to home.

"I need a full systems check on the nukedrive stat," Lieutenant Glar says. "Get in the ventilation shaft, and make yourself useful."

For fuck's sake, I'm always getting shafted, pardon the pun. No, don't pardon it. Shove it up your ass.

"I'd be happy to, sir, but may I make a suggestion?" I ask. In other words, only idiots adhere to antiquated procedures.

"No," Glar says.

I pause, chew my lip. "No? But, sir, *Icarus* is state-of-the-art engineering." On the inside, at least. "Instead of the vent, there's a neural interface—"

The backhand stings my cheek before I can process its course. He slapped me. Holy fucking shit, he just *slapped* me.

I spin on my heel, fuming, but Glar catches my elbow.

"Where are you going?" he asks.

"To report you," I snap.

Glar laughs. "This isn't the Protectorate. My rules, my way. I don't care about fancy interfaces. I've used the vent for twenty years, and we're using the vent now. Can't risk mistakes on this mission."

"But that's what I'm saying. There's less chance of error with the interface. Vent panels don't account for—"

Another sting. Another slap. Another swollen surge of misery. I don't have free will. I'm not even supposed to be here—I was the Ward's second choice after some dude who stardove his way to an early grave. Mhod, my manager, recommended me in his place, cited "exceptional workmanship" and "solid character," both lies crafted to dispose me. So I left. So I'm here. Without threat. Without bribe. I'm the last chosen, the least wanted, and the loneliest traveler.

“Yes, sir,” I mutter and obey.

I turn and slip on my gloves—I’ll demean myself to shaft work, but I won’t castrate efficiency. In lieu of the interface, the Net can match seventy-five percent of its productivity. Glar won’t approve. Well, fuck him and his moldy ambitions. I’ve spent enough time in tunnels, and vents rekindle unwanted nightmares—nightmares that bubble my flesh, stretch my skin, chain my limbs, and loosen my humanity.

Let me inside, Jace.

Let me out.

Scarlet Spires

Mazha: Age 15

Loneliness is a vise. Change is a cage. Existence's insurmountable rage fuels my core in one direction, toward one purpose.

Holopsych. *Holopsych*. The reason for madness, for rivers of hours and blurs of days. So much to study. So much to learn. The curse of understanding one brick but ignoring the wall.

Why persist? I'm rich. Secure. Heir to the heavens. My parents' empire of starship construction earns me prestige and legacy within the Protectorate. Yet it's not enough. Yet it's not *me*. Fine, call me entitled, spoiled, bratty, and immature. But you don't live on Midica. You don't feel the sharp bigotry of these Gothic spires, the aloof dogma of this city in the sky.

The nuns don't agree. The children shun me. They think me unappreciative, disrespectful. But I don't want to breed bullshit, ignite ignorance, fester fundamentalism. If I follow in my parents' footsteps, I will become the sword down the throat,

silencing voices and slaughtering ideas.

So at midday lunch, I'm here, beneath an abbey arch in the monastery cafeteria, moping at the seven moons with a knife in my hand and an encyclopedia in my mind. Psychological disorders tick through my brain as the blade roots me to now, a stake in the ground. I have no friends, no comfort, nothing outside my soul. A knot in my gut hurricanes my anxiety while I focus on blood, on obsessions, on patterns I've drawn with repetition and routine.

2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256...

Each skin cell freed is a step closer. Blood is a poison is the path to success. Pain is power. Pain is a prison. Pain is a penance asked of the harshest hearts.

2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256...

I can do this.

One step at a time.

2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256...

"Mazha? What on Midica are you doing?" Mother shrieks, the grate of glass.

I sneer at her, at my bloodied forearm. "*Worshipping*, Mother, as you always insist. Practicing rituals you've instilled since birth. *Mother Earth, hear our prayer.*"

Mockery shatters her fear into fury. "Not like this, Mazha," she says. "Never like this. You blaspheme sacred truths with mimicry. Blood is a gift, not a prize, and you use it now for selfish reasons. You should be ashamed of yourself, especially after your recent Net crimes."

Net crimes. Fucking fool. By "crimes," she means research, the act of bettering oneself in preparation for one's future, a preparation this backward world denies me with neurotic excuses. The Net is evil. The Net is dangerous. The Net can't

be trusted.

But the Net is my ticket to dreams.

"I grow weary of your constant discipline," Mother says.

"I grow weary of your constant refusal," I snap. This isn't my best idea. Blame the blood loss. "Let me go. I'll leave Midica, attend MedAc elsewhere. I'll pay my own way, find my own future. We're not compatible, Mother. We never were. And that's okay, but please let me go."

"No." The word is final as death. "You are our *heir*, Mazha. You don't get to find your future—your future found you from your very first breath. Our multitrillion-cyb empire and its myriad workers rely on our family to provide consistency and prosperity. You have a duty and obligation to support them, to encourage them, and this responsibility is not something you can throw away."

"Then have another kid. Make another heir. I don't believe in your crippling lies, and I never asked to be your tool."

Mother seethes. She wanted a clone, but she got a child. Father approaches, though he keeps his distance. He rarely interferes; when he does, he sides with her. *We want what's best for you*. The textbook response to persuade errant consciences. They don't want what's best for *me*. They want what's best for *them*. Because they need a puppet, a replica of their principles and ideals, someone to helm the mania driven by fear and fury, a macrocosm of Mother.

"This is getting old, Mazha," Father says, his voice the thrum of time. "We'll give you space for now, but I suggest you re-examine your priorities. Despite your insistence on our villainy, we have your best interests in mind."

See? Told you. A mutation of the textbook.

I nod, and it sates them. For now. But this family is a gas leak

inside a cauldron, and I am the spark that will set us all free.

Fairy-Tale Shackles

Kaj: Age 13

“How was school, Kaj?” Pa asks.
 “Good,” I mutter to my meatloaf. Same bullies.
 Same boredom. Same agonizing loneliness.

“Do anything fun?” Dad asks.

“Nope.” I scribble a poem’s embryo on my napkin.

One sun. One moon. The ghost of Earth.

A myth reborn without her worth.

It’s dumb. I’m dumb. Writing is fucking dumb. But I can’t stop, no matter my flaws. I have a love-hate (mostly hate) relationship with translating my mind into ink, so I continue to pen these literary abominations.

It’s based on today’s history lesson. With one sun, one moon, and a temperate climate, Damascus is the Protectorate colony that most resembles the fabled Earth, mother of civilization, home of our ancestors, and root of the celestial tree. The other planets peg us as gentle, but gentle doesn’t equal weak.

My dads' cottage sits on a verdant field near the River Docks. Our home is a polygonal barn with a shingled roof and rusty walls, the magic of the bucolic. It's quiet here. Caged by comfort. Chained by content. I rarely want to leave, and when I do, I'm reminded why.

"Come on, Kaj, tell us *something*," Dad begs. "Any crushes? Any parties?"

If by "crushes," they mean my head crushed in a door, then yes, and if by "parties," they mean degenerates that trail my every move, then many. But my dads know about the bullying, they've tried to stop it, and they can't, so I won't remind them of playground barbarism.

"Again, nope and nope," I say. "What about you? How's work?"

Dad sighs, and Pa eyes me with disappointment. They want me to share, but every day is the same, and repetition drains interest fast as taxes.

"Work is good," Dad says. "More worlds break free of the Ward to join the Protectorate."

"Why?" I ask, scribbling, always scribbling.

One sun. One moon. One autumn's end.

"They're finally coming to their senses," Pa says. "Should've happened long ago. The Ward is a plague."

"What's so bad about it?" I ask, and they both gape. Hatred for the Ward permeates the Protectorate. They're demons in shadows, monsters in nightmares, the inexcusable villains in the Protectorate's narrative. But little is known about *who* they are and exactly *what* they've done.

"Have you heard the stories?" Dad asks.

"Some," I say. "But most are vague at best."

"You want specifics," Pa says, equal parts pleased and concerned. He's glad I'm curious—and he worries about curiosity's

ramifications. "I guess you're old enough now." He exchanges a look with Dad, a look that speaks of blood and broken things, then continues. "The Ward recruits lost souls for doomed missions. They take advantage of the weak, the grieving, and use them as guinea pigs in their macabre experiments. We know little of their purpose, but their interstellar navy grows by the day. Their rivalry with the Protectorate goes back generations."

"Yes, but what have they done to earn such a notorious reputation?" I ask.

"Destroyed planets," Dad says. "Unleashed plagues. Murdered trillions for the gory pursuit of science. They're the mafia of the stars. The ships they send on their cursed missions return empty, charred, or haunted."

"Haunted?"

"Yes, haunted. Phantom sensor readings. Ghosts in the Net. Ever since their bloodthirst for Diogen, these anomalies have increased at a record rate."

"Ghosts?"

"That's enough for tonight," Pa says. "You have nothing to worry about, Kaj. Steer clear of the Ward, and you'll be fine. Plus, the work we're doing with the anti-Ward revolutions has quelled their advancement for now."

For now.

But I obey, always the good son, the safe son, the honest and boring and predictable son.

"Kaj?" Dad asks.

"Hmm?"

"Do yourself a favor and don't mention this at school. Politics rile even the most levelheaded among us, and we know you're already having trouble...adjusting."

If that ain't the understatement of the millennium. I'm not

having trouble adjusting—I’ve been “adjusting” for almost a decade. I’m having trouble being, living, growing, fitting in. It’s so easy for other kids to slide into place, but for me, I’m a phantom, a ghost, an anomaly, a cursed mission. I can relate to the Ward, to their exile and infamy, and this connection scares me. I shouldn’t commiserate with criminals, yet here I am, wondering if people could forgive plagues and massacres in the face of something greater, of something more.

It doesn’t matter. My future lies in mediocrity, not masterpiece. The unraveling of morality is of little concern to a boy fated to remain in fairy-tale shackles.

Another scribble. Another surrender.

Some books exit your brain with wings.

Some books exit your brain in a rickety chariot—missing a wheel, leaking gasoline, and billowing smoke—that stops every mile for snacks.

Gore Games

Jace: Age 15

She keeps me in the attic with the rest of her ghosts. Mom and Mama don't know. They think we're up here playing games. And we are. Saia loves games. She's playing one now. If I move, I lose. If I scream, I lose. If I tatttle on her latest "experiment," I lose, I lose, I lose. The only way I win is complete and horrific obedience.

I know this isn't normal. I know this isn't right. But it's all I have, how Saia's conditioned me, and familiarity breeds liking, among other sins.

"Baby brother, isn't she beautiful?" Saia asks.

I must agree. More so, I must make Saia believe me.

The goat isn't beautiful, but Saia is. She has the same dark skin and lithe build as me, but her hazel eyes are steady instead of frantic, her gunmetal hair glossy and free. Her parka yawns open, and her figure peeks through the gap. She's two years older, but decades maturer. I focus on her charm, however

wrong, and practice the lie with my tongue.

“Yes, Saia, she’s beautiful,” I say around bile.

My sister raises the decapitated goat’s head toward me. Fleishy ribbons wiggle beneath the neck like octopus tentacles amid the severed skull. Ragged tissue sprinkles blood droplets on the floor, and I cover my gag with a smile. Outside the window, the blizzard howls against our metal skyscraper in objection of our crimes. Carthage judges all.

“She needs a bow.” Saia tosses the head in a corner—it lands with a squishy *thump*—then cuts a strip from her dress. She ties silk around the goat’s spinal column and pats the stump in admiration. “So pretty. So *fancy*. But she’s missing something. Or rather, I am.”

Saia retrieves her dagger from the floor and rips open the goat’s torso. Blood splatters her face, but she blinks her eyes, licks her lips, then proceeds. With a heave and a moan, she snaps open the rib cage and plucks the heart from its home, then the lungs, then the rest. A blood eagle topped by a “fancy” bow instead of a head, what I fear will become her signature. She’s far too pleased with her artistry.

“Thirsty, my baby dancer?” Saia asks. She dips a cup into the cavity and sips till her teeth stain red. At my pallor, she frowns. “Oh, you gentle soul. Did I frighten you, love? Want Sissy to comfort you?”

She shrugs off her parka and thrusts out her chest. I recline and squeeze my eyes shut. “No, Saia, please. You’re my sister. We’ve been over this.”

“Have we?” she asks with a nursery rhyme’s lilt. “And here I thought we’d celebrate.”

She lifts the cup to my lips. The sticky, copper tang almost costs me my lunch.

"You haven't been eating much lately," she says, but it's a threat, not a concern. If I don't behave, if I don't play along, she'll tell my moms of my disorder, of my ill-fitting skin, of my oversized human suit, of how comfort eludes me in this fleshy form.

"I'm fine," I say, swallowing sick.

Saia smiles a red smile. "So am I, baby brother. So am I." She touches the cavity, moistens her fingers with gore. "Our hircine friend is all dressed up with nowhere to go." She retrieves the severed head and paints the lips crimson. "That's better. Don't you think, Jace?"

She frees a breast from her dress and rouges her nipple with the goat's bloody demise. I turn, but she catches my chin and forces me to watch.

"Clean it," Saia commands.

I dry-heave and pull away. "No, Saia. I'm going downstairs."

"Are you?" She pokes my rib, a rib that's a xylophone. As I rob my body of meat, my skeleton strains to burst external, like an insect.

Go, Jace. Tell Mom and Mama everything. Who cares about shame?

I do. Because admitting it to them is admitting it to myself, and that would cripple and spiral and derail my core.

"Think of it as a mouth hug," Saia says. "Siblings hug all the time. It's normal. Most kiss on the cheek. Why not somewhere else?"

She lifts her breast to my lips. I close my eyes. Obey. Pretend it's a straw. Salty and warm. She inhales desire and exhales disappointment as I finish.

"See? That wasn't so hard." Saia grabs between my legs, fondles my rising guilt, and winks. "Or was it?"

Jellies Incandescent

RJ: Age 14

“I want to try a jelly,” I tell Kraken.
“No,” the hulking mass grumbles.
“I’m the Von Rei boss—I can do whatever the fuck I want.”

“You’re also a fourteen-year-old kid. I’ve seen jellies pulverize the minds of hardened criminals. No way in hell I’m letting your scrawny ass dive down that rabbit hole.”

We walk through Sidon’s neon lattice—a warning glance here, a blastgun flash there—reminding this cybercity of the underworld’s power, the bloody Styx that fuels the facade. Tourism’s down because of explosions. Bombs, fireworks, same fucking difference.

“Is that *concern*, Kraken?” I ask. “How repulsive. I can handle myself. Or have you forgotten the latest shipment?”

The latest shipment where I crushed bones to dust, scalped our enemies, and fed them their livers. Sidon sharpens children

into blades.

Kraken shakes his head. "Though you may be tiny, you're a brute. You think you can punch, kick, and shoot your way through everything, but jellies aren't like that. They unwind your mind, compromise your psyche, open doors you shut long ago in your soul. You aren't ready for that kind of emotional mutilation."

"You calling me weak?" I ask.

"I'm calling you *young*. Rush into something when you're not ready, and it will destroy you. Some things are better left buried." The massive man shivers.

I whirl around and pin him with my villain-red glare. "I lost my parents when I was *eight* years old, and I've been alone for six bloody years. I'm as young as you are poetic."

"And here I thought you liked my sonatas."

"Farts are more eloquent than your wordshits."

He sighs, resigned, and leads me up several neon levels, through the thick of Sidon's night, past doorways crammed with vagabonds, into a dim, humid alleyway. The patchwork blockade of shops and apartments extends in all directions. This planet is a multilayered infestation of harlequin psychedelics, a violent rainbow where travelers lose each other and themselves.

"This is a bad idea," Kraken says. He punches the wall, and a crate slides free.

"Everything's a bad idea till it works," I say.

I take the crate from him and snap off the lid. Inside, glowing with membranous vibrancy, is a cyberjellyfish (you see why we abbreviate to "jellies"). The size of my torso, its circuits pulse with pink-orange rays. Jellies are illegal and addictive, as are most of life's treasures.

"We have a shipment pickup at the stardocks in thirty," Kraken

warns. “Heo promised to double our blastgun supply. The Florist should be there, in case he withdraws his offer.”

The Florist. My nickname. My epitaph. The orphan chorus chimes the rhyme in my mind: *A lily in the bed means a bullet in the head.*

“Don’t worry,” I say. “I’ll be fine.”

Without ceremony, I lift the jelly from the crate and place it on the back of my neck. In an instant, it latches. Tentacles spear my nervous system, and a hundred tiny needles inject hallucinogen into my bloodstream. The trip is immediate. Space warps. Time retreats. The world falls away, or I do, into chromatic cyclone.

I’m dizzy. Disoriented. Weightless and adrift. Memories smudge my vision like paint, my ears ring with a tapestry of past conversations, and scents spark my fiery chariot. Strawberry-filled crêpes powdered with sugar. Blueberry muffins glazed with vanilla icing. Chocolate-chip pancakes bloated with fried banana. *Dad.*

No. Let me out. I came to escape, not return.

But return I do. To books and ink. To toys and goldfish. To turquoise pools on Gao, Yuan, and Hattusa. Then it fast-forwards. To butchered bodies. To blood-drenched walls. To gut-stained floors. To mushy corpses that replaced my parents.

We’re sorry, R—. It was an accident. A gas leak, most likely. An awful tragedy.

Hollow words from the Protectorate. Ill-conceived lies and soggy apologies. I never believed them, of course. But they whisked me away to foster homes, then orphanages, then street gangs before my brain could process a reason for doubt.

Gas leaks don’t butcher bodies. Someone *murdered* my parents.

But who? And why? The old itch for revenge flares like a rash, and my jelly-pumped mind weaves webs from stale facts.

My mother's skull cracked open like an egg. My father's eyes oozing red roses. Human debris littered across my home. Gory books, ink smudged with blood. A frying pan, a spatula, a half-eaten latke. Grated potatoes in a fleshy heap. Dolls soaked scarlet and blocks charred black. Two lives stolen, one life ruined.

A child's mind is no place for such tragedy, for such parasitic calamity, but it latches onto my psyche, same as the jelly onto my nerves. The sheer horror and vile trauma is still a head-on collision, a rogue starship through my soul. My bones rattle under hell's fury as I try to breathe, fail to exist, crumple in an existential pile of regret and remorse.

You look, but you do not see.

My mother's mantra wafts through the nightmare, a cliché phrase bounced between worlds across voids. But I *do* see, Mom. I see everything that is the nothing you became. How much longer can I stare at the death of me, at the birth of RJ, at the genesis of my moral apocalypse? There's no more to—

Look, baby girl. Look, and see.

A shadow in the doorway. A kraken of a boy. A behemoth. A beast. A brute.

Nooooooooooooooooooooo.

It's him. My recruiter. My "friend." My foe. Blastgun in one hand, blade in the other, a bouquet of lilies mangled at his feet.

Kraken killed my parents. The Von Rei murdered them. Why? Because of me. My parents would never allow me to join a gang, but the Von Rei needed my baby face to front their atrocities. This was all a plan. It took them years to find me, but find me they did, and I played into their hand like a fucking pixie.

Remember, baby girl. Remember.

The jelly dissolves, its dosage drained. My mind is my own, and I'm sober as a saint. Rivers of rage electrocute my limbs, but I steel myself, face Kraken as a stranger, and he retreats, disturbed.

"RJ?" he asks, confused, suspicious, wary as the weak.

I can't kill him. Not here. Not now. He's stronger and skilled. I'd only dishonor myself and my parents' memories. But I can plan. Plot. Prepare. Proceed. And when vengeance solidifies, Kraken won't be the sole target. The entire Von Rei criminal empire will suffer this mistake. The bloodthirsty gang's heart will beat, severed, in my hands, their drugs and weapons destroyed with the rest of them.

"RJ?" Kraken asks again. His scraggly eyebrows twitch with apprehension.

"Run," I rasp.

"Sorry?"

"Run. We only have fifteen minutes to reach the stardocks. Heo fears the Florist."

And soon, they all will.

Scapegoat

Jace: 1 Day to Launch

Something breaks in the Engine Room.
 Glar blames me.
 I defend myself.

But no one listens when I cry.

We launch for deep space in one day, for this Diogen treasure hunt, and everyone's on edge. Glar sends me to the Strat Room to "explain myself" to Captain Heid. She's not pleased to see me, but she doesn't vilify me, either.

"Lieutenant Glar tells me the nukedrive overheated," Heid says. She gestures for me to sit across from her at the conference table. I do, cautious. "Something about the subspace coils?"

"Yes, Captain," I say. "The recalibration triggered a plasmic feedback loop. Apologies. It won't happen again." It wasn't my fault, but no one cares. If Glar would let me interface, this wouldn't have happened in the first place, but he's an anachronistic zealot stuck in Earth days.

Heid steeple her dark fingers and squints her beady eyes at my innocence. "This mission is important, Ensign. More important than all the worlds."

...than all our lives. That's what she wants to say, what she doesn't want overheard.

"I understand, Captain," I say. "In the future, I'll take every precaution." I always do, but I'm always the scapegoat.

She sits straight in her chair and tightens her black bun. "That is good to hear. After what happened with your sister, I doubted your recruitment, but it seems my doubts were misplaced."

I freeze. Heid knows about Saia. She's testing me. The Protectorate must have briefed the Ward on my history, rivals cooperating for my ethical collapse. It's fine. *It's fine.* They know what they know, what I told them, what they found. Saia's gone. That's all that matters.

Jaccccccccccccccccccc...

Saia's gone. That's *all* that matters.

Jace, my sweet Jcccccccccccccccccc...

SHE'S FUCKING GONE.

"My condolences," the captain says.

I gulp a dry gulp. Fear evaporates humanity. "Thank you, Captain. Her loss was difficult, but I am more than capable of performing my duties. I understand this mission's significance and am honored you've included me in such a prestigious enterprise."

So much corporate, clit-sucking bullshit. Talk the talk, and walk the walk, or suffer the consequences for creativity, for individuality, for an uncloned mind and soul.

"Before you leave, I'd like to hear in your own words what happened," Heid says. "I read the Protectorate holofeeds, but the ambiguities were...troubling."

My worst nightmare, my oldest dream—that's what happened, and it's none of her Net-damn business. Stay out of my trash, and I'll stay out of yours.

"In all honesty, I don't remember," I lie. "Living with Saia was...traumatic. She was abusive, violent, deeply disturbed. You read the holopsych profile—they called her a psychopath, a sociopath, a murderous savage. I'm not surprised her sins caught up with her."

"What were her sins exactly? You mentioned murder, but it wasn't that simple, was it?"

Heid knows it wasn't, the crustacean crone. Her questions are hawks circling prey, sharks orbiting a corpse, *Saia's* corpse.

"It's difficult for me to discuss her criminal history," I say. "She hurt me, Captain. She broke our family. I'd appreciate the mercy to move on."

"Hmm," the captain grunts, a throaty growl, the beast inside us all leashed by customs and norms. "I understand, Jace, and I meant no disrespect. Since you were the last to see her alive, I wish to ensure your mental health for the mission."

The last to see her alive, the first to see her dead. I know how it looks.

"Thank you, Captain," I whisper.

She smiles a serpent. "Carthage is an unruly colony. When they declared independence and joined the Protectorate, the Ward was relieved. I am glad that you, too, have escaped that bleak backwater. Your mothers still live there, though, do they not?"

This isn't an interrogation; this is a threat. Heid knows everything about me, about everyone on this ship. She doesn't want my answers; she wants my allegiance.

"It's home," I say, tiptoeing around commitment. "Despite

Carthage's quirks, it's theirs." And Mom and Mama don't have my shadows. Two shadows. Saia's and mine. Entwined since birth. Cursed at death.

"Well said, Ensign," the captain says. "If you think of anything else, my door is always open. We all have our secrets, but if you're not careful, you will become yours. Secrets hold great power, more than most realize. It is essential to monitor oneself in such matters, especially in deep space, if you catch my meaning."

I don't catch her meaning. Our mission is to harvest the rogue stellar nursery for Diogen, to fuel the Ward's interstellar navy. It's a candid, clear-cut, capitalist campaign. My secrets have nothing to do with the Ward versus Protectorate rivalry, nor the galactic Manifest Destiny between nemeses.

But I say, "Understood, Captain," to avoid further torture.

"Good. Dismissed, Ensign," Heid says.

I rise from the table, slip on my gloves, and connect upon exiting the Strat Room.

There's a folder of images I keep in the Net. Reminders of reasons. Excuses for evil. Headless horsemen. Wingless ravens. Eagles crafted from bone. Blood for paint. Bows for brains. Saia's artistry on full display.

This is why. This is my reminder, my reason, my excuse, my confession, my penance for apathy, my punishment for action. It was necessary. It was right. It was a humane obligation to save those left behind. Saia was the devil, and I was her fallen angel, her risen demon compelled to interfere. A coup d'état was the only way to destroy her bespoke hell.

Yet logic doesn't quell my festering guilt, my septic regret, my infected conscience that trails me like a storm.

Because I miss her. Despite what was necessary, what was

right, what was the only way, I still miss my sister every fucking day.

Jacccccccccccccccccc...

I miss you, too, Jace...

Melted Freedoms

Mazha: 1 Day to Launch

I have my first patient.

His name is Gaard, an ensign in Hydroponics. White hair, white eyes, white skin. Striking. Gorgeous. And so full of shit.

He's a compulsive liar. Everything on his CV, on his Ward application, is prefabricated bullfuckery. It's blatant, illicit plagiarism and parody. Though I reported him, Captain Heid called him an "essential role," so here I am, assuaging felonies with falsehoods.

"My anxiety is at subspace levels," Gaard says.

He glances around my office, through the foggy windows to the rest of the Infirmary. Poor design, if you ask me, but no one asked me; they *told* me, leveraged Alix, and sold my soul. So I'm now in a kitty-corner office stuffed in the sterile *Icarus* medical bay with tinny walls, white beds, and phosphorescent control panels. Hololight ping-pongs outside as nurses test calibrations

on their nodal gloves.

The Infirmary staff—both holopsychology and holo-surgery—all wear black fiber-optic scrubs. The rest of the crew, Gaard included, wear the standard Ward uniform—black jackets, pants, and boots with fiber-optic vests and health-monitoring inserts. Our left clavicles all sport a badge, a silver phoenix, the symbol of the Ward with its name embroidered beneath.

RJ is here. So is Kaj, the ensign recruited as her leash. She needs him—that much is obvious—though her gratitude presents in crassitude, not credit. At the moment, she wrestles with the cyberscanner, a machine that 3D-prints organs and limbs. The device produces artificial, metallic cyberflesh laced with synthetic stem cells. These cells then mimic the host's DNA and dissolve into the body till machine becomes human, indistinguishable and complete.

"Fucking piece of Net-damn shit," I hear RJ swear through the door. These walls are thin; they should be soundproof, but the Ward has other priorities.

"Calm down, RJ," Kaj says. The glossy-haired nurse crosses to the cyberscanner and inputs a code. At his delicacy, the machine hums in approval. "You can't punch your way through everything."

RJ's angular face tightens with indignation, and her red eyes narrow into blinding slits. "And you can't *talk* your way through everything, you pussy-ass bitch."

Several nearby nurses gape at her indecency, and Kaj pulls her aside, whispering sweet nothings out of earshot.

"Um, *hello?*" Gaard asks, annoyed.

Forgot about him. Forgot about everything.

"Sorry, yes, anxiety," I say. And *felonies*. "If you want a quick

approach, I recommend holomedes. If you'd like something more aggressive, we can start exposure therapy."

"Holomedes?" he asks.

"Medication that enables the body's self-healing properties, empowering your own anatomy to produce the missing chemicals."

"And exposure therapy?"

"Holographic simulations that recreate the sources of your neuroses and disorders."

Gaard is skeptical of both. That's the fatal flaw with society—if you can't see blood, people assume there's no pain, that injury exists solely in the visible, in the light. But shadows harbor the rawest agony, the anguish at the heart of the will to survive.

"Holomedes," Gaard says.

I swipe up on a tablet. "I've filled your prescription and delivered it to your quarters."

"Thanks, Doc." The pale pretender rises and leaves my office, and RJ's antics sift once more through my door.

"*You dragged me here, Kaj,*" she accuses.

"No, the Ward recruited you," Kaj says. "If you didn't come, they'd—"

"Hack me in half, shove my severed arms up my ass, stuff me with synthosine, light me on fire, and use my burning corpse as a beacon for obedience?" RJ scoffs and rolls her eyes. "Please, Kaj, I wasn't born yesterday. I know how this works."

Both Kaj and I stare at her in horror—him face-to-face, me through a window.

"You have issues," he says.

"No, I have *experience*," she says. "If you've reached thirty-five without some scars, then you're living wrong. And get the fuck

out of my way. I need to talk to that kid doctor.”

Shit, she means me. Fury flares at her condescension, replaced by desire at her recognition. It seems I have issues, too, but we knew that already.

Kaj huffs and hurries away, beyond RJ’s sphere of destruction, and the weaponized woman barrels through my door.

“You, Doctor Whatever, I can’t access my neurocalls.” RJ holds out her golden-bronze arm. A neurophone cuffs her wiry wrist, a gunmetal bracelet dotted with blue lights.

“Mazha,” I say.

“Is that a code?” she asks.

“It’s my name.”

“I don’t care. How do I get my neurocalls?”

My jaw twitches with tension...and passion. “You’re rather rude.”

“You’re rather young,” she snaps. “Get your period yet? Your parents know you’re here?”

“My parents are dead,” I whisper.

She doesn’t pity me. “Ah, right. I remember. You’re from that Earth-worshiping hellhole. Assur? Rashidun? No, wait, Midica. You were all over the holofeeds. ‘Heir Inherits Starolite Only to Sell to Highest Bidder,’ or some other clickbait. You surrendered a multitrillion-cyb starship empire for money. Classy. Great way to honor your parents’ memories.”

“Excuse me?” No one’s ever spoken to me this way.

“My parents died, too,” RJ says. “But unlike you, I didn’t sell their souls.”

“No, you sold your own,” I snap. “I’ve heard rumors about you, too, and if they’re even a quarter true, you’ve no business judging me.”

“Why? Because I fought for every scrap while Mommy and

Daddy gave you handouts?”

“Because you have no idea what it’s like to live in a fundamentalist prison.”

RJ smirks. “Well, then. Seems we’ve researched each other. I’ve had worse first dates.”

She winks, points at her wrist, and I am as off guard as a sheep in a lion’s den. Is she *flirting* with me? Or am I projecting? No. I can’t do this. RJ’s bad news. She’s dangerous. Unstable. An emotional time bomb of savage havoc. I have rules. Groupings. Labels and limits. RJ would bleed through my systematic fail-safes, the lifeboats of my psyche.

And yet...

And yet...

“Yo, pretty dreamer, the neurocalls—how do I access them?” RJ asks.

I stare into her red abyss. “Your eyes. Scan them.”

“Scan them with what?”

“The neurophone. Then the neurocall will appear only to you, the receiver. The Ward retinal-encrypts all nanotech communications.”

“A hologram in my skull. That’s annoying as fuck.” She peers into the neurophone, a blue light sweeps her irises, and her gaze fogs with information overload. “Great. My backlog is constipated with bullshit. Thanks, kid. Appreciate it.”

RJ leaves my office, chaos in her wake, and regroups with Kaj, a scowl on her face.

What the hell was that?

How do I categorize it? How do I organize it? How do I splice it into understanding, into digestible comprehension? RJ is wrong. Ruthless. Volatile and cruel. A thousand reasons to run from her smile cascade through my brain and caution my

future. But one reason brutalizes them all, and it's undefined. A feeling. A sentiment. A spark previously unknown. I *want* her. Badly. Pure and simple lust. Or love. Or another unattainable happily-ever-after.

A happily-ever-after I don't deserve.

A happily-ever-after none of us will get.

We're slaves of the Ward, of the *Icarus*, of the waxy, feathered wings, flying too high and too far till stars melt our freedoms and the void drowns our dreams.

Drowned Dreams

RJ: 1 Day to Launch

That was stupid. I can't afford delays. I don't deserve rewards.

Mazha is a distraction, a candy-eyed sprite. We're colleagues, coworkers, cohabitants of the Infirmary. That's *it*. That's *all*. Despite her glacial gaze. Despite her frosty hair. Despite her brushstroke eyebrows. Despite her starlight skin, carnation-pink lips, lyrical curves, and details branded on memory by an urge to forget.

Net-fucking-dammit.

I can't do this again. I can't lose myself in lust, labor over love, only to sever my heartstrings with guilt, grief, and gore. Because I'm not the only victim. I'm one of the damned. Cynicism is a sanctuary to stave off my sins.

I slump on my bed, hang my head in my hands. My quarters are tiny—a bed and bathroom in a cube—boxed in by secrets, caged by regret. *Icarus* relates. She's an ugly-ass cunt. The

runt of starships. The overambitious babe with false wings and fatal hubris. Diogen is our sun, the stellar nursery our sea. The Ward's labyrinth will spawn massacre and mistakes.

After this cursed mission, I can return to the Outpost, to mediocrity, to penalty for my past. *If* I return. If the mission is Diogen. If the maze is deep space and the message humility. But there's more. There's always more. There are always layers to meaning, onions of understanding, chocolate lava cakes where the lava is blood.

Mazha.

Is that a code?

It's my name.

And I'm a dick. A ruthless, heartless, temperamental dick. I insulted her parents, slandered her name, and cast an emotional blowtorch at any hope of connection. Because I can't let her in. Not after Sidon. Not after *him*. Not after the two captives of my sinful scars.

Tomorrow, we launch. Next, we complete the mission. Hopefully, we *survive* the mission. Then we go our separate ways. That is the only script my future can follow.

Wings of Ash

Kaj: 1 Day to Launch

I'm in a corner of the Mess Hall, writing a message in a bottle, a letter to my past, to my future, to the prism of selves reflected through time. We prepared all week and launch tomorrow, but at this moment, I must remember the why, the words, the wonder that chased me from Damascus to the Outpost to here.

His fathers served the king, a government-shaped god.

They pacified protests in treaties written red.

And this king hungered for a monster-made maze.

So a labyrinth of lies sprung from the dead.

The fathers warned their son about risk and chance.

The son warned his fathers about apathy's chains.

"The timid are forgotten," Icarus told them both.

"The brave are destroyed," Daedalus explained.

But the son didn't listen. Neither did the men.

So wax and feathers pretended at wings.

Birdless planes latched onto the fool.

He leaped from hell's tower and escaped into nothing.

Because wax melts. Feathers burn.

Stars cremate all souls.

Sun and son collide mid-sky.

And fathers mourn pride's toll.

A myth from the myth of Earth. Choose humility over hubris. Pick moderation over motivation. Stay put. Keep quiet. Don't talk too loud. Don't travel too far. Live safe, and die easy. Because the minds of men will never equal the glory of gods.

I hate that story. I also relate. Dad and Pa never gamble; they fold in all matters. The Protectorate is their master, their lord, their king. They are my Daedalus; I am their Icarus son. But is this *Icarus* my makeshift wings? Is Diogen our sun? The stellar nursery our sea? Are we fated to fail, doomed to drown? Have we leaped too high from the Ward's tallest tower? Will my fathers watch me die? Will we all burn to ash before we see our dreams?

Because I, too, ignored my fathers' warnings. Dad and Pa never trusted the Ward, and for good reason. They also invented a monstrous maze of apathy and ennui where only words could free my frustration. Words, and the Ward. So a door opened. I stepped through. And now, I fear what's on the other side.

Countdown

Jace: Launch Day

T-minus two minutes and holding," Captain Heid's voice booms through the shipwide intercom. "Engine Room, report."

"Subspace coils primed and nukedrive stable, Captain," Glar responds. "Extragalactic launch configuration complete. Beginning fuel cell conditioning...*now*." He points at me, and I flip a switch on the dashboard. The other engineers scurry like ferrets, bouncing from console to console, checking this, verifying that, tightening the math on this imminent bomb.

"Thank you, Lieutenant Glar," Heid says. "Close all vents. Seal all airlocks. Activate holocams. Clone flight system and stand by for launch. Await Ward final green light."

"Ensign, what the hell are you doing?" Glar snaps.

I motion toward the dashboard. "Standing by."

"Get your ass up to the Bridge. They need an engineer on deck. Haven't you read the deep-space launch protocols?"

"Of course, sir, but Mhod used an intern—"

"I don't give a shit what your old manager did. Get up there now."

"Yes, sir."

Fucking prick. Just my luck the biggest dick in the Ward gets shoved up my ass. This is baby work. Kids could do this in their sleep. But I nod and salute like a good little boy and take the lift to the Bridge.

Jacccccccccccccccccc...

Let me inside, Jace.

"You're late, Ensign," Captain Heid says as I arrive.

No use arguing when people assume you're swine. So I bow my head as I exit the lift and take my place at Engineering.

The Bridge is an octagonal jigsaw of consoles and panels—helm in front, chairs for the captain and commander in the center, and the other stations in the back. Chatter percolates through the metallic dome as crewmen coax beeps and flashes from panels. A chemical stench stings my nostrils and eyes. They must have cleaned this old cow—new hope for an old hag. *Icarus* is a dump, unworthy of dreams, yet the Ward stuffs all their ambitions into a corpse.

No, it's not a dump. It's *disposable*. *Expendable*. As are we all.

"Ward Command to *Icarus* Bridge," the intercom spurts. "It's a go. Retracting stardock...now. Netspeed, Captain."

"Copy that, Command," Heid says. "T-minus two minutes and counting. Javik, initiate launch sequencer."

The freckled lieutenant attacks Operations with codes.

"Jace, boot up auxiliary power units," Heid tells me.

"Aye, Captain." I press a button. *One* fucking button. But that's why I'm here, to bow and bend and hopefully not break. It's a big button, at least. And red. So bloody satisfying.

"Mik'valo, verify final coordinates, and arm nukedrive," Heid says.

"Verified and armed, Captain," the pilot says from the helm.

"T-minus one minute and counting," the captain updates. "Engine Room, initiate nukedrive gimbal profile test."

"Initiated, Captain," Glar barks through the intercom. I should be down there with him, with my team, but I'm ostracized *again*. Exiled *again*. Caged in a haunted attic again, *again, again*. "Test passed."

"Transfer power from Command to *Icarus*."

"Copy that..." There's a pause. A beat. The ticking of fate. "Transferred."

"T-minus thirty seconds. Start auto-launch sequence."

"Started, Captain," Mik'valo says.

The deck thrums, the surge of a waterfall. We wait for stability, then the captain continues destiny's demise. "T-minus fifteen seconds. Activate gravitational dampeners."

"Activated, Captain," Lieutenant Dunavard says from Science.

"T-minus ten seconds. Ignite nukedrive burn-off system."

"Ignited, Captain," Commander Sadhir says from the center.

"Main engine start," Heid says. "T-minus five, four, three, two, one...liftoff."

The nukedrive roars, the Minotaur unleashed. The floor trembles with the beast's rage, and we pierce subspace, slice celestial flesh, as stars streak the windows. *Icarus* is a shark riding a tidal wave, a seizure of defiance, an arterial rush, an eruptive paroxysm like the rockets of old.

We detonate, then disappear.

Liftoff

Kaj: Launch Day

“Prep for casualties,” I warn the Infirmary.
 “Casualties?” RJ asks. “This is a standard launch.”
 “And this is the Ward, not the Protectorate. There aren’t the same safety protocols.”

“So glad I followed you to Wonderland. Thought you said Ward tech never malfunctions?”

“I was wrong.” About everything.

As *Icarus* adjusts to subspace, the nukedrive stabilizes, and the floor steadies beneath our feet.

“Rather anticlimactic, don’t you think?” RJ asks. She adjusts her black scrubs and perches on a white hospital bed. “All this hoo-ha about the Ward, the mission, the stirring of the loins...and it’s a launch-and-wait situation.”

“For now,” I say. “Did you just say ‘hoo-ha’?”

“I’m out of sorts,” she says. “Blame the meat.”

“The meat?”

“From the Mess. Avoid the bacon.”

Speaking of “out of sorts,” Mazha exits her office and pauses in the doorway. A glance at RJ. A twin blush. A unison glare. There’s a fire between them, a spark at first sight. I’ve noticed—hell, we’ve all noticed. And though RJ likes playing with fire, I fear Mazha will get burned. The holopsych is young. Organized. Ordered and controlled. RJ is her antithesis, the epitome of disaster. Crack her open a hair, and the whole ship explodes.

“Leave her alone, RJ,” I whisper.

RJ scowls, her body a blade, her stare a scythe. “Fuck you, Kaj, and I am.”

“I see how you look at each other.”

“And I see how you look at that tight-ass engineer.”

“I don’t want her to get hurt.”

“What am I, a fucking bomb?”

“Basically.”

“Compliment taken.”

Before she can further insult my character, the Infirmary alarm wails, and a couple patients stagger through the sliding doors. One of them is Jace, the “tight-ass engineer.” *Fuck.*

RJ snorts. “I assume you want the pretty boy, you hypocritical cunt.”

I swallow my dignity. “Sorry.”

“Apologies are for the weak. Mind your own business, and stay the fuck out of mine.”

We slip on our gloves and connect to the Net. RJ helps the other patient, a yoga instructor from the Rec Room, onto a bed. Sprained ankle, as far as I can see, from the launch turbulence. The Protectorate invests in their dampeners, but the Ward uses cheap shit.

RJ can fix the ankle with a sliver of brainpower, and the yogi will heal in minutes. Jace, on the other hand...

"Whoa, let me help you." I catch Jace's scrawny arm as he stumbles across the Infirmary. A nasty gash pulses blood from his temple, spraying the nearby bed red. "How'd this happen?"

"Tripped," he mutters, "on my way back from the Bridge."

"The Bridge?" I ask. "Aren't you an engineer?"

Dammit. Now, he'll think I'm a stalker.

But Jace doesn't notice my slip. "Glar sent me. Intern's job. Doesn't matter."

His words slur together in literary syrup. He's bleeding out, and he's too thin to weather the loss. I lay him on the bed and summon light from my gloves. Flashes cauterize his wound and accelerate his body's self-healing abilities, but it will still be some time before he should stand, though stand he does.

"Jace, you need rest," I say.

"I'm fine," he says. "If I'm not back in the Engine Room soon, Glar will freak."

RJ finishes with the yogi and retreats into a corner while Mazha returns to her office. Besides a few nurses scattered about, we're alone enough, so I push.

"Is he treating you well?" I ask. "If there are grounds for harassment—"

Jace scoffs, stopping me. "This is the Ward. Harassment is part of the job."

"No, it's not. I could tell Captain Heid—"

"You'll tell her *nothing*. Leave it, Kaj, and get out of my way."

I don't. "If you work with this head injury, you'll risk an aneurysm. I'll submit a medical waiver so you can take the day off."

Jace narrows his hazel eyes and crosses his dark arms. Shit,

he's beautiful. "There is a fine line between a marriage license and a restraining order. I get you're into me, but I have enough baggage. Fuck off, buddy, and let me go."

I blush but don't budge. I've always been an open book with everything on the table, all my weaknesses and weapons. "I won't be the reason you fall."

He stalls. There's a frantic energy in him, a restless desperation of someone who always needs to see doors, windows, and escapes. I don't know his past, but I see his scars, and despite the risk, I step further onto the cliff.

"I'm here if you need me, Jace," I say. "Just call."

He scoffs again, but this scoff is forced. "You don't know me, and you don't want to."

With that, he shoves me aside and leaves the Infirmary.

RJ drifts over to me and smirks. "Thanks for the dating advice—you're such a stud."

"And you're such an ass," I say.

"That's why you love me."

"Go to hell."

"Never left."

Setup

Mazha: Launch Day

“How long till we reach the nebula?” I ask a nurse.
 He shrugs. “Dunno. Deep space is far.”
 Thanks, Einstein. Though there’s someone who
 would know, someone I should avoid.

2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256...

RJ pesters Kaj across the Infirmary. I peer through my office windows, debating whom to ask. It’s just a question. Just one question. We’re coworkers. We help each other. It’s not weird. Not desperate at all. And I wouldn’t need to ask if this mission were organized.

2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256...

Kaj. I’ll ask Kaj. Then I can avoid She Who Burns Bridges in Her Wake.

But he sighs. Then swears. And leaves with a hand in his hair. Frustrated. Annoyed. Tormented by RJ’s incessant sting.

2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256...

I could try another nurse. But if I don't know, they don't know. Most have never even met Captain Heid. And unless I want to trek to the Bridge, I have one option left. One fatal decision. One irreversible and irredeemable choice.

2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256...

"RJ," I say. I'm somehow beside her, out of office, across the Infirmary. My legs decided what my brain could not.

"Doctor Whatever, we meet again," RJ says, a hint of humor in her husky voice.

"It's—"

"Mazha. I know. What do you need, kid?"

I'm not a fucking kid. I'm a twenty-eight-year-old, board-certified holopsychologist with a degree from the most prestigious MedAc in the Protectorate. I've been through more shit than most senior citizens and suffer enough secrets to bury a starship.

I open my mouth to paraphrase my rant, but RJ interrupts with: "I know that look. You want to tear me a new one. Well, don't bottle up all those juicy gibes. Let me have them."

I hesitate. "When will we reach the nebula? The rogue stellar nursery?"

RJ smirks. "That's not what you want to say, though, is it? Insult me first, then I'll tell you. It's been a while since I've been properly abused, and—what can I say?—I'm a masochist. Kaj is too kind to cut deep, but you've an edge to you, little one. So go on. Give me your worst."

"Never mind. I'll ask someone else."

"But you want to ask *me*. That's why you're here. So lay into me, then ask. Don't run from fear."

"You're exhausting."

"And you're enchanted." RJ grins, arrogant to her core. But

arrogance is a mask for insecurity.

"Fine," I say. "You're a patronizing, condescending, belittling *bitch*. I'm sick of your ageist comments. I may be young, but I'm a professional, and I have every right to be here. You're not the only one with skeletons in your closet, yet you think no one can match your regret. I don't know who you've been or what you've done, but it's no reason to treat everyone like shit. You push people away to preemptively avoid heartbreak, but it's made you cold, lonely, and miserable."

I expect RJ to seethe, but instead, she smiles, smug and satisfied. "Thanks for noticing."

It's all a game to her. She drew me out, made me confess, highlighted my vulnerabilities with a conversational whip.

"And one day," RJ says. "Till we reach the nebula, that is. Assuming we don't combust."

"Only one day?" I ask, fury replaced with confusion.

"Yep. Now, scram, kid. I have a nurse to 'patronize.'"

"Stop calling me kid," I say, fuming.

She smiles again. "Did it ever occur to you that it's a term of endearment, not condescension?"

I gape, stunned. Endearment? Even my parents—bless and damn their souls—never endeared me.

RJ chuckles. "You're too serious, Doc. Lighten up. Or light shit up. Anyway, gotta go." She abandons me for the nurse, and I stutter to myself—unsteady, unstable, and undone.

Cleanup

RJ: Launch Day

A h, shit. Net-damn fucking hell-forsaken *shit*.
Mazha catches me off guard. Only one other person
does that—*did* that—and he's a galaxy away. Must
remember the past, the present, the inescapable and irreparable
future.

Time for a drink.

Or ten.

I leave the Infirmary sans farewell. Besides the yogi and that
engineer Kaj drools over, there were no other injuries from
launch turbulence. Pity. I'm bored. Only a day till we reach
the stellar maternity ward, till we breach that placental nebula,
but twenty-four insipid, insidious hours can reflect a lifetime
of fuck-ups and slips.

I can't run away fast enough. From the Infirmary. To the
Mess. From my mess. To the abyss. Drown me in alcohol, and
erase my soul with jelly-induced fervor. Too bad *Icarus* only

carries prude shit. Never thought I'd miss my days in the Von Rei, yet here I am, remembering nightmares with nostalgia.

"A doctor, I presume?" Zariah asks. He's the bartender, a short, stocky, olive-skinned elder with graying black hair and bright emerald eyes. No rank, no tact. He's also the cook, and he's too happy to be on a Ward ship headed to deep space on a doomed mission with a broken crew.

I toss back the whiskey and glare at the psychogenic intruder. There's an unspoken pact when one sits at the far end of a bar in a corner of the Mess Hall: *Don't fucking engage*. I stay in shadows to avoid the light—not to burn beneath its scrutiny—for I am a curse, damned to dungeons, banished from my own kingdom by angels on high. I wade in what I've lost, because what I've found is only penance, deliverance unto karma's cold-hearted chains. *I'm sorry*, I tell my past, but my past remains silent.

"Holosurgeon," I rasp. The whiskey stings my throat. Annoying, really. It's too weak to numb, too soft to sustain. "Do you have anything stronger? Overproof rum? Or absinthe?"

"Absinthe?" Zariah asks, then chuckles. "No, Doctor. My job is to comfort the crew, not kill them."

"So you're useless," I mumble and order another shot of whiskey's flaccid cousin.

Zariah chuckles again. I hate joy. There's no substance, no longevity. Better to wallow in misery's predictable infinity than crest the sea only to forget how to swim.

"You must be RJ," he says while he pours amber blasphemy. "I've heard of you."

"All bad things, I hope."

"Yes, as I'm sure you intend."

He slides the thick shot glass across the metal counter, and I down number two in a guiltless gulp. I order a third, and he

obliges, begrudging me. He's like Kaj. One of those hero types. Always out to save a damsel in distress. Well, I'm no damsel, and I cause the distress.

"Drinking might help," Zariah says, "but talking helps more."

I scoff. "I came here to escape the shrink, not to find another." And I don't want to help my situation; I want to hinder it. Bury it along with the rest of my corpses. Line my closet with fossilized skeletons. Ignore the dinosaurs till death claims me and releases the beasts.

"You mean Doctor Mazha? She's wonderful, isn't she?" he asks.

"Yep," I say. *Too* wonderful. That's the fucking problem. I down the third shot, order a fourth, but Zariah shakes his head.

"If you want another, eat something. You're too thin as it is. Alcohol will go straight to your bones."

"That's the bloody point."

"Lady trouble?"

"Are they ever not?"

Zariah chuckles yet again, ruthless in his joy. "Come on, let me cook for you. Lasagna? Pizza? Polenta? Risotto? Focaccia? Bruschetta? Antipasto? Prosciutto?"

"I don't know what half that shit is," I say.

"And here I thought, with your colorful and cultural history, that you'd know everything under every sun." He winks, ruthless, as I said.

Relief finally arrives. Whiskey latches onto my brain, kinder than a jelly, with a foggy, blurry blanket of undeserved benediction. It'll do. For now. It's not enough—a dirty washcloth on a preschool floor—but it lengthens my timeline by inches, if not miles.

"Make your favorite," I slur.

"I have no favorites," Zariah says. "Why limit options based on a single instance of your temporal self?"

"Dude, I'm too drunk to give a fuck. Just make me something. Anything. I don't care."

He pauses, ponders. "My ex-wife had favorites. I'll make you one of hers."

"*Had?* She dead to you, or she dead to the worlds?" I ask.

Zariah smiles. "You're too clever for your own good...and for everyone else's own good." He starts sautéing garlic and onions in a saucepan with olive oil. "She's alive. I assume so, at least. She divorced me and disappeared years ago, and I haven't heard from her since. Forced me to raise our four kids alone. Since then, I've been a single dad working full time."

Regret pulses through me. "This is a sob-story-free zone," I say to avoid elaboration.

"It's not a sob story," he says. "Their mother freed me to be me, to raise our sons how I wanted, to live a life I chose. She gave me my boys, and they're everything to me. As far as I'm concerned, we're even."

"Most wouldn't see it that way." More regret. More guilt. More secrets seeking revenge.

"Most are fools. They're on this ship, you know. My kids, I mean. Razz, Mads, Dag, and Berg from Tactical. They're identical quadruplets—pain in the ass as babies, epic as adults. That black hole of infancy is brutal, I tell you. Got any kids, Doctor?"

I motion toward the garlic. "It's burning."

Zariah notices my deflect but allows the foul. "It's crisp." He adds peppers to the pan, then stirs the contents and conversation. "I did burn a few things at first, though, because of the normal gravity here. Before *Icarus*, I was stationed on *Gēras*,

an ionjet cruiser. Gravity was lower for the older crowd, to decrease anatomical stress, and adjusting has been a challenge.”

“Adjusting always is,” I say, thankful for his segue.

“So is starting over.”

“And cleaning up.”

Before our euphemisms reach hipster levels, Captain Heid enters the Mess Hall, a frown on her face. “Doctor? Your shift isn’t over. Why aren’t you in the Infirmary?”

“Why aren’t you on the Bridge?” alcohol speaks with my tongue. *Oops.*

Zariah covers for me. “She made a house call. Normal gravity strains my joints—walking to the Infirmary would’ve killed my knees—so the kind doctor scanned me here.”

No one has ever called me kind. I don’t like it. Don’t want it. Don’t deserve it.

“Is that so, RJ?” Heid asks, skeptical.

I nod. “What he said.”

“And the shots?” she asks.

“I’m a difficult patient,” Zariah interjects. “Whiskey was required.”

Heid doesn’t buy it, but for some reason, she lets me go. Some reason concealed in a glance between her and the cook. Hold the Net-damn neurophone...is she *flirting* with him? Oh, juicy gossip, perhaps all that glitters is gold. Well, good for the old farts. I applaud their long-lasting genitals.

I’m sick of your ageist comments.

Fucking Net, Mazha. Not here. Not now. Not in my whiskey haze. Not while temptation teases me, and trauma torments me. Let me escape like all the others. Let me run away.

“Clean yourself up, and return to the Infirmary,” Captain Heid orders.

“Aye, Captain,” I slur.

As I leave the Mess, I realize I’ll never know what Zariah was cooking, and this bothers me. Why do I care about some garlicky shit? His ex-wife sounds like a cunt, so it was probably something basic, like soup, or spaghetti.

Yet this ignorance bugs me. I usually know everything. See everything. Hear everything. Anticipate *everything*. But here, I’m blind. Senseless. Comatose with contrition. Reanimated with a renaissance of passion, of desire. Mazha. *Mazha*. The apple. Or the snake. Or the sin in the garden on a raw, newborn world.

You push people away to preemptively avoid heartbreak, but it’s made you cold, lonely, and miserable.

Yeah, that hurt. And the rest of this book will, too.

Jericho Run

Mazha: Age 16

To be loved? To be feared? To be revered? To be remembered?

How do you want to live? How do you want to *die*? What would you risk to achieve your goal, your passion, your desire, your fire that animates the ladder of years?

Me? I would risk *everything*. Because without this, I'm *nothing*.

As you know, my parents disagree. That's why I'm here without them. And when the Starolite heir requests a ride on one of her own starships, who are you to refuse?

Long subspace story short, I left Midica alone, and I'm on Jericho at a Protectorate testing center for holopsychology admission exams. The room is blinding, a hololight star designed to sear distractions from awareness. Without a passing grade, MedAcs close their doors forever. I *must* succeed on the first try. There are no do-overs. No second chances. No that's-okay-there's-always-next-time bullshit. Prove your

worth, or leave forever. Try a different field. Pursue a different dream.

But there are no different dreams for me. All other roads end in nightmare, in netherworlds of damnation with spoiled hope and ruined ethos.

“Mazha, welcome to Jericho,” the test administrator greets from behind her white desk.

She’s forgettable, replaceable, a monotonous minion, a drone cloned into dozens. I stand opposite her, across the purgatorial gulf, as I await my personal doomsday. We both wear white, lie-detecting, fiber-optic tunics to ensure accountability on both sides—no cheating and no favorites. There are no tablets, no consoles, nothing and no one besides myself and the decider of my future, of my fate.

“You hail from Midica, correct?” she asks, and I nod. “Do you need a refresher of holopsychology admission exam regulations and procedures?”

Hail? I *am* out of my league. And a refresher isn’t customary—she asks as a courtesy to my heritage, to my ignorance. Few Midicans venture beyond its Gothic spires.

“Please,” I say, embarrassed. Off to a great start. On crutches before the test even begins.

“As you wish,” the admin says. “The test is in oral format, the same for every applicant. Two incorrect answers are allowed. Each question has a three-second time limit.”

“Sorry, three *seconds*?” I ask. That’s not in the manual.

“Is that a problem?”

Yes. And only *two* wrong answers...*shit*.

“No,” I say.

“Good,” she says. “The examination will commence in five...”
Wait, that’s it? No buildup? No introduction or orientation?

“...four...”

I understand why. Trillions apply for MedAcs each year.
There's no coddling.

“...three...”

No time for handholding or wasted exposition.

“...two...”

But this reduces us to robots, to inhuman machines. A brutal
wash of get in, get out, get on with your fucking life.

“...one.”

Hang on.

The test starts with the silent crack of death's whip.

“Diagnose the disorder based on the provided symptoms,” the
admin says. “Nod if you understand.”

I nod. She zooms forward, no pause, no hesitation as I veer
after her, scraping against mental guardrails.

“Disorder one: hyperactivity, impulsivity, and inattention
that disrupts professional and personal functioning,” she says.
“Three...”

Oh, fucking Net, she's counting down, ticking the time limit.

“...two...”

It's wicked distracting. Then again, so are patients. “ADHD,”
I blurt out.

She waits half a second, then narrows her prosaic eyes.
“Incorrect.”

“Incorrect? That's textbook ADHD.”

“‘ADHD’ is not sufficient,” she says. “‘ADHD: attention
deficit hyperactivity disorder’ or ‘attention deficit hyperactivity
disorder’ are both allowed. If you use an acronym, you must
also provide the full name of the disorder.”

“But you didn't tell me that,” I say.

“And you had years to prepare.”

“On *Midica*.”

Her nostrils flare with annoyance. “Your homeworld is neither my problem nor concern. If you interrupt further, I will disqualify you for verbal loitering. Shall we resume?”

I smother my fury, my frustration, my economical privilege that yields penurious opportunities. Most hate *Midica*, myself included. They think us rich, elitist, entitled radicals, a colony of erudite, Earth-worshiping terrorists intent on propagandist indoctrination. And I agree with them—I have firsthand experience, after all. But now is not the time to play the brainwashed-cult card. Now is the time to break free of destiny.

“Yes,” I say, and she continues.

“Disorder two: caused by a traumatic event—symptoms include edginess, reliving said event, and avoiding reminders of said event,” the admin says. “Three, two—”

“PTSD: post-traumatic stress disorder,” I reply with a touch of ersatz docility.

She doesn’t notice or doesn’t care. It was stupid, anyway. I have a habit of pissing off the wrong people, a habit I can’t afford today. This is the most important test of my life. It’s either my key to escape or a lock of damnation.

“Disorder three: alternating episodes of mania and depression,” the admin says. “Three—”

“Bipolar disorder,” I answer. “Bipolar I patients suffer more severe manic episodes than Bipolar II patients, whose mania is milder.”

“Disorder four: patient harbors two or more contrasting personalities. Three, two—”

“Dissociative identity disorder, formerly multiple personality disorder.”

“Disorder five: excessive distress and extreme reaction

to physical symptoms that interfere with daily functioning. Three—

“Somatic symptom disorder.”

“Disorder six: an eating disorder characterized by food binges followed by food removal via vomiting, laxatives, or drastic exercise. Three—”

“Bulimia nervosa.”

“Disorder seven: acute periods with disturbances in attention and awareness. Three, two—”

“Delirium.”

“Disorder eight: excessive food consumption where patient feels out of control. Three—”

“Binge-eating disorder.”

My heart is a hammer, my mind a bomb. I’ve studied for years, yet performance drains purpose. A single instance to prove oneself, a sliver of time to make or break all the rest. I already have one wrong answer because of a fucking technicality, and I’m only allowed one more. So I will my body to slow, my brain to calm, but nerves fidget my core and yank wires from my motherboard. *Motherboard. Mother.* Rage rekindles my neural circuits and springs forth a renewed sense of desire, of *need*. I will *not* become my blood.

“Disorder nine: pain during intercourse, often present in victims of sexual abuse,” the admin says. “Three...”

Fuck. I know this. I learned this yesterday, yet yesterday fades.

“...two...”

No, no, no, *no*, **no**.

“...one...”

It starts with a “D.” Maybe. I think.

“...time.”

“Dysphagia,” I say.

“No,” she says, cold and crass. “Dysphagia is difficulty swallowing. Dyspareunia is correct. You have two wrong answers. More errors will result in immediate disqualification.”

Net-dammit. No more mistakes. No more forgiveness. No more redemption. From here on out, it’s perfection or failure. I must resemble the robot society requires. *I will not become my blood,* I remind myself and resume, invigorated and intent.

“Disorder ten: frequent, uncontrollable spells of sleep,” the admin says. “Three—”

“Narcolepsy,” I say.

“Disorder eleven: obsession and emotional arousal surrounding fire. Three—”

“Pyromania.”

“Disorder twelve: emotional dejection and withdrawal, loss of interest in life. Three, two—”

“Major depressive disorder.”

“Disorder thirteen: delusions, hallucinations, and confusion, along with disorganized and/or bizarre speech and/or behavior. Three, two, one—”

Shit. Wait, it’s—

“Schizophrenia,” I shout.

The admin doesn’t react. She barrels on, Charon on the River Styx. “Disorder fourteen: limited food consumption and low body weight in reaction to a fear of weight gain and distorted self-view. Three—”

“Anorexia nervosa.”

“Disorder fifteen: social and communicative deficits, along with rigid and repetitive behavioral patterns, all of which present during early childhood. Three, two—”

“ASD: autism spectrum disorder.”

“Disorder sixteen: inability to acquire adequate sleep, struggles in falling or remaining asleep. Three—”

“Insomnia disorder.”

I’m breathless, panicked, but the admin stampedes forward.

“Disorder seventeen: persistent, chronic, long-term depression,” she says. “Three—”

“Dysthymia,” I say.

“Disorder eighteen: extreme memory gaps as a result of stress or trauma. Three, two, one—”

“Dissociative amnesia.”

“Disorder nineteen: catastrophizing of normal bodily sensations, fear of disease. Three—”

“Hypochondria.”

“Disorder twenty: sudden fear- or anxiety-induced attacks that may include heart palpitations, difficulty breathing, disorientation, blurred vision, and racing thoughts, often mistaken for heart attacks. Three—”

“Panic disorder.”

“Disorder twenty-one: excessive, uncontrollable worry resulting in restlessness, edginess, irritability, muscle tension, sleep disturbance, and focus issues. Three—”

“Generalized anxiety disorder.”

I am a swimmer underwater, choked beneath oceans of stress. A marathon runner stranded in a bleak highlands valley. An astronaut abandoned between stars, within voids. Yet while anguish crushes my anxious mind, the last two diagnoses are gifts...or gibes.

“Disorder twenty-two: recurrent and anxiety-inducing obsessions, impulses, and urges, along with repetitive and excessive behavioral compulsions,” the admin says, or mocks, or taunts.

No, the mockery is in my head, not hers, because this is my

label, my limit, my curse.

"OCD: obsessive-compulsive disorder," I answer.

"Disorder twenty-three: cutting, burning, or otherwise harming oneself to instill a false sense of control, emotional distress manifested in physical form," she says, summoning another demon.

"Self-injury," I whisper. "Self-harm."

She doesn't understand. None of them do. Yes, I do it to myself. No, I'm not in control. Would you blame the bone for the break? The victim for the virus? The skin for the slice? No? Then why accuse me of my pain?

"Exam complete," the admin says.

"Complete?" I ask, wary. The test lasted minutes, not hours, a vicious onslaught of academe. The sea of applicants necessitates haste. Quick in, quick out, quick career birth or death.

Hololight blinks, a cue to exit. I finished the exam, but I answered incorrectly twice, the maximum errors allowed. Is it enough? Am *I* enough? Will I ever be enough? Can any of us compare to our impossible standards, to the monstrous ambitions of our unsettled minds?

Victim One

Jace: Age 16

I found a secret.

A secret I should have ignored and escaped.

I should have left long ago, abandoned Saia to her scandals, reported her crimes to our mothers or the Protectorate or even the bloody fucking Ward. But did I? No. Why? I'm sick. Fatally so. A mental parasite that shrinks my body with fear of growth, of gain, of Net-damn wretched mirrors that distort shadows into monsters. Am I really that large? That loose? That ugly? That old? Or are my eyes only soldiers for my shriveled brain, spies for my mind intent on self-sabotage?

Yes, Saia is a poison, but I am the catalyst, not the antidote. She keeps my secrets, and I enable her sins. If I left, as I hear you shout, I'd be alone. At risk. In danger. Undone. Forced into recovery, a recovery I don't want. This is Carthage, after all, colony of ice, of knives, of hazy, red twilight pierced with

skyscraper horizons.

This is why most remain in toxic relationships longer than our commercial friends like Bill and Sue suggest. We crave belonging, dread loneliness, hate change, shun growth. Even if our stake in the ground is a sword in a neck, we swear loyalty to the comfort of familiarity's throne. Because something better is *not* guaranteed. Things can always get worse. They tell us to "live in the present," so that's what we do. We root ambition to here, to now, to cages we carve from mediocrity and routine.

But enough of my rant. You aren't interested, and I'm exhausted. My parasite drains more energy by the day.

Back to Victim One.

"Saia," I gasp, then vomit to prove myself human.

My sister claps her hands, pleased. "I knew you'd be proud of me, baby brother."

I've seen it before. You have, too. But then, it was a goat, and now, it's an echo, a child of our demiurge, a fellow mortal soul. We're back in the attic, in our loft of forbidden games. Before us lies Arckimy, a boy bled free. In the corner, his severed head squats atop a stool, ribbons of brain splayed in a circle, a squid inside a skull. His foggy eyes glower as his mouth opens with final, unspoken words. Saia shaved his head and plucked his lashes to leave only the flesh, the meat, the truth of our end.

Arckimy's decapitated body leans against the window ledge, frosted with the chill of yet another blizzard. A bow around his spinal stump replaces his head—a fluffy, scarlet ornament, Saia's arrogant boast. His chest gapes open—a human cave, anatomy's cavern—and gloats a blood eagle sculpted with immaculate precision. She's improved since the goat. This is her mark, her signature: decapitated blood-eagle torsos painted with the victim's own blood, a red canvas, a barbaric confession.

If Saia has a signature, I can ignore her no longer. She never killed before—maimed and mutilated, yes, but never murdered. This is her first human victim, her first casualty of madness. *Saia is a serial killer.* There, I admit it. Childhood was evil's labor, and this is her satanic birth. Since she's tasted the abyss, she'll never return. She won't stop. Ever. Unless I make her.

Only I know. Yet if I tattle, she'll tattle, and the worlds will know of my parasitic truth. Fine. Let them. Her demons outshine mine, and this must end before she ends us all.

"He's beautiful," I say to throw her off my scent. But I've never been a liar, and she's always been the best.

"My baby dancer, Sissy doesn't like when you lie to her," Saia coos.

"I'm not lying. Arckimy's your best work."

"Jacccccccccccccccccc..."

"It's true!"

"Let me inside, Jace. Tell me what you're thinking. I know it's scary, but I'm here for you. *Always.*"

That's what I fear. That she's here. *Always.*

"I'm great, Saia," I say. "Just tired. Dinner's soon. I'll head downstairs."

"Eating again?" Saia asks and smirks.

Shit. I'm an idiot. Worst poker face ever. Flashing my cards to the entire fucking room. She knows me inside and out, better than I know myself, and calls my bluff with surgical speed.

"A bit," I squeak. "Don't want Mom and Mama to worry."

Her smirk sours. "No, we wouldn't want that, would we? I'm sure Mama'd let you cry on her shoulder, but Mom'd shun you for your silence thus far. She'd never trust you again."

Threats start, as I knew they would. The first weapons in Saia's psychotic arsenal. The warship armada to squash

victory's hope. She wins before the battle begins.

Usually.

If you tattle, our mommies won't love you anymore.

She's chanted it since birth, since my brain was a sponge, my body her robot. I've always yearned for her approval, for her validation and praise. So Saia took advantage. She soaked the neuroplasticity of my undeveloped mind with her thoughts, with her ideals, and encouraged in me a beast, the beast she became. Her brainwashing was my amniotic fluid, my surrogate womb in this cold, dark world.

I know you wonder why I allowed her sins. Well, my heart didn't, but my brain did. My body, too. The brain and body she built through years of behavioral conditioning—positive reinforcement this, negative reinforcement that—shaping my malleable soul with crude compliments and complaints. She's a monster. Or am I? Is she my Frankenstein, or was I the scientist all along? In the end, is there a difference between curiosity and cruelty, or does all progress warrant sacrifice and slaughter, rituals to understand our terminal state?

It doesn't matter. Morality is ambiguous. Judgment is reversible. What we do today counts more than yesterday, so today, I change.

"I'm not telling our parents," I whisper. "I'm telling the Protectorate."

I expect her to yell, but as always, she thwarts prediction.

"Good, baby brother," Saia says. "*Good*. I've been waiting for you to grow some balls. Also been waiting to drain them."

I gag and close my eyes, center myself. "You won't try to stop me?"

She laughs. "I don't need to, love. They'll never believe a skeleton."

Flesh Quilt

RJ: Age 16

It's two years later.

I'm stronger, but not strong enough.

Kraken, it was you, you son-of-a-fucking-bitch piece of shit. It was all the Von Rei scum. You slaughtered my parents. You brutalized my past. Then you preyed upon my fragile grief, gave me purpose, a sword of violence to decapitate my childhood.

Like a virus, I plot revenge from within. Yet while I do, I play along, dance the steps, sing the song, and scowl on cue. I am the boss, after all. Must uphold appearances and all that bullshit. Ah, there you are, Kyder. Thought you'd return in some form.

Anyway, gang life is peachy, as always. Theft and arson and murder, oh my! It's a tough job, but someone's gotta do it. Wait, no they don't. We just want the cybs.

And the money is divine. The Von Rei have rolled in the good shit since my inauguration. Though today shows the dirty

work, the blood money, the septic tank filled with gold.

“Never trusted you, Heo,” I taunt as I thread my oversized needle with twine. It’s a jagged thing—seven inches long (go on, make a dick joke) with a quarter-inch diameter—a tetanus-riddled rapier of malicious desire. “I gave you three extra chances, but again, your shipments were *late*. Unhappy clients make an unhappy boss. We all need our blastguns and jellies to survive Sidon, and punctuality is of the utmost importance when running businesses like ours. Do you know what punctuality means, or were you born too deep in the underworld for proper education?”

I don’t know why I ask, because Heo can’t answer. None of his associates can. I sewed their mouths shut first, then their eyes, then their assholes. Ran out of twine, though. Pain to restring, but restring we must.

“Punctuality means promptness, being on time, adhering to a previously agreed-upon schedule,” I say. “And we agreed upon a schedule, did we not? A schedule you’ve shunned for a disrespectful length of time. I don’t tolerate disrespect, Heo.”

Kraken would tease my vocab, but Kraken isn’t here. Since my jelly-induced realization, I’ve eased us apart bit by bit, slowly, surely, a gradual peeling of a scab returned to wound. And once free, this gash will bleed—oh, it will fucking *bleed*—till all Von Rei and Sidon herself tremble with the wrath of a daughter’s stolen youth.

But my internal monologue is just that—*internal*. For now. So I wait. And plan. And scheme. And ache for the day when thoughts become truths, when ideas become inevitable, when fantasies become facts, when rumors become reality, when nightmares become night monsters, when secrets become sentient. Then—when personal demons become literal demons,

when ghosts seek revenge, when my monsters rest in war—only then can I rest in peace.

As I finish sewing Heo and his friends together, a flesh quilt of my silenced nemeses, a shriek interrupts villainy's rise. A shriek in the form of a man. I cleared the stardocks. No one else is supposed to be here—just me and my regrets. Yet there is a shriek, and a man, and a problem to solve with blood.

I peer across the stardocks, at the skyscrapers outlined neon, at the multilayered trellis of this cramped, humid cybercity. We live in the night, for the day blinds with brightness, our maternal star cluster a cruel, harsh, strident parent—indifferent and insouciant. It's a tough place to live, a tougher place to grow. Sidonese kids are coddled with knives, nourished with riots, encouraged with brawls. I am my roots, as are we all.

The shriek continues. The man eludes. I know he's here. His shadow borders the marina. Headlights flash from passing hovercars and hoverbikes (yes, the future is lazy with names), and tentacled mechs usher trash into incinerators. Traffic provides cover—sleek starships, spitfire shuttles, and ruby pods—but it also obstructs clarity. Within all tech pulses the invisible Net, the hololight deity to whom we sell our souls.

My flesh quilt whimpers as the body blanket twitches with death's embrace. Pity. Corpses reek. I'd hoped to sleep in the heated sack, but I'll need to find other souls to bunk with. Perhaps live ones.

"*You* did this?" The shadow appears. The man, too, minus the shriek. "But you're just a little girl."

Rage flares within me. "And you're just a little boy."

Little and lost. He doesn't belong here—that much I can see. Maybe a year older than me, he's lanky and soft, too soft for the streets, with gray-blue eyes and frizzy strawberry-blond hair.

Worse, he's curious. Approachable. Pale and pockmarked with a soothing voice and aura. No, he doesn't belong here at all.

"Leave," I say. *Leave?* Since when do I wait? I usually shoot first, bury bodies later. "Tourists shouldn't wander this far from the museums."

"I'm not a tourist," he says, tentative and afraid. "I'm an immigrant."

"From where?"

"Babylon."

That explains his softness. Babylon is a transcendent utopia. Citizens spend their entire lives in the Net. They can be whatever they want—virtually, of course. It's a low-maintenance, high-yield lifestyle. Mother Babylon realizes dreams while her children provide stability. No rebellions in heaven. No revolutions, either. It's safe, steady, and secure—a boring and stagnant lackey of a colony. Their compliance makes Babylon the Protectorate's favorite, the humblebrag they boast at board meetings. Sidon is the emancipated bastard.

"Got bored of paradise?" I ask.

He pauses, rattles air between his teeth. "Something like that. No progress in paradise."

"So you came to *Sidon*? We're as backward as the Ward. Should've gone to Jericho. Or Damascus. Or some other fairy-tale world."

"I don't want a fairy tale. I want an escape. My parents... they...well, let's just say they took advantage of Babylon's 'endless possibilities.'"

"They were abusive," I say, blunt. No time for euphemisms in dystopia.

The man—*boy*—nods. "The Protectorate said it'd be months before a *potential* conviction. I had evidence. Proof. Months

of data. But they refuse to believe that their beloved world is corrupt at its core.”

“So you ran.”

“And never looked back. Sidon was the only colony that could give me a visa on such short notice, so here I am.”

“There’s a reason for our promiscuity—no one wants to live here.”

“I didn’t want to suffer any longer.” He pauses again, cautious, or scared. “Dimo.”

“Sorry?” I ask.

“That’s my name.”

I shouldn’t connect. I shouldn’t build bridges I’ll need to burn. And yet—

“RJ,” I say.

“RJ?” Dimo pales, then glances again at my flesh quilt gone cold. They’re all dead now, patches of corpses and cadavers sewn strong. “I’ve heard of you.”

“Already? I’m honored.”

“You’re the Von Rei boss.”

“Among other things.”

“Where’s your bodyguard?”

“Kraken?” I scoff. “He’s not my bodyguard; I’m his.”

“I should leave,” Dimo says.

“I should kill you,” I say.

He pisses himself, proving my point. Can’t leave loose ends—especially when loose ends leak. Secrets spill. Bribes bleed. Leverage is a whore that switches sides sans dignity. He’s seen my crimes, my body blanket, my delinquent declaration. Either he goes, or I go, and I’m not done yet. Kraken lives. Von Rei thrive. Sidon sleeps sound, whereas she should quake with terror.

"I'll make it quick," I say. "You won't feel a thing. Three jellies on your neck, then you'll dream forever."

"Are you fucking serious?" Dimo asks. "You'd kill a stranger... just like that? What the hell is wrong with you?"

I glare at him, a villain-red scythe. "Sidon. Sidon is what's wrong with me, with the Protectorate, with this whole Net-damn galaxy. You chose the wrong planet, love. Should've never left Babylon. Abusive or not, your parents are saints compared to our sinners."

"They assaulted me, RJ. Sexually, physically, verbally."

"That's a rite of passage here. At least it was virtual for you. Be glad you got parents at all. Mine died when I was eight."

Dimo's eyes widen, and he raises his scrawny arms in surrender. "Sidon is *so* fucked up."

"Well, you won't have to deal much longer."

He panics. "No. Please. Listen to me. I'll do whatever you want. Go wherever you go. Just give me a shot. I don't want to die before I can live."

I shake my head—the head I shave for armor, the face I sharpen for a shield. "I spare your life, and I look weak. You know what they do to weak little girls around here?" Dimo retreats, so I attack. "They *destroy* them, Dimo. They dress them like dolls, paint them like prostitutes, ravage every hole, then make them ask for more. Patrons force their prey to beg on their knees, mouths full of cum, cunts full of gore."

"I've seen children pleasure crones for free, slaves to the wicked witches of industry. I've heard stories that could murder. Tales that could kill. Fantasies marred by underage scars. Do you want that for me, Dimo? Do you want me used and abused, ravaged and ruined? Do you want me to become just another weak little girl?"

Dimo gapes. Pisses himself again. Might've shit himself, too. Then he recovers—somewhat—and rears a beast I hadn't seen.

"A weak little girl?" he asks. "No, RJ. You're not weak, and you're no little girl. You're a *killer*. A murderer. A cold-blooded villain." He motions at the flesh quilt, at the corpse blanket of Heo et al. "You use youth to excuse atrocity, but we all grow up, then we all fall down."

Hot damn. Boy's got balls, even if they're hiding. No one speaks to me that way. Especially not a target one blink from oblivion.

"Point taken," I say. "And ignored."

I dig in my pocket for jellies, but Dimo leaps across the void and stays my hand with his own. I prickle, wary of skin, of contact, of lingering humanity. There's an energy about him—creation's heartbeat, or galaxy's elegy. Whatever it is, it's universal, dangerous, a magnetic beacon that draws victims to its source.

I must kill him.

But...

If he has this effect on me, this persuasive integrity, then he'll also have this effect on others. Could come in handy. That's what I'll say. That's how I'll spin desire. I'll spare his life for publicity: Even enemies want to join the Von Rei. Treat us well, and we'll treat you well, too. Follow us. Trust us. Believe in us, and we'll believe in you.

Gah, it's nauseating. But necessary. Dimo is a foreign face we locals can't replicate. He exudes authenticity and would imbue our interactions with elevated prestige, a prestige we Sidonese could never hope to impress. He's business; we're blades. Together, we could move worlds. Or burn them.

"I can protect you," I say. "But you won't like the price."

“I’m yours, RJ,” Dimo whispers, desperate, Faustian. “Make me Von Rei.”

Make me your boss.

I pledged Kraken those words five years ago. He chose me for my youth, for my brilliance, for my class—now evaporated in a bloody mist—to become the unpredictable boss of a criminal empire. Have I done the same? Chosen Dimo for his costume to conceal our rancid decay? Yes. Yes, I have.

We all become monsters at the edge of the breach (sorry, I’m a marketing whore). We all become demons that secret away desire. We all become our enemies in the end—intimate with hate, not love—and wonder why time carves wounds instead of wisdom.

Winged Words

Kaj: Age 16

Some books exit your brain with wings.
*Some books exit your brain in a rickety chariot—missing
 a wheel, leaking gasoline, and billowing smoke—that stops
 every mile for snacks.*

I wrote that three years ago, and every day since, I permutate
 its poetry.

Some stories spoil your soul with hope.

Some words grow fangs that sink ships with their truth.

*Some tales pierce the hearts of armies and swivel history on an
 axis.*

I'm improving. Slowly. Surely. Practicing till muscle
 memory—or *mental* memory—harnesses the reins of my errant,
 wandering spirit. The process is masochistic—a self-mutilating
 scalpel into the darkest depths of one's psyche—but the finished
 product, if the product finishes, is worth any prior suffering.

But what is the point, Kaj? What are you trying to prove? What

story do you want to tell?

That's what Pa always asks. He fears my lack of career direction. But Dad—bless his golden soul—sates him with vague platitudes. "The boy's a dreamer, so let him dream."

I have a backup plan. Become a doctor. Or nurse. Most likely nurse. I have neither the drive nor smarts to enter the brutal, gladiatorial rings of holosurgery and holopsychology. Nursing is good, though. I like to help people. Save people. Those who aren't punching me, at least.

"Kaj, always nice to find you here," my literature teacher says as he enters the classroom, my hideout, my getaway. "Studying over lunch?"

Mr. Randall make-believes normalcy, pretends bullies plague everyone when they only plague me. He reported the violence to Mount Damascus's school administration, but—surprise, surprise—they've done nothing. The bullies are connected, so even here, in this fairy-tale Avalon, prejudice reigns supreme.

"Yes, sir," I say. "Well, I'm writing, not studying."

"Mind if I read?" he asks, always supportive and encouraging, even if it's shit.

"Sure," I say, nervous.

I shouldn't worry. Mr. Randall is a tall calm presence with dark hair and kind brown eyes. Friendly and pleasant, approachable and welcoming. But old habits die hard. With bullies, without friends, my swords are always *en garde*, my shields ready to block the blows that inevitably fall from the heavens.

"This one. I like this one best." He points at this line: *Some stories spoil your soul with hope*. "But you don't agree."

He reads my mind with elementary ease. It embarrasses me, yet heartens me, to be seen. For us invisible ones, a cursory

glance is enough to thaw our walls and melt our shelters.

"It's too short," I say. "Too simple."

"Short doesn't equal simple," Mr. Randall says. "The most complex concepts derive from single words. *God. Human. Right. Wrong.* And the most ignorant ideals require tomes of dubious explanation. Religious texts, for instance. Which do you prefer, though?"

"This one," I say. I point to: *Some tales pierce the hearts of armies and swivel history on an axis.*

The teacher nods. "It's good."

"But not great."

"It could be. There's potential. Can you simplify? Which words are unnecessary?"

I reread and scrutinize the sentence. "I guess 'the hearts of armies' sounds clumsy."

"And which words make it clumsy?"

"Sorry, sir, I don't know."

"Never apologize for learning," he says. "For me, 'the' and 'of' feel unnecessary. Many times, little words are superfluous."

"But 'some tales pierce hearts armies' doesn't make sense," I say, confused.

Mr. Randall chuckles. "No, but 'some tales pierce armies' hearts' does. Switching word order works like a charm. You could also use 'enemies' hearts' for a broader message."

He lifts the veil, and understanding invades. Condense, clarify, carve beauty from raw marble. I write again and change the end.

Some tales pierce enemies' hearts and swivel history's axis.

"Perfect," the teacher exclaims, and I bask in his enthusiasm. "That's my new favorite. And I love your equation of history to a globe, like time is as tangible as space."

"I didn't realize that," I admit.

"Yes, you did," he says and winks. "When your subconscious speaks, you listen."

"Thank you, Mr. Randall."

"Don't thank me, Kaj. You did all the work. I only polished the last one percent." He hesitates, then presses forward, tentative but concerned. "Writing's the only thing that helps, isn't it? The only thing that organizes your mind? That quiets the world?"

I nod, unwilling to speak, humiliated he knows of my exiled social status.

But he switches directions, like he switched words, and surprises me with an offer. "Would you like a tutor?"

"I...what...wait, who?" I stutter. "I can't pay, sir."

Mr. Randall smiles. "It costs nothing. This is through the school. You'd enroll in my independent study, and I'd privately teach you during that period. No distractions."

No bullies. That's what he means. He sees me when no one else does, and he just gifted me freedom and a future. This is my break. My key. My door. *Finally.*

"Yes," I whisper. "Yes, *please.*" Tears jewel my eyes, and I let them. He should know what this means to me. Life's lonely when you've no one to share it with, when no secrets pass between lips, beneath fingers.

"Wonderful," Mr. Randall says and squeezes my shoulder. "We start tomorrow. Bring your worst work, and we'll make it your best."

Karmic Welcome

Mazha: 1 Day Post-Launch

We're here.
 Outside the galaxy. On the edge of the unknown.
 In a nebula. In deep space. In a rogue stellar
 nursery saturated with Diogen. *Icarus* soared to familiarity's
 border and stabbed the uncharted with inquisition's razor.
 We're here to harvest, to power the Ward's navy. That's what
 they say, anyway.

I'd care more if I weren't caught in a spiral. As it is, I sink with
 obsessions, drown beneath compulsions, suffocate on routine
 and repetition and redundancy.

2, 4, 8, 16...

Twitch, blink, left ear, right...

I focus on the nebula's beauty, on her maternal grace and
 power, while curses click through my mind.

2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128...

Twitch, blink, left ear, right, left, right...

When it hurts is when we grow.

Shut up, Mother. When it hurts is when we lose. A muscle can only suffer so much stress till it snaps; a mind can only survive so much struggle till it cracks. There's no meaning in madness, no control in chaos, no higher purpose or power in this purgatorial life. Mother Earth is a myth, as are all human-divined deities.

2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256, 512, 1024...

Twitch, blink, left ear, right, left, right, twitch, twitch, blink, blink, left, right, left...

Focus, Mazha. Focus on the nebula, on the now.

But if there is a god, a goddess, an omnipotent pantheon, I imagine this their magnum opus, the masterpiece they'd paint in existential farewell. The nebula is breathtaking, stunning, a thief of mankind's utopic dreams, of the brightest visions conjured in the darkest times, of hope, of peace, of one-word impossibilities. I can't look away, yet it burns to see. Not a physical burn, but an emotional wrench. A metaphysical ache. A burgeoning of questions demanded by our ancestors and descendants.

Who are we?

And why?

That's the nursery's echo, the rogue infant's cry in the dead of night. She hides behind rainbow arteries and fluorescent veins, amid watercolor clouds and sequined stars, but the echo, the cry, the anguish is there.

2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128...

Twitch, blink, left ear, right, left, right...

Red rain, orange oceans, yellow yells, green glares, blue brilliance, indigo illustration, and violet violence alliterate the naked sky. And around the sky? Outside the galaxy? In deep

space? In the abyss? In the vacuum? In the void? In limbo lies ink, the blackest black, the darkest dark, a wasteland of orphan, veteran nightmares. I see monsters in the mirror.

2, 4, 8, 16...

Twitch, blink, left ear, right...

And the monsters see me.

There's a scream. It's not mine. I've no reason anymore. The nebula calms me with her contrast—demons circling a stubborn angel, a steady core, a candle at a funeral, a flare lost at sea. But there is a scream. Now a second. Then another. And a last before it curtains.

Hesitant, I leave the Rec Room's Observatory and update the Bridge via neurophone.

"Proceed with caution, Doctor," Captain Heid's technologized voice replies. "I will send medical and security teams to your location."

I cut the call and turn one corner, then another, meandering through Daedalus's maze. I should feel fear. I don't. And I don't know why. Perhaps the excuse to leave inner pain for outer, to escape external, soothes my ragged soul. Or perhaps I am too broken to fear, beaten into numbness by a laundry list of regrets. It's no matter. I am a doctor, and I hear a patient—*heard* one. As I navigate the ship's bowels, this duty erases all other doubts.

Two more corridors, and I see him. Or rather, I see his remains. A smudge on reality. A smear. A stain. A muddy, bloody blemish against the bulkhead's blasé metal. I recognize him. Ensign Gaard, from Hydroponics. White hair, eyes, and skin, a gorgeous lie, prescribed holomeds in lieu of confession. He is—*was*—a plagiarist, an expert bullshitter, a fabulist supreme. Yet these compulsive lies tortured him with immense

anxiety—crippled him, some might say. His death certainly says.

It's gruesome. And laudable. With reluctance, I admit I'm impressed. An instant in deep space, and his death is striking as the nebula, a macabre reflection of celestial seraphim, a newborn clone of the magnetic void. Beauty is beauty, in both sacrifice and sin.

Gaard is caught, a fly in a web. But instead of silk, he is the web, spun by his vascular spider, by arteries and veins turned shackles and noose. Blood vessels stretch within him to without, stick to bulkheads and suspend him midair, a scarecrow that blocks the hall with a fleshy wall. Capillaries wriggle through his pores like seaweed underwater, but he's unable to drown, unfit to soar, and so he freezes and stalls incomplete, seized between judgment and justice, ensnared in stigma and crucified by ghosts.

"Lovely," says a husky voice behind me.

I jump. So does my fear. Numbness melts, and horror floods on realization's heels.

"Holy shit," I say. "Holy *fucking* shit."

RJ eyes me, cautious, as I hyperventilate. I expect her to say something cold like, "If you're gonna faint, please do so over there," or something crude like, "Vomit elsewhere—the grown-ups are working," but instead, she says, "Easy, kid. I've got you."

And that only escalates my terror.

I fall. She catches me. Together, we sink. She digs in her black scrubs, retrieves a mask, and forces it over my nose. I breathe in relief as my heart slows from stampede to march.

"Okay?" RJ asks.

I nod. She removes and re-pockets the mask.

"You know him?" she asks.

“Not well,” I say, “but yes. He was an ensign in Hydroponics. I prescribed him holomeds for anxiety.” I pause. “And sorry about...this,” I add, embarrassed.

RJ quirks a dark eyebrow. “For what?”

“For...you know...almost fainting.”

“Nothing to apologize for. I envy you.”

“Why?”

Her doors slam shut, and she severs the connection. I know why, though (I am a holopsych, after all). RJ doesn’t envy me; she envies my reaction. She wants to feel, but can’t. Her scars run deep, perhaps deeper than my own.

“I’ll take it from here,” RJ says. She stands, pulls me up, and ushers me away.

“I can help,” I say, then cringe. I sound so needy, so desperate, so young and undone.

“Unnecessary. The medical team will arrive in a minute, with the security team right after.” RJ dons her gloves and approaches Gaard. Careful to avoid the blood pooled beneath his elevated feet, she scans his circulatory system, the web woven from within. “Go, Mazha. *Now.*”

Our moment of connection, of commiseration, evaporates, and she is once more the sword as I reclaim my shield.

Forensic Prayer

Kaj: 1 Day Post-Launch

“Nothing adds up,” Razz says. “Berg and I scoured the holocams, but the entire deck’s footage is blank till Mazha found him.”

“What about the rest of the ship? Was *Icarus* dark at time of death?” Captain Heid asks from across the conference table. The Senior Crew huddles in the Strat Room, smothering terror with debate.

“No, Captain,” Mads and Dag respond. They, Razz, and Berg are the four lead Tactical Officers—he and his identical brothers were the security team on-site. “*Icarus* was online the whole time,” Dag adds.

“What about forensics?” Heid asks. “Did the autopsy reveal a cause, a lead?”

“No,” RJ says. “It told us what we already knew. Gaard was ripped apart from the inside out.”

The others gasp, but RJ remains stoic. She and I were the first

responders—after Mazha, that is. As the medical team, we did the dirty work, scrubbing the blood, testing the viscera, training our gag reflexes into obscurity. RJ is well acquainted with the grotesque—Sidon was her surrogate, the cruelest colony in the Protectorate—so I’m used to her callous, but not quiet, and she’s been quiet since she saw Gaard. No, since she saw *Mazha*.

“Like a parasite?” Commander Sadhir asks, brown eyes skeptical.

RJ shrugs. “Your guess is as good as mine. I’ve seen nothing like it before. We found no external DNA, no signs of an attacker. Forensically, Gaard did this to himself.”

“That’s absurd,” Lieutenant Dunavard, the lead Science Officer, says. “Something tore him apart.”

“Or he tore himself apart,” RJ says.

“That makes no sense,” Lieutenant Mik’valo, the pilot, says. “There’s no way he could have done that to himself.”

“Then you lack imagination,” RJ says.

Mik’valo opens his mouth to retort, but the captain raises her hand, stopping him and challenging RJ.

“Okay, Doctor,” Heid says, “enlighten us. How could Gaard mutilate himself like that?”

“A hololight burst,” RJ says without hesitation. “A cyber-scanned bomb. There are myriad ways to replicate DNA, to weaponize organs.”

“Did you find any indications of a burst or bomb?”

“No. These methods leave nothing behind—no traces, no evidence.”

“Convenient,” Captain Heid says, suspicious. “And how do you know so much about untraceable weapons?”

RJ glowers. “Because it’s my job, Captain, like Diogen is yours. That’s why we’re here, right? For Diogen? Nothing

else? Nothing more?"

Net Almighty, RJ makes my job difficult. I interject before Heid banishes her to the Brig. "We apologize, Captain," I say as RJ shoots me a contradictory look. "Gaard's death was... unexpected. At this time, we can form no conclusions, but our best guesses are disease or homicide."

"Murder?" Lieutenant Javik from Operations asks. The others bristle at the implied threat, then glance between each other, distrustful.

"Possible," I say, "but improbable. It was most likely an infection or illness."

"What illness does *that*?" Lieutenant Idony from Communications taps her tablet and summons the autopsy report. Gaard's holo-likeness revolves above the glass, strung between bulkheads, a bloodless slab of meat.

Most shirk from the image, but not RJ, and not Lieutenant Glar. The Chief Engineer studies the holo as if the body were a machine while Ensign Jace, his Executive Assistant, pales beside him. I see how Glar treats Jace, yet I'm powerless to stop it. *Do the job, bank the cybs, and get out.* That's what I told RJ a week prelaunch. But it's never that easy, is it? A job is never just a job. Money is never clean. Escape is never easy. Life is never complete.

"It's not natural," Glar says. "It's intentional. Designed. A message. A metaphor. Too much meaning to be an accident."

"Should we open a murder investigation?" Berg asks.

"No," Captain Heid says, too soon, too fast. She knows more than she claims, but this is the Ward, not the Protectorate—the demon, not the angel—so we allow her inaction, her withdrawal from morality, and focus only on the job, the money, the escape, the end. "Gaard's death was a tragedy, but it was *one* tragedy,

and one tragedy does not warrant an investigation. Resume the mission. Adhere to harvest protocol for Diogen, and proceed as planned.”

Proceed as planned. Nothing to see here. No one to question. None to blame.

“This was *your* idea,” RJ hisses in my ear.

I know. This was my idea, my mistake, my desperate quest for adventure at the cost of corruption.

She and the other Senior Crew leave the Strat Room as droids. *Yes, Captain. Whatever you say, Captain. You know best, Captain.* But I shouldn’t judge. I’ve always been weak, a coward, comfortable in obedience. If you don’t punch me, I’ll do anything you want. I can thank bullies for that—no, I can thank myself. Bullies exploited a preexisting condition, a frailty inherited from my dads’ careful ways.

I trail the crew at a distance, steady my heart, secure my head. An old poem returns to me and anchors my sanity.

Some books exit your brain with wings.

Some stories spoil your soul with hope.

Some words sink ships with fanged truth.

Some tales pierce enemies’ hearts and swivel history’s globe.

Some myths blaze downpours of fury.

Some rumors tighten ignorance’s rope.

Some legends trade wisdom for youth.

Some sagas rip open worlds and string time in kaleidoscope.

The meter is still off, though the arrhythmic cadence pauses the reader, forces consideration, and the last line strikes true. It’s mutated over the years, thanks to Mr. Randall’s devotion, a devotion and dedication I never felt I deserved. Yet it was there, and he was there, and that door became a room, and that room became my home. A voice in the dark becomes the light in a

life—he was there when I needed him, so I’m now there when others need me.

“Sorry,” Jace murmurs, further evidence of my providence.

The small man scampers by, down the corridor, toward his boss’s glaring form.

“What the hell were you doing?” Glar demands.

“Bathroom, sir,” Jace says, head down, tail tucked between his legs—and oh my stars, what legs he has.

Stop it, Kaj. Gaard died. He might have been *murdered*. This is no time to indulge.

But I don’t listen to myself. You don’t, either.

“You just went,” Glar says.

“I had coffee,” Jace says, though his hazel hollows object.

“Don’t lie. You’re always in the bathroom, and you hardly drink or eat.”

Because the poor thing has massive anxiety from serving a fucking piece of shit.

“He was with me,” I interrupt, wiping rage from my voice. “My neurophone glitched, and I asked Jace to help. Sorry I kept him from you—it was my fault.”

“Then why’d he claim coffee?” Glar asks, doubtful.

I pause, panic, but—

“Jace was covering for Kaj,” RJ says, appearing around a corner. “My nurse fucked up his neurophone doing some dumb-ass shit, and Kaj knew if I found out, I’d move him to the graveyard shift.”

Thank you to infinity, RJ.

“What’d he do?” Glar asks.

“Masturbated on the clock,” RJ says. “Wet tech, you know the drill.”

Fuck you to infinity, RJ.

“I see,” the Chief Engineer says. Finally, he relents, though

he offers Jace no apology. "Come, Ensign. We're behind on Diogen calibrations."

They leave, RJ joins me, and we wander down the corridor.

"You're an asshole," I say. "But thanks."

"Don't mention it," RJ says, on edge. She's used to conflict, not credit, so she switches to offense. "Your lies suck. Root them in truth, and they'll come easy, like you."

"As I said, asshole."

"What? You strike me as the type to wank violently to holoporn."

"I won't gratify your insults."

"So it's true." She hesitates a beat, then switches targets. "You think there's a killer on this ship?"

I look at her, pointed. "I'm sure there are several."

She laughs. It's horrifying. "That ain't my style, sweetheart. If I went through the effort of hanging someone with their own circulatory system, I'd want recognition, Net-dammit. Recognition, praise, and fear. All work and no play, and all that bullshit."

"You're fucked up, RJ."

"Thanks for noticing. Back to Gaard—what do you think? Who killed him? Or what?"

"Honestly, I just want to—"

"—do the job, bank the cybs, and get out," RJ interrupts with an eye-roll. "Yeah, you're repetitive. And predictable. But if there's a shipwide massacre, no job, no cybs, no happily-ever-after. As fun as it is to autopsy a corpse, it's not on my daily to-do list, you know? If this happens again, and the captain brushes it under the rug...well, shit deepens."

"Shit deepens?" I ask, longing for humor, for distraction. "Is that Sidonese slang?"

But nothing gets over or under her head. She knows I'm afraid. She knows I avoid the inevitable. And she lets me. A small mercy of her microscopic compassion. Though it comes with a stab. "You're such a pussy, Kaj. Fine, I'll pretend everything is great, that murder is common, that I'm back in the slums with the jellies and flesh quilts."

"Did you say 'flesh quilts'?"

"Well, you're the one who yodels when he wanks."

"What the hell?"

"We need to grow the story, make it believable. Can't have Glar discover our little lie, can we? However could you pound Jace over a bulkhead then?"

I run a hand over my face. "You're impossible."

"And you're soft," RJ says. "I won't always be here to watch your back, buddy."

"Yes, you will. You're too stubborn to die."

Storms cloud her red gaze. "If only."

Time's Twins

Jace: 1 Day Post-Launch

Kaj is nice to me.
 I don't deserve nice.
But you do, Jace. You were always so nice to Sissy, even when no one else was.

So many mistakes. Repeated ad infinitum. And here, now, time clones itself a twin.

Gaard didn't die naturally. The ensign was murdered—by someone or something. I know the marks, the signatures of this craft. He's a web instead of an eagle, but bloody just the same. Like Saia. Like Carthage. Like all I've tried to leave behind. But the past is clingy, a needy spouse, intent on reunion or destruction, in marriage or divorce of destiny's vow.

But Kaj is nice to me.

So was I, baby brother.

Who fucking cares? Everyone abandons me, exacerbates my oldest fears and darkest desires. Kaj would do the same, if I

let him in. I'm discarded as trash, filled up, thrown out, when people pledge platitudes then trade in, trade up.

No one gives a shit about me. No one ever has. It's the same old song, a broken cycle, a ramshackle wheel of greet, meet, and go. They tempt me with hope's succubus, use me when they need me, then leave me when I need them. I've become an island, not a man—a tree, not a forest—in a preemptive defense of pity, of dignity, of sanity, of mundanity. Let me live alone, then let me die in peace. Risk yields ruin, not reward.

Peachy today. Want Sissy make you feel better?

Fucking Net, this must *stop*. She's gone. Dead. A desiccated corpse.

I live on in you, Jace. Forever.

My body itches like always, an oversized coat sagging on a skeleton. If only I were rock, stone instead of soft, metal instead of man. But I'm not. I'm Executive Assistant to the Galaxy's Biggest Dick. As I follow Glar to the Engine Room, I allow myself a moment of self-pity, an indulgent mope, before the doors open. Then duty manacles my wrists to consoles and tethers my mind to this cursed, doomed mission.

"I want those calibrations complete within the hour," Glar barks. "Diogen is a finicky bitch, and if the harvest fails, it won't be our fault. Understand?"

In other words: *If you fuck up, I will fuck you up*. Crass without class, that's the Ward for you. But their cover story wanes, weakens, invalidates itself. The longer we're here—at the rim of reason and the edge of deep space—Diogen whispers bona fides, tattles through the nebula, while the Ward denies rumors, bandages secrets with soggy justification.

Eventually, though, truth always bleeds through.

Necrotic Copycat

RJ: 1 Day Post-Launch

“*Icarus*, this is the captain speaking,” Heid booms over the intercom. “Our Diogen harvest has successfully begun, due to the crew’s productive efforts. Further updates to come later. Thanks for your patience. Captain out.”

The Infirmary buzzes after her message. *What does this mean? How long will we stay? When can we go home?* Weak, all of them. Little holds meaning, and endings are never guaranteed—especially not happy endings.

“You look cynical.” Kaj joins me on a corner hospital bed. Our black scrubs against white sheets cast us as shadows. I fit the role; Kaj does not.

“I’m always cynical,” I say.

“I know,” he says. “My dads would call you a hikikomori.”

“Which means?”

“An antisocial misanthrope, a hermit, a recluse.”

“You have a thesaurus fetish or something?”

Kaj runs a hand through his shiny black hair. “Bloody hell, never fucking mind. I only want to make sure you’re okay.”

“Okay?” I scoff. “People always ask if I’m okay, but if the answer’s no, guess what happens? They bail. Everyone loves to make gestures, but Net forbid they help. And when they ask, they crack your lid, loosen your armor, drop your shield. This vulnerability *hurts*. It fucking *kills*. But people don’t care. They rub salt on wounds, wring muscles still raw, and incapacitate you for their own selfish infatuation with mock-kindness, because we’re supposed to be *kind*, to *care*, to be good *fucking* people, when we’re really just hell-driven assholes.”

“So...I’ll take that rant as a no,” Kaj says. “Some of us aren’t assholes. I’m here if you want to talk—*talk*, not beat the shit out of me. Stop pushing people away.”

“That’s the point. People are weapons.”

“I’m not.”

“Not yet.”

“Mazha isn’t.”

“Fuck you.”

Kaj sighs. “Tone yourself down.”

“Build yourself up,” I say. “I won’t lower myself to your level.”

“Oh, RJ, you’re the lowest of us all.”

The Infirmary alarm blares, interrupting my comeback. “Turn that fucking thing off,” I snap at a nurse, and he cowers, then obeys. Kaj gives me a you-should-be-nice-to-the-staff glance, and I return a keep-your-dick-to-yourself glare.

The sliding doors open, and a stretcher zooms through with a *déjà vu* curse. *Fuck*. Not again. I knew Heid was full of shit. One tragedy, my ass. *Proceed as planned*. Shut your eyes, cover your ears, and do our dirty work for us. Two deaths in a day is no coincidence.

“Shit,” Kaj swears, and we hurry toward the doors.

“What happened?” I ask as I lock the stretcher into a docking station. Monitors stream diagnostic lists—symptoms, vitals, medical history, and cause of death. The last one blinks, blank, as her heart beats its last. Shocked she survived this long. I mistook her for the corpse she’s become.

Without the monitors, I wouldn’t know her name. She’s unrecognizable—a pulpy, meaty mass. But there it is, her name, her epitaph, flashing across the screen in dirgeful lament. *Ensign Esche, Flight Deck, twenty-two years old.* She’s timeless now. Eternal. Immortal. And with her loss, grief spikes my brainwashed core.

She was a *baby*. Barely alive. Hardly human. Reduced to a monster, the demon inside. She went same as Gaard, noosed and shackled with her own arteries and veins. Pale skin puckers around the vascular web, blood vessels now snakes, now lifeless worms, as her slender body twitches and stiffens with rigor mortis. She dances her last, then lies still. Her blue eyes fog, and her golden hair dims till she is a sun-faded doll, a star-bleached tapestry.

“Where did you find her?” Kaj rasps beside me.

“Outside th-the Mess-ss Hall,” a nurse stammers. “She was...”

Strung between bulkheads. A blood-drained corpse. The pattern repeats.

“I saw her right before,” the nurse continues, steadier. “Esche wasn’t making sense. She kept rambling about her best friend, the one who died before the mission.” That’s part of the symptom list—*delusions, fatigue, fever*. “Then she wandered away, and...and...and...”

Kaj rests a hand on her arm. “It’s okay.”

It’s not. “Any recordings of the...attack?” I ask, for lack of a

better word.

The nurse shakes her head. "Something jammed the deck's holocams, but only that deck, and only during the...attack." She copies my word, and repetition paints reality.

"Clear the Infirmary," I say. "Essential staff only."

The other nurses file out till only Kaj, Mazha, and I remain.

"You, too," I tell Mazha. She found Gaard, Victim One, and I'll save her from further trauma.

Soft, RJ. So fucking soft.

Well, this isn't Sidon, so I can afford a soft moment. *One* soft moment.

But Mazha says, "I'll stay," and wastes my chivalry on pride.

"Fine, but don't faint on the corpse," I say, all softness gone. I tap a wall console and open a channel. "Bridge, this is the Infirmary. Private report for Captain Heid."

Can't cause a panic. Can't tell the truth.

"Heid here," the captain responds over the intercom. "What is it, RJ?"

"We have another one, Captain," I say. "Esche, a Flight Deck ensign. Same symptoms as Gaard. Same...signature."

The room tenses at "signature." Because it *is* a signature, same as a serial killer. These deaths look less like disease and more like murder by the hour.

"Understood," Captain Heid says. "How many know?"

The nerve of the fucking cunt—

"Only the Infirmary staff, Captain," I say.

"Good," Heid says. "Keep this quiet. Focus on Diogen. This mission will not survive scrutiny, and the crew isn't as...seasoned as you."

"With all due respect—"

"Enough, RJ. Heid out."

I seethe. I never should have come, but I didn't have a choice. We never do, not in life, nor in death.

"Presumably, Heid wants to avoid mental breakdowns among the crew," Mazha offers.

"No shit, Sherlock," I say.

I tap a code into a monitor and shove the stretcher through the docking station to the incinerator. In seconds, Esche is ash. Gone. Erased. Deleted. Wiped from existence light-years from home. No coffin. No funeral. No condolences. No sorry-for-your-loss receiving line.

"Don't do anything stupid, RJ," Kaj cautions. Mazha looks between us, the third wheel of our hearse.

"Don't worry," I say, fuming. "I'll play along like a good little girl."

But not a weak little girl. Never weak. Nevermore.

Aerial Escape

Kaj: 5 Days Post-Launch

The mission started with a curse, but since then, it's been routine.

I'm good at keeping quiet, keeping my head down, keeping shut. Bullies taught me surrender; my fathers taught me submission. Yes, Gaard and Esche were shocks, but they were strangers, cold as that sounds. I'll mourn them later, safe in Protectorate space, when the Ward is a distant memory, a shriveled nightmare, an oh-shit-remember-that-craziness campfire tale.

So for now, till "shit deepens," per RJ's phrase, it's time for some calm, for some fun, for a much-needed break—a temporary triumph, as the masters often say.

I seek out Jace in the Rec Room. I shouldn't, but I do. RJ warns me against connecting here—hell, I warn myself, too—but there's something about this boy I can't shake. Something dark. Something bright. Like a fresh bruise. Tender yet firm.

The Observatory arcs in front, a graceful titan, a window to the gods. Through glass, the nebula sparkles in splashy prisms while the void suffocates the nursery with futile bonds. Baby stars shine, stubborn in the core, twinkling in amniotic ether amid the rogue stellar womb.

It's captivating. Dazzling. Yet it doesn't hold my gaze. What does is a man—*only* a man—a hodgepodge of skin, bone, muscle, and sinew. Jace is in the park, the false greenery before the view, suspended midair, in aerial escape. He's angry. And afraid. A winged book. A spoiled story. A fanged truth. A pierced heart. But why? Why this fury, this fear, this frown, this facade? *What are you hiding, Jace?* What are we all?

Jace silences his secrets, but his body tells his stories. He blurs across the verdant park, lithe and agile, a tangle of dark limbs. His narrow feet smash the fake turf and trample the gravel walkways, spewing pebbles and grass clippings in his slipstream. There's a gentle *tap, tap, tap* against the ground as he hits every trick, contrary to the fierce, intense, cutthroat slicing of the air as he sculpts himself into fractured statues.

He hypnotizes me, my mouth open in ventriloquy. I've seen others move this way, dance these steps, but not with this soul, not with this *need*. Jace makes love to the void. He slides between skills—handstand, to handstand forward roll, to cartwheel, to front and back walkovers—tying one move to the next, threading beauty from oblivion, a limber limbo of feverish prayer. With a sharp breath, he jumps, tucks forward, then back, somersaulting midair with a raven's grace. Panting, sweating, he preps his final pass. A quick hop, then he sails forward—roundoff, back handspring, back layout, side aerial, front aerial, full-twisting layout—and lands solid, perfect, arms V-ed in victory.

I hear applause, then realize it's me. Jace's buzzed head whips around in horror, hazel eyes wild. His reaction is a gut-punch. I never want to cause him fear. But once he recognizes me, he defaults to bitchy and reclaims his abrasive edge, like RJ. Why am I drawn to knives?

"Sorry to scare you," I say.

"No worries," Jace mumbles, tugging his shorts up his leotard.

I try not to stare. I fail. "You're good. You tumble professionally?"

"No, college acro team," he says.

"Where'd you go?"

And the door slams shut.

Jace forgets me, turns, and beelines for the Rec Room's exit.

Fucking Net, not again...

"Jace, wait," I call after him, jogging over, catching up. "I didn't mean to offend you. I'm curious, that's all."

"Curious about what?" he asks as we enter the labyrinthine corridors.

My breath hitches, but I've come this far. Might as well commit. "About you."

Jace laughs a humorless laugh. "No, you're not."

"I am," I insist. "What are you doing for dinner?"

The small man shirks away—I've scared him again, but I don't know why. It's just a meal. Just food. Just what normal people do on a normal date. A date—is that what he fears? Or normalcy? Or food? I'm so out of my element, out of my league, and if he didn't magnetize me, I'd abandon this star-crossed mission.

"Okay, no dinner," I say, salvaging this wreckage. "Drinks, then? A bar?"

"You're relentless," Jace says, tense. His anxiety peaks—I *see*

his heart flutter in panic. Does he fear conflict? Commitment? What key unlocks this man?

"I'm *interested*," I say. "No pressure, no ties, just a drink."

"Then you'll leave me alone?" he asks.

I stall mid-hallway, hurt. "If that's all I am to you, Jace, just a nuisance, a bother, then forget it. I'll chase you if you need chasing, but I won't pursue a dead end."

Finally, Jace stops, chest heaving with indecision. But he doesn't face me, doesn't talk. We freeze in the corridor as crewmen flow around us.

This was a stupid idea. I never should have come. "Never mind," I mutter and turn, but a hand—a *plea*—chains me to this spot.

"Carthage," Jace whispers.

He meets my eyes and roots me here, and for a moment, language fails. "Sorry?"

"Carthage Polytech. My college. My...home."

This is his olive branch, the surface of his secrets. I return with my own. "Damascus. Well, I grew up there, but I went to school on Thebes. That's where I met—and suffered—RJ."

"Thebes...isn't that the best MedAc in the Protectorate?"

"Second best. Hattusa is first, as they like to remind us. I think Mazha went there."

"Ah."

Conversation dwindles, but his hand stays on my arm, his warmth on my skin, our eyes entwined.

"So...that drink?" I ask, trying not to squeak.

He releases me and nods. Air chills his touch's ghost, and I miss him, ache for him, as soon as we part.

"Lead the way," I say, and he does.

Broken Bird

Jace: Age 18

I am a broken bird. A wingless dove. A blue jay crushed in a brute's palm. My body writhes with eternity's rhythm, to destiny's cadence in a divine stride.

Roundoff, back handspring, back layout, side aerial, front aerial, full-twisting layout.

Fall, rise—repeat, repeat, *repeat*.

I've escaped Saia—temporarily—and life is good—relatively. Though she still roams free. Before you attack me with your self-righteous tirade, hear me out.

I reported her. I did. After we last spoke. After Arckimy, Victim One, two years ago today. But guess what? Saia was right, as she often is, as we often fear of our darkest reflections. *They'll never believe a skeleton.* And they didn't. The Protectorate treated me as a child, indulging my story, ignoring my warning. Instead, they diagnosed me with anorexia, damned me as delusional, and wrote me off as unreliable, as ill.

A boy was *murdered*, and the government did *nothing*. We should have stayed Ward. At least they get shit done. After the report, I raged, then fainted—further discrediting myself—and woke to Saia at my bedside in a grungy Carthage hospital. *Shh, my baby dancer*, she told me, knife in hand. *Anorexia, what a big, sexy name. They want to institutionalize you, but I can free you if you free me. Sissy always has your best interests at heart.*

I should have declined. But I didn't want to. If I were institutionalized, our mothers would know, would mourn, would grieve, and engineering schools would label me "disabled, high-risk." Other careers understand, but not tech, not when nukedrives are involved. "Can't have crazies handling bombs" was a phrase overheard at my college's open house.

So Saia and I saved each other, shook hands, then parted. For now. She hasn't contacted me since I left for college—I enrolled early, at the ripe age of sixteen. I tried. I did. You saw, even if you don't agree. What else can I do when I'm voiceless, powerless, exiled by disease? The Protectorate nullified my integrity; without them, my protests are invisible. So I moved on, moved out, while Saia looms in shadows, in mirages, whispered into legend and myth.

Our moms don't know. They can't. It'd destroy them. Instead of a baby, they birthed a beast, let loose a monster into these cold, feral lands. Guilt would cripple them, so Saia remains their daughter, not the devil, and I the loner, the lost one.

Fast-forward two years.

Roundoff, back handspring, back layout, side aerial, front aerial, full-twisting layout.

I hit every trick.

"Good, Jace," Coach says. "Do it again."

I'm on the acro team at Carthage Polytech, where I study

subspace engineering. It's finally something for *me*, sans Saia, a brief high before her inevitable return. But till then, I study, and train, and ignore my concerns as the Protectorate ignored me.

Roundoff, back handspring, back layout, side aerial, front aerial, full-twisting layout.

"Tighter on the twist," Coach tells me. "Otherwise, you're ready." He faces the rest of the team and calls, "Weight check."

Panic. Frozen, frostbitten panic. Frigid, burning fear that clamps my heart and locks my bones.

My teammates jog toward Coach, toward the scale, but I flounder. Why reduce people to numbers? Why strive for unattainable perfection? Why aim for ever-shifting, ever-changing goals? Our target is fluid, oil on water, a slippery, uncatchable end. I've done better in college, without Saia's constant stress, but relapse rears its ugly head, offering the sweet candy of control, of comfort's addictive drug.

The line before me shortens as Coach calls out weights. My teammates react with a smile or shrug, opting to gain or lose depending on his verdict. They don't worry, though. Not like me. They don't fear the dormant demon, the weapon lurking in psychotic sleep.

"Jace," Coach says. He's a bear of a man, but not overbearing, and he ushers the others away while I approach the wretched scale.

I step on the land mine, close my eyes. The machine beeps as it calculates my floppy mass.

"Done," he says. "Back to practice."

My eyes open, reluctant, but the machine is blank, erased. Coach knows my demon, or assumes. I'm too relieved to feel shame.

I clear my throat and ask, "Do I need to...um...gain...or lose... sir?"

Coach smiles, kind yet firm. "You're perfect, Jace."

Perfect means healthy means not thin means fat means failure means—

"Skinny as a rail," Coach adds as he spots my spiral. "Go on. Rep that full-twisting layout. It's too delicate. Add more power. More force."

I step off the scale, grateful. I'm not a number to him, to this team. They save me from myself.

Like me, Jace. Sissy loves you, no matter what.

Well, that's new.

And disturbing.

First Date and Last Break

Jace: 5 Days Post-Launch

Kaj worries me. Well, not Kaj, but his kindness. I've known kindness before. It backfired. Everyone's out for themselves and after me.

"What can I get you boys?" Zariah asks. He's the bartender and cook. Most of us juggle two or three jobs—overworked, underappreciated, but not underpaid, at least not here.

"Saké," Kaj orders.

And there it is, the first window into a soul, his drink preference, his desire.

Zariah pours Kaj a glass of clear liquid, then turns toward me. My foot fidgets. Which alcohol is the lightest, the least caloric? Which poison can feed the parasite within?

"Vodka," I decide. It arrives in seconds.

The bartender leaves us to our corner, a metal counter in the Mess Hall. Around us bustle crewmen, languid from their shift, but my nerves tighten as I shift on my stool.

"You don't have to drink if you don't want to," Kaj says.

Stop seeing me.

"No, I want to." I want to escape. I down the shot in a sloppy toss and wipe liquor from my lips, embarrassed.

Kaj sips his saké, amused. He's thin, slight, with olive skin and shoulder-length black hair—an inky sheet that frames his gaze in night. His dark eyes survey my face, and I sink beneath his investigation, anxious of what he might find.

"Tell me about yourself," he says.

"You first," I deflect and itch for another drink. But more drinks mean more calories, and more calories mean more regret.

Kaj chuckles. "There's not much to tell. I suspect I'm the most boring one here."

"I like boring," I say, then cringe. "Not that you're boring, of course."

How adorable, Jace. Let Sissy lead. You always liked when I drove. Fuck, not now. Not here. Not ever.

"You're not boring to me," I say to recover. It's weak. Like me. Another itch. Another ignore.

He smiles, an open book to my locked tome. "Well, I'm from Damascus, which you know. I studied on Thebes, went to the Outpost for a bit, then came here. My dads are Protectorate diplomats, so this mission was a 'fun' conversation."

"Only child?" I ask.

"Yup," he says.

"Lucky."

"Lonely."

And I fucked up again, though Kaj is merciful, or doesn't care.

"What about you?" he asks. "Any siblings?"

Dammit. I led myself into a trap, as Saia used to cage me.

You miss me, baby brother. I know you do.

"One, a sister," I say and about-face. "What's Damascus like? I've heard it's paradise."

Kaj's jaw tenses. "Not paradise, but it's gentle, bucolic. I never fit in, to be honest. There wasn't much to do, so bullies roamed free. Bored kids become assholes."

Yet another failure to add to my list: conversational norms. My first real date in months, and I remind him of his shit.

"Sorry," I mumble.

"Don't be," he says, then smiles again, warm and welcoming. "It's the past. Your turn. Carthage has a red dwarf sun, right? Always twilight? Or dark? And isn't it wicked cold?"

"Yeah," I say. Memories bubble of ice and snow, glass and metal, skyscrapers and skylines haloed in blood. "We were Ward before our independence."

"No shit. Is that why they recruited you?"

I shake my head. "I was their second choice—the first stardove himself into oblivion. My manager wanted to get rid of me, so here I am." I take Kaj's saké and down the rest, guilty of the faux pas and the calories.

But Kaj only frowns, concerned, and that hurts worse than disgust. "That's awful, Jace. People can be real cunts sometimes."

"Sometimes?"

He laughs, and I laugh, my laugh raw and unused. Is this what normal feels like? A man, a date, a dream? No ghosts to haunt this fairy tale's wake? No karmic backlash, no cursed chain? I never earned normal before—everyone in my life always stole my soul, then left a mess. But not Kaj. I trust him for some inexplicable reason. I shouldn't, but I do.

Saia shipwrecked my faith, and Carthage capsized my hope, but Kaj...Kaj sparks a flame in the boat's skeleton, thaws my

carcass against the icy draft. He welcomes light while burning shadows, so I lean into his warmth and surrender a smidge.

“Glar has been less of a dick,” I say, because Kaj worries, because I worry that Kaj worries. I don’t want anyone to fret about me, but he does. He always has.

“Half hard or full flaccid?” Kaj asks.

I laugh again, he laughs again, and the rest of the date passes with relative ease—a montage of chats, chuckles, and shy, whispered things. To my surprise, it’s not a disaster. In fact, it’s the opposite. That should scare me—it would have days ago—but it doesn’t. Not here. Now not. Not on the edge of reason in the depths of space.

“Are you really this nice, or are you a psychopath?” I ask, half joking, half serious.

“Definitely a psychopath,” Kaj says with a wink. “And as a psychopath, let me walk you back to your quarters and discover where you live.”

Jacccccccccccccccccc...

Let me inside, Jace.

Net-dammit, Saia, you ruin everything.

“You okay?” Kaj asks, concerned.

I discard the phantom and plaster on a smile. “Of course. Let’s go so you can stalk me.”

Kaj grins. “You’d make terrible prey.”

“Or the best,” I say, a lump in my throat, a noose around my neck.

I stand from the stool and lead us from the bar, from the Mess, down the hall, into a lift.

“Hold on.” Kaj slips inside as the doors slide shut. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, sorry, stomach pain,” I say, and it’s not a lie. Guilt

coils my stomach in agonizing knots. I didn't plan on vodka and saké. I didn't account for the calories, and it's the end of the day, and I didn't exercise enough, and I ate an extra cracker yesterday, and—

"Hey," Kaj says, his voice the sea—the rhythmic, healing tonic that cuts through the breach. He pauses the lift between decks and faces me, hands on my shoulders. "What's going on?"

Don't do that. Don't care. Don't treat me like a victim when I've always been a villain.

But I don't snap at him. I don't push him away. Instead, I lean forward, rest my head against his chest, and the weight of the worlds shifts from me to him—for a moment. Yet for this moment, I am free.

"I know," he says, though I don't answer. "I'm here."

His hands wrap my mortal wounds, bandage cracks in my withered resolve to live, to fight, to see another day. Heat radiates through his scrubs, and his heartbeat is a cure, his breath a salve, his stillness an anchor in trauma's stormy fathoms.

"I assume you're too stubborn to talk," Kaj says, "but when you're ready, if you're ready, I'm here day or night, no matter the time."

"Why?" I ask against his chest. "Why offer that? You hardly know me."

"I don't know your history, but I do know *you*, Jace. I don't need to see where you've been to know what you've become. We aren't our pasts. We outlive mistakes."

"It's not that simple. You don't know what I've done. If you did—"

"I'd understand. We've all fucked up. We've all seen shit. You think you're different, but we're all the same. Don't shut us out

when we've been there and could help."

I pull away and stand apart. "Believe me, you haven't been where I've gone."

Kaj steps closer and returns me to his arms. "Then take me. Show me. Don't fight alone."

I force a smile. "Thank you for tonight. You're a saint, Kaj."

"Nobody's a saint, Jace."

Instead of letting me go, he reels me in, and his lips are on mine, and I'm on the wall, and desire hardens, and doubts fade. I pull back, shocked, electrocuted, as Kaj wipes me off his lips. He presses a button, and the lift resumes. When the doors open, he casts me a wry glance.

"Am I allowed to follow you home?" he whispers.

I should say no. I should. I really should say—

"Yes," I whisper back. *Please.*

Fanged Truth

Kaj: Age 18

You should submit that," Mr. Randall says, craned over my desk. It's between periods, and besides us, the classroom's empty.

I shake my head. "The meter's off. And the cadences feel..."

"Unbalanced?" the lit teacher offers.

I nod.

"That's what I like, though," he says. "It thwarts predictability. You expect an ending, yet you receive a continuation. The story carries on, even when you assume defeat." His finger runs over the poem again, scanning for weaknesses, points to polish.

Some books exit your brain with wings.

Some stories spoil your soul with hope.

Some words sink ships with fanged truth.

Some tales pierce enemies' hearts and swivel history's globe.

Some myths blaze downpours of fury.

Some rumors tighten ignorance's rope.

Some legends trade wisdom for youth.

Some sagas rip open worlds and string time in kaleidoscope.

"Perfect," Mr. Randall says. "There's an arrhythmia in the heartbeat, an irregular pulse, an abnormal charm. There's beauty in asymmetry. Embrace the dissonance."

"I do," I say. "But most cringe."

"Then let them cringe. It's not for them. You're writing for resonant souls, not disparate critics. If you compromise yourself for your audience, you'll attract the wrong audience."

I scoff and mumble, "I'll never have an audience."

"Yes, you will," Mr. Randall says, and I think it's fake, and I think he's lying to be nice, but it's not fake, he's not lying, and it doesn't sound automatic, practiced, or rehearsed. He believes in me. He really *believes*.

No one else believes in me. My dads, great as they are, encourage the steadfast mundane, a "marketable skills" plus "three to five years of work experience" equation. They support me, sure, but in a be-whatever-you-want-but-choose-the-easy-path sort of way. I know they care, worry, and want what's best—scratch that, they want what's *guaranteed*. A secure job, a stable salary, a safe formula of sit, clock, and repeat. But nothing's guaranteed, no job is secure, and when shit hits the fan, people pine after untaken risks, not recycled choices.

Tears burn my eyes, blur the poem, and I try to respond, but gratitude lodges in my throat. No words are enough.

The teacher smiles. "You're better than you realize, Kaj. You're better than you let yourself become."

I wish he were true, but he's one voice amid a sea of bullies, enablers, and ignorers. My peers shun me, and my other teachers forget me. I'm not a star student or problem kid, so they have no time for a middle-of-the-road, wannabe writer.

But Mr. Randall does. Though he also has no time, he makes it for me.

"It only takes one," Mr. Randall says softly, as if he sees my mind. "Resonate with one reader, then your future reverberates. Beginning is the hard part—the grind, the grunt work, the thankless hours—but once you've completed this rite of passage, progress is organic, unstoppable, and everything is worth the wait. Trust me. Trust yourself. Remember why you started. Become your fanged truth. Dreams aren't soft, tender pups wrapped in blankets against the cold. No, dreams are hungry, feral wolves who take the cold as a challenge. They walk through ice, because they know ice ends. Blizzards stop. Winter doesn't last forever. There is a refuge, even if you can't see it through the storm."

I don't respond. I can't top that. I can't properly thank him for his insight, for his gift. The echo of a kindred soul heals hearts and moves mountains. Life is lonely, till you hear others in the night.

"So," Mr. Randall says, "my whole, long-winded point is that you should apply for that award. Submit that poem. Either you win, or you lose. Regardless, you're moving forward and casting a net to find that one reader, then all the rest. Every rejection is a step in the right direction away from the wrong. And I'll pay your fee. Don't worry about the cybs."

"Mr. Randall," I whisper, "I can't accept that."

"You can, and you will," he says, "or I'll cancel these tutoring sessions."

I freeze, stunned, and manage a "Thank you, sir" before tears fall.

"Thank *you*, Kaj, for daring to try."

Horrible, Terrible, Inexcusable Things

RJ: Age 18

I was right. Dimo came in handy. He's great for publicity, and Sidon *loves* publicity.

For two years, we've danced this dance. Dimo offers a new client a "business opportunity." With his trustworthy face, the Von Rei don't look like barbaric savages. The client usually accepts, if they taste saccharine risk. If they don't and deny, I become the barbaric savage, do the dirty work, then wash my hands of their bloody dissent.

I've done horrible, terrible, inexcusable things—most to save Dimo's conscience. He still has one and clings to it with desperation. *I won't become the monster they made.* Words I prayed. Words I chanted. Words I cast away. Dimo doesn't know the extent of my coddling, how I shelter him from every storm. He'll find out one day. In the meantime, I lie and wait and scheme to avenge my parents' pulpy demise.

I hardly remember them. I hardly remember anything from

before. I am Von Rei, and Von Rei are me. They killed my parents to free me, recruit me, assimilate me into their hive-minded ways. But I'm a snake, not a bee, vicious and venomous. I'll strike the feet to corrupt the head.

It's slow progress, a double entendre of crime and corruption. Pretend it's business, then fold in a bribe or three. Learn weaknesses over drinks disguised as celebrations. Catalog pet peeves amid stressful heists. Weaponize comfort, then support secrets. Bind loyalty through leverage and silence through threat.

"Hey, RJ." Kraken joins me on a neon side street, crammed somewhere between muggy ground and dark, dank sky. Dimo isn't here—the night's been dirty, not clean. But Kraken is. He seeks blood like a shark. "Been a while. Miss me?"

"Never," I say.

"That's my girl."

"I never was, never am, and never will be 'your girl.'"

"Touchy lately."

"You made me boss."

You killed my parents, shattered my heart, and ruined my mind.

But he doesn't know I know. Same as Dimo. So many secrets. So much suffering.

"Boss, not bitch," Kraken says, and I snap.

I kick out his knees, sink him to eye level, and shove my blastgun against his neck. The barrel bruises his throat, and he sneers up at me, surprised yet impressed.

"Do you know what I just did?" I ask, seething. "I cleaned up your mess. You left listeners, asshole." *Listeners*, aka people who heard, who could talk, who could survive.

"They were kids," Kraken protests.

"They were *eighteen*. I'm eighteen, and I'm no fucking kid."

"What did you do?" Finally, fear creeps across the giant's gaze. Yes, this is the monster you made, the monster I've become.

"As I said, I cleaned up your mess."

"Holy fuck. It was only a party. No harm done."

"It was a *theft*," I say and dig the blastgun into his jaw. "They stole *our* jellies from *our* clients, clients who were unhappy when their shipments were half empty. Unhappy clients mean less money, and less money means hunger, mutiny, revolt. This gang's a chain, and if one link breaks, we all fall down. Fuck up again, and it'll be your head on a pike."

"RJ?" a third voice asks, timid, confused.

Shit. Dimo's not supposed to be here, but here he is. As he looks from my blastgun to Kraken on his knees, squished against the street's wall, his trust in me wavers, a flicker of panic in his gray-blue eyes.

"What happened?" Dimo asks us both.

I don't answer, but Kraken leaps at the opportunity, shoves my blastgun aside, and jumps to his feet. "Your girlfriend, that's what happened." But he leaves in admiration, not anger.

That's the issue with gangs—one of many. Von Rei flip morals upside down, upend norms, somersault ethics on their face. Risk is reward, danger is desired, and threats are thank-yous. We're a dysfunctional family, but a family just the same. Kraken's not mad—in fact, this secures my strength, my power at the top. Dimo, on the other hand...

"I want to ask, but I don't want to know," he says.

"Then don't ask," I say.

Dimo runs a hand through his frizzy strawberry-blond hair and sighs into the oppressive night. He's nineteen now, though no more a man. Still lanky, still sweet, still pockmarked and pale. Sidon hasn't hardened him. There's softness about him—a

warmth, an aura. Stubborn kindness lingers in his sugarcoated veins. Rage burned away my beliefs years ago, but he still hopes for something greater, for something more.

"Do you want to do this forever? To *be* this forever?" he asks. It's all I know. And despite the pain, it's home.

"What about your future?" he asks.

"Futures are a luxury," I say, "a luxury Sidonese can't afford."

"Then move. Find a way off this rock. Plead asylum. Claim juvenile delinquency. You were a minor most of your time in the Von Rei. The Protectorate can exonerate you."

"The Von Rei boss doesn't *plead*. And I might have been young, but that doesn't excuse my crimes. I knew what I was doing. I was aware the whole time."

Dimo takes my hands with sudden insistence and pulls me from the side street into a cubbyhole alley. It's quiet here, dim, with only Sidon's muted hum as soundtrack.

"Then *I'll* plead," he says. "Let's get away from here. Move out. Move on. We can start over. We can *change*."

I shift against him, fidget in his grasp. Away from neon, from jellies, from blastguns, I feel so small, so insubstantial. I'm nothing without costumes, without masks, though Dimo is. He's better than us all.

"I can't, Dimo," I say. "But you can. Take some cybs, and go. I'll cover your escape."

"I'll only go if you come with me," he says.

"I'm not done here. Not yet."

"Nothing's ever finished, RJ. If you stay too long, you'll never get out."

Maybe that's the point. Maybe I don't want to leave. Maybe I want to walk the same streets they walked, breathe the same air they breathed, cling to my parents' ghosts as Dimo does his

conscience. This sentimental flaw roots me here, at least till revenge is done.

Dimo doesn't understand. He hates his parents, and his parents deserve it, the abusive cunts. But my parents don't, and I still love them. I'll always love them, miss them, ache for them beneath the armor I've forged. I can't admit it to him, to myself—certainly not to anyone Von Rei—but Mom and Dad are the reason behind all the blood.

"I owe them this," I say, and Dimo knows who I mean, but not what, not why.

"When revenge is done, what will remain of you?" Dimo asks.

He breaks character, pins my body to the alley wall. I falter; he advances, presses us together. Our youth ignites and scorches through the gang, the fear, the crimes necessity committed. For a moment, we are teenagers—young, in love, and free. In *love*? Was that me or my hormones? Can a monster love an angel? Can a demon love at all? Because that's what I am. A monster. Demon. Beast. Parasite. A viral abomination that plagues Sidon with grief. Yet somewhere between knives and heists and jellies and blastguns, love rooted on the battleground—stubborn, insidious, and strong.

"RJ, what's your name?" Dimo whispers.

His words slide over my skin in the neon night, and for once, he's not awkward, not soft, not sweet. No, not at all. He's a sword with purpose, an anchor sunk into an island's shore. We're home, he and I. A nomadic tribe, a vagabond troupe. Wherever I lead, he follows, and whenever he follows, I'm at peace.

"What's your name, RJ, your *real* one?" he asks again.

"I should shank you," I spit between clenched teeth. But there's no bite, only hunger, and he starves the same.

Dimo presses harder against me, and I fizz with need. "You don't have to hide from me."

He kisses me, and my soul fireworks. I-should complaints flood my thoughts, but I-want decrees wash them away. I don't give him my name, but I give him everything else. Right here. Right now. Right on the alleyway ground.

We do horrible, terrible, inexcusable things. We lay truth raw and surrender to trust. We mold into one and move as the sea. We're calm, quiet, kind, and scared, nothing the Von Rei taught us to be. Songs replace shrieks. Fire melts ice. Shields lower, guards drop, and both our fortresses come tumbling down.

We don't stand alone, so together, we fall.

And when it's done, when it's over, when we stick together in the dark, he trails a finger through my jagged hair, my wilted armor, and smiles. I don't.

"This can't happen again," I say, pulling on my tunic.

"You said *can't*, not *won't*," Dimo says, smug. He reclines naked on the ground with no hint of moving. "*Won't* is dislike, but *can't* is desire. You *won't* do unwanted things, but you *can't* do wanted things, because they're dangerous, because they'll hurt. But I'll never hurt you, RJ, and as we both know, I'm definitely not dangerous."

"Don't make promises before you know the price. I'm the Von Rei boss, and this is..."

"Human?" he offers.

"Juvenile," I say. "I can't be a—"

"Weak little girl, I know. But you're wrong, RJ. Sex is power, is conquest, is domination. You make someone vulnerable and force them to come undone...pardon the pun."

I chew my cheek and know he's right. But I don't want him to be right. Well, I don't want to want him to be right. Sex frays.

Love fractures. Relationships string hearts, and string could snap, and hearts could burst. It's not worth the risk.

"Trust me, 'I Should Shank You,'" Dimo says.

I raise an eyebrow. "What?"

"That's your name, your answer from before: 'I Should Shank You.' It suits you."

I laugh. I shouldn't. But I lead, and he follows. And in the dark, empty, abandoned alleyway, we're a girl and a boy, two kids, two teens, clothes cast aside, starting round two.

When we leave the alley, and we do leave soon, our shields rise, guards lift, and fortresses reform higher and wider.

But there are bricks missing, weaknesses in the foundation, and through these weaknesses, doubts invade.

What I Am, What Am I?

RJ: 5 Days Post-Launch

There's not enough whiskey in all the worlds to rescue me from this pit.

Gaard's death makes no sense. Neither does Esche's. But Captain Heid doesn't care. She sweeps blood beneath the rug, burns bodies clean. And I'm a hypocrite for judging. I've done far worse, yet free from Sidon's sordid atmosphere, morality poisons me with concerns.

So I drink.

Then drink some more.

And keep drinking till my face and mind are numb.

For the most part.

"Slow down, Doctor," Zariah says.

"You...underestimate...me." I manage not to slur—by speaking in slow motion. The faster I drink, the faster time flies, and I've no fun to waste today, so I settle for whiskey instead.

"Perhaps, but you overestimate yourself," the bartender says.

“Should I call Kaj?”

I scoff. “I don’t...need...a babysitter.”

He scans me up and down. “No, you need *much* more than that. What happened to you?”

“Sidon happened...then the Protectorate...then the Ward. A fucking Cerberus of suffering.”

Zariah chuckles.

“What the...fuck’s so...funny?” I snap.

“You,” he says. “You’re rather well educated for the thug you portray. Wouldn’t have thought you’d know ancient mythology.”

“I’m full of...surprises.”

And booze.

Too much booze.

“Excuse me,” I gurgle, then sprint for the bathroom.

Ensigns squawk as I barge in, but a quick look at my ashen face, clamped lips, and clenched stomach exorcizes them. I wait till the bathroom empties, then I open a stall and heave my overestimation in the bowl. Net-dammit, whiskey burns in reverse. I stay there for minutes—perhaps more—till bile turns emerald and acid blisters my throat.

Pathetic. What I am is...what I am...what am I? What have I become? Kraken would beat me if he could see me like this. He can’t, of course, but memory stings the same.

“Oh my Net, Becky, you’re such a slut.”

A new pack enters the bathroom, a clone of the previous. *Shit*. As if I need a reminder of my social exile.

“Stop it, Katie. You’d have slept with her, too.”

“Well, yah, *her*, but not the nineteen others you’ve had this month.”

“Would you two chill?”

"Anyone got any lipstick? This color makes me look like a virgin."

"We certainly can't have that."

I want to bleach their conversation from my brain, but my stomach cramps, my esophagus spasms, and I'm back over the bowl, louder than intended.

They fall silent.

"Um...hello?" one sings. I think it's Becky. "Anyone in here?"

Obviously. It's a bathroom, not a green room. Stop make-believing fame for inconsequential lives. Dimo would call me cold, but he's not here, either. None of them are.

I creak open the stall door and give the universal we-all-know-I'm-shitfaced-but-let's-ignore-that-elephant nod. The girls scan me from hair to hips, lips curled in the judgment of those who have always been a piece but never a puzzle.

"Excuse me," I rasp and shimmy toward the sink. They part for me, reluctant, and resume their tedium as I wash my hands.

"The harvest is going faster than planned," Becky says. I think it's Becky. Hell, they're all Beckies.

"Thank Net. There's a party on Gao in a few weeks, and I *must* be ready. My rep is *ruined* if I don't go."

"Your rep's already ruined, Katie. You slept with my sister, and she's a whore, so you're a whore by association."

"Well, we aren't all rich bitches, Angela. Some of us have bills to pay."

"Oh my Net, Katie, how could you say that?"

"Girls, girls, don't fuck up our Diogen-free night. Heid'll be on our asses soon enough, so let's have fun while we can."

"Speaking of fun...anyone got jellies?"

"Tracey, those are illegal."

"In the Protectorate. This is the Ward."

"No, we are *not* doing anything stupid. We can't afford another Hattusa after-party."

They exchange worried glances, and I bite my lip to stifle a laugh. Such trivial concerns. Such petty lives. Doubt any of them have even farted in public.

"The nebula's pretty," one says. I dry my hands and try to shuffle past, but there are too many of them.

"I would *love* a dress with those colors."

"Like totally."

"Excuse me," I say when they won't budge from their nest.

Their heads swivel toward me, a dozen haughty owls.

"What?" one squawks.

For the love of—

"*Move*," I snap and point toward the door.

Their feathers fluster, and they murmur, "How rude," and, "So Sidonese," and, "What's *her* issue?"

But I behave. I don't engage. I allow their hypocrisy.

Till one insults Kaj.

"So, anyway, I went to the Infirmary earlier for my earache, and that nurse is a dunce."

"Which nurse?"

"Kev? Karl? Kaj! That's it."

"He doesn't want to fuck you; that doesn't make him a dunce."

"Everyone wants to fuck me, so yes, it does. He's so stupid. No idea why the Ward recruited him. Took him five times to find the right spot."

"That's because you fidget, Becky."

"No, it's because he's dumb as fuck."

Let's pause here a moment and examine the roads untaken, the paths I should have chosen. I could have said, "Watch yourself, Becky," which is a tepid yet polite warning. Or I could

have ignored them and glared till I left. Or, even better, I could have pranked their asses at an unspecified time in the future, away from the Ward, off *Icarus*, when they least expect revenge. But do I do any of these? No. Do I make the good choice, the smart choice? No, and no. Because I'm drunk and angry and, as they said, Sidonese.

Becky falls from one punch. Her limbs crumple beneath her, and her body slumps to the tile, knocked out cold. The other girls gasp and start "attacking." Their hands flap at my face as their feet swing at my shins. It's embarrassing. Pleasure raised them; pain raised me. I should push them away, walk out the door, but again, I make neither the good nor smart choice.

I kick out one's legs and toss her over my hip. The next I elbow in the throat. I jab and hook and knee clone after clone till the bathroom echoes with sobs and shrieks. It's been so long since I've fought, since I've let myself free, that adrenaline drugs me beyond sanity.

"What the hell are you doing?" a voice billows from the now open door.

Well, at the moment, I am using Becky.3's braid to bash her head against the sink while stomping on Becky.7's oversized tits.

"RJ, stop." It's Kaj, ironically, the man whose honor I'm defending.

"They talked shit about you," I say.

"So you beat the shit out of them?" he asks, incredulous. "This isn't a gang; this is a *crew*, and you're their doctor. You're supposed to help them, not hurt them."

"They're idiots."

"It doesn't matter. You can't do this to people."

I release the Beckies and take a step back, above, outside this

moment. The girls lie limp as bloody rag dolls on the floor. Whimpers and moans bubble from their throats, and fear fogs their eyes, coils their limbs. They're frightened of me. No, they're *terrified*. This should bother me, yet it empowers me. I remember what I was, what I had, till I threw it all away.

"Doctor," another voice whips from the doorway, "what is going on here?"

Captain Heid glowers, rage incarnate. Tension ripples her body, and she crosses her arms to cage her fury.

I try to answer, to explain, to appeal to her mirrored sense of pride, but whiskey interrupts me. Golden sludge cascades down my chest and slimes a Becky at my feet. Kaj shakes his head, disturbed, while Heid shakes her head, disappointed.

"I should throw you in the Brig," the captain says. "The Protectorate would. They'd revoke your medical license and return you to the Outpost, or damn you to worse."

"Well, thank Net this isn't the Protectorate," I say, wiping vomit off my face.

Heid scoffs, and her beady eyes flare. "You think this mission is a *joke*? A game? It's not. We're light-years from home—no safety net, no second chances—outside the galaxy in the depths of space. No one can save us. No one can hear us scream. We're alone, vulnerable, without backup or reinforcements. Everyone before us *failed*, RJ. They returned shipwrecked with haunted sensors. Diogen is jinxed, and we chose *you* to break this curse. But if you can't behave, you can spend the rest of the trip in chains."

I spit at her. Whiskey and bile spray the tile...and the Beckies (still whimpering, by the way). "It's preferable to the company."

"RJ," Kaj warns, "stop." He slips on his gloves and starts healing the Beckies.

"You should listen to Kaj," Heid says. "That's why we recruited him—to keep your scrappy ass in line. Most of us work for success—one rung at a time, climbing the ladder, playing the system—but you steal yours, replace crimes with awards. I don't know how you erased yourself from the Net, but you can't erase karma. One of these days, your shit will catch up with you."

"Believe me, Captain, it already has," I say. "So send me to the Brig." The Von Rei boss lurches, but I pull her back, push her down, bury her again, and reclaim this version of myself, this temporal slice of mediocre existence.

"No, not the Brig," the captain says. "You like punishment—you thrive on giving and receiving it. No, you need something uncomfortable, something you'd never choose. Therapy. An hour with Doctor Mazha *tonight*. After you clean yourself up, of course."

No. Not that, and not her.

I open my mouth to object, but Heid adds, "It's that or the airlock."

And if not for the cybs, I'd take the airlock.

Sidonese Echo

Mazha: 5 Days Post-Launch

She's just a patient. Just a job. Just a name.
But she's not just a name. She's two letters. Two symbols. A code, a conundrum, a fuck-you-if-you-crack-me dare. I've never encountered such resistance before, such shields, such armor, such hostile opposition.

"Somehow, I'm both drunk and hungover," RJ groans.

We're in my kitty-corner office, stuffed into the sterile, whitewashed Infirmary—empty at this hour, thankfully. I sit behind my desk, and RJ sits opposite. Her buzzed head hangs in her hands. My tall, dark, and handsome ghost. My golden-bronze goddess. Though the goddess part is lacking tonight, late as it is, wasted as she remains. Her black scrubs bunch around her angular frame, clumped in the hollows, hiked up her forearms. Kohl smudges around her villain-red eyes, those venomous orbs distant yet disastrous. Still, the visceral response is there, the gut-twisting I-like, I-want, *I-need* urges.

But she's just a patient. *Just* a patient. And maybe less.

"Captain Heid wrote you up for drunken and disorderly conduct," I say. "She assigned you one hour of therapy, but if this hour proves ineffective, I will request another."

Become the doctor, the holopsych, the ice.

"So assign me another," RJ says. "I'll nap in that one, too." She massages her temples, gaze trained on the floor. "Go back to sleep. Sorry I woke you from your toddler bedtime. Just sign off on this session, and we can both crash."

I want to snap at her, rise to her bait, fall into her arms and—
Stop it, Mazha.

She's *just* a patient.

"Your abrasive tendencies indicate an evasive nature," I say. "Reactive, defensive behavior often stems from latent, deep-rooted trust and/or abandonment issues."

RJ raises her head, glares red, and says, "I'm not a textbook word problem."

"I'm afraid you're more textbook than you'd prefer," I return. "So, treatment options. Exposure therapy uses hololight to render—"

"I know. I went to MedAc, too. Give me holomedes instead."

"I'm not prescribing you drugs."

"You'd deny me treatment?"

"I'd deny you control. My office, my rules, RJ."

Her lips quirk, lips I want to—

Fuck, this is fast devolving into a cheesy holorum from a stardock gift shop.

"Then give me a third option, *Doctor*," RJ taunts, "because I sure as hell won't relive my past."

"Why?" I ask.

"What?"

"Why won't you relive your past?"

"None of your fucking business," she snaps.

"Well, this is your other option, RJ, talking the old-fashioned way. Either you share, or I force—"

"You can't force someone to share. Most of it I can't, anyway."

"Confidential?"

She pauses and chews her cheek. "Something like that."

"Then share at a conceptual level," I say. "Instead of details, give me abstractions: moods, dreams, desires, feelings."

"Feelings? You want me to share my *feelings*? I don't do how-does-that-make-you-feel bullshit."

"No, you punch first, talk later, and that's gotten you *so very far*. Five of the twelve girls you beat up needed reconstructive holosurgery—did you know that? Kaj fixed them tonight, and it's lucky he could, since you were preoccupied, because there would have been lasting damage otherwise. Do you feel guilty about that? About hurting people?"

She shrugs. "It's what I know. They insulted Kaj, so I repaid the favor."

"No, they made a passing remark, and you *destroyed* them," I say. "That's not how things work here, not even in the Ward."

"Well, it was on Sidon."

There's her first surrender, a minor concession, a major key.

"Is that where you're from?" I ask, afraid she'll hide, skittish as a rat. But everyone wants to be seen. Even RJ.

She nods. "Originally."

"You told me before that your parents died," I say. "Is that where it happened?"

"Subtle as a sword."

"I learn from the best. If we only have an hour, I have no time for 'how-does-that-make-you-feel bullshit,' so yes, I'll cut to the

chase, like you.”

That earns me a smile—well, a sneer, but it’s progress. I think.

“Losing your parents young is traumatic,” I continue.

“You’d know,” I say. “Yours died, too. Left you shitloads of money.”

And we’re back to basics.

“RJ, if you don’t let me in, I can’t help you,” I say.

She leans forward and rests her elbows on her knees. “I don’t want your help. You’re like ten years old from a backward, dogmatic, judgmental hellhole. What do *you* know about life?”

I finally crack. “You have *no* idea where I’ve been, what I’ve seen, what I’ve done. The fact that I’m Midican has nothing to do with my ability, and my age is insignificant. You’re the one who acts like a petulant child, acting out instead of looking in. You didn’t beat up those ensigns because of Kaj. He was an excuse. You would have beaten them up anyway, because you’re overflowing with anger, frustration, and feelings of entrapment. You don’t fit in, you’ve never fit in, and you punish everyone else for who you are. But it’s not their fault you’re different, RJ. Keep running from yourself, and you’ll run out of life.”

“Fuck you,” she snarls, as expected.

“No, fuck *you*,” I say, *not* as expected (she brings out the worst in me). “Fuck you for thinking you’re the only one who suffers. Fuck you for thinking the rest of us have it made. Fuck you for thinking Sidon’s the only rough colony. And fuck you for treating me like shit from day one. Kaj and I are the *only* ones on your side here, yet you abuse us endlessly.”

“Tough love, tough shit.”

“Love?” I ask, and that catches us both off guard.

“For Kaj,” she says, but it’s a second too late.

Silence suffocates my tiny office as we stare at each other, en-

raged and confused. This is not going according to plan—same as most of life. Any hope of therapy vanished as soon as she sat in that chair, and now, everything's ruined. Or rather, everything's ripe.

"What happened to you, RJ?" I whisper. "What did you do?"

"What didn't I?" she whispers back. "There's a reason I'm a ghost, kid."

"So you admit you erased yourself? From the Net? From the worlds?"

"I admit nothing."

But her face does. Her eyes burn with guilt and regret, shame compounded from years of struggle. I forget the office, the Infirmary, the *Icarus*, the Ward, and enter a sky where we're the only stars.

"Let me go," RJ says, "and I promise I'll try not to beat anyone else up."

"You can't promise to try. That's not how promises work," I say.

"In my experience, it is."

"Here, it's not."

"Your office, your rules?" Again, her lips quirk.

The atmosphere shifts, the pressure drops, and a storm beckons us both to the horizon. She leans further forward and props her arms on my desk, inches from me, closer than we've ever been. Red burns in her gaze, and she steeples her fingers between us.

"I'm not perfect," she rasps in her husky voice, "but I *can* function...usually. You're here to help those with conditions that 'impede daily functioning.' Well, that's not me. Tonight was a fluke. Won't happen again. If it does, you have my permission to lock me in a dungeon, or whatever else you Midicans do for

fun.”

“I don’t need your permission to lock you up,” I say. “The Ward’s institutionalization protocols are more lenient than the Protectorate’s. Fuck up again, and I’ll sign off on your exile.”

RJ just chuckles. “You’re feisty—I like that. And stubborn. And principled. But your threats need work. Why would I fear exile? As you said before, I already don’t fit in. So let’s put this shit behind us, shake on it, and call it a night.”

She’s impossible. Insufferable. Aggravating and rude. I can’t think. Can’t focus. Can’t breathe, see, or function. I need the therapy I project onto her.

“Then what would I report,” I say—I *squeak*, “if I let you leave early?”

“For starters, you wouldn’t say I left early,” RJ says, intense... and radiant. Looking at her is like looking at lightning. “You’d make it believable. Say I resisted at first, wasted half an hour complaining, then cracked open a bit about my fractured childhood. Attribute my misbehavior to the anniversary of my parents’ murder—management loves sob stories. Oh, and say it was an isolated incident, or whatever wording the corporate monkeys prefer.”

“Murder?” I ask, mouth agape.

She purses her lips. “It’s believable.”

“But is it true?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it *does*, RJ. That explains—”

“*Stop.*” She silences me with a predatory glare. “Write the report, then let me go.”

“And lie to the *Ward*?” I ask.

RJ rolls her eyes. “You’re such a goody-two-shoes, following all the rules, obeying all the laws. Well, what happens when

those rules limit justice and those laws convict the innocent? You're so *young*. So *naive*. Everything's corrupt, so write the Net-damn report."

"I'm sorry," I say.

She exhales, exasperated. "What the fuck's so hard about writing—"

"No, not about that. I'll write the report. I'm sorry about your parents. Is today really the anniversary?"

Finally, RJ stalls. Perhaps it's her buzz, or perhaps it's her fatigue, but she lowers her guard a hair—*only* a hair. Even so, I see fathoms in her eyes, leagues of suffering, mountains of struggle, years carved deep. Then she shields herself again, but I saw, and she knows I saw.

"I don't remember," she whispers, and I can't tell if it's truth or a lie.

"I'm sorry," I say again. "I'm here, if you need me."

"I need no one." RJ stands to leave, but I snag her hand. The contact jars us both, a zap of static, a shock of electricity.

"You aren't alone," I say—I *urge*.

"Fuck you," she says, her default deflect, and yanks her hand away.

I wish you would.

Faith Is a Bloody Thing

Mazha: Age 18

You did *what*?"

My father's disappointment trembles the Moon Vault. Seven moons mock me through abbey arches as blue binary sunlight flees beneath Gothic spires. Midica smirks behind her midair monasteries as clouds spiral around our sky city's feud. I hate it here. I always have.

"It was two years ago," I say.

Two years since I stole a starship. Two years since I returned from Jericho. Two years since I passed their brutal holopsych exam. Two years since I realized test results are a *fraction* of MedAc admission requirements. Two years of searching, applying, and weathering rejection after rejection after *fucking* rejection. And after two years, all I can show for my efforts is an inbox full of not-the-right-fit, thanks-for-considering-us, we're-selective-in-our-candidates, we-can't-respond-to-every-application, best-of-luck-in-your-future-endeavors dismissals.

"I don't care if it was ten," Father says. "You stole from us."

But it took them two years to find out. A small victory in a landslide of failures.

"I didn't steal," I say. "I am your *heir*, as you constantly remind me, so what's yours is mine."

Mother slaps me, a sting of mirrored betrayal. Her silk robes billow with outrage, inky as the void. "Foolish child. You twist our words to feed your desires. And if I remember correctly, which I always do, you don't want our empire. You want your own. Then build it, Mazha. Build it from scratch, as we did ours."

"I *am*," I say, "but it takes time."

"So in this time, you use your legacy but shun its source?" Father shakes his head, broad shoulders stiff, and his glacial eyes—the eyes he gave me—glitter with writhing emotions. "That's despicable, Mazha. Despicable and desperate. Worthy of a commoner, but not of you."

"Perhaps she *is* a commoner." Mother's starlight skin gleams as she smooths her ice-blond hair—both her gifts to me, though I've frosted my blonde with blue. "She acts like a Jerichan bourgeois. Happy for handouts, prickly about taxes. Always taking, rarely repaying."

"Better a bourgeois than a bigot," I snap.

Father tosses his hands up toward the sky, toward Mother Earth, their god. "We're not bigots. We're believers. Faith is a beautiful thing."

"Faith is a *bloody* thing," I correct. "You torture Midica's children into submission and claim blasphemy if anyone disagrees. True power comes from respect, not fear."

"They are one and the same," Mother says. "To respect something, one must fear it first. Pain builds character—well,

in most. In you, it breeds opposition. We gave you the stars, yet you'd throw it all away for naive ideas of right and wrong."

"You're unbelievable," I say.

"No, you don't believe," Mother says. "When you do, all worlds will open for you."

"No worlds will open for me. Everyone hates us. That's why Midicans can't leave."

"You still don't understand," Father says, sadness in his gaze.

"And I never will, so let me go," I say.

"Let you go as what?" Mother asks. "As a daughter? As a Midican? As a Protectorate citizen? Just how far will you run, Mazha?"

"As far as I can."

"Then go. Run. Without our ships, without our power, you're *nothing*."

There it is, my door, my key. But Mother's right. Without their reach, I'm nothing. Too young to thrive. Too naive to survive. They chained me with hate, fear, and ignorance, so now, I'm trapped in a prejudiced prison. Our radicalism invalidates Midicans to all other colonies, while exile and treason destroy any who don't hop on the Net-is-sacrilegious hype train.

"One day," Mother says, smug, "you will see this was all for your own good."

"Mother Earth, accept her offering," Father chants, and Mother nods, joining him. "Mother Earth, keep her. Mother Earth, guide her. Mother Earth, watch over her. Though we've wandered far from our holy home, your heart travels with us, and our souls are yours."

I stare at them both, disgusted. They raised a slave, enabled incompetence, shackled me with idiocy, strangled me with

circumstance. The harder I fight, the tighter the rope. The faster I run, the worse the recoil. The higher I rise, the further I fall.

“Your offering, Mazha,” Mother says and hands me a knife. She exacerbates my darkness, but this is a release I crave.

I take her blade, stare into her eyes, and hack a gash from wrist to elbow. Blood mists the Moon Vault and paints my smile red. Father lunges to wrap my arm, but Mother calmly retrieves the knife, satisfied and elated. I obeyed. I complied. I relented. I accepted. She proved me wrong...for now. Wrong and weak and powerless. But things change, planets shift, stars burst, and darkness beckons.

One day, I *will* escape. Everything changes. Nothing lasts forever. Nobody leaves life unmarked and unstained.

Pain, Rage, Time, and Lies

Jace: 1 Week Post-Launch

I feel like shit. Most of us do. There's a flu going around—that's what they say, at least. A convenient, coincidental flu that struck as soon as we pierced deep space.

But I'm nobody, just an ensign, just an engineer, just Executive Assistant to Mr. Phallus Himself. The Ward knows all, so we swallow their lies, their bullshit, their tomfuckery, and their threats. Shh, shh, that's it, that's it. Everything's fine. Nothing's broken. Just do your job, and don't worry about the blood on the walls or the bodies in the fires.

The harvest is going great, by the way. It's the only thing that is. Diogen is simple; death is not. And *Icarus* preps to increase her casualty count.

Since Gaard and Esche kicked the bucket, morale plummets, and panic brews. Gone are the wow-look-at-the-nebula and oh-my-Net-what-a-rainbow praises. Instead, the crew demoted

the rogue stellar nursery to “finicky bitch,” “limp dick,” and “slutty cunt.” They insult what confuses them and dodge what they fear. As such, no one mentions the void.

“You’re late again, Jace,” Glar grunts as I enter the Engine Room.

“Sorry, sir, I stopped by the Infirmary,” I say and sway, catching myself on a panel.

“Why wasn’t I notified?”

“You were, sir. Ensign Kaj pinged you a note.”

“Don’t get cheeky with me. I got no note.”

Yes, he did. Because Kaj is thorough. *Too* thorough. In every way.

“Then it was a technical malfunction,” I say, “because I saw him send it.”

“Stop,” Glar snaps. “Just stop. I’m not doing this with you.”

“Doing what?”

He rolls his eyes. “This is why you get nowhere. You’re unwilling to take responsibility.”

Oh, I take much more than that. I take the blame, the fall. But Glar is impossible, so I let it go.

“I’m sick, sir,” I explain, “and I didn’t want to infect anyone, but the Infirmary ruled the flu anticontagious.” Which is an oxymoron, of course. What kind of flu is *not* contagious? Unless it’s not a flu at all. Kaj muttered something about “Diogen poisoning” till a glare from legacy Ward tied his tongue.

It was...*good* to see him this morning. Better than I’d care to admit. I don’t trust his kindness, the selfless altruism he aims toward me—among other things—but I’m acclimating to his warmth, to his compassion, to the way he coddles the universe like a babe. He’s gentle, yet not fragile, a true nurse at heart. More than anything, I want to melt into his arms and let

him rescue me from my past, from my present, and fashion my future with laughs instead of tears.

Then I remember Saia...and Coach...and all those other “kind” souls who “helped” me along the way. But Kaj is different...right? Or are we all the same?

You miss me, baby brother. It's okay. I miss you, too.

Fever suction my mind, and I see her shadow next to mine, two ghosts on a bulkhead.

Jacccccccccccccccccc...

Let me inside, Jace.

Fucking Net, not today. I'm exhausted, sweaty, delusional, and burning up...or burning down. I must maintain a facade of normalcy, or the Ward'll have my balls on a platter.

Just wait till I tell them the truth.

Which truth, Saia? The parasite that consumes me? The guilt that drains me? The crime I committed to set you free?

Oh, you gentle soul.

Once upon a time, but not anymore. I'm as gentle as you were. The monster jumped from you to me. I'm host to your demons, and they mingle with my own.

That's it, sweetheart. There you go, baby boy.

Yet despite all the pain, all the rage, all the time, all the lies, I do miss her.

I knew you'd be proud of me, baby brother.

Saia knew me best. Her madness rewrote my soul and engraved my heart, but she was mine, and I was hers. She saw what others missed, and no one wants to be invisible.

Sissy always has your best interests at heart.

As long as they suited her own. But when we clashed, it was thunder and lightning, an apocalyptic hurricane of parallel craze. Manic gusts. Chaotic uproar. Turbulent mayhem tinted

with blood.

They'll never believe a skeleton.

I know, Saia. They didn't. And though I'm less a skeleton now than then, the familiar shame and comfortable longing morph my bones into swords that stab my bloated flesh. I'm too *big*. Too *loose*. Too *soggy*. Too *human*.

You're perfect, Jace.

Coach this time. Coach who supported and encouraged, who used and abused me. Coach who poured synthosine over budding insecurities, then ignited cynicism with a high-powered blowtorch. If not for him, I could have changed. If not for Saia, I wouldn't need to.

"Jace, what the hell?" Glar asks.

I'm on the floor, curled in a ball, as my sister's shadow looms over my corpse. Wait, I have that backward. Or do I?

"Back to work," my boss says. "*Now*."

The other engineers snicker. Let them. Their lives are rom-coms; mine's a horror. Or a thriller. So many genres, so little time.

"Yes, sir," I rasp through my fever, through my "flu," through flashbacks of secrets I buried along with the body.

Jacccccccccccccccccc...

Let me inside, Jace.

Anomaly

Kaj: 1 Week Post-Launch

“Anticontagious flu, my ass,” RJ says.
“Shh,” I hush. Legacy Ward nurses peer at us from the Infirmary’s corners while the recruited nurses glance around, nervous and uneasy. There’s something wrong with this flu. Hell, there’s something wrong with this whole fucking mission.

“*Shh* yourself,” RJ says. “Flus are contagious. They don’t crop up in the middle of deep space. Everyone had a clean scan before launch. Looks like poisoning, if you ask me. And Diogen’s the only anomaly—”

I cover her mouth and pull her aside. She knees me in the groin, and I buckle, winded.

“What the fuck, RJ?” I wheeze.

“Don’t touch me,” she says in our little shadow, hidden between a hospital bed and a stretcher.

“You’ll get us both killed, talking like that.”

"And they'll get us all killed if we don't do something. It's Diogen poisoning, Kaj. That's the only thing that makes sense, why those other ships failed, why those other crews died. There's something Heid's not telling us."

"I'm sure there are many things," I say. "But it's not our business. We'll be different. We'll break the mold. We'll survive, then we can—"

"We *won't*," RJ says. "That's my whole bloody point."

"You can't take down the Ward."

"I've taken down worse."

"You have no proof. No one even knows what Diogen is."

"So we run tests," she says. "Gather data. Hoard evidence, then report them."

"To what?" I ask. "To the Protectorate? They're already at each other's throats. We'd start a galactic war, and *trillions* would die. No, RJ. For once, play along. *Please*."

"Fuck you."

It's always the same old song and dance with her, and I tire of the tune and steps.

"You push everyone away," I say, "then wonder why you're alone."

"I don't wonder why I'm alone," RJ says. "I *choose* this life. Sorry I didn't grow up on Damascus with princes, princesses, and storybook castles."

"It wasn't a fairy tale. Nothing is. Different monsters, sure, but monsters just the same."

"I'd trade my childhood for yours any day of the week."

"We *know*, okay? We get it. You dealt with shit, and now, you're angry."

"I didn't deal with 'shit.' I dealt with a septic overflow. And I'm not angry; I'm enraged."

"For Net's sake, move on already," I shout-whisper. A few nearby nurses side-eye our argument, but they're legacy, not recruits, so I continue my tirade. "Move on, or your past will destroy you."

"It already has," she says and shoves by me toward the wall.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Growing the balls you won't." RJ slips on her gloves, accesses the Net, and taps a cadence on a console. "Running scans, setting tests, hiding drones within the diagnostic system."

"Stop it, RJ." I tug at her gloves, but she bitch-slaps my face. "They'll find you."

"Kaj, I erased myself from the Net. Do you really think I can't hide a few turds in the pipeline? Don't insult me."

"I'm not insulting you. I'm trying to protect you."

"That'd be a first. You're usually the one calling an ambulance while I do the dirty work alone. Relax, sweetheart. They'll never know."

Relaxation plus RJ is a paradox—both can't exist at once. So I leave her to her hack and wander to an empty bed, a bed recently filled with Jace's scrawny form.

I worry about him, especially now that he's sick. He's so small, so skinny, so tiny and taut. *Taut? Really, Kaj?* I shiver away heated memories of his mouth on mine, of our legs intertwined, inside each other, untying nerves one doubt at a time. This is a *job*. He is a *colleague*. *Icarus* is a means to an end. But to *what* end? Cybs? Something more? As much as I fight her, RJ is right. There's something dark here, something sinister, an inescapable monster hidden beneath the celestial bed.

The Infirmary simmers with patients' groans. Fever consumes them as they sweat through their sheets, white soaked gray. Fatigue drains them, but delusions devour them. It's

odd, though. Their delusions are constant—different between patients, but for each patient, the same delusion reruns. For instance, Jace kept murmuring about a sister, or a goat, as his hazel eyes faded into and out of focus.

True delusions follow no pattern, same as dreams, or nightmares. The brain harvests our emotions, a wild splatter of ideas, and coalesces them into something abstract, something mutable. But these delusions replay without fluctuation, the same dream sawed through mangled psyches in infinite loops of watch, relive, repeat. Though I fear they're not delusions at all.

Jace told me he has a sister...or had? Regardless, he evaded talk of her on our first date, the first time he opened, if only a smidge. Could these delusions be flashbacks? Memories restated, reiterated, recited ad infinitum? That paired with Diogen...

No.

Let RJ handle conspiracy theories. That's her brand, her blunt hammer to the Ward's face. She's the rebel; I'm the butler—the timid, loyal, steady servant without opinions or complaints.

But if they hurt Jace...

If they hurt my boy...

My boy? We hardly know each other. But time is insignificant when it comes to love. To *love*? Maybe I'm feverish, too. I check my temperature with hololight, but it blinks normal. No excuse, then. I've fallen into the abyss.

Acidic Vintage

Mazha: 1 Week Post-Launch

“What are you doing?” I ask RJ.
 “Something illegal.” She bends over an Infirmary console, gloves on, hololight sparkling.

“Is that why Kaj ditched you?”

“You catch on quick.”

“And if the Ward finds out?”

“Well, the Ward’s illegal, too, so two negatives cancel each other out.”

The old me would have rattled off Protectorate rules, their lists of laws and labels and limits. But this is the Ward, and the new me—the *changed* me—is afraid. Not of RJ, but of the rest. The nebula. Nursery. Void. Abyss. Mother once called my ideas of right and wrong “naive.” At the time, I fought her. Now, I understand her. Nothing is plain and simple. Nothing is linear and direct. Paths curve, roads widen, and worlds tilt beneath our feet.

I point at RJ's gloves, at the exoskeleton of wires, at nodes that connect her brain to the Net. "It's natural for you. Took me years to adapt. The input was overstimulating, like hallucinations."

"I'm used to voices in my head," RJ says with a slight grin. "Ghosts, too."

"Is that how you erased yourself?" I ask.

"You're subtle as a sword."

"So you said."

"So you remember."

"Fucking Net, you're—"

"Insufferable, infuriating, impossible. Yes, yes, I know, I know," RJ interrupts. But she's less abrasive today—fine-grit sandpaper instead of extra coarse.

"Find anything?" I whisper.

"You'd make a terrible spy," she snorts. "I bet you've never even broken a law."

"Most of us haven't."

"Pity. Crime is fun."

"Not when you hurt people."

"Not all crimes hurt. Most laws are pointless, most felonies harmless. As soon as we evolve, we find new jungles." RJ side-eyes me, gauging my reaction, and softens—yes, *softens*. "Listen, kid, something weird's going on, and...well...watch out, okay?"

"What are you talking about?" I ask, hyperaware of her presence, of her proximity.

Hololight dies, and RJ disconnects from the Net, hack planted amid a forest of code. She removes her gloves and stuffs them into a pocket. "This is no flu. I think it's poisoning."

A boulder drops into my gut. "Poisoning? From what?"

"From Diogen," she says. "There are no reported cases, since

the Ward hoards deep-space data, but it's the only diagnosis that makes sense. It's maddening, though. No known diseases or conditions have this specific set of symptoms."

"Plenty have fever, chills, fatigue, delusions—"

"*Not* delusions. They're flashbacks. *Specific* flashbacks...the same ones each time."

"For every patient?"

RJ shakes her head. "No, they differ between patients, but each patient relives their own flashback on repeat in an endless loop."

"Okay, then...but why are some of us still fine?" I ask.

"Metabolism? Immunodeficiency? No idea. But you're not here to talk about Diogen."

The boulder turns iceberg, and my gut squirms. Most want to be seen, but I shirk from attention after my parents' prison, after Midica's abuse, after the Protectorate's negligence and exploitation. I fought so hard to escape Mother Earth's radicalism, then advocated my worth every day in the Hattusa MedAc—debating how a Midican runt could compete with the Protectorate's elite. Discrimination trails me since birth, first from parents, then from peers. I avoid spotlights, because spotlights become firing squads with one wrongly inflected word.

"Mazha?" RJ stares down at me with her vintage of concern—slight acidity with a sweet aftertaste. "I'd ask if you're okay, but I assume we're all wrecks at this point." I start to answer, but she barrels on. "Sorry about the other night. I was stupid, and my fuck-ups shouldn't have woken you up—even if your bedtime is midafternoon." A smile twists her lips, her red eyes flash fire, and the iceberg in my gut melts into a whirlpool.

"No worries. It's my job." Was it only two days ago? Seems

eons since we were alone.

"Your job is therapy, not babysitting, and I was a cunt," she says. "So I'm sorry, I suck, I'm clearing the air, yadda yadda yadda. Anyway, why *are* you here? You never answered."

"On *Icarus*?" I ask.

"Don't play the dumb blonde with me," RJ says. "Why are you *here*, standing *near* me?"

The whirlpool roils. "I was curious."

"About the hack?"

"About...you."

She inspects my expression, a scientist learning her experiment. "You're afraid."

"Of course I'm afraid," I say, defensive.

"And you're seeking...what? Comfort? Camaraderie? Sweetheart, you're barking up the wrong fucking tree."

"Yes, because Net forbid you ruin your hostile-asshole reputation. You know what? Never mind. Fuck you, RJ. Fuck you to hell."

I spin on my heel, charge my office, slam the door, and sink behind my desk. *This was a mistake*. I should've left her alone and not played with fire, with knives, with danger embodied. But I *did*. I followed her to the edge of the breach and jumped off the fucking cliff.

"Hey," RJ says, opening my door. "Can I come in?" And it seems she followed me, too.

I glare at her. "By all means, barge in, take what you want, and leave a shitstorm behind."

She shrugs. "Sorry. I'm Sidonese. We aren't the nicest bunch." She shuts the door behind her and sits opposite me. "Back where we started."

"And you're just as cooperative," I snap. I'm done with her

bullshit...and with my own. I search for meaning in messes, sanctuary in sob stories, refuge in riddles when riddles lead only to remorse. RJ is a puzzle to solve, but the picture isn't pretty. Well, it is pretty, very pretty, but—

“Mazha,” RJ says, and her voice is unusually calm. “I know I’m an ass. I deserve all your rage. And this isn’t an excuse, but I’m trying. It’s hard for me to...”

“Talk and not punch?” I offer.

She chuckles. “Exactly. I was in a gang. Boss of one, actually. As you can imagine, we didn’t do heart-to-hearts.”

And there’s her second surrender.

“A gang?” I ask as focus sharpens. “Well, that explains a few things.”

“Yeah,” she says. “We didn’t share feelings. We didn’t work things out. If you disagreed, you fought. If you lost, you died. I left years ago, but ‘polite society’ is still a challenge for me.”

“Then I’ll be less polite.”

“That’s my girl.” Her smile sears all sense from my mind. “Anyway, gotta run. My ‘hostile-asshole reputation’ doesn’t maintain itself.” She winks and stands, then half-turns back toward me. “Oh, kid? I’m afraid, too.”

Love Is Dangerous; Love Is Kind

RJ: 1 Week Post-Launch

Go on. Stab me. I deserve it. For the talk, not the hack. I follow when Mazha runs, and when I run, she follows. *It's dangerous.* That's what Von Rei preach. *Trust no one.* That's what Sidon teaches. *Love will ruin you.* That's what Kraken would say, if he were here, if he could speak.

I'm *nice* to her. I'm kind. I'm sweet. And not in a saccharine, I-hope-you-choke-on-your-tongue sort of way. An actual, authentic, genuine concern. I *care* about her. Worse, she cares about *me*—me, the ex-gang, ex-criminal, ex-murderer piece of shit. Everything's breaking and building in the wrong Net-damn shapes.

I need some air.

Well, some recirculated gas.

So I exit the Infirmary and walk as *Icarus* teases me with whispers, creaks, and shadows.

The halls are empty. Most crewmen squat in the Observatory between shifts, ogling the nebula, the prismatic butcher. Okay, yes, I don't know if Diogen is the culprit, but Von Rei shoot first and ask questions later for good reason. The longer you wait, the more time you give the crook. But I'm not Von Rei anymore, and I haven't been for years, so I keep quiet, play nice, and nod or shake my head in the right places.

I don't trust Captain Heid. I don't trust the Ward. I don't trust the Protectorate, its colonies, or this whole fucking void. The universe is cruel, an existential hoodlum, a cosmic ruffian, a tragic omnibus of skirmish and suffering, an omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient overlord. Sidon is creation's reflection, a mirror of its master. There is no happily-ever-after this far down the rabbit hole.

And speak of the fucking devil...

It strikes again.

Gaard first, Esche second, and third, Javik.

I didn't know him well. Then again, most of us are strangers, as the Ward intends. It's easy to lose a stranger, easier to kill. But is this murder? A serial killer's wet dream? I've seen plenty of death, both natural and forced, yet this strikes me as neither, and my thoughts loop in futile Möbius strips.

Oh, I forgot. You can't see unless I show you. Well, let me open the curtain and invite you inside. Then we can agree this is no flu, no anticontagious oxymoron. Anyway, here he is.

The blood-drained corpse suspends in a vascular spiderweb between bulkheads, hanging above a crimson puddle, same as his predecessors. Arteries and veins coil Javik's freckled neck, wrists, and ankles, ripped through flesh, a lanky, fraying rag doll strung up to dry. Wild red hair haloes his fear-drawn face, algae eyes wide with terror's echoes. His skin—feverish in life, sallow

in death—still shimmers with the sweat of struggle. If I caught him before his end, I'm sure monitors would beep symptoms including fatigue and delusions—or *flashbacks*.

Javik is a copycat death, except for one detail: he's naked, but the others weren't. It's only one detail, but one detail can win a war. And despite the blood beneath his feet, there's also blood in a compromising organ. It's rigid, hard, a signpost aimed down. *Figure this out before others find me*. I follow the phallic finger and spot a shine on his feet.

Wait a sec—a *sec*. Freudian slip...or was it? *Was he jacking off before he died?* Or did he die from wanking it, the sorry simp? His toes are chafed; oil coats his feet...and signpost...along with a splatter of DNA. Did he have a fetish? I don't care, but maybe he did...or maybe his murderer did. Love is dangerous; love is kind. Love massacres nations and ruins minds.

Before my thoughts find reason, Javik begins to bubble—yes, *bubble*. His skin sizzles like meat in a frying pan, flesh rippling between excavated blood vessels. His capillaries waggle, anemones underwater, while his skeleton crackles and crunches as bones burst free. He restructures and reanimates into a ghastly, grisly, winged spider—a massive, airborne tarantula of recycled bone and blood, tied together with macramé arteries and veins. The spider breaks free of its web, a reverse genesis, a Volat-Araneus, a zombified humanoid-arachnid intent on revenge.

The thing Javik became—or rather, the thing that became him, possessed him, escaped him—turns toward me. It grows eight eyeballs—eight blistering bubbles—that gleam with iridescence, and its jaw widens to flash venomous fangs. The spider beats its wings, hovering mid-hallway, the size of a lion with the wrath of a snake.

Well, that's new.

Volat-Araneus

Kaj: 1 Week Post-Launch

I can't stop worrying about Jace. Whenever I see another bed, another patient, another case, I remember him and his sickly mien. It doesn't help that I've been working extra shifts. Fatigue manipulates minds.

So I take a walk to clear my head, to think away exhaustion, to ground myself in a groundless place. That's why I prefer hallways to the Observatory—no windows to see how far we are from home, swallowed by the void, lost in the abyss.

I round a corner and collide with RJ. "Ouch, you bony fuck," I swear, but she doesn't turn, doesn't spit a gibe. That's when I know something's wrong—*really* wrong. So I shake pain from my head and peer past her, down the hall.

Oh.

Shit.

A winged spider glares with eight eyes, flapping midair with dripping fangs. But it looks *human*. Well, like an inside-out

human run through a meat grinder. I recognize bone and blood vessels rearranged into monstrosity...or revealing the monstrosity that always lurked within.

Never mind. This is no time for philosophy. This is time for a holy-fucking-shit-what-the-hell-is-that meltdown.

RJ clamps a hand over my mouth to stop my scream. "Javik," she says. "That was Javik...or that was inside Javik. He's the third."

My horrified mind skitters in circles. "The third what?" I ask through her fingers.

She removes her hand from my mouth and, with a slight shiver, says, "The third death."

Gaard, Esche, Javik. This is no flu. This might be poisoning. But it looks like murder. Or does it? We're in creation's bowels—nothing makes sense in deep space, outside the galaxy. Our anchor snapped free, and we float, becalmed, in Styx's purgatory, the shores far from reach.

"Kaj," RJ hisses as the monster tracks us, "do you have a blastgun?"

"A what?" I ask, unable to form words, never mind thoughts, in the face of its eight eyes and fatal fangs.

"A blastgun."

"Those are illegal."

"That thing's about to eat us, and you worry about rules?" RJ punches my arm, then the bulkhead, and the spider buzzes forward. "What about a holopistol? Bombs? Grenades? Knives? I'll take a bloody mop at this point."

"Nothing," I say. The spider pauses, disoriented, adapting to its new form. If not for its confusion, it wouldn't allow this conversation, and it won't much longer. Spare seconds tick by like the bomb we desire.

"You're horrible in a crisis," RJ says.

"This is a catastrophe, not a crisis. Sorry I can't handle a zombie, mutant, winged spider with grace and panache. Can you rig an explosion? Seal the bulkheads? Something?"

She shakes her head. "*Icarus* has fail-safes against all that."

"But this is an emergency," I say.

"The ship doesn't know that. I tried to contact the Bridge, but holocams and comms are down on this deck."

"Like the first two times."

"Yup. Wanna make a run for it?"

"That...*thing*...can *fly*. We'd never make it, and we can't endanger the crew."

"It's that or fight, and you suck in a fight."

The spider shudders. Venom splashes the corridor and sizzles against metal. It refocuses and rises, glare trained on us. We have no chance. Sorry, Dad and Pa. Sorry, Jace. "Sorry, RJ."

"Don't be," she says. "This is a good death. I'd rather an army butcher me, though. Pity there's only one of them."

"Yes, such a pity," I say, sarcastic. "Thank Net."

RJ snaps toward me with flames in her eyes as a slow smile curls her lips. "Yes, thank *Net*. Cover me."

"What? Why? *How*?"

"I don't know—distract it. You're a shit fighter, but you're great as bait. So play bait."

RJ sprints toward a wall console, and the spider lunges. There's no time to think, react, or move. Its leg pierces my shoulder, throws me back, and pins me to the floor. Pain rips through me, an excruciating tidal wave that drowns me in suffering. My vision sputters, ears ring, mind shrieks to *get up, get out*, but its leg is Excalibur, a sword in a rock with me in the middle.

Some books exit your brain with wings.

Not books. Spiders. Nightmarish beasts breathed into life by regret.

My shoulder wails with agony, but then pressure's gone, my vision's back, my ears quiet, and my mind staggers. The spider skids across the hall, and RJ stands over me with the crowbar that saved me. I don't know where she got it, and I don't ask. She and weapons always find each other.

RJ yanks me to my feet, and I stand, wobbling, as the spider and I recover. "*Play* bait. Don't *be* bait. For fuck's sake, Kaj, I only need a minute. Sixty Net-damn seconds. Try not to get eaten before then." She tosses me the crowbar and heads back toward the console.

"Thanks," I squeak.

The spider shakes and resets, frustrated and enraged. Its gaze flashes red, and it attacks me again. I lift the crowbar and parry, but my shoulder throbs, and I'm losing too much blood. *Come on, RJ. Come on, come on, come on...*

It lunges again. I shut my eyes and swing blind. The crowbar connects with something mushy, one of Javik's repurposed arteries. I crack my eyes. The spider stalls, more annoyed than anything else. Its wings slow, and it lowers itself to my level.

"Aim for the face, asshat," RJ shouts. "Pop those eyes...shatter its fangs...do *something* useful. Forty more seconds, you damsel in distress."

"We don't all play villains," I mutter.

"Well, you suck as bait, so might as well move up in life."

"Or down."

"Same difference."

The spider attacks, and I wield the crowbar as a sword. It's pathetic, I'm pathetic, and the spider senses my weakness. But

as it lunges, a demon unleashed, I lunge, too, and my crowbar finds one of its eight eyes. The bubble bursts with a splat, and bile burns my throat.

"Twenty seconds," RJ calls from her console.

Incensed, the spider charges in a half-stampede, half-dive rage, using all its legs and wings. It's hell incarnate, the underworld made flesh, generations of fear cooked into Frankenstein's monster. And here I am, with a crowbar, in scrubs, shoulder bleeding, wholly inadequate in every way.

Still, I lift the crowbar and swing, eyes open this time. The spider growls as my makeshift sword connects, and one of its hairy legs crunches. Again, I lift and swing and tear a chunk from its wing, but it returns the favor and rips open my gut. Intestines spill to the deck, and pain drags me down.

"Done," RJ shouts, but she's distant, or I am, and nothing else matters except the broken boy in the Engine Room. "Stay with me. Come on, buddy. For once, don't be such a sidekick."

I hear a soft smack as she slips on her gloves, but I'll need holosurgery and soon. RJ's unconcerned. As hololight patches me, she watches the winged spider, and I follow her focus, then forget all my pain.

Around the spider, the air shimmers in a lightning tornado. There's a flash, then a flare, as the corridor blinks solar. Then the storm fades. Then the afterimage dims. Then the spider is gone. A bloody smear paints the floor in Javik's only eulogy.

"Do you know how the Net works, Kaj?" RJ asks. She binds me together best she can, but I'll need the Infirmary within minutes to survive.

"I have...other things...to worry about...now," I wheeze.

"Nanites," she says, tending my mortal wounds. "Gloves connect your brain to the Net, but nanites are always connected,

always collaborating...always conspiring."

"Are you saying...you hacked the Net?" I ask.

"I weaponized it," she says.

"That's...illegal...in both Ward...and Protectorate space."

"We're in neither," she says, "and I just saved your sorry ass *again*, so calm your tits."

"But it's also...impossible," I say. "No one's...done it before."

"Well, I'm no one, and I've done it now, and before. Shh, Kaj. Rest. Dream of your pretty boy. I've got you."

"That doesn't...comfort...me."

"Good. You'll fight harder, then."

But darkness fights hardest.

And so I fall.

* * *

"You did *what*?"

Captain Heid shares my reservations. As soon as I wake from holosurgery, she barges into the Infirmary, throws everyone else out, and traps me and RJ with interrogation.

"I did what I had to," RJ says, arms crossed, gloves over her shoulder. She saved my life. *Again*. Though her heroism is rough around the edges. "Javik was the *third*. This is no flu, and you sure as hell know it. What the fuck are we doing in the cosmic boonies?"

"It's not your concern," Heid says.

"It is if people are dying."

"You weaponized the Net. You turned nanites into bombs. You *disintegrated* Javik."

"It wasn't Javik anymore. Don't play dumb, Captain. You hired me for this reason, *because* I can hack the Net. You knew

I'd need to, but why? What aren't you telling us? I'm done with your games, and unless you spill, I walk."

Heid scoffs. "Walk where? We're in deep space. *Icarus* is your only way home."

"I have no home," RJ says, "and at this point, I don't give a shit. I won't stand by while you run this little...experiment."

The captain's jaw tenses, and she narrows her beady eyes. "The implications for this hack are colossal. If you can dissolve a person with a few lines of code, imagine what that means for intergalactic warfare."

"I've already imagined it, and that's why I've told no one. You've imagined it, too, and that's why you hired me. Just as the Ward-Protectorate feud boils over, this mission crops up with a convenient excuse. Self-defense, right? We *had* to do it. Make martyrs out of test subjects, and claim scientific progress. Your ambitions are clear, but there are worse forces than the Protectorate out there, stronger forces itching for a fight."

Captain Heid pinches the bridge of her nose and inhales a shaky breath. "Leave it, RJ. Idony will take over Javik's responsibilities, and the mission will proceed as scheduled."

"What about the crew?" RJ asks. "You can't hide this anymore. Something happened to Javik, and it could happen to us all... unless that's your plan."

"Leave it," Heid repeats. "You're one step from an airlock."

"No, I'm not. You need me, and as far as I can see, your experiment is failing. Careful, Captain. Don't burn yourself on the backlash."

But RJ does leave it, with me in her wake. I smile at Heid, weak and pale, a body in a hospital bed not far from the grave.

"You're supposed to control her, Ensign," the captain says.

"She saved my life," I say. "With all due respect, Captain, I

don't trust you, either."

Well, that's out of character. Blame the holomeds.

"It's not about trust," Heid says. "It's about duty. Do your job, or we'll pull the cybs."

"Pull the cybs, and I'll tell the Protectorate," I say.

"Tell the Protectorate, and we'll fire Jace."

And by fire, she means...

Checkmate.

Balance Bittersweet

Kaj: Age 18

“Kaj, you won.”
Some books exit your brain with wings.
Some stories spoil your soul with hope.
 “You won, Kaj.”
Some words sink ships with fanged truth.
Some tales pierce enemies’ hearts and swivel history’s globe.
 “Kaj?”
Some myths blaze downpours of fury.
Some rumors tighten ignorance’s rope.
 “You okay?”
Some legends trade wisdom for youth.
Some sagas rip open worlds and string time in kaleidoscope.
 “I won,” I whisper.
 Mr. Randall grins. “I’m not surprised. Congratulations, Kaj.
 You deserve every joy.”
 I hear him, but I don’t understand. I’m still in shock. Applying

was a pipe dream; winning was an impossibility. Till it wasn't. I read the tablet again, for the dozenth time, branding words onto my mind, carving moments into my soul.

Dear Kaj of Damascus, Protectorate Citizen 1717B.5915A,

We are pleased to inform you that, out of 451,989,128 applicants, you have won first place in the Colonial Poetry Tournament. Your prize includes publication of your poem, "Fanged Truth," in the intergalactic holozine, Speculasis, as well as a featured spotlight in the holofeed, Young Minds in Old Souls.

Congratulations on this achievement. We look forward to your bright, creative future.

*Respectfully,
Colonial Writers Guild*

"Holy shit," I say, then remember Mr. Randall. "I mean...I mean...I...sorry, sir."

The lit teacher chuckles. "No worries at all, Kaj. This is, indeed, a 'holy shit' moment. You should be proud of yourself. I certainly am, and I'm sure your dads are, too."

I flinch. Well, they are...and they're not. They're proud of the award, of the success, of the concrete. But as for the reason behind recognition...let's just say they struggle with abstractions. They're practical, not poetic. Logical, not lyrical. They deal in guarantees, not gambles. My dads keep asking about my future, about next steps, but this is the only road I see...even if it's a dead end.

Mr. Randall claps me on the shoulder. "You're welcome to

stay here, but I have a staff meeting. Ghastly things, if you ask me. A civilized form of medieval torture. Anyway, savor this moment. Let it give you strength.”

He turns on his heel, heads out the door, and leaves me alone in the empty classroom.

I won.

I won.

It’s still raw as a wound. I’m used to disappointment, to depression, to forcing function through the drivel of routine. But I’m not used to *this*, to joy. After a lifetime underwater, fresh air is freeing yet bewildering. Till now, I knew only ocean, the turbulent pressure, the current of failure, the riptide of rejection, the *down, down, down* of a subjugated existence.

Then light filtered through, the stubborn shine of *something greater, something more*. Bubbles became stars, a sky above the waters, the ideated ceiling lifted to reveal imagined infinity. I knew my cage but not its size, and as my universe expands, the horror of happiness thrills my core.

“Kaj, old buddy, it’s been too long.”

Jeje slinks through the door, into the classroom, with her crew of lackeys close behind. She’s a victim turned villain from my elementary school days—you remember her, right? Well, if not, there’s your reminder. She used to be like me—beaten and bullied—but she mimicked the monsters and became one herself. Me? I’m a perpetual victim. Or a victim turned vermin.

“Heard about your prize,” Jeje says. “All that scribbling panned out. Good for you.”

Her lackeys arc behind her, a semicircle of stupidity.

“I don’t want any trouble, Jeje,” I say.

“Trouble?” She laughs. “That’s how you repay congrats? With insults? I’m not who you think I am.”

No, you're worse.

"Sorry, then," I say and stand. The lackeys don't move. Neither does Jeje. "If you don't mind, I'm late for Sociology."

"Silly me," Jeje sneers. She waves a hand, and the lackeys part. Easy. Too easy.

But I'll take the escape.

Wary, I walk through their arc, out the classroom door, and into the hallway.

"Oh, Kaj?" Jeje says from behind me.

And here's the catch.

"Lucky you submitted that poem," she says.

Don't take the bait.

But I ignore myself, as most ignore me.

"What do you mean?" I ask, turning around.

"It's all you have left," she says.

Ice spikes my gut. "Sorry...?"

"You shouldn't trust school tech," Jeje says. "Sloppy firewalls. Preschool-level security. A toddler could've hacked the system."

"Jeje, what have you done?" I whisper.

"Freed you," she says with a twinkle in her eyes. "You get to start over. Build from scratch. Your old stuff sucked, anyway."

No, she didn't...she couldn't...

"I wiped your writing," Jeje says, confirming my deepest fear. "All of it...well, except that poem. Can't hack *Specularis* unless I want exile to the Ward."

"You...erased...my...work?" I tremble, seething, a teapot at full boil.

"Blame yourself. Don't know why you stored it on school servers."

"Because I thought they were secure. I thought they had backups."

"Then you have a lot to learn about the worlds, buddy. Budget cuts hit schools first, and Damascus suffers big time. Guess your head was too far up your ass to notice."

They deleted it. *All* of it. Except for "Fanged Truth." *Speculasis* will still publish the poem, but outside of that, I have *nothing*. I'm back to zero. So many ideas, so much inertia...*gone*. Yes, I can start something new, but stories take years to plant, to water, to grow. A blank slate isn't freedom; it's failure. I regress to childhood, and my future looms ever closer.

A stronger person—perhaps a better person—would punish Jeje and her lackeys for what they did. A beating, an outwitting...even a tattling. But I'm weak. And the worst. And a coward in all ways. They drew no blood, yet they bullied me hardest today. So I slump and trudge, weighted by collapse, by isolation, by crippling loneliness. No friends come to my aid. Hell, even I don't come to my aid.

"Thanks," I say by accident, too used to submission, to forcing gratitude for savagery.

Jeje laughs again. "Thanks?"

"Sorry." Sorry for existing, a reflexive apology, a reactive amends to barbaric society.

I should tell Mr. Randall.

But he's in a meeting.

Then I should tell my dads.

And I will.

Yet they'll use it as an excuse. *It's a sign, Kaj. Time to move on*. But isn't victory a sign, too? I won. *I won. I fucking won*. Then I lost everything, a balance bittersweet. I'm still alone, still searching, still treading water through life. Dad will nudge me toward MedAc applications, and Pa will offer to pay tuition, *if* I become a nurse. Then this crazy dream of writing, of creating,

of rendering worlds with words, will vanish forever. I'll be a cog in the system, a tooth on a gear, winding ever tighter till one day we all snap.

Human-Shaped Bomb

Mazha: 1 Week Post-Launch

The Infirmary boils over. Rumors of the winged spider, the zombie insect, trickle through *Icarus*, through corridors, ping-ponging from mind to mind till fear corrupts truth.

Only one fact is clear: RJ killed it. How? Well, that's where creativity ruptures reality. Some say a crowbar. Others say a knife. Dramatists claim hand-to-hand combat, while academics argue chemicals. Knowing RJ, it could have been all the above... and more. I'd ask her myself, but she's been absent since it happened, delivering a baby in the tiny maternity ward set inside the back wall. The door has remained closed for hours, sealed against percolating gossip.

I'm surprised the Ward recruited a pregnant mother. Then again, I'm surprised a pregnant mother enlisted with the Ward. But these are desperate, crazy, cursed times, and money makes monsters of us all.

The door opens; a wail escapes, tender and raw, a scrape of air against newborn lungs. RJ exits, scrubs bloodied from the birth, and nurses replace her inside the small room. All mouths stop, and all eyes trail her, but her gaze is a harpoon, and each question would die a whale.

Yet instead of leaving the Infirmary, she heads into my office and motions for me to follow. I pause, confused. Her shift is over. She can return to her quarters, clean up, drink herself into oblivion, or whatever she does for fun. But she doesn't. She taps her foot, impatient, waiting in the doorway.

I oblige—I must—and shut the door behind us. “*Now*, you want therapy?” I ask, nervous.

“What can I say?” RJ rasps. “I can’t stay away.”

But there’s no jest in her tone, no tease in her timbre. She’s drained and exhausted, melted down to basics.

We sit across from each other, divided by my desk, as I wait for her to breach the silence. Push RJ too fast, and she flares in your face, like synthosine on fire, but linger too long, and she’ll leap away, flighty as a bird at sea.

“I assume you heard about the...you know.” RJ cradles her head in her hands. Tension ropes her shoulders, Atlas beneath the worlds.

“Yes,” I say, assuming she means the spider and not the other messes she’s made.

“It was Javik. That...*thing*...was Javik.”

“The Ops Officer?”

“Yeah.”

I hesitate, panic, smother my OCD with logic and reason. “RJ, it couldn’t have been—”

“Don’t fucking patronize me,” she snaps. “I know what I saw. And yes, I told the captain. She doesn’t give a shit.”

"How did you kill it?" I ask, hoping her murder hobby will clarify details.

"If you don't believe me about Javik, you won't believe me about this."

"Fine, I believe you. Now, tell me."

RJ pauses, lifts her head, scans me like prey. "I hacked the Net."

"That's impossible," I say, "and illegal."

"Two words I've never obeyed."

"Then prove it."

"Prove what?"

"That you hacked the Net."

"Are you asking me to break the law again?"

I don't know—am I? It's what Midicans fear most, that nanites are slaves to humanity's whims, that someone could weaponize the Net as a traitorous hound. Mother and Father cautioned of its "evil," but I never heeded their warnings, because I need the Net for holopsychology—everyone needs it for something, and we all excuse what we need. However, RJ's ability concerns me. I never thought I'd agree with my fellow Midicans—and I don't agree with their violence or forced submission—but I do worry what this means.

"Don't worry," RJ says, a mind reader as well. "I'm the only one who can."

"How do you know that?" Anxiety seeps into my voice.

2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256...

"Because I killed those who taught me," she says, "for the good of the galaxy, of course."

I pale, and she laughs, but it's humorless as shame.

"Listen, kid," she continues, "Sidon ain't like Midica. Morality is a luxury there. But I've moved on and changed...for better

or worse. And I won't prove it to you, that I can hack the Net. I'd hoped you'd trust me by now."

"Trust you?" I ask. "We've known each other *days*, and you confessed to *murder*."

"We've all done things we're not proud of," she says.

"But you *are* proud of it. You're proud of who you were, but not of who you are."

RJ tenses as I scratch at truth. "Guess Hattusa taught you right. Anyway, I'm not here because of Javik...or the spider...or whatever the fuck you believe. I'm here because of the newborn. If this is Diogen poisoning, we must protect him."

"What do you suggest?" I ask, relieved to segue from murder.

"Keep him in maternity. Reinforce the walls with hololight," RJ says.

"You don't need me to do that."

"I don't *need* you to, but I *want* you to. I'm wiped after Javik, after the delivery. But if you're busy finger-painting, I'll ask someone else."

"And here I thought we could make it one session without you insulting my youth."

"This isn't a session; this is a meeting. Never mind. I'll ask a nurse."

"Why are you *really* here, RJ?" I ask.

"For the money," she says.

"No, not on the ship. Why are you in my office? You make small talk, yet you hate gossip. Was it the delivery? Did it—"

"Gotta go." She stands and leaves, an insufferable mystery. The door slams behind her, and she exits the Infirmary.

What the fuck was that about?

It's no use wondering. She's RJ, a human-shaped bomb—an explosive, destructive rocket launched straight at my heart.

There's something more here—something soft, something fragile—but she guards it with artillery large enough to fell a planet.

Secret in the Dark

RJ: Age 18

“**M**arry me, RJ,” Dimo says.
 “Are you fucking serious?” I ask as we tandem-ride a hoverbike through Sidon’s outskirts.

He squeezes my waist and taps my helmet with his own. “We’ve watched over each other for two years—why not watch over each other forever?”

“I’m not wife material.”

“So we have a nontraditional arrangement,” he says.

“I can’t tie myself to anyone. I have unfinished business.” Revenge against Kraken, against Von Rei, against Sidon...and then some. My parents’ ghosts demand retribution. No, wait, that’s me.

“What happens when business finishes? What will you do then?”

I shrug as neon streams by us, blurs of buildings and fluorescent smears.

"Do you love me?" Dimo asks.

"Hmm?"

"Don't play dumb."

"Of course I love you," I say. "But love is one thing, and marriage is another. Don't you want freedom?"

"Marriage is freedom to me," he says. "It's freedom from the fear of losing you."

"You've been watching too many holoroms."

"And you've been sneaking away too often. What is this unfinished business? What's more important than me, than your future?"

My one purpose in life. When it's removed, I don't know what remains.

"Don't worry about it," I say.

"I always worry about you," Dimo says.

"You're clingy."

"I'm *concerned*. You're so tunnel-visioned. What happens when all this is over, when there's nowhere left to run? What will you do then?"

"Whatever's in front of me."

"For fuck's sake, RJ, you don't have to be this anymore."

I skid to a stop outside a grimy warehouse and toss Dimo from the hoverbike. He flies off the back, a leather tumbleweed, and bounces to his feet, enraged.

"What the hell is your problem?" he bellows. I've never seen him like this. His soft, lanky features sharpen into razors, his strawberry-blond hair frizzes in agitation, and his gray-blue eyes churn in storm. "Why do you make it so difficult for people to love you?"

I unmount the hoverbike. "Do you *really* want me to answer that?" I shove him backward, toward the warehouse, and he

staggers along the pavement, scuffing his shoes. "This is Sidon. You know what happens here. You know what we must become to survive."

"You Sidonese are all narcissists," Dimo says. "You think you're the only ones with problems, but there's a whole Net-damn Protectorate out there with tons of fucked-up colonies. We've all been through shit. We've all lost someone. Get over it, RJ, or you'll lose everyone."

"I don't need anyone else," I say as I push past him.

He hooks my elbow and spins me to face him. His gaze glitters poison in the humid, cybercity night. "Tell me to my face. Tell me you don't need me, and I'll walk away forever."

"Asshole," I say and punch his face with my free hand.

Dimo jerks back and cups his nose. Blood gushes between his fingers. "You think Von Rei are the enemy?" he asks, voice nasal with gore. "Well, you're their boss. All their crimes, all their kills, are on *you*. You claim revenge, or some other bullshit, but you *like* this; you've liked it from the start. No rules, no laws, no consequences. You think you hide things from me, but you don't. I'm not an idiot; I see and know everything. I've ignored it till now, and I'll keep ignoring it if you *let me in*. So tell me to go. Tell me to walk away. Or take a chance on something that lasts."

I scoff. But he's right. I can't tell him to go. I can't watch him walk. Try as I may to push him away, he always slingshots back, a boomerang of commitment. We're in too deep, loyal to a fault. This is why I don't do friends; they're baggage, chains, anchors that dock you in familiar waters on complacent shores.

"You can't blackmail me into marriage," I say, walking toward the warehouse.

Dimo follows close behind, too close for comfort, for control,

the detonator to my chaos. "I'm not blackmailing you. I just want to talk, preferably without punching." He wipes his bloody nose, and scarlet streaks his face. "Logically, it makes sense. We'd combine our assets, and if anything happens to either of us, all we've worked for wouldn't go to waste."

"I don't give a shit about legacy."

"Then you're shortsighted. What happens after Sidon? What if you have kids?"

I freeze and whip around to face him. "Kids? Are you out of your Net-damn mind? I'm a gang boss. People'd exploit any weakness."

"You won't be a gang boss forever," he says. "And kids aren't a weakness; they'd reflect your strength. Just think about it. Marriage, not kids."

"Dimo, we're about to steal illegal blastgun shipments from that warehouse. If we get caught today, only one of us would take the fall. Married, we'd be legally joined, and the Sidonese government would incarcerate us both. It's not worth the risk, not while we're Von Rei."

"It's worth the risk for me. I'd rather fall together than rise alone."

"I won't endanger you," I whisper.

He smiles. "So you *do* care about me, after all."

"Hence, why I won't marry you."

"Hence, why you should marry me. I'd be under your protection. If any harm comes to the Von Rei boss's spouse, there'd be hell to pay. Marry me. Protect me. And if anything happens to you, I'll finish your revenge."

I stall, and pause, and realize I must. My parents deserve this—that's my excuse to myself. And I need him—that's my secret in the dark.

“Thought you’d like that,” Dimo says. “I love you, and I know our love isn’t normal, or common, or ordinary, but it’s love. That’s all that matters. So I’ll ask one more time, at the risk of you punching me, and if you say no, I’ll never mention it again. Will you marry me, RJ?”

I stare at him, at this gentle boy, at this magnetic aura who radiates compassion. He doesn’t belong here. Then again, he didn’t belong on Babylon, either. Perhaps “belonging” is an ancient concept preserved by traditionalists who always fit in. If you lock into place, why escape your bounds? Never mind. That’s too deep for Sidon, a planet of primordial power and rage. As Dimo said, logically, it makes sense. Two instead of one, a backup, an insurance. And illogically, it makes sense, too. No one wants to be alone forever. Even the Von Rei boss.

“Okay,” I say.

Dimo beams like the suns. “Okay.”

We shake, then kiss, then sign our lives together in the Net.

And then we steal the guns.

Skeleton Crew

RJ: 2 Weeks Post-Launch

A week has passed since the Javik fiasco, and three more followed in his bloody footsteps. Mik'valo, Dunavard, and Idony—our pilot, lead Science Officer, and lead Communications Officer—were strung out, exsanguinated, and mutated into insects. For hours, three winged spiders terrorized the corridors, dragging casualties into the same abyss. We lost ensigns and interns in the crossfire, but finally, Captain Heid ceded and let me do what I do best: make weapons. Break rules. Hack the Net, and use nanites as blastguns.

Icarus struggles to function with this skeleton crew, and most crewmen are sick. It's only a matter of time before men become monsters and ghosts become gore. To say most are panicking would be an egregious understatement—the type of understatement I'd say as the Von Rei boss, in another place, in another life. *Tell us the truth, and we'll let you go free.* But conditional freedom isn't freedom at all, and the truth is a

savage, greedy, ambiguous thing. So easy to claim payment due when the price is eternity.

Anyway, I've escaped the Infirmary for now, broken away from the flood of illness, overworked and overtaxed, exhausted and fatigued. Kaj and Mazha cover for me, as I covered for them mere hours ago. At least the harvest is a success, the pretense for our pain. I don't know if Diogen is poisoning the crew, or if it's the reason behind the zombie spiders, but I've never heard of poison that births demons from death. However, we are in deep space, where rules don't apply, where laws of physics turn toward each other and laugh, then cackle, then spit in our eyes.

"Good to see you again, Doctor. It's been too long," Zariah says as I enter the empty Mess Hall. Most crew cower in their quarters, as if walls can worry away fate.

I sit at the counter. "Well, you know, people to threaten, bodies to bury. Same old shit."

The stocky man chuckles. "Your day sounds far more exciting than mine." He has a way about him, a talent to make-believe normalcy in the dregs of despair. It's annoying...yet endearing.

"Give me your worst." I motion toward the hard liquor.

"It's too early for that, kid."

"We're in deep space. Time doesn't exist. Give me alcohol, or I'll find someone who will."

"Eat for me, then I'll pour you a drink," Zariah says, olive skin crinkling in a smile. His bright emerald eyes glint with paternal mischief beneath his disheveled black and silver hair.

"Pour me a drink, then I'll eat," I return.

"Doc, I raised four rambunctious sons single-handedly. I know every trick in the book."

Forgot about that. Razz, Mads, Dag, and Berg, the lead Tactical Officers, are his.

"Are you implying I'm lying?" I ask.

"Not implying," Zariah says. "Accusing."

"Fine." I'm too tired to argue. This mission is a nightmare, a surreal and sadistic dream.

"Great." Zariah gathers ingredients, bangs pans together, and sparks stovetops into being. Soon, a garlicky cloud thickens the Mess Hall, and my eyes water from the strong scent.

"How are your joints?" I ask. "Still adjusting to normal gravity?"

He grins as he sautés. "So you do remember."

"It's my job to remember. I can prescribe holomeds for the pain." Before *Icarus*, he was stationed on an old-fart ship, *Gēras*, a low-gravity ionjet cruiser. Easy on joints, hard on egos.

"I like pain," Zariah says. "Reminds me I'm alive." He sets a plate before me, a sautéed medley of peppers, onions, garlic, eggplant, zucchini, tomatoes, and peas.

"What's this?" I ask.

"Ciambotta," Zariah says.

"Meaning...?"

"Just eat. You're too skinny to ask questions."

I take a tentative bite, then another, then a third. It's good. Better than good. Then I realize I'm starving, that I neglected desire for duty yet again.

I finish the ciambotta, but before Zariah can reward me with a drink, Captain Heid strolls in, winks at him, and glares at me.

"What are you doing here?" she demands.

"Eating," I say.

Her glare intensifies. "It's still your shift."

"Kaj and Mazha are covering for me. I haven't eaten all day, and unless you'd like me to faint on the job, I still need food."

"Back to work," the captain says. "Now."

"Heid, please," Zariah says. "She's skin and bones. A quick meal won't upset routine."

I expect her to snap, to tear him a new one, then rip a hole in me. But she doesn't. Instead, she softens, then smiles, then cedes to us both. "You're right. Sorry. All these double shifts affect me, too. As you were, Doctor."

What the fuck?

Oh, that's it. She wants to fuck him. Forgot about that, too. But there's something more. The captain sways, flushed and confused. Is she...*sick*? Oh, shit. Oh, no, no, no. Not only does her experiment backfire, it takes her with it. The captain always goes down with her ship, but there are no lifeboats for the rest of us to escape.

I slip on my gloves and scan her with hololight. "You're burning up, Captain. How long have you felt like this?" *How long till you crack?*

"I'm fine," Heid says.

She's not, but Zariah is. Peculiar. Significant. A riddle for the privileged. But we don't have time for luxuriant speculation, not while in the universe's sewer.

"Leave us, RJ," the captain says. "Back to your shift."

I nod, then face Zariah. "You owe me a drink." But I leave, obey, shuffle back through the ship's carcass. Halls echo silent nightmares as *Icarus* plays tomb.

Lachrymose Chainsaws

Jace: 2 Weeks Post-Launch

I'm frozen. Feverish. Burning alive with icy flames.

Fires roar through my head, through my heart, to the soundtrack of Glar's pestering. *Jace, do this. Jace, do that. Jace, too slow. Jace, too fast.* Everything is wrong. Nothing is enough. I am a glitch in the code, no matter my effort. If I finish late, I should work faster. If I finish early, I should work smarter. If I finish on time, I take the blame for someone else and spear myself on karma's sword. But if Glar plagues me again, if I see his mousy hair or bloodshot eyes, his ashen skin or timid frame, I promise I'll fucking—

"Jace?"

That's not Glar's voice. But I see Glar there, in the entrance to the Engine Room, along with another, a familiar—and welcome—face.

"Kaj?" I ask.

The slight man nods. "Lieutenant Glar, may I borrow Jace

for a bit? We'd like to run some tests on him in the Infirmary."

"No," Glar says. "Not the Infirmary. You have five minutes here, in the corridor. Then I need him back for the harvest."

He doesn't need me for the mind-numbing harvest. He needs me to harass, to assert his mediocrity, to pretend he's more than a lumpy sack of useless flesh.

"I'd prefer the Infirmary," Kaj says, an unexpected edge in his voice. "He's sick, and we have the proper tools there. If there's an issue, I'll ask RJ to—"

Glar snorts. "The holosurgeon holds no sway here. Either get a note from the captain, or use the now—" He checks his watch. "—four minutes and forty-seven seconds remaining."

Kaj bites back a retort and motions for me to follow him. I stagger into the hallway and slump to the floor. He kneels beside me and uses his gloves to scan me with hololight. I close my eyes, and diagnostics dapple the insides of my eyelids.

Jacccccccccccccccccc...

Let me inside, Jace.

I fear you've always been here, Saia.

Sissy always has your best interests at heart.

"Sorry," Kaj murmurs. "I didn't think it possible for Glar to be an even bigger dick."

"He's quite erect lately," I say.

Kaj laughs. "If he's not careful, I swear I'll..."

"Castrate him?" I offer.

"Indirectly," he says.

"RJ?"

"Precisely."

Oh, you gentle soul.

I cough and open my eyes. Kaj is close—too close, not close enough—and his intense black eyes scrutinize me, brow drawn

in concern. “You’re still feverish and fatigued, from my scans. Muscle aches, too, and possible delusions. But you’re stable, for the most part, at least more than the other patients. How do you feel?”

The question melts me. How do I *feel*? Feeling insinuates being insinuates agency. I’m usually a puppet—a flat character stuffed into a scene, overshadowed by leads, a step above ensemble. I have a name, yet not a credit. A face, yet not a feature. I’m middling, unremarkable, in a pedestrian, forgettable role. But Kaj sees me, cares about me, is kind to me. I thought I was a booty call, like I was to all the others, yet he keeps following, regardless of how often and how far I push him away.

Just wait till I tell them the truth.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay, love,” Kaj says as he wipes unnoticed tears from my cheeks.

I’m crying? Since when? I feel nothing, yet I feel everything, and this dichotomy drowns me beneath fear and hope. I *want* to trust him, though I trusted Saia and Coach, too. But Kaj is different...right? Right?!

“I’d never hurt you, Jace,” Kaj whispers. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

They’ll never believe a skeleton.

The flood bursts free. Sobs ravage my body, lachrymose chainsaws of release, of revenge. I buried everything too long, closed the lid on too many coffins, slammed shut too many doors that now rebound in my face. Kaj doesn’t react, doesn’t judge, doesn’t leave. Instead, he sits and wraps an arm around my back as kindness exorcizes decades of pain.

That’s it, sweetheart. There you go, baby boy.

After a few minutes, there’s an impatient tap behind us from

Glar. "Time's up," he grunts and returns to the Engine Room without noticing my breakdown—or without caring.

"Fuck, I'm sorry," I say, rubbing my eyes.

"Sorry? For what?" Kaj asks. "You did nothing wrong, Jace. Don't apologize for existing." He helps wipe away the rest of my tears—gentle yet firm. "I'd take you to the Infirmary, but your boss is a douche. However, if you feel worse, contact me."

"Okay," I say, weak as always, a mushy heap of soggy inadequacy. With the illness—or whatever it is—and the exhaustion, my parasite rears its ugly head. I itch in my body, yearn to tear it off, to don a new frame, sculpted from steel.

You're perfect, Jace.

I shiver away Coach as a gurgle of laughter approaches. Surprising, given the rampant "flu," the recent deaths, the reactionary panic, and the escalating sense of entrapment, of isolation. The void is claustrophobic—an oxymoron, I know—yet vastness is monotonous. There's nowhere we can go. Nothing we can do. And so infinity shrinks with wasted opportunity.

"Hey, Jace. Hey, Kaj," the passersby chorus. There are four of them, identical quadruplets, the lead Tactical Officers—Lieutenants Razz, Mads, Dag, and Berg. Their shaved heads bob in synchronous stride as their huge frames weave through the narrow corridor.

"How's it going, boys?" Kaj asks as I plaster on a smile.

"Fantastic," Berg says.

"Divine," Mads says.

"Wicked," Razz says.

"Epic," Dag says.

Not the expected reactions. They're on the same ship, right? In the same book? Stuck in the same sadistic story?

"Feeling good?" Kaj asks, a hint of skepticism in his tone.

"Yep," they all say, and they all mean it. Joy bounces their movements, twinkles their gray eyes, and flushes their olive skin with glee, with youth.

The quad turns a corner, out of view, and Kaj mumbles, "Odd."

"What's odd?" I ask.

"They're happy...and healthy. But cases have gone up. Most are showing early symptoms, and yet..." He shakes his head. "Never mind. They must be a fluke. I'm glad they're good. Just confused."

"What about you?" I ask. "Are you...good? After the...spider?"

I mentally kick myself for not asking sooner, for not checking on him a week ago when it happened, when RJ saved his life after the attack. He almost *died*, and I did nothing because of this "flu," because of Glar, because of *life*. Life is always the excuse for not living. And in my emotional cleansing, my soul-wrenching detox, I forgot to mention it till now. Though now is too late. Glar waits inside the Engine Room, and the Infirmary beckons Kaj. We're both bound by duty, unleashed from humanity.

Kaj smiles. "I'm fine, Jace."

"Really?" I ask.

"Really."

"I worried you'd...I worried it would..." My voice trails off, suffocated by terror.

He smiles yet again, a gentle grin, always consoling me through this doomed, cursed mission. "RJ's a pain in the ass, but she's always got my back. If I died, she'd have no one to torture, so don't worry about me. As long as she's around, I'm around."

"Promise?" I breathe, afraid to lend the word voice.

"Promise."

“Jace,” Glar barks, and the moment dissolves.

Kaj kisses my forehead and helps me to my feet, then leaves for the Infirmary while I return to the Engine Room. I sway—dizzy, disoriented—but manage to stay upright and finish my shift. Something’s wrong, though. Wrong with me. Wrong with *Icarus*. Wrong with the nebula. Wrong with the nursery. Is Diogen ambrosia? Or is it a poison that possesses our psyches? Am I damned already? Condemned for suffering? Jinxed into the same ghastly, gory fate as Javik, Mik’valo, Dunavard, and Idony? Will I become the same arachnid monster, a spider of nightmares, a zombie fueled by revenge? Or will I just die? Rest in peace? Sleep forever? Or could I heal and fix all I broke?

There were times in my past when I wanted to die, dark cages of depression that seeped hope and stole warmth. This is not one of those times.

Life Is a Sandwich

Mazha: Age 18

Life is a sandwich, hope bracketed by hurt, happiness hidden by harm.

It's been two years. Two years of applications, of rejections, of sorry-you're-not-good-enough autoreplies. I passed the test. I passed the *fucking* test. But the Jericho gamble was a failure. The holopsych admission exam is one part of MedAc acceptance—one *small* part. And I know you will judge me for this chapter, but I *tried*. Net-dammit, I tried. I studied my whole life for a chance, for a door, and poured years into fathomless pits of thankless toil. What are they looking for? What the *fuck* do they need?

My dream has become a nightmare. I've wanted to study holopsychology forever—shunning my family, my home, my legacy to pursue *this*, to be *this*—but holopsychology doesn't want me. Every day, I beg myself to stay. Every night, I pray it lasts forever. Life is one long debate with myself to not cut,

shoot, drown, end.

How many times can you hear no before believing it?

Two times? Four Times? Eight times? Sixteen? Thirty-two?
64, 128, 256, 512, 1024...

Stop.

I tried. And I failed. And I admit my defeat.

I can't fight anymore—it's no use flogging the corpse of my dream—and I've nothing to look forward to. They cut my last string of hope, and pain becomes power. If I'm denied the life I want to lead, I'll take the life that cursed me.

So I take the small knife—insignificant, like me—and channel all my brutal angst, all my existential rage, into a quick, decisive stroke. A gasp escapes me. There's pain. *Agony*. Overwhelming and exhilarating. So much more—so much *better*—than the other times I cut, the times I hedged, the times I stalled, the times I limited myself because of a mere, pathetic, improbable possibility. But possible turned impossible, and limits became limitless.

I slice my wrist again and paint my forearm red. Moonlight mottles the Moon Vault's arches as seven satellites witness my unholy demise. This is not the Midican way. As with all else, this world of worship is intolerant of struggle. The planet disapproves in a scream of moonlight, in the shrewdness of Gothic spires, in the haunting echoes of her floating sky city, yet still, I cut. And cut. And cut, and *cut*, and *cut*. Excruciation frees me—a shrill pierce of clarity, a fleeting window of answers, of purpose, of meaning beyond madness.

But madness wins. It always does. Scarlet drenches my paling skin, and I laugh at the encroaching abyss. I won. *I won*. You fucking piece of shit. I gave this life my all, yet only death repays with peace. Blood bubbles from my wrists, my monsters set

free, and I laugh again, flinch again, scowl at fate's chains and destiny's cruelty as I outwit their callous detention.

I wish I felt regret. I wish I suffered shame. But I don't. Not here. Not now. Not in the crimson sea. Not while I make the one decision I can to reclaim power long stolen from me. So I sink to the stone floor, a smile on my lips, a fuck-you to the worlds the last sign they'll all see.

Good night, moons. Goodbye, Midica. Farewell, Mother Earth, if you exist, unlike me.

See Me Now

Jace: Age 18

I thought I could escape. I thought Saia left. But I can't. She didn't. We'll never fully part. There's a skeleton in my closet—a literal skeleton. Here. In my dorm room. At Carthage Polytech. This is why I can't have friends. Thank Net I have no roommates. College was supposed to be my renaissance, a redemption arc toward freedom. But it's not. I'm trapped. And I'll never be free.

Do I forget it? Feign ignorance? Play dumb? Claim juvenility? But I'm a kid no more, and this is too big to slide under the rug. *See me now, or never see our moms again.*

That's the note Saia left, taped to a gory rib. The corpse is her signature—a decapitated blood-eagle torso painted with the victim's own blood, with a fancy bow instead of a head (that's in the dresser)—so I know it's from her, I know she's at large, and I know my inaction exacerbated her gruesome ways.

I *did* report her. But they didn't believe my skeleton. Though

perhaps they'll believe this skeleton, if brought with repute. I need someone else to report it for me, an esteemed character with power and prestige.

Coach. He runs the acro team. He can vouch for me. They'll believe him like they never believed me.

I leave the corpse and exit the dorm into the vicious cold, a parka wrapped around my loathed body. The gym is close, but by the time I reach it, I'm shivering violently. Coach is alone—one lucky fluke amid a cursed life.

"Hey, Jace," he says, then scans my face. "Everything okay?"

My face warps with anguish, and my mantra of "hold it together, don't fall apart" melts like snowflakes on blood. I shrug off my parka as tears fall and words abandon me. Coach helps me sit, a large hand on my back, soothing my broken soul.

"I'm here, Jace," he murmurs. "You can tell me anything."

I bite my lip and whimper, "It's bad."

He chuckles. "I'm sure I've heard worse."

"I doubt it."

An eyebrow lifts. "Then I'm intrigued. What happened? How can I help?"

I hesitate. Am I just an athlete to him? Or am I something more? And if he believes me, will he condemn me in Saia's place? The situation is tricky, sticky, an emotional hemorrhage of septic pleas.

"I have a sister," I say, because she's the beginning, because she's the end.

"You don't get along?" Coach asks.

I cringe. "She does...bad things, Coach. *Really* bad things."

"Hmm, I see. Have you reported her?"

"Yes, but no one believed me. I'm rather...dismissible."

"You're anything but," he says, moving closer. "What hap-

pened? What does she do?"

My bottom lip trembles, and Coach squeezes my shoulder, steadying me. "She hurts people," I whisper. "And sometimes... sometimes...sometimes, she does more."

Coach tenses with understanding. "I'm so sorry. I believe you. I'll *always* believe you."

Relief crashes over me, and I slump, at ease. But it's unearned relief. More than one monster lurks in the night.

"She did it again," I say. "Can you maybe...would you mind... could you report it?" And by "it," I mean the corpse leaking in my dorm. "The Protectorate would listen to you."

Coach catches my meaning and winks. I catch his meaning and freeze. *Shit*. I misread him, and now, I'll pay. I could run; he would follow. I could fight; he would win. I flashback to three years ago, when Saia saved me from this fate. But she's not here to save me now, though like then, I wish she were.

"Don't worry," Coach says, his voice a slither, a slimy snake. "I'll take care of you."

But first, you take care of me. That's how this goes. I hear the silent echo of his wicked purpose, of his true intent. Though I'll test him and pray I'm wrong.

"Thank you, Coach," I croak. "Thank you so much. We can go now and—"

A claw shackles my wrist. "No need to rush. The Protectorate isn't going anywhere."

And neither am I.

I squirm and try to wriggle out of his grasp, but he doesn't budge. He's a bear; I'm a bee. He's a wolf; I'm a weasel. Evolution damned me from birth.

"You've been landing all your tricks," Coach says, reeling me toward his putrid scent.

"Please, sir," I whimper. "Don't do this."

"Do what?" he asks, mock-confused. "We're two adults having a chat, helping each other out." But one hand tightens around my wrist, and the other loops around my neck, arches me back, exposes me, renders me vulnerable. "Remove your clothes so we can do a proper weight check."

"No," I say.

In half a second, he drops me to the floor, pins my arms by my sides, and grinds his crime against my leg. I clench my fists, shut my eyes, but tears boil over, and fear spasms my body.

"I'll tell," I gasp. "I'll tell the college."

Coach laughs. "You wouldn't be the first, and they have yet to fire me."

Dread strangles me. "What?"

"They don't care. This is Carthage, not Jericho. If I get results, no one wonders how. You could enjoy this, you know."

I buck against his grip, but he slams me against the floor. Stars sparkle my vision, and a dirge rings in my ears.

"Struggle, and it's hours," Coach hisses. "Surrender, and it's minutes."

So I surrender, as I always have.

It's over quick, yet it lasts forever.

He undresses me, then erases me, and stains everything I was, am, and will become. It hurts. It cripples. It wrenches me apart from the inside out. But what damages me most is that I don't scream. I don't thrash. I don't wrestle him off me, then scramble away, spitting insults in my wake. No, I simply lie there, naked in all ways, and let him invade me, violate me, trespass on everything precious.

"Good boy," Coach says when he's done. He grunts and rocks back on his knees, zips his pants, and smiles like he didn't just

steal my soul. "About your sister, I'm afraid there's nothing I can do. If I report her, the college could implicate me in murder, and I can't have that."

No, you're guilty of far worse.

"So you lied," I rasp, shakily pulling on my clothes, my parka.

"I told you I'd take care of you, and I did," Coach says, his tone saccharine, sickly, sugary, poisonous. "Don't pretend you didn't like it. I saw your eyes. You wanted more."

I heave, swallow bile, and he chuckles as he strokes my jaw.

See me now, or never see our moms again.

Saia's note returns to me, though my spirit never will.

"If you won't help me, I gotta go," I say.

"I did help you, Jace," Coach says, but leans away. "Fine. Go, then. But you'll come back. They all do."

I stand, trip, stagger toward the gym exit, and bisect bone-chilling Carthage alone.

Death's Maw

Mazha: 2.5 Weeks Post-Launch

Ashes, ashes, we all fall down.
The ship is haunted, but we are the ghosts, the sentient secrets, the skeletons in the void's closet. The mission is cursed...or we are. I certainly am, and I deserve it. As for the others? I don't know. But we're all sick now, except for a sparse few—Zariah and his boys, the lucky ones, the flukes. We've run tests in the Infirmary—scanned for aberrations, for abnormalities—but (medically) we're all the same. No differences divide the sick and well, only perception, only pain.

But *where* does the pain come from? What causes the fevers, fatigue, muscle aches, and delusions? I fear the captain knows, yet she's been absent, locked away on the Bridge, removed from the rest of us in her tall, stormy tower.

"Mazha, the doors," RJ shouts from the hall.

Nurses scatter, panicked, as if from a bomb.

“What?” I call over the sudden racket.

“Shut the fucking doors!” She barges forward, bloody and bruised, as a dire scratching crescendoes behind her.

I peek through the opening and flatline. At least it’s still a person. I’m not sure if that makes the monster better or worse. “Feral” is the first word that comes to mind. “Rabid” is the second. But it’s still a victim, a patient, even if it’s lethal. Two cables hang from its hands, the ends molten, spraying fireworks. It aims them at RJ, and she ducks, dodges, rolls aside while mortality breezes by her and chars a console to dust.

I sprint toward the wall and slam a button. RJ dives through the sliding doors as the Infirmary seals itself. We hear the knocking, though. The knocking and the scratching. The scratching is worse.

RJ groans as she stands and enters a sequence into the wall. The knocking stops. The scratching, too. She reopens the doors, but the monster—the *person*—lies unconscious.

“Fix this,” she mumbles to a squad of nurses, and they hurry to put the newest patient on a hospital bed.

Kaj surveys RJ’s battered body, her ripped scrubs, the black cloth frayed and chewed and wrinkled. “You forgot your gloves?”

“I forgot my gloves,” RJ says.

She looks feral, too—feral as the monster. Then again, she always does, like a wild beast who’s seen death’s maw, then laughed and flipped it off. I see the gang boss in her now—the cruel, no-holds-barred intolerance of infraction. Her eyes blaze red, and she slices me with scrutiny as she passes by in a rage.

“What?” she asks, though it’s less a question and more a demand.

“N-n-n-nothing,” I stutter. “I was...I was wondering...” I

motion to her blood, her bruises, her probable broken bones.

"Do you need help?"

"Help?"

"To heal."

"I'm a holosurgeon."

"Right. Stupid question."

"Yes."

RJ storms away, more abrasive than usual. We all are. We all feel like shit. We all suffer this "flu." Her behavior shouldn't bother me, but it does. I thought we'd made progress. I thought we'd sparked trust. But she pushes me away, throws me out, and barrels forward without me—without *needing* me.

I was an idiot to hope. An idiot to dream. An idiot to wish for something better, for something more. So I leave the new patient to nurses, escape to my office, and slam the door. Tears fall before I sit. This is why they're gone. Why I deserve the worst. Why I should have stayed on Midica with my fellow fools and played it safe, played it easy, played it dumb. When I try, I fail. When I fly, I crash. When I rise, I fall. Limits, like labels, exist for a reason, and I fucked everything up to catch a glimpse of the sun. But it melted my wings, so down I drop.

"Hey," comes a voice, comes a knock, comes a visitor. RJ shimmies into my office and shuts the door behind her. She's still bloody, but healed, because she doesn't need me. No one does or ever will.

"Hello," I say as I wipe away tears.

RJ doesn't mention them, or she doesn't care. "Sorry. I know I'm an ass. I'm just sick of this whole..." She waves her hand at the walls, at the ship, at existence. "Well, I'm sick of it all. Didn't mean to snap at you, though. You're the only..." She stops. "Never mind."

"No worries," I say, a lump in my throat.

She squints, sees my smudged tears, notices my ragged breath. "I'm a shit listener, but I'll listen, if you wanna talk."

A smile tugs my lips, succeeded by a sob. The longer she stays, the more I crumble. "No. I'm fine. Thanks, though. I'm sick of it all, too."

RJ nods, then coughs, but she doesn't leave. Her skin yellows with illness, or poisoning, or whatever the fuck curses us, and a clammy sheen dewes her forehead. "You can cry for me, kid. I won't judge. No one should."

No, don't do that. Don't say the right thing at the right time in the right place. Don't disarm me with words.

Yet she does.

Then I fall.

But she catches me.

And holds me together as I shake in her arms.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry," I bawl into her shoulder.

"No reason to apologize," RJ murmurs into my hair. She smells like dried blood and heady cologne as she strokes my back in a soothing waltz. "You'll explode if you don't let go."

Underworld Undone

RJ: Age 18

You asshole," I snap.

"What the hell, RJ?" Dimo asks as I kick his shins.

We're alone in a neon alley, as planned, though we don't have long. The Von Rei boss is always expected, anticipated, required to run Sidon's underworld on time.

"What happened?" he asks, voice hushed, eyes wide.

"You got me pregnant, you Net-damn idiot," I say, "with *twins*."

But instead of panicking, Dimo beams. "You're pregnant? Oh, this is wonderful!"

"Then fucking enlighten me as to how."

"We *must* leave now. We can't raise kids here, on Sidon, as Von Rei."

"You want to keep them?"

His face tightens. "Of course. But if you don't want them, I'll take them."

I backhand his cheek, and Dimo blinks, stunned.

"Net-dammit, RJ," he swears as the sting sets in.

"Of course I want them, you bloody fool," I say. "My concern isn't the pregnancy. My concern is their safety. If we leave Sidon, then what? Von Rei can leave, too. There's nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide. Nowhere to escape their mutilation."

"Well," Dimo says, rubbing his flushed cheek, "that sounds like motive to me. You've planned revenge for years. Now, it's time to take it. Then we can live as husband, wife, and kids. Then we can have a home. Isn't that what you want? To live again? To be yourself again?"

But I died years ago and lost myself along the way. "It wouldn't work," I say, shaking my head. "If it would, I'd have done it sooner."

"You're brilliant. Only fear holds you back. You can do this, RJ." Dimo takes my hands and kisses my knuckles. "We can *be* this. We can both have a family again." He kneels in the alley, rests his hands on my stomach, and kisses my waist with morbid tenderness. "*Please.*" The word is a whisper, a wisp of wind, as he stands again and kisses me in mortal prayer.

"Revenge will endanger them," I say, resting my forehead against his.

"The worlds are dangerous," Dimo says. "Stay, and they suffer, but fight, and we all have a chance at a better life."

So I have no choice. I must set us free. But there's no guarantee. There never is.

"Okay," I say. "*Okay.*"

Dimo beams again, kisses me again, holds me in desperate anticipation. "After this is done, after this is over, you can study for something else...become a lawyer, a doctor, a—"

"Holosurgeon. I'll become a holosurgeon to provide, to protect them. But first..."

His grin widens. "Kill them?"

I nod. "Kill them all."

"And let the void sort them out."

Or Else

Jace: Age 18

What is a body without a soul, when only flesh remains? Is this what it feels like? Numb? Loose? Baggy? Saggy? Sloppy? Soggy? Where nothing fits and everything burns? Where skin is a straitjacket? Where bones are bars of your prison, of your cage?

I asked for help.

And Coach *raped* me.

While I let him.

I should report him. But others have, with repute and esteem, and the college ignored them, as they'd ignore me, same as the Protectorate. I'm too damaged, anyway. Even I wouldn't believe myself. At this point, in the pits of hell, they're more likely to lock *me* up than Coach.

So I'm back to the beginning. Alone, I pierce Carthage's icy, infinite twilight, then burrow beneath her frigid city into an abandoned magtrain tunnel. This one's Saia's favorite, where

she knows I'll follow. Red emergency lighting leads me toward her, splashes of bloody stars against the dark titanium tube.

"My baby dancer, how I've missed you," Saia sings as I approach.

She waits beside a pile of cargo crates arranged in a makeshift bed. Her parka covers it, like a sheet, and a literal dumpster fire warms the area. We're back in the tunnels I can never escape, trapped in morality's underground.

"Got your note," I whisper.

A vandalized corpse plus a threat: *See me now, or never see our moms again*. In other words: *See me now, **or else***. Saia gifted me years apart to pretend at freedom, at normalcy, but the shackles were always there—and the noose, too.

"Did you have fun?" she asks, meaning at college, in my brief taste of escape before her poison tainted my tongue. "Because I had fun, had time to practice, though absence makes the heart—and loins—grow fonder."

I don't answer. I don't care. I've been used and abused and thrown out with the trash, so I stand and wait and suffer.

Saia notices. She always sees me. "Something happened, didn't it?" She strokes my cheek and scans my eyes. "Someone stole you first."

She doesn't know about Coach, but she knows me best. And though her insight doesn't scare me, her last word does. *First*. First? First insinuates a next, another, a repeated—

Oh.

Shit.

I notice again the bed of crates, the blazing dumpster, her sultry stance. *No*. I can't. I won't. I'll break. Shatter. Vanish. Disappear in the deepest abyss. But she's wanted this forever, and karma bends toward her. Sweat sheens her dark skin, and

flames dance in her hazel eyes.

"My poor love," Saia says. She unzips my parka and lays it over hers on the bed. "Let Sissy make it better."

"Please, Saia," I beg, because I'm too weak to fight.

"I know. It's okay. You've wanted this, too."

"No. Please. Don't do this."

She caresses my arms and drops to her knees. "You're broken, Jace. I'll put you back together."

"If I resist?"

"I'll break you even more, and our moms, too."

Another ultimatum, another Coach, another silent struggle buried beneath forced obedience. But Saia's right. I *am* broken. I can't even cry at this point. So I let her undress me and lay me beside her, but *let* is not the same as *want*.

"Here, drink this." Saia hands me a cup. I know it's a drug, and I know what it does. She sees me, knows me, and needs me at my hardest.

I sip the starchy liquid and gag while she strips. Immediately, I stiffen, and lust fills my veins—her lust, not mine. At least desire, even fake, could make this one less invasive.

No. I'm wrong. It makes it more harmful. My body betrays me, as it always has, and bloats with passion as I wobble on insanity's cliff.

Saia eyes my rising form, aches with longing, and tosses her glossy gunmetal hair over her lithe shoulder. "That's it, beautiful. Don't worry. I'll do the work."

She straddles me and moans as we connect. I want it to hurt, like with Coach, yet this one feels good from the drug. But because it feels good, I feel worse, feel dirty. I don't want this—I've *never* wanted this—yet Saia manipulates my mind and harasses my heart.

“Come for Sissy,” she hisses, rocking her hips. “That’s right, baby. Oh, you’re so big.”

Now, tears come, but I can’t feel them, only this—the slap of Saia’s thighs on mine, the ridges of her sex on my own. She speeds up, roughens her dance, and we arch toward hell with a shared, sinful gasp.

“Good boy,” Saia whispers against me. “Because you played nice, I’ll dispose of my gift.” The corpse in my closet. “And you saved our moms. I hope our kids take after you.” She pats her stomach, and I collapse.

Coach, then Saia.

Both stole my soul.

Two attacks within the same day.

There’s nothing left of me.

“Jaccccccceeeeeeee,” Saia coos as she reaches between my legs. “Let me inside, Jace.”

And I do.

A Rose by Any Other Name

Mazha: Age 18

I wake beside two corpses. Dizzy. Disoriented. Drained of all reason, of all recollection.

I was supposed to be one of them, one of the fallen, one of the damned. But I'm not. I'm alive. Somehow. Someway. I try to sit—black out, come to—and swivel, creaking, toward the lost couple.

A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life.

No.

No.

NO.

NO.

This day's black fate on more days doth depend.

I meant for much, but I never meant for this. Sobbing, I crawl toward them, bones scraping the stone floor. Starlight silhouettes them here, in the Moon Vault, in the place I tried to take my life, but instead forced them to take theirs.

I am fortune's fool.

Mother Earth's favorite son riddles my mind—a deity Midicans quote ad infinitum, repeat ad nauseam, till the cycle restarts. It's an ancient text—a myth, really—but stories outlast lives, loopholes to achieve immortality.

These violent delights have violent ends.

Violent, indeed, because of me. Bawls escape. Howls, too. Anguish echoes off arches, unheard and unnoticed, while I disintegrate within grief's cruel embrace.

Under love's heavy burden do I sink.

I loved them. I hated them. I suffered because of them. Yet they were mine—my family, my home. Now, they're not. They're bloodless wraiths, leaking on rock. No longer Mother and Father, they're times of deaths, numbers of ends—calculated, formulated, forgotten history. This is my fault. They're dead because of me. Yet fate took mercy on my ruined soul. Mercy...or misery.

Mercy but murders, pardoning those that kill.

I kiss their cold, clammy foreheads, and my tears rain in their empty eyes.

Thus with a kiss I die.

Daggers still rise from their chests, twin icebergs amid scarlet oceans.

There rust, and let me die.

Why them? Why not me? How the hell am I still alive? I glance down at my wrists, and though bloody, they're healed. But *who* healed me? Who didn't—or couldn't—heal them? I wanted to die, but I wanted them to live. Why did destiny twist its threads?

All are punished.

Punishment, of course. This is my punishment, my torture,

my karmic curse. They drove me toward the cliff, but I flung them into the stormy sea. They're gone. I'm here. And I'll suffer forever.

For never was a story of more woe than this of Juliet and her Romeo.

I lie beside Mother and Father for one more night, for one more memory, and pretend they were the parents I needed, though they weren't, and because of it, we all fell down.

Ashes.

Ashes.

A rose with three thorns.

Violent Ends

RJ: 2.5 Weeks Post-Launch

I hide in my quarters. Most do, at this point; we're all ill, exhausted, and out of control. Spiders plague the ship, and nanites are too weak to remove them all. We can seal bulkheads, partition *Icarus*, but our only power lies in division—and you know what they say about divided houses.

There's a knock at my door. Odd, but expected. I know who it is. I *want* who it is. But now's not the best time.

"Come in," I rasp.

Mazha does, but she lingers and stands opposite where I sit on the bed—a bed and a bathroom, that's all we get in these quarters.

"Well?" I ask, too sick for games, too tired to try.

"Where were you ten years ago?" she asks, and a shiver ripples her small, curvy body.

"Fuck if I know. I usually can't remember where I was ten minutes ago. Why?"

Her carnation-pink lips open, close, open, close, indecisive as a pendulum. "I know you."

"I'd hope so," I say. "We've worked together for weeks."

"No, I know you from before."

"From that confidential bullshit you used as a pick-up line?"

Her starlight skin blushes, and she twists an ice-blonde lock. "No, from further before. You've always been my ghost, my guardian." Her glacial eyes beseech mine for recognition, for understanding, but her gaze glazes with fever.

"Sit," I say. "You're sick."

"Yes, but it makes everything clearer," Mazha says, though she indulges me and perches beside me on the bed. "They said it was a ghost, someone erased from the Net, an impossible someone they could never track down. Only one person I know fits that description."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." But I do, and she does, too. *Shit.*

"For once, RJ, tell me the truth," she says. "Why were you there? Why did you do it? Why didn't you tell me sooner? It's my most shameful secret, yet it wasn't a secret, was it? You knew all along, for ten bloody years. Because it was you. *You* saved me."

And I'm trapped. "Sorry," I whisper, because I know her horrors, because I was there, because her ashen, lifeless body still haunts me every night.

"Sorry?" she asks as tears paint her cheeks. "You saved my life. Why are you sorry?"

"Because I couldn't save them. Your parents' approach was more...drastic. Sorry, Mazha. I'll never forgive myself for leaving you behind. I should have stayed. I should have waited. But I was scared. Seeing you like that..." I shake my head. "I

cared. And I hadn't cared in a long, long time. You reminded me of...love. But love burned me before, stole all I built, so I ran."

"Love?" she rasps, and her lips tremble with sorrow, with fever, with hope, with fear.

"Love," I say with a slight smile. "I think I've always been looking for someone who takes everything else away, someone who gives me peace. You did that ten years ago, when we unofficially first met. But seeing you like that, seeing you broken, reminded me how the good in my life always rots. I thought that by leaving, I'd save you from my shitty luck...or save myself from more heartbreak. It was stupid, and I'm sorry. Fuck, I'm so Net-damn sorry."

My head sags in my arms, but she lifts my chin, undisturbed. "As I said, you saved my life. You did nothing wrong and everything right."

"You give me too much credit," I say.

"You don't give yourself enough. I'm sorry you were burned before, but I won't—"

"No. No promises. Time breaks all vows."

"Not all."

"Most."

Mazha chuckles and rolls her eyes. "Always the optimist."

"Optimism is for children."

"Why *were* you on Midica, by the way?"

"Work," I say. "Auditing your hospitals."

"I assume we failed?" she asks.

"Horrifically."

"Good. Your process works, then."

"Sorry you grew up on that hellhole," I say.

"Sorry you grew up on yours," she says.

"At least we had drugs."

"RJ!"

"Not that I ever partook."

"Bullshit."

I grin, despite the "flu," despite the spiders, despite the void. "Well, I *was* a gang boss. If I didn't, it'd be sacrilege. Someone needed to test the product...multiple times...to ensure quality."

Mazha's face softens, and her fever lifts. Wait, her fever lifts?

"How do you feel, kid?" I ask.

"Great," she says, then realizes my meaning and frowns. "Wait, how is that possible?"

I answer her question with another. "When did you start feeling better?"

Her brows scrunch in concentration. "A few minutes ago? When we spoke about...you know. It helped. Talking to you, I mean. I felt guilty for years—the shame almost destroyed me—yet you made me...I don't know...let go? I still blame myself for my parents' deaths, but I no longer feel like *I* killed them, if that makes sense. Hearing your side of the story, finding us like that...well, we all make our own choices, don't we?"

"We do," I say, thinking, chewing my lip. "So you felt less guilt, less shame, less regret, and then felt better?"

"I guess."

Before I can shift puzzles into pictures, my neurophone dings with a high-priority call. I raise the gunmetal bracelet to my eye, a blue light scans my iris, and the retinal-encrypted neurocall blinks on.

Commander Sadhir appears in holographic form, but only to me—the Ward is paranoid, as I now see they should be. "Doctor," he says from the Bridge. His salt and pepper curls frame his dark eyes—foggy with fever—and his brown skin grays with

fatigue. His short, broad build sways, adrift in a sea of illness and monsters.

“Commander,” I greet.

“The captain is dead,” Sadhir says.

I stall, stunned. “Sorry?”

“Captain Heid is dead. I’m acting captain now, and I’m appointing you as acting XO.”

“Hold on, sir. Wait a—”

“There’s no time. The Diogen harvest is done. We must return to Ward space, and I need you on the Bridge for the return trip.”

“Thank the bloody Net. I’ll be right there.”

Sadhir nods, and the neurocall clicks off.

“What happened?” Mazha asks, confused, suspicious.

“The captain is dead,” I say. Killed by her own experiment, a backfiring Bunsen burner. “And we’re going home.”

Hope's Ashes

Jace: 2.5 Weeks Post-Launch

“E ngine Room, report,” Sadhir radioes from the Bridge. “Subspace coils primed and nukedrive stable, Acting Captain,” Glar responds. “Launch configuration complete. Beginning fuel cell conditioning...*now*.” He points at me, and I flip a switch.

Yes, we’re going home, but with a different captain, with a skeleton crew. We lost so many, and the remaining are sick, but we finished, we harvested, and with Diogen in tow. Except this time, I’m not on the Bridge doing an intern’s job. We’re too short-staffed for that.

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” Sadhir says. “Close all vents. Seal all airlocks. Activate holocams. Clone flight system.”

“Flight system cloned,” Glar says.

“T-minus two minutes and counting. Operations, initiate launch sequencer.”

That’s Javik’s job, but Javik’s gone, like so many others. This

mission didn't only fail; it decayed into oblivion, its ghosts lost in the void, or damned to demons.

Icarus lurches, and alarms blare. That's not supposed to happen.

"Glar, what was that?" Sadhir demands.

"Stand by," Glar says into the intercom, then clicks off the channel and aims his wrath at me. "Jace, what did you do?"

Some things never change. "Nothing, sir," I say. "The Bridge initiated the launch sequencer. It wasn't on our end."

"Take responsibility for once in your Net-damn life."

"But it wasn't me."

He slaps me, and I collapse. I've been sick for eternity, and fatigue snaps my strings.

"Get up," Glar bellows, but I can't. "Get up!"

I let him beat me, as I let Coach steal my soul, as I let Saia thief my conscience. No one stops him. No one cares. Not even when my face is raw meat and my body is a fleshy slab. Glar's feverish—that's their excuse, why the other ensigns won't interfere. But I'm feverish, too, and I haven't become a monster.

"What the hell are you doing?" Wait, someone *does* care. Someone *will* stop him. Or am I hallucinating? "Get off him."

Pressure stops, the drumroll of abuse, but pain soars even without his attack. Everything hurts. Everything's broken. I'm a mountain of agony, ripped apart, mangled incognito.

Light flashes and erases pain, but not blood. I blink awake, focus on my savior, and spot Kaj's infuriated face inches from mine. He healed me. He saved me. He keeps following me.

"Go," he seethes, pointing at Glar. "Get the fuck out."

"Or what?" Glar asks, smug. "This is the Ward. Save your lawsuits for lawful places."

"Engine Room, what the hell is going on?" Sadhir asks

through the intercom.

A timid ensign pipes up from a corner. "The nukedrive fuses blew, sir, because of the...spiders."

Shit. More vent work.

"Then fix it, Ensign," Glar says, but he doesn't order me; he orders the timid one. "And bring a few with you in case...you know."

In case you get mauled on the way.

"As for you," Glar says, turning toward Kaj, "return to the Infirmary. You're not needed here."

"Okay," Kaj says, "but Jace comes with me, and if you have a problem with that, you can take it up with RJ."

"I told you before that the holosurgeon holds no—"

"She's acting XO now, the captain's right hand, and I'll sure as hell get that captain's note if it means Jace can rest. Even lawless, I'm sure the Ward doesn't appreciate unsolicited murder, and that's what this will become if you don't let him heal."

Glar purses his lips, but nods. "Go, then. But I want him back—"

"You'll have him back when he's ready to come back," Kaj snaps.

My boss falls silent, and Kaj helps me stagger out of the Engine Room toward the Infirmary.

"Thanks," I croak, "for back there."

Kaj frowns. "Sorry I didn't tell him off sooner. I thought the Ward had their shit together, but I guess no one has their shit together."

I cough, and he coughs, and conversation withers. We reach the Infirmary; he helps me onto a bed, and I faint.

"Easy, Jace," Kaj says in dream limbo. "Rest, buddy. We'll take it from here."

Polychrome Prison

RJ: 2.5 Weeks Post-Launch

“**T**his Net-damn piece of fucking sh—”
 “RJ,” Sadhir interrupts me, “you are acting XO.
 Behave like one.”

The hodgepodge Bridge crew look away, wary of me, afraid of him, but they should fear the void that traps us. We’re stuck in deep space, captured by this nursery, convicts of a rogue prison amid the polychrome, newborn stars. Spiders fried the nukedrive fuses, so we’re now sitting ducks. I’d rather wait for our inevitable demise in the Infirmary where it’s warmer, brighter, safer—where it’s *mine*—but I’ve been thrown into a role that fits like a hospital gown—ass out, tits loose, fabric crunchy with starch.

“There’s nothing we can do till the engineers finish, so I’m going to the Mess,” I say. “Call me if shit deepens.”

“The hallways aren’t safe,” Sadhir says. “As acting XO, you must remain on the Bridge.”

"I made it here in one piece, and I don't give a fuck. Make someone else act, if you have an issue with me."

He won't. There's hardly anyone left. So I go, and he lets me as everything falls apart.

I avoid spiders by crawling through vents—an uncomfortable journey but a fast one. On the way, I call Mazha, transmit her a safe path, and have her meet me at the Mess Hall. She arrives a minute prior and waves from a corner bar, waited on by a grieving Zariah.

"Hey, buddy," I greet Zariah as I sit beside Mazha. She intoxicates me with every encounter, a glacial ex-empress of an Earth-fearing world. I like to break things, and she likes to fix things; we're a balance, a team...or more? I shake my head. It doesn't matter. I doubt we'll live long enough to wonder at vulnerabilities.

"Doctor," Zariah says as he pours us all whiskey.

"Sorry about the captain," I say. "I know you two were close."

"Close," he echoes, then frowns. "I thought things could change, but I guess things never can. She was a force. Not always a good one, but a strong one. I know I shouldn't, but I miss her despite her...shortcomings."

"I'm sorry, Zariah," Mazha says. "I'm here if you want to talk."

"You're sweet, but I'm okay...somehow. Grief is an odd curse. You never feel what you think you're supposed to feel—it's either too much or too little. If I cry too much, she'd want me to be happy. If I cry too little, she'd think I didn't care. Anyway, how are you two? Still sick, I see?"

"Is that your way of saying we look like shit?" I ask with a chuckle turned cough.

Zariah smiles, then winks. "Not Mazha. Just you."

"Smart man," Mazha says, but her arctic eyes bite into me

with concern.

We all sip our whiskey—well, not sip, more chug, but let's pretend at manners this close to brimstone—then Zariah's words sink in with the buzz.

"Wait, Zariah, how are *you*?" I ask.

"Great," he says without hesitation. "Why?"

"Because you're the only one who is."

"I guess, yeah. My boys are also fine, last I saw them."

"When was that?"

"This morning."

This makes no sense. Or it makes all the sense. "You've had no symptoms?" I ask. "No fever? No fatigue?" No mammoth, murderous, winged, zombie spiders belch from your corpse, ravenous for revenge?

"Nothing," Zariah says. "Neither have my sons."

"But why? Why not you five? And why all of us?"

He shrugs. "Heid said something once about shame...about its lack in me, in my boys...that it might 'complicate' things. I don't remember more, but it upset her. She said the Ward wouldn't like surprises, and we surprised her."

"Shame," I say as memories click like gears in an engine. *We all make our own choices, don't we?* "Mazha, after we spoke, you felt less shame, felt better, right?"

She nods, and I nod, and everything slides into place.

"What about now?" I ask.

"I feel..." She glances at Zariah, tiptoeing around her *Romeo and Juliet* secret. "I feel worse, like how I felt before."

"Guilt ebbs and flows, so it makes sense that you're sick again."

"Doctors, care to explain?" Zariah asks, a dark eyebrow cocked.

"You have no shame," I say. "Neither do your sons."

"No shame...as in arrogance?"

"No, as in no guilt, no regret. You're always happy, even when nobody else is. Oh, and shit, I almost forgot—the newborn! The one I delivered onboard. The infant and his parents are fine, happy, healthy, and though I sealed maternity with hololight, I couldn't block everything. Diogen should affect them to some degree, but it doesn't, because they're guilt-free."

"RJ, in layman's terms," Zariah says. "We didn't all go to MedAc." He glances at Mazha. "Well, I didn't."

"Diogen amplifies regret," I say. "It feeds off guilt and shame, then corporealizes secrets into those...spider things."

"But *how*?"

"Fuck if I know, but it fits."

"It does," Mazha says slowly. "Between us, Gaard was anxious in our session when I prescribed him holomeds. He was a fraud, a compulsive liar, and faked his CV. His secret consumed him."

"Literally," I say. "He was the first to die. And Esche, the second—her best friend died before the mission. Grief destroyed her, also literally."

"What about Javik?" Zariah asks. "He was the first spider, right?"

"Yes," I say and recall that horror, one of millions. "He died naked."

"But what was his secret?" Mazha asks.

I think a minute, then lock in another piece. "Foot fetish. He was...hard...and his feet were chafed, oiled."

"He died masturbating with his feet?" Zariah asks, disgusted.

"We all have our quirks." Some more than most. "What about the others? Did either of you know Mik'valo, Dunavard, or Idony well?"

Mazha clears her throat. "It's supposed to be confidential,

but...fuck it. We're all going to die, anyway."

"That's the spirit," I say.

"Mik'valo was the sole survivor of a nukedrive breach; he suffered from survivor's guilt. Dunavard's parents couldn't afford holomedes for her juvenile diabetes, so they sold themselves into indentured servitude to save her life; they died on the job, and she never forgave herself. Idony was addicted to jellies; they bankrupted her."

"Do you think that's why the Ward chose this crew, because of their secrets, because of their shame?" Zariah asks.

"Except for you," I say. "You and your boys are a mistake."

"I know. Heid told me many times, but I never understood her till now."

"What was her secret?" Mazha asks.

"Family," Zariah says. "She had an infamous bloodline, a gangster heritage."

"So that's why she hated me," I say. I represent everything she fought to escape—*used to* represent. Despite the Von Rei's sadism, I miss the freedom. Okay, I miss the sadism, too.

"How do we fix it?" Zariah asks.

"If we had time, I'd recommend therapy," Mazha says. "But it'd take too long, and I'm the only holopsych. I couldn't help everyone on *Icarus* alone."

"Even if we had time, that'd take years," I say. "Or never. Some people can't overcome guilt and shame." Yours truly. "But what if we could fake it? Erase it? Just temporarily."

"Like an emotional blocker?" Mazha asks.

"Exactly. Do those exist?"

"Not yet, but we could try to rig something together. Wouldn't hurt."

It could hurt, but we'll ignore consequences for now, as we'll

ignore the mystery behind the Ward's selective recruitment. A dumpster fire for the end.

"Sounds like you two have a plan," Zariah says.

Less a plan, more a Hail Mary.

"Good luck," the bartender calls after us, but Mazha and I are already out the door and on our way to the Infirmary.

"Do you think this could work?" Mazha asks as we hide in a shadow from a colony of winged spiders, of corpses turned monsters.

"It will, or it won't," I say, motioning her forward. We drop into a vent and shuffle through the ship's arteries.

"What if it doesn't?"

"You'll be dead. You won't care."

"Such a way with words."

I grin, and I want to do so much more, but duty's a cockblock, life's constant curfew.

We are our own villains.

But we are also our own heroes.

Savage Sorrow

Mazha: Age 18

It's been two weeks since I woke an orphan.
 Two weeks since I took my own life.
 Two weeks since a stranger handed it back to me.

Two weeks since my parents succeeded where I failed.

A fortnight of brutish regret, of barbaric grief, of vicious shame and savage sorrow.

I'm alone. It's just me and a legacy I never desired. Starolite is mine, but I want to throw it away. *You are heir to a multitrillion-cyb empire. Do you know how many people would sacrifice their eldest child to stand in your shoes?* Mother's memory echoes in my mind, but I'm no longer heir; I'm empress. She equated cybs with luck, wealth with worth, but the violence she ingrained ruined me beyond fortune, beyond fixing, beyond fate.

2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256, 512, 1024..

A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life.

Their lifeless bodies drained of blood.

No. No. NO. **NO.**

2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256, 512...

This day's black fate on more days doth depend.

With only moonlight as witness.

No. No. NO. **NO.**

2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256...

I am fortune's fool.

Pale, sticky, clammy corpses.

No. No. NO. **NO.**

2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128...

These violent delights have violent ends.

My parents returned to dust.

No. No. NO. **NO.**

2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64...

Under love's heavy burden do I sink.

Because of me.

No. No. NO. **NO.**

2, 4, 8, 16, 32...

Mercy but murders, pardoning those that kill.

I killed them.

No. No. NO. **NO.**

2, 4, 8, 16...

Thus with a kiss I die.

Their deaths are my fault.

No. No. NO. **NO.**

2, 4, 8...

There rust, and let me die.

I should be there, and they should be here.

No. No. NO. **NO.**

2, 4...

All are punished.

But a ghost gave me a second chance.

No. No. NO. **NO.**

2...

For never was a story of more woe than this of Juliet and her Romeo.

A guardian angel saved a demon.

I want to scream, to cut, to die, to escape forever, erase everything I was, prevent everything I might become, but I can't. Even in death, they helicopter my life. I must live for them now. They never supported me, but they loved me, and they were mine. So I wade through gray, struggle with sanity, and grind my teeth as I chant, *What now? What next?*

I slip on gloves and connect to the Net—no one complains that I do, but crippling guilt floods their absence. I push through and open my messages, further penance for my sins.

Thank you for applying, but unfortunately...

We appreciate the time you took...

We're sorry, but it's not a fit...

I pound my fist against the Moon Vault's floor. *More* rejections. *More* failure. *More* MedAcs bitch-slapping me, dismissing hopes, vetoing dreams. But I *must* attend. I *must* learn. I *must* recompense for all I've done. I *must* understand darkness to save others from my fate. I *must* become a holopsych.

So I apply again.

And again.

And again and *again* and ***again***.

Then, once I'm done, I throw away my past.

Starolite is mine, but I will never own its heart. It was always my parents' prize; I never wanted its prestige or power. So I put it on the market, auction it like an antique, sell it to the

highest bidder, and anonymize the receipt. Holofeeds simmer with clickbait headlines: “Heir Inherits Starolite Only to Sell to Highest Bidder,” “Starolite Heir Trashes Late Parents’ Legacy,” “Starolite Usurped After Tragic Double Suicide,” and countless others bred from taboo.

I’m rich. But it’s blood money. Someone regifted me a life I discarded, but my parents weren’t as lucky. I wanted to die, but I didn’t want others to suffer because of me, and the only way to cope with this immense guilt, with this monstrous shame, is to rigidify routine, to label limits, to construct categories that tunnel-vision existence.

A rose with three thorns.

A family with three scars.

Ashes, ashes, we all fall down.

Breathe Suffering

Kaj: Age 18

I haven't written since it happened, since I won everything, then lost everything. One poem, "Fanged Truth," will live on, but Jeje and her lackeys wiped all else from cyberspace.

Fear erases drive. Anger smothers ambition. It's not fair. It's never fair. Justice is a concept for the privileged few. The rest of us flounder beneath society's shackles, chained to corruption, bound to lawless litigation where criminals escape scot-free.

"Thought I'd find you here."

I startle at the voice, then relax at the man. Mr. Randall—the lit teacher, my mentor—sits beside me near the waterfall. His tall frame folds into a cross-legged crouch, and his brown eyes squint into the spray. We're behind the school's rec fields, at the little-known Hollow, a refuge for rejects, a sanctuary for square pegs.

"I used to hide here, too," he says, tucking a dark lock behind his ear. "The other colonies think we're a fairy tale, but we just

hide our demons better. Damascus is the worst world I've ever taught on, and I've taught on both Carthage and Sidon."

I raise an eyebrow. "Really?"

Mr. Randall nods. "They're rough, of course—vicious, even—but they own their brutality. You know what to expect, and you adjust. Here, however, everyone's...saccharine. They're shallow, superficial. It's nauseating."

"Then why not leave?" I ask.

"Some students make the cons worth it," he says. "And yes, that means you, Kaj."

My ears redden. "Don't stay for me. I failed. I let you down."

"Failed?" Mr. Randall chuckles. "Kaj, you won first place in one of the most elite competitions in the Protectorate, and two esteemed journals published your poem. If you failed, then the rest of us have no chance. Even so, failure's good for the soul."

"You're too kind, sir."

"Oh, I'm not kind at all. In fact, I petitioned to have Jeje and her associates expelled, and the school board agreed. That's not kind, but it's correct, and I don't regret it for an instant."

"You what?" I ask, stunned, shocked, bewildered that someone would defend me.

"There's an ancient saying about when good men do nothing," he says. "And, well, I didn't want to be one of those men. Pardon my language, but they were little shits, and they deserved it, whereas you deserve so much better, so much more."

"No, sir, you're wrong about me," I say. "I can't even write anymore."

"Because you write for the wrong reasons. You write for *them*. You write for the worlds. You write for the validation of an external, insignificant source. You've forgotten why you started, and you've fallen out of love. But you can fall back in

love. You can learn to love again.”

“But I don’t know how. I’ve tried, Mr. Randall. I’ve tried everything.”

“Focus only on the intimate relationship between you and your stories; ignore all outside pressures. Don’t write for a living; live to write. What drew you to writing in the first place? Why do you write, Kaj?”

I think for a moment, watch the waterfall rush over slate stones, through emerald fronds. Dewy air bristles with stubborn breeze, then settles into the stagnant humidity of late spring.

“It calms me,” I whisper. “It makes everything go away.”

“Hmm,” Mr. Randall says. “It *does* calm you, but not because it makes everything go away. It calms you, because it makes everything clear. You don’t write to run away, to escape; you write to confront, to conquer. Don’t avoid your monsters; face them head on. Make your demons work for you. Breathe suffering into story. Find the starving parts of your soul, the slivers that ache for words, and lend those shadows voice. Your poem was great, but it was safe. Take a risk. Live on the edge. Challenge yourself with uncertainty.”

“Easier said than done.”

“It’s not supposed to be easy; it’s supposed to be right. You’ll write again, Kaj, and when you do, you’ll write better.”

“Promise?” I ask.

“I can’t promise you anything,” Mr. Randall says. “Only you can promise yourself.”

Violent Womb

RJ: Age 18

“No, RJ. No fucking way,” Dimo says.

“It’s the *only* way,” I insist.

We perch atop a jigsaw skyscraper beneath Sidon’s neon night. Starships and hoverbikes streak the dark sky in psychedelic traffic patterns while mugginess swamps my lungs.

“Hear me out,” I say.

“I did,” Dimo says, “and that’s why I say no.”

“I’m the Von Rei boss. I can do whatever the hell I want.”

“And you’re the mother of my *children*. You’re not only you anymore.”

I hiss and clutch my hip as pain spikes through me. My ligaments loosen and remind me of duty, of the two growing inside me. Dimo’s right, of course, but the plan will fall apart without me. We don’t have a choice.

“Someone else can go,” he says.

“Someone else will fuck up,” I say.

"You could die. They could die."

"We'll all die anyway if we don't cut ourselves free."

"It's dangerous."

"Life always is."

"Net-dammit, RJ." Dimo slams his fist into his palm and stomps to the rooftop's edge. The urban kaleidoscope stretches before him, brimming with crime, buzzing with sin. It's no place to raise kids. "If you fail—"

"I won't," I say.

"You could," he says.

"I can't. As you said, I'm not only me anymore."

"Then send someone else."

"They'd trust no one else. It must be me."

Dimo opens his mouth to argue further, but a rustle interrupts us. They're here, as scheduled—right on time, as required. No one ignores the Von Rei boss.

"It's an honor," the first says, a mousy girl.

"Thanks for the opportunity," the second says, a gawky boy.

Don't thank me yet.

"You're...you," the girl says, awestruck.

"Yep, I'm me," I say, and they'll regret it in a minute. "Show me what you've got."

The girl and boy eye each other, cautious, leery. "Here?" they chorus. Both are about mid-twenties, older than us, but fresh with youth, crippled by innocence.

"The roof is secure," Dimo says. He's not happy about this, but he plays along, plays Von Rei, plays a beast.

"Okay," the girl says. She removes the modified gloves from her pocket. "These are the prototypes."

I take one pair, and Dimo takes the other. "These are the only two?" I ask.

They both nod. "RIT destroyed the others. We could only save these."

"Good," I say.

That's why they're here, to trade science for cybs—untraceable, erasable, ghost science. The girl and boy, Zahra and Abrax, are postdoc geniuses from RIT—the Rashidun Institute of Technology, best engineering school in the Protectorate—blinded by academe to the vile implications of research. They use "pursuit of knowledge" to excuse felony, but RIT caught on, caught up, and suspended them for their misdeeds—*suspended*, not expelled, and certainly not killed. These two miscreants devised a way to hack the Net, and they only received a slap on the wrist paired with a "you shouldn't do that, but brilliant code, and here's an A+ for the project."

That's how I found them, from their grades and rap sheets. I need cleverness plus corruption, and they deliver both beautifully. Their starship flight here wasn't cheap—cost half my cybs—but value justifies the expense. Their tickets here are our tickets free.

"Have you tested them?" Dimo asks, nervous.

"Of course," Zahra says.

"And?"

"They work," Abrax chimes in. "That's why RIT suspended us."

"Does anyone else have the code?" I ask.

He shakes his head and puffs out his chest. "They said we were the first to crack it, that no one else came close."

"Perfect," I say. Then I kill them both, two blastgun bursts, and they slump to the rooftop as squishy, pulpy trash.

"RJ, what the hell?" Dimo exclaims.

I shrug. "We got what we need. They're too dangerous to

live.”

“You can’t murder people like that after we leave the Von Rei.”

“They hacked the Net, and they’d do it again. This is the only way to ensure stability.”

“Stability? *Stability*?! You killed two people!”

“And I’d do far worse to save our family. Give me the gloves.”

“Why?” he asks.

“I need to destroy them,” I say, “so no one can copy them or find us.”

Reluctant, he hands his over. I place the two pairs on the rooftop and vaporize them with another blastgun shot.

“What about the code?” Dimo asks, shaken and distraught.

I tap my temple. “Already transferred.”

“An implant?”

I nod.

“Aren’t those illegal?” he asks.

“And expensive.” Cost a fuckton. “It’s cloaked, invisible to scans.”

“But what if someone finds it?”

“Then it self-destructs.”

“And you with it?”

“Yes, but I have no interest in letting someone lobotomize me.”

“How does it work?”

“It contains the access key,” I say, “and enables any gloves or interface I use.”

“So you can hack from anywhere?” he asks.

“With a link, yes.”

“Shit, this is risky. If others copy that code—”

“They won’t. It’s hidden, safeguarded.”

“I don’t like this.”

"You don't need to, but I don't have time to baby you now. We gotta run before those two rot." I point to Zahra and Abrax, oozing crimson puddles. "I deleted us, wiped our records, but we must move fast before others realize we're off the Net."

"You already deleted us?" Dimo asks, still perplexed, still appalled. He's really not cut out for this world or this life. "When?"

"When you were rambling about stability and all that bullshit. We're free. Let's go."

Let's finish revenge for you, Mom and Dad.

Innocent Anathema

Jace: Age 18

“**T**hey’re gone, Jace,” Saia says with tears in her hazel eyes, the eyes we share. “Our babies...they’re gone.”

We’re still in the abandoned magtrain tunnel where she committed the sin—she hasn’t let me leave since it happened three months ago. The bed of crates is my only home, the blazing dumpster my only light. Coach cheated justice, unpunished, and the college hasn’t called. They graduated me in absentia, messaged a Carthage Polytech diploma. Even our moms haven’t asked about me—they assume I’m busy, or working, or drowning beneath adulthood. They never ask the right questions, anyway.

But Saia...she’s here. She’s always been here. I can never escape her undivided attention.

“Hug Sissy,” she says, curling up beside me on the crates. “Make it better.”

Yesterday, I would have held her close, despite the rape,

despite the abuse, despite the shared secrets and cruel commiserations. Today, however, I shove her away.

"No, Saia," I say. "Let me go."

"Let you go?" she asks, confused, enraged. "You're the father of my children—of my *late* children." A stifled sob. A choked whine. "We were supposed to be a family." Her cries boil over, and she bawls on the bed. "I never meant to hurt you." But she did. Oh, she fucking did. "And I haven't hurt you since."

So an I-only-raped-you-once excuse absolves her from hell? Bullshit. But though I don't feel for her, I *do* feel for them, for the two I lost. I never got to see our twins, never felt them move, never saw their smiles. Cursed though they were, they were mine. Damned though they'd be, they'd be mine.

"What happened?" I ask, not to calm her, but to calm me.

I owe them this—an interest, a tribute—as their father, as someone who loves them without condition, despite their shameful genesis. They didn't choose their fate; they didn't have a chance. Death claimed them as caterpillars before they could grow wings.

"The doctors said..." Saia starts, then stops as sobs shiver her body. "The doctors said it was a miscarriage. Fatal defects. There was so much blood. So much fucking blood."

Fatal defects because of incestuous rape. They'd have lived as ostracized monsters. I should feel relieved. I don't. Instead, I'm broken, destroyed, ripped apart at the seams. They were still my babies. I lost my children, my *innocent* children, branded with unjust anathema. I feel guilt and grief, smothering and suffocating, as well as loss and love—so much love, and the pain it sparks. I'm hollowed out, a carcass of suffering, a transmogrified demon that will never again see light.

I'm Carthage incarnate.

So I must break free.

And break Saia down. For she's Saia again, not a mother, not immune. She's the same sinner you first met, the same butcher, the same killer. While she's alive, no one is safe.

Bleached Existence

Jace: 2.5 Weeks Post-Launch

I can hear them, but they can't hear me. A bleached existence fades in and out as my sickness escalates, but I'm no monster yet. Or rather, I've always been one at heart, like her. My blood is a poisoned chalice.

Just wait till I tell them the truth.

The Infirmary hums in my subconscious periphery, a splatter of beeps, flashes, and hushed conversations. From what I can gather in my brief, lucid periods, *Icarus* still buckles beneath this Diogen "flu." There are too few crew, too many demons, and until my fellow engineers fix the nukedrive fuses, we're trapped. We can't go home yet, but we must return. We must set right all our wrongs.

They'll never believe a skeleton.

My flashbacks worsen. Everything worsens.

Oh, you gentle soul.

"Hey, buddy. How're you feeling?"

It's Kaj again. He checks every couple minutes, ensures I'm still breathing, ensures I'm still *me*. It's endearing. And embarrassing. I don't deserve his kindness.

Let Sissy make it better.

"Can you hear me?"

I nod, and Kaj exhales, relieved.

"Good, good," he says. "Don't speak if you can't, but I want to let you know that Glar won't bother you anymore. You're safe now. You're free."

Sissy always has your best interests at heart.

Dread knots my stomach—memories of Saia, of what my inaction enabled—and suddenly, I *can* speak.

"Is Glar...okay?" I shouldn't worry about the asshole—the fucker who teased me, harassed me, bullied me from day one—but I've always protected evil and shunned good.

I'll take care of you.

"He beat the shit out of *you*, but *you're* worried about *him*?" Kaj tsks and caresses my chin; his hand is frigid against my feverish skin. "You're too good for the worlds, Jace."

You're broken, Jace. I'll put you back together.

Saia and Coach tangle in my skull, and again, words fail me.

You can tell me anything.

"But Glar's fine," Kaj clarifies. "RJ scared him, that's all."

"You sent RJ after him?" I ask, and a fresh wave of dread rushes my chest.

"He beat you up, so RJ beat sense into him."

"Don't worry," RJ calls from across the Infirmary. "He's only missing a few ribs."

I can't see her, but her presence mortifies me. She reminds me too much of Saia, pirouetting on morality's fragile edge.

"You shouldn't have," I say.

"Shouldn't have what?" Kaj asks, annoyance in his tone. "He treated you like shit. I should have done something sooner."

I should have stood up for myself.

Struggle, and it's hours. Surrender, and it's minutes.

But I tried that before, and it didn't work.

Good boy.

"Sorry, long..." I stall, searching for impossibility.

"Life?" Kaj offers, then chuckles. "Rest, Jace. Worry about nothing else."

Jacccccccccccccccccc...

Let me inside, Jace.

But I worry about everything.

Agony pierces my chest. I gasp, unable to breathe. Monitors wail, and nurses flurry to my bedside.

"He's seizing," Kaj calls, panicked.

"Move," RJ orders, cutting through the throng. "His heart's ruptured, and he's suffocating on his own blood." I hear her slip on gloves. Hololight flashes in urgent supernova, but darkness encroaches my vision and mind. Though I can't see it, I still feel the stubborn change.

"He's...bubbling?" a nurse asks.

"He's dying," RJ says.

And shifting, the silence adds. I'm becoming a monster, a zombie, a posthumous beast, a grotesque, winged spider intent upon massacre. My skin sizzles with transformation as blood vessels ache to escape their fleshy home, as secrets strain to break free.

"Hail the Bridge," another nurse says.

"Can't," someone answers. "Comms are down."

No. Don't turn me into *this*. Don't burden me with more impotent situations, more powerless circumstances, where I

become a weapon I can't control. Don't excavate my veins and arteries, then bind me to the bulkheads with a bespoke spiderweb. Don't render me a blood-drained corpse, then a vengeful savage.

More pain. More *agony*. An excruciating surge. My bones crunch, shatter, as metamorphosis mutilates my body.

"I'm sedating him," RJ says.

"No," Kaj shouts. "He's too weak. You'll kill him."

"If I don't, he'll die. This is the only way to stop the mutation. Sedated, Diogen can't feed off his emotions."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"A theory. Get out of my fucking way, Kaj, or his death is on you."

"I swear...if you hurt him—" Kaj starts.

"You can beat me up then," RJ interrupts.

There's another hololight blast—brighter, blinding—then the void invades.

The Mortality Experiment

RJ: 2.5 Weeks Post-Launch

“Is he stable?” Kaj asks.

“For now,” I say.

Jace lies before us, a withered skeleton on the white hospital bed, eyes closed, brow furrowed, like so many others. We’ve an army of near-corpses, a militia of suffering. The Infirmary will soon turn funeral home at this rate. So many bodies to burn.

“Save him, RJ. *Please*,” Kaj begs.

“I will,” I promise, though I should promise nothing. “Cover for me. I have an idea.”

“Is it about Diogen? The emotional...leeching?”

“Just...cover for me.”

Can’t give him hope. Can’t pretend at rescue. We’re alone in deep space, light-years from salvation. No one can save us but ourselves, and we’ve a poor track record at that.

I barge into Mazha’s office, uninvited, and lock the door

behind me. Her beauty stops my heart, as always, but I can daydream later...if there is a later at all.

"Sorry, got pulled away," I say, sinking into a chair opposite her. "Back to the emotional blockers. What can you do?"

"I...um..." Mazha clears her throat, flustered. *Please let me live to pursue this Elysium.* "I could rig something together...maybe," she finishes.

"I can't do 'maybe,' kid. People are dying. We can't afford a fuck-up."

"You don't have to be crass."

"You don't have to be sensitive."

Shit, this isn't what I intended. "Anyway," I say, "what *can* you do?"

"Holomeds," she says, lips pursed. "It's a long shot, but I could try to use airborne holomeds and circulate emotional blockers through the ship's vents."

"How?"

"A low dosage of antidepressants, pain relievers, and opioids."

"Good," I say. "When will you be ready?"

"When I'm ready," she says. "I've never done this before. The only sure-fire way to relieve guilt, shame, and regret is through extensive therapy, but we don't have time for that."

"No, we don't. I'll work on a method to resonate the shields at the nebula's frequency. That should limit Diogen's ability to amplify emotions and reduce onboard poisoning. We can then return to Ward space relatively intact...after the engineers fix the nukedrive fuses."

Mazha scrunches her blonde brow. "The nebula has a frequency? And you can block it?"

"Yes and not yet," I admit, "but I'll figure it out."

"Do I want to know how you came across this information?"

"Probably not." I hesitate. "Remember that console I hacked?"

"*Illegally* hacked? Yes."

"I finally broke through."

She gasps. "You hacked the Ward?"

"No, security's too tight," I say. "But I hacked *Icarus* and found enough breadcrumbs to follow a trail. See? It pays to misbehave."

"What if they catch you?"

"They won't. This isn't the first time I've erased myself, kid."

"Oh, right." Mazha fidgets, uncomfortable. "What did you find?"

"Are you sure you want to know?" I ask. "You can't claim ignorance—or innocence—then."

"I'm not as ignorant—or innocent—as you think," she snaps. "Tell me."

"Fine," I say, both annoyed and aroused—those two often go hand in hand. "*Icarus* is an experiment: 'The Mortality Experiment,' our code name. The Ward chooses people with dark pasts to prove their scientific theory that secrets are sentient, that mortal sins become mortal wounds become monsters in deep space—specifically around Diogen, the catalyst."

"Mortal sins...like Catholicism?"

"Is that still a thing? I thought it went extinct millennia ago. Then again, you're Midican, so you basically live millennia ago. Anyway, no. A mortal sin is not decreed by religion. A mortal sin is decreed by the soul. They vary between people, but in general, the sin spawns so much guilt, shame, and regret that it takes on a secret's vice. Sin to secret to slaughter. Sins that kill. Secrets that kill, that create mortal wounds. Hence, 'The Mortality Experiment.'"

"And these sins...these secrets...become spiders?" she asks.

"If the shame is severe enough, yes," I say. "The others form a web." A web of their own blood vessels. "The Ward intends to use these monsters to usurp the Protectorate."

Mazha snorts. "Good luck with that. They're uncontrollable brutes."

"Let's hope so."

My neurophone dings. I scan my eye, watch the private neurocall, and blanch.

"What is it?" she asks.

"Sadhir...he died," I whisper.

"Does that make you...?"

"Acting captain."

Shit. A boss again, but this is no gang. This is far worse.

Struggle Is Soul

Kaj: Age 18

Loneliness's fist squeezes my still-beating heart.
 "Kaj, have you applied to any nursing schools yet?"
 Dad asks.

"Yes," I say.

Solitude grants quiet, but never peace; none ever rest in peace.

"What about Thebes?" Pa asks. "It's the second-best MedAc
 in the Protectorate, and we have connections on that colony."

Seclusion carves ghosts from minds and monsters from spirits.

"Yup," I say.

Isolation is a false god stemmed from volcanic guilt and shame.

"Kaj, it's rude to write at the dinner table," Pa says.

"Then I'm done with dinner," I say and push away my plate.

"Wait," Dad says. "We only want what's best for you, son."

"No, you want what's *safe*, and I'm doing what's safe. I'm
 applying to all the schools; if they accept me, I'll study to be a
 nurse. But till then, I'll write."

I stand, exit my dad's cottage, and cross the verdant field toward the River Docks. When I find a suitable stone, I perch on its edge, above rushing water, and inhale sweet, rustic, pastoral nostalgia. I'll leave soon. Go on adventures far and wide. Pursue a career I don't want, a life that bores me, disgusts me, riddles me with doubts that corrupt my core.

But I'm writing again, how Mr. Randall advised, by breathing suffering into story. I used to run from pain, but now, I face it. Struggle is soul.

I reread the lines I wrote at dinner.

Loneliness's fist squeezes my still-beating heart.

Solitude grants quiet, but never peace; none ever rest in peace.

Seclusion carves ghosts from minds and monsters from spirits.

Isolation is a false god stemmed from volcanic guilt and shame.

Not bad. Not great. But not great gives me room to grow. This is my secret, a secret I'll cherish, nourish, and encourage, despite school, despite career. Writing will trail me to my grave as a ghost—unseen, unheard, unrecognized. Dreams are ephemeral, erasable, and *none ever rest in peace.*

Soliloquy

Kaj: 2.5 Weeks Post-Launch

“S adhir is dead,” I tell Jace. He can hear me, but I can’t hear him. “RJ is acting captain, and she made me acting XO. We didn’t come here for this...never mind.”

Jace’s gaunt chest trembles with ragged breaths, and he fidgets, unconscious, on the hospital bed. The Infirmary is quiet for once—the sick rest, waiting for the end.

“I said yes, of course,” I continue, unable to stop the emotional deluge, unwilling to die without one last confession. “I always say yes. I’m always a helper, a pleaser—selfless, self-loathing, and self-sabotaging. I could have done so much more with my life, Jace. So much *fucking* more. But I played it safe. Played it easy. Appeased my dads and satisfied society. I was an only child and so lonely, always so Net-damn lonely.

“Perhaps that’s why I surrender myself. I try to fit in, to make others happy. I need to be needed, whereas most need to be tended, and that works for me, because there are so many

freeloaders in the worlds. They soak me for kindness, for generosity, then disown, desert, and abandon me. No one wants *me*. No one stands by *me*, defends *me*, holds *me* up when *I* need a boost. Only one person ever did, but he's gone now.

"I can't connect to anyone—well, except to RJ and you, but you push me away. I shouldn't have come here. I shouldn't have pursued nursing first and writing second. I shouldn't have waited this long to tell you—"

My neurophone dings. A high-priority call. I'm needed elsewhere. Always helping, never helped. Though I do feel better after releasing steam, but it's temporary, as good things always are.

"I'm writing a book," I whisper. "I've told no one else, and it's probably shit, but I want you to be the first to know." I lean down and kiss his feverish forehead, then return to duty.

Amid the Flood

Mazha: Age 18

It never ends. The constant, unwanted rejections. The consistent, persistent refusals. I drown in a tide of anonymous judgments.

[INSERT NAME], thank you for applying, but...

We appreciate your time, but...

Thanks for your interest, but...

We reviewed your application, but...

Unfortunately, we did not select...

Unfortunately, we will not move forward with...

...we wish you the best of luck.

...best wishes in your MedAc search.

There's no light at tunnel's end, no escape from insurmountable guilt, no relief from unconquerable shame. I killed my parents. Well, I killed myself, then they killed themselves because of me. But it doesn't matter, does it? They're still dead. I'm still alive. And I still suffer penance for my grievous

pain.

Three hundred and forty-three rejections. *Three hundred and forty-three*. Three hundred and forty-three MedAcs telling me no, laughing at my attempt, wiping my name from their system, forgetting me at deletion. Let *me out OF THIS CAGE*. But they don't. They won't. Because no one wants me in all the worlds.

2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128...

So I cope. Label. Limit. Organize. Rigidify routine. Construct categories. Divvy up time in little boxes, then adhere to this schedule with robotic obedience. After selling Starolite, I'm rich but directionless. After losing my parents, I'm rescued from one hell and thrown into another. Does struggle ever stop? Does failure ever fail? Or must I trudge through life's quicksand till death claims me at last?

2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128...

I want to try again. It'd be so fast, so flat, so free, so final. A stranger saved me before, but that was fate, and fortune never smiles twice. Yet if I do, I kill my parents' memories, too. But do they deserve preservation? Mother and Father caused so much despair. They patronized progress and condescended creation. Other colonies would call them abusive, call Midica a cult. Then why do I regret liberating myself from their chains?

You're better than them, a small voice whispers in my skull. Very small, very soft, lost amid the you-aren't-good-enough flood. But it's there. It whispers, *You aren't done yet*. Then it begs me to stay. So I stay. Because if there's one thing I won't become, it's my parents—not again—and if I steal myself from these worlds, I'd follow in their bloody footsteps.

This is my secret, a secret that cripples, that maims, that mutilates my spirit, a macabre *Romeo and Juliet* retelling where one survives...and suffers.

Mirage à Deux

Mazha: 2.5 Weeks Post-Launch

RJ and I work in a corridor outside the Bridge, in a makeshift lab sealed off from spiders. She attempts shield modulation, and I attempt emotional blockers, and both our attempts keep failing.

“Net-fucking-dammit,” RJ swears. “Piece of bloody shit.” She kicks the panel, and the panel spits sparks as *Icarus* wags her tongue at us. “Talk to me about something, anything to distract me from this fucking code. You went to Hattusa, right? How was it?”

“It was okay.” I handle my panel with a gentler touch; my clinical organization contrasts RJ’s crude rage. Then I sway, dizzy, as Diogen reminds me we’re still sick, *Icarus* is still broken, people are still dead, monsters still roam free, and we’re still sitting ducks.

“Just ‘okay’? It’s the best MedAc in the Protectorate. How was it just ‘okay’?”

"Because I'm Midican. They discriminated against me and thought me radical."

"Are you?"

I glare at her. "No. I don't believe that bullshit, and I'm insulted you think I would."

"Easy, kid. It was only a question," RJ says.

"No, it was a test, and since you're Sidonese, you should know better than to propagate stereotypes."

"Oh, but I am the stereotype, and I happily propagate it to scare most people away."

"Well, you can't scare me away," I say before I can filter. I blush, and she notices, and then she presses further.

"No, you're rather fearless, aren't you?" she asks. "Why?"

"You know why."

RJ was my savior, after all. I lost everything I feared losing, so their deaths stole my fear...and honesty.

I sigh and let RJ in a smidge. "I found myself, then my world shut down. I put everything into something, but it amounted to nothing. I was trapped. Broken. Drained and depressed. Disillusioned and disheartened. My parents pushed me to drastic measures, and I welcomed the darkness. Midica preaches corporal punishment, and they adhered to these teachings. They wanted me to worship Mother Earth, to inherit and expand Starolite.

"When I told them I wanted to pursue holopsychology, they flipped. They never encouraged or supported me, and they made life a living hell. Midicans believe the Net is blasphemous, dangerous, and as you know, holopsychology needs the Net. This divide caused friction, to say the least. They put up resistance at every turn, and I constantly wished them gone.

"But when they *were* gone...when they died...when they died

because of me, I felt immense guilt, despite their abuse. So I cut ties, sold Starolite, moved to Hattusa, but I couldn't escape shame. I still can't. I cope with order, with organization, but it's rarely enough. Sorry. Didn't mean to ramble."

"I meant for you to ramble," RJ says with a sad smile. "It's not your fault. You know that, right? They didn't die because of you. As you said before, we all make our own choices, and they made theirs. You can't blame yourself for hurting after they caused you so much harm."

I return her sad smile with a touch less sorrow. "You wouldn't make a bad holopsych."

"I'd make an awful holopsych, and we both know it." She laughs, then sobers. "I only have patience for you."

"Why?" I whisper.

RJ shrugs. "You tell me, kid. You're not even my type. I don't usually go for perfectionists."

"Perfectionist?" I ask with mock-offense.

She raises a dark eyebrow. "To the nth degree. You're obsessive, compulsive, idealistic, rational and responsible, principled and purposeful, addicted to control, and stubborn as a mule in heat. You want to change worlds, to reform reality, but your fixation on improvement blinds you from advancement."

"So you do notice me," I tease. "If we're psychoanalyzing, then you're temperamental, fiercely independent, angry and arrogant, distant and detached, and possibly psychopathic—you compartmentalize for holosurgery too well."

"Don't forget charming and charismatic." RJ winks. "Well, *you* can't see the forest for the trees."

"And *you* want to burn the forest down," I reply.

We both laugh, then refocus on our tasks. Silence stretches seconds into minutes till curiosity urges me to shatter the

quiet—because I may never get another chance.

“What about you?” I ask. “You know all about me.” About my suicide attempt turned double funeral, about my deepest, darkest secret. “Who are you, RJ?”

She pauses. “You know who I am. What you want to know is who I was.” Another pause, another hesitation. “I guess it’s only fair.”

“You don’t need to—”

“I know, but I want to. Soon, we’ll all die vicious, gruesome deaths, so I might as well tell someone...and I’d like that someone to be you.”

I blush again. RJ reflects my olive branch, reaches across the void, darkness to darkness, shadow to shadow, secret to secret, connecting via pain. She returns to her panel, to the troublesome code, but her voice beckons me, so I shuffle sideways to work closer.

“I told you I was a gang boss,” she says. “Well, I was boss of the Von Rei. I’m sure you’ve heard of them. They were rather notorious.”

Not rather. They were the *most*. The most notorious, infamous legend in the Protectorate. A story to scare children into compliance. Villains of nightmares and geneses of all horrors.

“Yeah, I’ve heard of them,” I say and try not to squeak. “But aren’t they gone now?”

RJ nods. “Because of me. I killed them. I killed them all. They murdered my parents to recruit me as boss, so I returned the favor. It took years to plan revenge, but some things *do* work out. I erased myself from the Net to avoid backlash.” She rubs her ring finger, itches at a ghost life. “However, while I was boss, I fell in love. Didn’t mean to, but it happened. And it wasn’t

perfect—nothing ever is—though it was a relief. Perhaps that’s why I mistook friendship for romance, because of desperation. It’s lonely at the top. It’s lonelier at the bottom. And we were the bottom, the Protectorate’s underworld, a half-step above the Ward.”

I hold my breath, because I know there’s more, because I know she’ll snap shut at the slightest aggravation.

“I have kids, Mazha,” RJ whispers. “Two of them. Twins. Fraternal. A boy and a girl. Everything I do, I do for them. I watch them every night, on an outdated holorecording, and pretend they’re here, but they’re not, because I left them.” She bites her lip, breathes a broken breath, then continues. “I’ve always provided for them, always protected them. That’s my sole purpose, my only drive, but it’s not enough, and I’m not enough, and they deserve better. *So* much better. That’s why I took the job at the Outpost, and that’s why I agreed to the bloody Ward, to give them a better future, because I fucked up their past.”

She sucks air through her teeth, but again soldiers on. “I’ve always struggled with my identity. I found myself late. Because it took me so long, I hurt others, and I hate myself for that. Who I am split my family apart, and that split tore me apart in return. I’m too much for most. I know that. I get that. But I compromised myself for so long, was unwanted by so many, that when I finally found me, I couldn’t cage myself anymore. I feel so guilty. So fucking guilty and so fucking ashamed. I’m not a typical mother, not an ordinary mother, not a warm, maternal, nurturing force. I’m chaos. I’m fire. I can provide, but I can’t soothe, and I’ll never forgive myself for not being what they need. And this guilt, this shame, is why the Ward chose me, why I’m sick, why I’ll soon become a monster if I can’t figure out

this bloody code.”

“But you *are* what they need,” I say, timid, tentative, dancing on melting ice. “They’re yours, and you’re theirs, and you balance each other. All families are different. All mothers, too. You don’t need to be the storybook mom to be the mom they need.”

RJ shakes her head. “They need more. They *deserve* more.”

“Where are they now?” I ask.

“Safe,” she says.

“Yes, they’re safe because of you. They’re fed because of you. They’re warm and tucked in with a roof over their heads *because of you*. Don’t underestimate yourself. Don’t underestimate what you do.”

“But I’m not there. I’m not with them.”

“But is someone else?” I ask.

“Yes,” she says. “Someone warm, maternal, nurturing, and soothing, someone who’s everything I’m not.”

“Then if they’re getting everything they need, why do you guilt yourself?”

“Because *I’m* supposed to be that. I’m their mother, but I can’t mother...I can only...”

“Parent?” I offer. “As the resident Midican, I’m supposed to be the backward one, yet you cling to gender roles like the myths of Mother Earth.”

“Well, Sidon was backward *and* upside down,” she says.

“You’re not on Sidon anymore—in fact, you’ve destroyed most of Sidon—so let go, RJ. Let yourself free. The more you guilt yourself, the less you give to them, and they need you *as you are*, so keep being what you are.”

“Easier said than done.”

My panel beeps, interrupting us. “Holy shit,” I say. “Holy

fucking shit, it works.” I point at the simulation, at the Net-induced tests.

A mirror beep sounds from RJ’s panel, and her console lights up green. “Mine, too,” she murmurs as she rips herself from regret.

“We should test mine first,” I say, “then we can test yours.”

“We can’t test mine,” RJ says. “The shields only have enough power for one shot.”

“Great, so we’re winging it?”

“We’re winging it by the seat of our pants.”

“I thought it was flying by the seat...?”

“Flying insinuates grace,” she says. “This is a drunken leap off a cliff.”

“Let’s hope we grow wings, then,” I say.

“A Bradbury fan?”

“Midicans read all the greats.” I chew my cheek and wring my hands. “RJ?”

“Hmm?” She already heads toward the Infirmary to test my holomed.

“Thanks for...um...thanks for before.”

“Thank *you*, kid. Thank *you*.”

Avant-Garde Adieu

Jace: Age 18

They're gone. My babies are gone. My soul is stolen.
My spirit is dead.

"Did you hear me?" Saia asks. "They're gone, Jace.
Hug Sissy. Make it better."

She shifts closer on the crates, in the abandoned magtrain tunnel, and the dumpster fire blazes with a fury reflected in my bones, in my heart.

"No, Saia," I say. "I told you *no*. I've always told you *no*. But you never listened, did you? You never once listened to me."

"I always listened, baby brother," she says. "I didn't always obey."

"Yet you made *me* obey, do terrible things, commit crimes beyond forgiveness and sins beyond redemption."

"You could have left. Hell, you tried to leave. But you always returned. You know why? Because you *trust* me. You *love* me. You can't *live* without me."

"I'm willing to test that theory," I say, then lurch.

I'm her baby brother, but I'm bigger than her now, and while she's imprisoned me, I've eaten, grown, despite the parasite and dysmorphia. So when I lurch, she listens at last and falls to the crates, writhing. My elbow pins her chest as my fingers noose her throat, and her hazel eyes widen in betrayal, then narrow in revenge. But she can't escape. She can't boss me around. She can't use me as she's used me since birth.

"If you want it rough," she rasps, "just ask."

Saia reaches between my legs, but I knee her knuckles, breaking her hand. She squeals like a pig, then thrashes beneath me, but I push harder, squeeze tighter, and panic invades. I've never killed before. She has, many times. Though I've assisted in murder, ignored atrocities, inaction is easier than action—hence, millennia of repeated cycles, of relentless discrimination.

She is sick. She is broken. She hurts. She harms. She steals souls. She must die. And I must kill her. I must set right all my wrongs.

"You'll miss me," Saia croaks, dark skin graying unto death. "You'll miss me...beside you...inside you...you'll miss what we were. We can...try again. We can...make another family. Please, *Jaccccccccccccccccccc. Let me inside, Jace.*"

Tears fall from my face onto hers. I should have done this sooner, but I was weak, and she was strong. She was always so fucking strong...and so fucking wrong.

"Goodbye, Sissy," I whisper, then snap her neck.

The crack is deafening. Her death grates my skull, skewers my brain, and spears my mangled heart. No more victims. No more decapitations. No more blood-eagle torsos. No more bows on bloody stumps. No more psychopath and sociopath.

No more serial killer. No more sister. No more Saia.

Even her corpse holds grace, holds elegance. Her glossy gunmetal hair spills around her, a dark halo of angelic beauty. Her limbs curve in lithe expression, and her hazel eyes focus on me, still steady. *You betrayed me*, they say. *You traitorous cunt. I may be gone, but you'll never forget me. I'll haunt you till you join me in death.*

I know, Saia. Fuck, I know. But I did it anyway, because it was *right*. You're gone. Our moms are safe. Hell, the worlds are safe from your indomitable wrath. But I still cry. I still wail. I still cradle your body and sob over your ghost, pretend I'm still your baby dancer.

Because I *do* love you. I always will. You're my family, my sister, the only one who saw me. But I'm invisible now. Invisible and erasable. Unraveled and undone. Broken beyond repair.

So, behind the magnetic chargers, I bury your body with all the rest—with casualties of curiosity, victims of villainy, and our unborn, unmade twins. It devastates me. Mutilates me. Ruins and wrecks me. I cry till tears run dry. I scream till my voice fails. Anguish echoes off the uncaring tunnel as I crumple, destroyed, in a decaying heap.

This is my secret, a secret that kills, that scars me with grief, that wrings me with guilt, that shames me twice—I regret both killing her and not killing her sooner.

Goodbye, Sissy.

Goodbye, my baby dancer.

Regret Rages Free

Jace: 2.5 Weeks Post-Launch

“I’m writing a book,” Kaj whispers. “I’ve told no one else, and it’s probably shit, but I want you to be the first to know.” He leans down and kisses my feverish forehead, then returns to duty.

I want to beg him not to go. I want to plead for him to stay, to hold me, to kiss me, to love me. But I can’t. They sedated me. Deadened me to the world. Then why am I aware? Is Saia aware? Are her taunts true? Are her haunts here? Does she yet exist, a demon in the abyss, a ghost in the void? Do I *want* her to?

No, baby brother, I’m long gone. You stole me after I stole you.

I shouldn’t feel disappointment, not after all the pain, but I do. I do. *I do. I do.*

“Wait,” RJ calls in the Infirmary entrance. Someone else is with her; I assume it’s Mazha. “Kaj, don’t leave.”

She speaks words I can’t, and relief storms my soul.

"I'm needed on the Bridge," Kaj says. "It's an emergency."

"This is more important, and I'm the captain, so shut the fuck up and stay," RJ snaps.

For once, I'm thankful for her no-bullshit approach.

"I did it," Mazha says, breathless. "I made an emotional blocker. The Net simulations verified every permutation, but I want to test it on a patient."

"You want to test it on Jace," Kaj says, leery.

"It's airborne, so we'll use a mask," Mazha explains.

"And what if it fails?" Kaj asks. "What if you hurt him? What if he dies, then...shifts?"

"He's in a medically induced coma," RJ says. "If we do nothing, he'll atrophy, then turn into a vegetable. He can't stay like this forever. But it's your call."

That's odd. She's the captain, as she said, and she's also the holosurgeon, the lead doctor, yet she swings control to Kaj. Could RJ have a soft side? A dull edge of her knife?

"Do it," Kaj whispers, and a burst of activity follows.

A breathing mask suctions my nose and mouth, then holomed pumps through the tube. There's nothing at first—only a sickly, sterile, chemical cloud—till medicine kicks in, and I rupture from the inside out.

I thought I knew pain. I was wrong. So fucking wrong. As usual. It's agonizing. Excruciating. A brutal, vicious, savage assault on all my raw and ragged nerve endings. I flail. Thrash. Seize. Scream. I'm alive, it *burns*, and all my sins attack at once.

Jacccccccccccccccccc...

Let me inside, Jace.

*Let me **out**.*

But I am the pain, the cage, the bars, and no one can free me from myself. Every capillary hemorrhages. Every skin cell

blisters. Every muscle rips, and every bone shatters—in my mind. My body is a bruise, a wound, a lighthouse of agony, and prayers escape me, unbidden, unheeded.

Then it's done. Pain fades, as it always does, and exhaustion invades in its wake.

Mazha scans me with hololight. "It worked. Holy fucking shit, it actually worked. No trace of Diogen, and his body is blocking new toxins. He's immune. He's healed. And he can't be poisoned again."

RJ smiles a rare smile—a rare, predatory, villainous smile—and I shirk away, reminded of the abandoned magtrain tunnel and the secrets buried behind the chargers.

"How are you, Jace?" she asks. "Do you feel better? Do you feel well?"

I open my mouth to answer, but fear swallows my words. I almost *died*...then I didn't. Everything is too much and too bright and too loud right now.

"For fuck's sake, give him a sec, you two," Kaj says. "Shoo, away. Question him later."

"We don't have later," RJ snaps. "We must know if he's okay so we can cure the crew."

"He's okay. Your scans confirmed it. Let him breathe a moment."

RJ doesn't. "Are you okay, Jace?"

Hesitant, I nod. "It hurt like *hell*, but I'm okay. I'm better." Though not best. Never best.

"That's all I need," the holosurgeon says. "You can have your moment, Kaj, but we have shit to do, so don't cry on each other's shoulders for too long."

RJ and Mazha leave my bedside, and Kaj sits near me on the white sheets.

"Sorry," Kaj says. "She means well, even if she's a pain in the ass."

My eyelids droop with fatigue, the only remaining symptom, the revenge of a secret too big and a life too long.

"Sleep," Kaj says. "I know you're tired. We've got it, don't worry."

"I...I got used to...death," I whisper. "I...I thought I deserved it."

"*Deserved* it? You're a saint. Why would you ever deserve such a thing?"

I pause, but truth must out, must set me free, even if it cuts all else loose. I'm sick of shame, and shame sickened me. Now that I'm healed—artificially, undeservedly—I must make things right.

"Because I'm not a saint," I say softly. "I'm far from it."

"We've all done shit we're not proud of," Kaj says.

I laugh a dark laugh. "Yes, but I've done shit *nobody* would be proud of. You think I mean something like feuds or grudges, but I've done more. So much more and so much worse."

"I'm here for you. I'm always here. You can tell me anything. You know that, right?"

"If I tell you, you'll...leave." Tears sting my eyes, and a lump chokes my throat.

"Never," he says.

"You don't even know what I've done," I object.

"But I know who you are, who you've become. Whatever you did forced you to this future, a future where you're the man...well, the man I fell in love with."

My ears blush along with the rest of me, and I freeze despite the heat.

"So tell me," Kaj says. "Test me. And I'll prove I'm not going

anywhere.”

I pause again.

Then I tell him.

Everything.

And he listens without judgment, without fear, without abandonment. He stays by my side as my sins break free.

I tell him about Carthage, my homeworld, a brutal planet made worse by her people.

I tell him about my anxiety and anorexia, both intensified by situation and circumstance.

I tell him about my uncertainties and insecurities, about my denial and distrust, about my frantic fear of conflicts and contradictions, about my skepticism and suspicion of strangers, except him, about how I lash out instead of letting anyone in, about how I only ever wanted peace.

I tell him about the metal skyscraper where I lived with my oblivious moms, about how their ignorance crowned my sister as queen and damned me as her loyal servant, about what Saia made me do and what she did to me, about the PTSD that ensued.

I tell him about Saia’s psychopathy, her sociopathy, about blood-eagle torsos with decapitated stumps and fancy bows on top, about how I spent my whole life trying not to be her.

I tell him about how no one believed me when I reported her crimes, because I’m a pushover, because I’m broken, because I look unreliable from anxiety, from anorexia.

I tell him about college, about Coach, about his kindness turned cruelty, about Saia’s follow-up assault, about our incestuous twins, about their deaths, about how it destroyed me, about how I murdered her like she murdered others, about how I did it to save our mothers, about how I suffer equal guilt for

killing her and for not killing her sooner, about how, in the Net, I keep a folder of images, a reminder of reasons for what I did and why, about how I miss her, about how I love her, about how I pray for her every day.

And last, I tell him I don't deserve him, but I love him, too.

At first, Kaj doesn't respond. But he also doesn't leave. Instead, he thinks, then smiles, then bends to kiss me. "Thank you for telling me," he whispers. "Thank you for letting me in."

I blink, confused. "So you're not...mad? You're not disgusted by me?"

"Mad? Disgusted?" He shakes his head. "Not at all. I worry about you, Jace. So much." Tears pepper his cheeks, and I gape, stunned someone could hurt *for* me and not *because of* me.

"It's time to forgive yourself," he continues. "You did nothing wrong and tried everything right. Fate was unfair, but that's not your fault. It's okay to miss her. Saia was your sister. She cared about you, too, even if she struggled to show it. You saved your moms from her. You saved the worlds from her. Yet, despite her abuse, you still loved your children together. That takes immense strength, to love something that sprung from such a deep wound. Most wouldn't be so generous."

My tears mirror his. "Generous? But I couldn't save them. They suffered because of me."

"No, they suffered because of her, but they shone because of you. Even if they only knew your love for a moment, you gave them a gift, Jace. They lived and died loved. Not everyone can say the same. If you can't forgive yourself for Saia, forgive yourself for them."

Tears waterfall, and sobs spasm my body. Kaj holds me as I dissolve, as years of suppressed regret rage free—emotional blockers overridden for a moment. The Infirmary fades, *Icarus*

with it, and I imagine—I *pray*—that we met in life and not death.

Sniffing, I raise my head to his. “I shouldn’t keep you. RJ’ll throw a fit if you’re late.”

“Then I’ll be late,” Kaj says, holding me close. “I’ve suffered worse than RJ’s fits.”

“Seriously?” I ask.

“No,” he says with a grin. “Though I’d suffer her and worse for you.”

“But I don’t want you to. Go. I’ll be fine.”

“You sure?”

I nod. “Oh, one last thing. When I was out, I heard you talking about your writing.”

Kaj blushes, then pales. “You heard that?”

“I heard everything,” I say. “Finish the book, Kaj. Promise me you’ll finish it.”

“You don’t even know what it’s about. It could be shit.”

“I know it’s not, because it’s yours. The worlds need your words. The stars need your stories.”

Kaj kisses me again, deeper, hungrier. He steals my breath and sparks my soul. “Okay,” he says. “Okay. Then promise you’ll keep me close. Promise you’ll never push me away.”

“Okay, I promise,” I say.

For once, my uncertainties, insecurities, denial, distrust, fear, skepticism, and suspicion fade, melt, wither, and disappear. We’re two broken pieces that fit together in our own puzzle, and the picture clarifies into a fragile shard of hopes, of dreams, of peace disallowed till here, till now, till this exact moment with Kaj.

“I love you,” I tell him again.

“I love you, too,” he says.

Neon Constellations

RJ: Age 18

I t's time. It's the end.
I cradle my stomach; the twins strain at the leather—kicking, swimming, nervous as I am to set us all free. Sidon glimmers fluorescent mirages as I wait at the stardocks amid neon constellations. It's home. A cramped, humid cesspool. A stuffy, muggy cybercity. A dank, dreadful cage where we all live on top of each other, where we all vie to vanish, fight to fade, and die to disappear, to never escape. This world claims our corpses.

Sidonese heritage is a curse, a curse I won't transfer to the children inside me. From birth, shackles limit our status, restrict our ascent, and condemn us all to the lowest societal rung. The Protectorate fears us. The Ward laughs at us. The universe spits in our eyes, then kicks us while we're down. But not them. Not my babies. I won't restart the cycle of violence, the cycle that stole my parents, then ruined me.

"Where's Dimo?" Kraken asks, approaching from the side.

I usher him behind the tower of shipping crates, then motion for him to crouch. "Sick. And you're late."

"Sick? With what?"

"A flu."

"But you're fine?"

I shrug. "Pregnancy hormones."

"Bullshit," Kraken says. "Where is he really?"

You think I'm nervous, that I crack under pressure, but this is part of the plan. Lie to Kraken. Let him call bullshit. Tell the truth—or a variation—so he doesn't question me further. That's the beautiful thing about apologies. People assume once you're sorry, you won't repeat the initial offense. Well, they're wrong, so bloody wrong. Apologies exacerbate infractions. It's not: "Sorry, I'll never do it again." It's: "Sorry, because I'll do it again."

"He's a fucking pussy," I say. "Wouldn't leave the flat. You know how he is."

"So he sent his pregnant wife?" Kraken scoffs. "Coward. Don't know why you married him."

"Because I need someone to balance my brutality."

"Can't argue with that."

"Where are the rest?"

"Here." Kraken points to a sea of Von Rei, a swarm of gangsters storming the stardocks.

"Oi, keep it down, ya savages," I snap. "Y'all sound like a herd of horny dinosaurs."

They listen—they must—and hunker with us behind the crate tower. I count heads and confirm they're all present. Every single Von Rei member waits at my fingertips. They think it's a juicy job, a stolen shipment of blastguns and jellies, the biggest

we've ever heisted. And it is, in part. Must make bait look legit. But it's not stolen—I paid for it. I hired pilots and bribed them with cybs. They're mine now, every last one, and I told them to escape, to fly away in just...a...minute...

Here's the tricky part, the lie that must latch.

"Shit," I swear and cross my legs. "Gotta piss. Net-damn kids."

"Now?" Kraken protests. "They'll be here any minute."

"And I'll be done in a bloody minute, unless you want me to piss on your fucking leg."

He rolls his eyes. "Hurry up."

I stand, stagger, and scurry to an adjacent crate tower, out of sight but within range. I should hesitate here. I should pause and consider the impending massacre, the imminent and unforgivable damage. But I don't. Because I don't want forgiveness. I want revenge.

So I press the button. It's a short-range detonator, untraceable and erasable. Von Rei would detect anything safer, and they'd trust no one but me to lure them here. I must be close for it to work, and work it does. My gang explodes in fleshy fireworks as blood showers the stardocks with crimson graffiti.

Is that it?

Was it that easy?

After years of planning, of scheming, of plotting revenge, could it actually *work*?

I draw circles in the scarlet pavement. Yes. Yes, it could.

"You...fucking...*cunt*," a roar resonates off shipping crates.

Well, mostly.

"Kraken, I'd hoped you'd survive," I say, standing to meet him. "The bomb would've been too good for you."

Though it came close to claiming him. Half his face melts, skin dripping to the ground. His massive bulk limps, favoring

his good leg; his other one twists with revolting mutilation.

"You killed them," he growls. "You killed them all. We were your *family*."

"No, you *murdered* my family," I seethe. "You slaughtered my parents and stole my home. Revenge was owed."

"So you found out," he says with a gory grunt, blood spraying between his teeth.

"Of course I did. You made me a weapon, and that weapon backfired."

It starts to rain, and human chunks drift toward drains.

"You were destined for more," Kraken says. "You were destined for greatness. You'd have amounted to *nothing* beneath their roof. Apathy would have crushed you. I know you better than they ever did, and that's why I recruited you to lead."

"You forced me to kill," I shout. "You forced me to thief. You forced me to do horrible, terrible, inexcusable things."

"And you *liked* it. You *liked* it, RJ—that's what tortures you, not the crimes or sins or horrible things. I showed you yourself, yet you blame the mirror."

I clench my jaw and bare my teeth. "Maybe I did. Maybe I liked it. But life is about choice. Without you, I would have chosen good. I would have chosen right."

Kraken chuckles, and blood bubbles up his throat. "In no alternate universe would you choose good or right. But if it makes you feel better to pretend you're a saint, by all means, lie to yourself. Secrets always catch up with us in the end."

I unholster a blastgun and aim it at his mangled face. "Perhaps. Yours did."

The trigger clicks, and Kraken disappears.

A minute later, the Protectorate arrests me—also as planned. You can't cage a ghost. At their police station, they question

the explosion and my lack of ID. For the first, I claim a malfunctioning hoverbike—didn't get the recall notice, and the damn engine blew next to a synthosine shipment. For the second, I claim hippie parents—they vacationed on Babylon for a silent retreat and were never the same since, so I was born without Net ID. Both fucking lies.

The Protectorate officers nod, understanding, grateful I “accidentally” eliminated the notorious Von Rei, and say they'll start my file. I let them, but I erase that, too, and leave the station a wraith.

This is my secret, a secret that frees, that destroys, that yields desperation in its wake, the cry of a crumbling world.

Celestial Surf

RJ: 2.5 Weeks Post-Launch

“We’re fixed,” Kaj says on the Bridge. “We can go home.”

Home. What a strange concept. Sidon was “home,” and it hurt me. The Outpost was “home,” and it bored me. *Icarus* is “home,” and she almost destroyed us all. Perhaps we should focus more on escaping home than finding it.

“Glar, confirm,” I order over the intercom. It’s not that I don’t trust Kaj, my acting XO; it’s that I want to hear Glar squirm.

“Confirmed, Acting Captain,” he squeaks.

“Captain,” I correct. Might as well claim it.

“Confirmed, Captain,” Glar says hastily. “My engineers repaired the nukedrive fuses, and we’re set to launch.”

“Good. Let’s hope the spiders don’t fry them again.”

“I wholeheartedly agree, Captain. We’re at your disposal.”

Gotta love him like this, timid, squirrely. Amazing what a few missing ribs will do to a person. I don’t tolerate dicks—in any

shape or form—and after that beating he gave Jace, I was more than happy to flex at Kaj’s request.

I hail the whole crew. “Stand by for launch. Before we return to Ward space, we’re emitting airborne holomedes to cure Diogen poisoning. The emotional blocker will last the trip, but it will wear off after our return, so you can feel again. This will be quick, but this will also hurt. Brace yourselves.” Then I hail the Infirmary. “Doctor Mazha, whenever you’re ready.”

Vents open in the metallic dome’s ceiling, but only Kaj and I stand amid the octagonal jigsaw of stations. We’re a skeleton crew now, wearing twenty hats, shuffling between panels, doing every job. Holomedes fog the Bridge, and we collapse.

Jace was right. It hurts like hell...like hell’s mutant son. I burn alive, freeze to death, writhe in agony, seize in torture. But it passes. Pain always does. And from the consoles’ beeps, I verify it worked for everyone else, too. We’re free of Diogen. We’re immune. We’re healed. One step complete, but it’s one step on a rickety ladder made of melting ice perched over a lake of lava and brimstone.

“For fuck’s sake, RJ, you could have warned us,” Kaj says. He stumbles to his feet and clutches a panel, wheezing.

“I *did* warn you,” I say. “I said it would hurt.”

“That didn’t *hurt*. That *crippled*.”

“Semantics. My turn.” One shot at this. One chance to free us or fuck up.

I slip on gloves, access the Net, and input the code. The shields resonate at the nebula’s frequency, eliminating Diogen from the onboard air supply. Though the crew is immune, the Ward is not, and if we’re to return “home,” we must limit exposure. This works, too, and that makes me leery. But I can’t stop now. No time to think. No time to make good choices and follow

them through. None of us are here because of foresight.

"Open the airlocks behind the sealed bulkheads," I order. "Vent the spiders into space."

"But what if the Ward can fix them?" Kaj protests. "What if they're not dead?"

"They're dead. I watched them die, and we all suffered their resurrections. They're zombies, nothing more, everything less. Vent them now, or I'll find a new acting XO."

"Good luck with that. There's no one left."

"Just fucking do it, or I'll steal your ribs, too."

He listens. He obeys. He always does. Airlocks open, massive spiders shoot into space, airlocks close, and bulkheads reopen. We're free of monsters, the monsters we bore, but I don't see monsters float before the nebula. I see misery instead, secrets instead of spiders, despair instead of demons, babies instead of beasts. Wings crystallize, frosty with ice. Fangs open in cries, then paralyze in goodbyes. Hairly legs stiffen in the frigid abyss, and the bitter void mists eight-eyeballed gazes. Parasites turned predators. Secrets turned sentient. Our monstrous, mortal wounds. I mourn them for a minute, grieve those they stole, those we leave behind, and resume the soul-crushing mantle of captain.

"Time to go," I tell Kaj, then open a shipwide channel. "T-minus two minutes and counting. Engine Room, report."

"Subspace coils primed and nukedrive stable, Captain," Glar rasps. We're all still recovering from the holomed and mass funeral. "Extragalactic launch configuration and fuel cell conditioning complete."

"Close all vents. Seal all airlocks. Activate holocams. Clone flight system. Initiate launch sequencer."

This is where everything fell apart last time, but I grow sick

of resistance, and I sense you do, too. Sometimes, shit works. More often, it doesn't, but it hasn't worked for tens of thousands of words, so let's boost morale at the end.

"Boot up auxiliary power units," I order. "Verify final coordinates, and arm nukedrive."

No one echoes affirmation as Kaj completes an entire crew's jobs.

"T-minus one minute and counting," I continue. "Initiate nukedrive gimbal profile test.

"T-minus thirty seconds. Start auto-launch sequence.

"T-minus fifteen seconds. Activate gravitational dampeners.

"T-minus ten seconds. Ignite nukedrive burn-off system.

"Main engine start. T-minus five, four, three, two, one... liftoff."

Icarus dives into subspace, and we surf the celestial tide.

Better the Devil You Know

RJ: 2.5 Weeks Post-Launch

Me again. Don't trust anyone else to tell this part right.

We return home. "Home." Whatever. And you think this is the end. The crew does, those of us who remain, anyway. But I've a bad habit of revenge, and the Ward wronged me worse than the Von Rei, worse than Sidon, and we all remember what happened there.

"*Icarus*, welcome back," Ward Command greets from the space station where we received our orientation, where we suffered their first lies. "I trust the harvest was a success?"

The harvest, the cover story. They really want to turn us into monsters, then turn those monsters—an army of brainwashed, zombified, posthumous soldiers—against the Protectorate. Remove our free will, then corrupt our corpses.

"The *harvest* was," I reply over the channel.

"RJ?" they ask, confused. "Where's Captain Heid?"

Where you want us all. In the bowels of deep space. In morality's void.

"Dead," I say. "Most of us are."

"Hmm, unfortunate," they say.

Yes, unfortunate that we can't become weapons. That's the problem with making people into bombs. We blow up at all the wrong times, in all the wrong places.

"Transfer the harvested Diogen, and prepare to dock," they say.

With pleasure...

I eject the Diogen container, but I don't prepare to dock. Instead, I distance *Icarus*. "Sorry," I tell Command. "Nav trouble. You know how subspace coils are."

Someone chuckles Command-side. "Oh, we do. No worries, *Icarus*. Take your time."

They don't care, because they got what they want.

And so will we.

The container drifts into the hangar, then explodes, taking the station with it. I supernova the Ward, a spark in the outskirts, a bullet to the core. Because it doesn't end here. It travels much farther. Within the explosion, I buried a code, a fuck-you Easter egg to the whole bloody institution. I hacked the Net, overrode its safety nets (pardon the pun), and magicked nanites into localized bombs. They let me in, so I lashed out.

"RJ, what have you done?" Kaj asks, appalled.

"What was necessary," I say. "Don't worry. The crew still got paid. I hacked the banks first."

"My concern is the *murder*, not the money."

"We all make our choices. They made theirs."

"You killed trillions of people."

"Have a little faith in me, Kaj. I killed far less, only the essential.

The Protectorate will give the rest asylum.”

“How do you know that?” he asks.

“Because I hacked them, too,” I say.

“Do you realize the ramifications? You weaponized the Net at a galactic level.”

“Then I destroyed the Net at a galactic level. As I said, have a little faith.”

“You *what*?” he asks.

“I destroyed it,” I repeat. “No one should have that power.” Especially not me.

“But if anyone discovers—”

“They *won’t*. For fuck’s sake, *listen*. I destroyed it, erased it, obliterated every single Net-damn nanite. No one will discover it, because there’s nothing left.”

“That wasn’t your choice to make,” he says.

“But it was the *right* choice,” I say. “The good choice. And someone should have done it long ago.”

“Then what keeps track of our IDs, our cybs?”

“A simpler system. No nanites, no Net. You still exist—your history’s still there—but biological firewalls encrypt your data. Holosurgery and holopsychology will still work, too, with force fields and holograms in a more isolated way.”

Kaj chews his lip. “You’ve been planning this. Since the Outpost?”

“Since Sidon,” I say.

“How?”

“I called in my stronger forces.”

“And they are...?”

“Anonymous. Confidential. We couldn’t do it till now, because we needed an in, and the harvest gave us one.”

He breathes a long breath, then sighs a long sigh. “Well, I

don't agree with it...but I'm glad you did it."

"I know," I say. "Something worse would've happened if I hadn't. There was a Ward-Protectorate feud on the horizon. So many more would have died in war."

"So you trust the Protectorate?"

"Of course not, but they're the lesser of the evils, the devil we know, the demon we can control."

"Then what are you?" Kaj asks.

I grin. "The devil they'll forget."

Goodbye, Midica

Mazha: Age 19

At last, the dam breaks. Suns breach. Seas swell. Wings spread.

Mazha, thank you for applying. Hattusa would be delighted to host your education. Please find enclosed your official admission statement along with a list of required courses for next semester.

It happened. I did it. After years of struggling and suffering, of rejections and refusals, I *fucking* did it. And Hattusa's the best MedAc in the Protectorate. I'll study with the elite.

"Mother, Father, even though you never believed in me," I whisper as I sign the holodoc, "this one's for you."

Goodbye, Midica. Goodbye, world of worship. Goodbye, Moon Vault. Goodbye, blue binary sunlight and seven moons. Goodbye, Gothic spires and sky city. You were never mine, and I was never yours. Nothing works out how we want, but everything works out for the best.

Goodbye, Carthage

Jace: Age 19

After I stole Saia, life was a blur. Days smudged into checkmarks. Months smudged into checkmates. The Protectorate gave me immunity, assumed my insanity, but I wasn't insane. I knew what she did, and I knew what I did, and I chose to allow both.

They think her death was self-defense on my part. I want to think that, too. Truth be told, I've ideated her murder since our early days in the tunnels with squishy victims and greedy rats. At least the Protectorate listened to me this time...mostly.

They'll never believe a skeleton.

But they did. They believed me. Well, they believed the bodies, the ones buried behind the chargers. As for Coach's assault and Saia's lost twins? No. Neither. Even when they saw the infants' rotting corpses. *Rest, Jace. You've been through a lot.* That's what they said. That's what they excused. They didn't even check the DNA, but it's better this way. They're mine, and

they'll stay mine, unadulterated by scans and tests.

My moms don't know. They can't. They won't. Let them remember Saia as their darling daughter, not as the monster they belched into this world. I'll suffer her truth—and mine—alone. And let them remember me as their stray son, the wandering soul, not as the man who murdered their firstborn to save their lives. They assume she's abroad, and they assume I'll follow.

So I tell them goodbye and leave Carthage behind. She mocks me with an icy gust, and her skyscrapers glare daggers. *You may abandon me, but I'll never abandon you*, she taunts from her high-rise kingdom. Her glass and metal skyline reflects blood-red hues as her gory, moonless horizon glitters with stars. I pull my parka tighter and mouth a silent fuck-you farewell.

Goodbye, Sidon

RJ: Age 19

That hurt like hell and ripped me apart, but it was worth every sweaty, breathy scream.

They're here. Cross-eyed and wobble-necked, weak and useless, but they're here. They're mine. And my world tilts toward them.

"They're beautiful, RJ," Dimo says beside me.

Our boy, Luka, has his gray-blue eyes with my chestnut hair. Our girl, Ava, has the reverse, my villain-red eyes with his strawberry-blond hair. We named our twins after my parents, after the deaths that drove me down this dark, disastrous path, a path that ended with the end of the Von Rei. I've never known love till today. I've never known fear, either.

"You want a divorce," I say, and Dimo freezes.

"Our children were just born. How could you say—" he starts.

"Because that's your plan, and I don't want to start their lives with a lie. You saw who I was at the stardocks, when I brought

down the Von Rei, and it scared you.”

He hesitates. “It didn’t scare me. It showed me who we are, both of us.”

I nod. I knew this was coming. I knew it would hit at the worst possible time. So I say, “Okay,” and bury my tears in our babies’ hair.

“Don’t be like this,” Dimo begs. “Maybe I’m wrong. Maybe we can work something out.”

“No,” I say. “With the gang gone, we saw each other clearly, and we don’t fit together anymore. This is friendship, not romance. Duty, not desire.”

“You’re not ‘duty’ to me. We’re partners, RJ. We’ve always been partners.”

“Partners in *crime*. But now, crime’s done, and we are, too. Aim higher, Dimo. You deserve someone to love you in the way I can’t love you, and it tears me apart.”

We’re splitting our family before it can begin, and it destroys me through and through. This is my fault. This is my truth.

“So what happens now?” he asks, voice unsteady as our newborns.

“We do what you want,” I say. “We divorce. You care for the kids while I protect and provide for them.”

“They need their mother.”

“They’ll always have me how I am, but this is best for everyone. They’ll have stability with you. With me, they’d be in danger. Even erased, as a ghost of the Net, there’s always the slight chance that someone finds me again. I won’t risk them like that. So, tomorrow, I head to Thebes, to the MedAc there. I’ll support you, always. You should leave Sidon, too.”

Tears spill from our eyes, but I ignore the mammoth guilt. This breaks me and ruins me beyond repair. I won’t see them

wake up. I won't watch them go to sleep. I'll miss their first laughs, their first words, their first steps. I'll miss their lives to save their lives...from me. I am their mother, but I'm also the monster, the one who murdered to set us all free, and as Kraken said, secrets always catch up with us in the end.

Dimo stifles a sob and holds my hand. "They're safe with me. I promise."

"I know. That's why they're yours," I say.

My spirit crumbles, and my heart bursts in agony. I don't want to be this, but I am this, and I always was. Though I ran from my identity, buried it for years, my identity caught up, too. I found myself late, but this delay burns. It hurts me, hurts him, hurts them, and I hate myself for who I am, because who I am splits my family, and that splits me apart in return. This wretched secret sears my soul, a sentient spider spinning an excruciating web.

"I'm sorry," Dimo whispers.

"I'm sorry, too," I whisper back.

This is life. You can never get ahead. Make more money; pay more childcare. Win more cybs; waste more time. Love more people; lose more souls. Goodbye, Sidon. Goodbye, neon nightmares and cyber curses. Goodbye, Dimo. Goodbye, Luka and Ava. I'll never forgive myself for this fatal farewell. Though I built a beautiful tomorrow, yesterday came crashing down.

Goodbye, Damascus

Kaj: Age 19

“Excuse me, sirs, but does Kaj, Protectorate Citizen 1717B.5915A, live here?” a woman asks at our door.

My dad’s glance back through the cottage at me, writing at the table as usual, as disliked.

“Who’s asking?” Pa presses, suspicious.

“Randall’s lawyer,” the woman says.

“Randall?” Dad asks.

“The literature teacher at Mount Damascus.”

“Mr. Randall?” I ask, piping up from my poem.

“Yes, that’s him,” she says. “It pains me to say this, but I must inform you—”

No.

“—that Mr. Randall—”

No. *Please not this. Anything but this.*

“—passed away yesterday evening in his home.”

Atlas drops the worlds, and they crush me with grief. My

dads notice, rush to my side, and rub my back as shock chars all thoughts.

"H-how?" I stutter.

"Heart failure," the lawyer says, "from a rare blood disorder. I'm sorry for your loss, but he left you something in his will."

"Me?" I meant something to him? I meant enough to remember in death?

She digs in her pocket and hands me a holocard. Engraved above the barcode is: *Write*.

"I...I don't understand." I flip the card, but the back is blank.

"It's his savings," she says. "All of it. Not enough to write full-time, but enough to keep your dream alive. He knew about nursing; he knew your dads could pay tuition, but you'd need a job to pay rent. With this, you no longer do. Pay bills with the will, attend MedAc during the day, and write at night. He's given you time."

"But...b-but what about his family?" I stammer.

She smiles. "*You* were his family, Kaj. He cherished you."

Tears stain my cheeks, and sobs lodge in my throat.

"That was immensely generous of him," Pa says.

"Please relay our gratitude to his associates," Dad says.

The lawyer nods. "I will." She pauses, unsure, but risks a final breach. "Randall believed in Kaj. You should believe in him, too."

She leaves our cottage before my dads can respond, but they're not angry at her. They're hurt. They're sad. They finally see.

"We're sorry," Dad whispers.

"We only want what's best," Pa adds. "But we've always believed in you, Kaj. We've just failed at showing it. *Some books exit your brain with wings.*"

It's a line from my poem, a poem that won, a poem I thought

their stranger.

"You...you read it?" I ask.

"Of course we did," Dad says. "We memorized it, too. Mr. Randall gave you a gift. He's enabling you. Keep writing. Never stop. And we'll try harder to encourage you."

Sobs burst free, and I collapse in their arms. My heart wrenches and warms, breaks and builds. Dad's right. This is Mr. Randall's gift, his last gift. And with his last dreams, he dreamed of me.

Goodbye, Damascus. Goodbye, fairy-tale world with nightmarish ennui. Goodbye, moon and sun, mirrors of mythic Earth. Goodbye, village school with your bully infestation. Goodbye, Hollow, sanctuary for victims like me. Goodbye, gentle grief and noxious nostalgia. Goodbye, saccharine storybook. Goodbye, River Docks. Goodbye, cottage. Goodbye, Dad and Pa. And last, goodbye, Mr. Randall. Thank you for seeing me.

Yet after I leave, when I arrive at Thebes MedAc, new bullies find me, sniff me out. Then I meet a human-shaped bomb with villain-red eyes. Though haunted, the aspiring holosurgeon is fierce, and she stops another rotation of the cycle I've suffered since birth. She says I remind her of a memory. I say she reminds me of a ghost. She laughs at that, introduces herself as RJ, and we anchor each other in our grueling new home.

But in the quiet, in pockets of routine, in cracks between schedules, in breaths between necessity, I write. And write. Then write myself free.

Love Is Foolish; Love Is Blind

RJ: Homecoming

“Are you sure you want me to come?” Mazha asks.

“That’s the only thing I’m sure of,” I say.

We land on Sumer’s outskirts to avoid disrupting this sublime world, then walk through lemon groves beneath leafy boughs, between sunbeams and glittering dust. It’s rustic here. Rolling, chartreuse hills. Wispy, feathery clouds. Cypress-lined dirt roads bordered by ramshackle villas. A too-big sky with a too-bright blue. This is their home, the home I provide and Dimo nurtures. I haven’t seen them in over a year.

Soon, their driveway appears—a twisted, earthy cursive. It ends at their villa, a limestone and sandstone sanctuary, beige and tan and limned with sunlight. Dimo notices me first—Von Rei instincts never leave—and smiles wide, flashing his teeth. He’s a lean thirty-six now with a new wife, more kids, two babies on his hips. Time’s been kind to him. It warms me to see his frizzy strawberry-blond hair and clear gray-blue eyes.

Horrors are still there, haunts planted by Babylon and Sidon, but no new nightmares haze his slate gaze.

Sumer is safe. Safe and soft. An extension of Dimo's soul, not mine. I don't belong here, but he does, and they do. Once they spot me, they call out, "Mom!" Then they sprint down the driveway, dirtying their white linen jumpsuits, and attack me with hugs.

Tears brim my eyes, tears Mazha sees. She squeezes my shoulder and lets the reunion breathe. Luka's grown tall as a weed, but he has his father's delicacy and gray-blue eyes, though my chestnut hair curls around his ears. Ava, however, takes after me. She's shorter, but a spitfire, with my glaring red eyes and her father's strawberry-blond hair. They're almost grown now. A hiccup from adulthood and all the promise that entails.

"We missed you," Luka says.

"What'd you bring us?" Ava asks.

And there they both are in a nutshell. Twins, yet opposites. Magnets, yet mirrors.

"I missed you, too," I tell Luka with a forehead kiss. "More than you'll ever know," I add in a whisper. Then I turn toward Ava. "Show me what you made, then I'll show you what I brought."

This is our routine, when life allows. Ava draws me her dreams, and I bring her hope. She retrieves a folded piece of parchment, hands me her art, and I gape. It's stunning. Brilliant. An abstract scream in the void. A stylized cry in the abyss. A rainbow prayer, a rogue nebula, a lost star in the clutches of deep space.

"Ava, this is..." I hesitate, search for words that don't exist. "This is breathtaking." It's not. It's more. But my expression contains the rest.

My daughter smiles from ear to ear. "Glad you like it. Pay up, Mom."

"Ava," Luka says, rolling his eyes.

But I grin. "Like mother, like daughter." I reach in my pockets and withdraw two holocards. "Tickets for spring break on Thebes."

"Yes!" they exclaim and try to snatch the cards, but I make them wait.

"Behave yourselves there," I warn.

"Like you did?" Ava teases. "Dad told us your MedAc stories."

"Do as I say, not as I do," I say as I give them the cards.

They pocket the tickets and retreat toward their villa. Dimo waves from afar, but we don't talk. We don't embrace. We don't say, "It's been too long," or, "Don't be a stranger." Because we are strangers now. There was a time when we were each other's everything, partners in the dark. But we left Sidon and those people behind.

I transferred cybs to Dimo's account, and he transferred me files regarding their lives, but that's our only interaction. I've always supported them, and he's always cared for them. This is the balance we need. For so long, I kicked myself for splitting my family, for drifting apart. But as I see Luka and Ava dance around Dimo's new wife, with their new siblings, I realize our family didn't split. It grew. They have more people who love them now. Even if our family is an odd size, a weird shape, it's still a family. It's still a home.

"Will you go inside?" Mazha asks, looping an arm through mine.

"No," I say. "This is theirs. I'll return in a week to take Luka and Ava on holiday, but till then, I'll give them space."

"Can I come?"

"Sorry?"

"Can I come with you in a week? As long as you don't mind."

More tears sting my eyes. "You want to?"

"Of course," she says. "They're your family. They're more of you. And I want to know all of you, all your secrets, all your soul."

I pull her closer, wrap an arm around her back. "Why?"

"Because I love you. I've never loved anyone before, but I do love you, RJ. Too much."

"Then you're a fool to fall in love with me."

"And you're a fool to love me in return." Mazha pauses. "Let yourself be happy. Let yourself be loved. Let go of all the guilt, shame, and regret. If I can do it, can you try, too?"

Storms cloud my gaze amid the sunny street. "I'll always feel guilt," I say. "I'll always be ashamed I'm not that woman. I'll always regret what I couldn't do, who I couldn't be." I point to Dimo's new wife, his maternal wife, his kind, caring, perfect wife. She's a sweetheart, and I'm jealous but not spiteful. Mazha's right. It's time to let go. "But I *will* move on for you, for them. They need me at my best, even if my best is a different breed."

Mazha beams. "Thank you. I know it's hard, but thank you, RJ. Thank you millions."

"Rayne," I say before I can stop. "My name is Rayne. But it's only for you to say and know."

She senses trust's hefty weight and nestles closer, kisses my cheek. "It's beautiful but not what I expected. Too soft for you. And where'd the 'J' come from?"

"Nowhere, like me."

"Always a ghost," she says.

"Always a pain," I correct. "Don't know why you love me."

LOVE IS FOOLISH; LOVE IS BLIND

“Love is foolish.”

“Love is blind.”

She laughs, then I laugh, and we wave Sumer goodbye.

Cursed Soil

Jace: Homecoming

“Give it,” I demand. “All of it.”

Glar shirks away, and it never gets old. He cradles his chest, his missing ribs—courtesy of RJ, requested by Kaj—and cowers in a corner of the space station. “*All* of it? But I earned those cybs.”

“You earned shit,” I snap. “You tormented me from the start. Beneath Protectorate law, I could file harassment charges, and you’d never work again. But I’m not filing charges. I’m not suing you for your bones. I’m only asking for your *Icarus* mission pay. That’s all...unless you’d like me to ask the Protectorate’s opinion.”

“Fine,” Glar spits, ashen and mousy, then hands over a holocard. “Take it, but please leave me alone.”

I grin at the cybs. “Of course, Glar. With pleasure. Unlike you, I keep my word.”

“I was on Carthage, you know.” His bloodshot eyes water,

and his scrawny frame trembles as he runs a hand through his thinning hair. “During your ex-Punic Wars. Brutal world. Horrid people. I don’t envy you your birth.”

“We scarred you, too, then,” I say. For once, I don’t hear Saia, I don’t feel shame, and I don’t suffer Carthage’s icy memory.

“Scarred?” he asks. “No, not scarred. You traumatized me and my whole platoon. Everyone who sets foot on your cursed soil leaves damaged beyond repair.”

“Hmm, yes, I read about your PTSD, and it seems you’re still blaming others, as you blamed me for your bullying. *Friendly fire*, that’s what it said. You killed your own side. It wasn’t Carthage’s fault; it was yours.” His secret, the reason the Ward recruited him. Surprised it didn’t destroy him. It would have destroyed me. Then again, I’m not one to talk, with a murderous, incestuous, serial-killer sister—a sister I killed.

Jacccccccccccccccccc...

Let me inside, Jace.

And there she is.

But I’m here, too.

“It was an accident,” Glar insists.

“I believe you,” I say, “but you don’t believe yourself. Anyway, gotta run. Shit to do, places to go.” It feels good to stand up for myself—odd yet good. It’s a foreign feeling, a strange sentiment, a fresh face that could grow familiar.

“Where are you going?” Glar asks as I hurry away.

“I’m buying a home,” I say.

Some Books Burn

Kaj: Homecoming

It starts the same.
Some books exit your brain with wings.
Some stories spoil your soul with hope.
Some words sink ships with fanged truth.
Some tales pierce enemies' hearts and swivel history's globe.
Some myths blaze downpours of fury.
Some rumors tighten ignorance's rope.
Some legends trade wisdom for youth.
Some sagas rip open worlds and string time in kaleidoscope.
 Then I add to the poem.
But some books burn.
Some stories scorch.
Some words wield weapons.
And some tales take charge.
Myths magic monsters.
Rumors raise regret.

Legends learn leverage.

All sagas suffer sunsets.

I finish the book, struggle's story, with words *Icarus* blessed me with amid our vile curse.

His fathers served the king, a government-shaped god.

They pacified protests in treaties written red.

And this king hungered for a monster-made maze.

So a labyrinth of lies sprung from the dead.

The fathers warned their son about risk and chance.

The son warned his fathers about apathy's chains.

"The timid are forgotten," Icarus told them both.

"The brave are destroyed," Daedalus explained.

But the son didn't listen. Neither did the men.

So wax and feathers pretended at wings.

Birdless planes latched onto the fool.

He leaped from hell's tower and escaped into nothing.

Because wax melts. Feathers burn.

Stars cremate all souls.

Sun and son collide mid-sky.

And fathers mourn pride's toll.

Last, I submit my legacy to dozens of galactic publishers. They all reject me, so I submit to dozens more. Still more rejection, so I submit again and *again* and **again** till my list numbers in the hundreds. Then one responds. Then one believes. Then my book becomes immortal. Bang the door till it opens. Slam the window till it breaks. Find an out; carve an escape. Breathe suffering into story. Find the starving parts of your soul, the slivers that ache for words, and lend those shadows voice. Struggle is soul.

I dedicate the novel to Mr. Randall. *To the one who saw me first.* It's a lonely song, a raw prayer, a journey against odds, a

fulfillment of childhood's dream.

"Congrats, love," Jace says from the couch. "I knew you'd do it. I knew you'd win."

I cross the room and take him in my arms. He coils in my lap—catlike yet calm.

"Remind me how you bought this station again?" I stroke his gunmetal curls. He's let his hair down literally since the *Icarus* mission failed, since "The Mortality Experiment" backfired.

"Don't worry about it," Jace says.

"I always worry about you," I say.

He sighs. "I blackmailed Glar for his *Icarus* cybs, then I bargained with the Protectorate as a Ward refugee. They gave me a steal, so I bought it outright."

"Wait, you blackmailed Glar? Then bought a fucking space station?"

He shrugs. "We need a home...a home together. Maybe I'm too much like Saia, after all." Shadows mar his hazel gaze, so I take his chin in my hand and force his attention.

"She was your sister," I say. "Of course you're alike. But you branched from her since birth. You're your own person, Jace. You pave your own path. You follow your own rules. And you stood up for yourself. I'm so proud of you."

"You're proud of me?"

I nod.

"How proud?" he jests and bats his eyelashes. "Show me."

I smirk, then I do.

Strange Tomorrows

Mazha: Homecoming

That's a wrap.
 And it's happy.
 Can we have a happy ending? Can we live happily
 ever after? Can we survive and thrive with bright futures ahead?
 Is anyone else itchy about this?

2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256...

"Hey, where's your head?" RJ asks across the table.

She, Kaj, Jace, and I all eat at a diner, a one-month reunion
 after the doomed *Icarus* disaster. No, not disaster. The Ward is
 gone. The Net, too. And the Protectorate behaves, scared into
 submission, horrified by the nameless Hero of the Harvest.

Well, RJ's been called worse.

"Nowhere," I say. "Guess I'm just fangirling over the galaxy's
 favorite author."

Kaj reddens, and Jace ruffles his hair.

"How's the station?" RJ asks. "Heard you buried a few bodies

to get it.”

“*Blackmailed*, not buried,” Jace says with an eye-roll.

“Boring,” RJ says.

Zariah arrives, popping our bubble of conversation. He still grieves the captain’s loss, still harbors a melancholy air, but he’s moved on and opened this diner on the Outpost—full circle, I know. And the fact that Heid’s sister—her nicer, better sister—has taken a fancy to him helps. Jace played matchmaker for that one. Seems Glar knew more than he let on.

“What can I get you fools?” Zariah asks. His emerald eyes dance in candlelight, and he shifts his stocky build to lean on the booth.

“Everything you’ve got,” RJ says.

“Just honeyed tea,” Jace says.

“Whatever’s your favorite,” Kaj says.

“What Jace ordered,” I say.

Zariah smiles at us all, then leaves to fill our order.

“You know this won’t last, RJ,” Kaj says once he’s gone. “You destroyed the Net, forced everyone to quit cold turkey. There are rumors of withdrawal.”

“Data is a drug,” RJ says. “It’s addictive. A little is great. A lot is risky. It’s good for people to get their heads out of their asses.”

“Without the instant info fix,” I say, “I’ve had fewer patients. People are going out more. They’re happier, healthier.”

“Still, there will be ramifications,” Jace says.

“Good,” RJ says. “Society was stagnating, and we gave it a shot in the spine.”

Our order comes, then we eat and return to our separate lives. After a quick goodbye to Kaj and Jace, RJ and I climb the spiral staircase to the rooftop balcony.

The Outpost is a barren world, an oft-forgotten colony. Vast and cold, windy and rainy, I huddle closer to RJ, and she wraps her coat around us both. Craggy mountains lurch from the volcanic earth. Cliffs and landslips crumple the ground. Fog fills the valley floor, and powder-blue lakes dot the craterous wasteland. It's coarse beauty, glacial and raw—similar to RJ, though she, too, thaws.

"What now?" RJ murmurs into my hair. "What happens after? What comes next?"

I don't know. We have enough money to retire, but we don't excel at relaxation.

"We work," I say.

She chuckles. "Always the romantic."

"Why? What'd you have in mind?"

"I'd like to travel, to see strange worlds and live strange lives, full of strange tomorrows." She hesitates, then draws a shaky breath. "And I'd like to live this life...with you."

RJ lends me her coat, then drops to a knee, a ring propped in her palms, a diamond star. Rain soaks her chestnut hair, and joy softens her villain-red eyes. She wants me, I realize. She really loves me.

My eyes widen in shock; my mouth opens in prayer. This was my dream, but dreams don't come true, and we can never break free. But it *is* true, we *are* free, and secrets chain us no longer.

"Me?" I squeak.

"You," she says. "Only and forever you. So...?"

"Yes." The word bursts from my soul. "Yes, Rayne. Only and forever and always you."

Acknowledgments

Congratulations. You have conquered this book monster and survived my mind.

To everyone who has retweeted, read, or reviewed my work: Thank you for encouraging my madness.

To my ride-or-die team, including but not limited to Dr. Mario Dell'Olio, TT Banks, Ash Knight, A.C. Merkel, all of Queer Indie, Agent Ross Young, Lali A. Love, Valkyrie Rose J. Fairchild, S.P. O'Farrell, Anya Pavelle, NT Anderson, M.E. Aster, M.J. Falke, and Riv Rains: Thank you for everything. I am a car, and you are my Vin Diesel, driving me forward even though I should have run out of gas three chase scenes ago. That came out wrong, but so did I.

To *The Writing Community Chat Show*, *Story of a Storyteller*, *The Tiny Bookcase*, *Boomers on Books*, *The Shadow's Project*, *Steve Talks Books*, *GBHBL*, *What The Book*, *Human Chapters*, *Words & Pictures*, and everyone in the "Press" section of my website: Thank you for your incredible support.

To family, blood and found: Thank you for always accepting me...and for letting me tie you up in the garage for "plot discovery" purposes.

To S and C: Conquer the universe, my darlings. Love you both always and forever.

Reviews are authors' superheroes.

They save us from the villainous Lord Algorithm to lend us credibility and visibility. If you would consider leaving a review on Amazon, Goodreads, and BookBub of even a few simple words (ex. "There's something wrong with Halo." or "Halo pulverized my mind and cackled while doing so."), I would be forever grateful and will award you an esteemed spot in my empire once I achieve galactic domination.

About the Author

Halo Scot is a dark fiction author of [book monsters](#), many of which bite. Reviews and press are available on [HaloScot.com](#). Halo has been featured in *Publishers Weekly* and *BookLife*. Also, as a founding member of [QueerIndie.com](#), Scot has appeared at Brooklyn Book Festival and Pop Pride Week, an event hosted by ReedPop, BookCon, and New York Comic Con.

To summon this obscure and skittish writer, one must align the following items in a circle as an offering: three shots of whiskey, two bowls of jelly beans, something shiny or lit on fire, and a printed photo of Nicolas Cage as a duck.

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NOTE: Please read the content warnings. My mind is a horrifying place. Only enter with poisonous weaponry and snacks.