HALO SCOT

HALO SCOT Burn the Sun

An Apocalyptic Science-Fantasy Novel

Copyright © 2022 by Halo Scot

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.

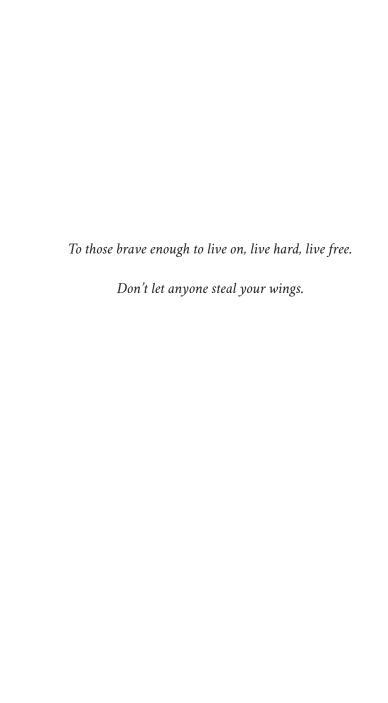
This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

First edition

ISBN: 9798352528198

This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy.

Find out more at reedsy.com



There Are No Champions Here

Camroc

B leeding sky, crying stars, sun on a noose, swollen and red.

She's dying. We're dying. Again, again, again. Flames slice open, and fire glows. Starving heat, greedy blaze, wants to eat worlds, waits for the end. She chews our songs and swallows our stories. We are nothing. Nothing. Bones and broth. No meat or memory. A smudge in space, a shadow in the dark.

Threadbare galaxy, she's a temptress. Eyes like diamonds, blind and bright. Lips like rubies, fangs wet with venom. She bit us twice: Earth, then our second sun. Death flirts with daggers. He chases us. We run. *Tag, you're it.*

"Duck," Coach says. I duck. "Dodge." I dodge. "Faster." I'm faster. "Stronger." I'm stronger. "Not enough." I know.

Iron scars, Coach is a hammer. Steel lips and titanium voice. Gray buzz cut and russet skin. Muscles like ropes, glare like ice. He makes us better. Builds us tougher. We are his puppets, and

he is our god.

"The Games are in a *week*," Coach spits. "In one week, you fight for us all. Tomorrow, Trials begin. You are not ready."

Win or die, the Games are knives. My life is a slave.

"Prime will destroy you. They've trained since birth. I coddled you too long. Again."

I miss the punch. Coach cracks my nose. Again, again, again. Pain flowers. Blood rains. Tulips in the mud.

"Are you worthy?" Coach barks. "Is Quate worthy? Our world's fate relies on you."

Only a single planet can escape, a sole survivor to see our third home. This is law: five worlds, five teams, five Games, one winner. Another punch. Petals stained red. Coach shoves me, and I stumble. Life sharpens as death beckons. *Run faster, runt.* And so, I run.

"There isn't enough room on the seedship for everyone," Coach says. "Do you want a seat? Or do you want to burn to death in the heart of our sun? If you lose, you kill us all. Fight!"

So I fight.

"More, Camroc," he says. I give more. "Push me." I push. "Destroy me." I destroy. "Take away my every hope." I flip, twist, kick him away. "Not enough." Again, I know.

"Let him rest," Arada says.

"Rest?" Coach roars. "He can rest when he's dead, which might be soon. Don't interrupt, Arada."

"Yes, sir."

"Nyo, spar with Camroc. Combat measures strength, both physical and mental. Want it. *Need* it. Victory is a slippery bitch. Earn her golden claws. You're afraid, Camroc, but fear is a demon. In new worlds, old ways must die. Save us or slay us.

THERE ARE NO CHAMPIONS HERE

It's your choice."

Not a choice, a chain.

Nyo throws a punch. I block. Ze kicks high. I crouch low. Ze twirls and flips backward. I catch zes ankle, yank zem to the ground. Nyo grins, and I help zem to zes feet.

"Weak, Camroc," Coach says. "You are so much better. So much *more*. You could have beaten Nyo from that first punch, but you let zem kick and flip. Don't wait. Time drains you, weakens you, wears you out so your opponent can obliterate you. Do you want to live? Or do you want to die? 'Cause right now, you're killing us all."

"Riahbat sos od," Evam says in Quatic. Give him a break. "El od lioht." Please. Ronoc, Yelir, and Trebor nod while Arada and Nyo murmur in agreement. The team stands up for me when I cannot stand up for myself. Guilt. Shame. Regret. Revenge.

"In Common," Coach says. "Our language has no place in the future."

Evam switches tongues. "Please, Coach. Camroc fights harder than us all. He's tired today."

"He's not tired. He's gentle. And life is not gentle to gentle boys."

Lin na loas silim. Life is not gentle—period.

"Sorry, Coach," I say.

"Don't apologize to me," Coach says. "Apologize to *them*." He gestures at my teammates. "I'm an old, cranky bastard, and I've seen enough life. They haven't even started. Don't let them die before they can live."

Duty. *Pressure.* Burden. *Pain.* Quate stands on my shoulders. I buckle beneath her weight. Blood cries down my face, red as rage, hot as hunger. I am an athlete. My body is a machine—a *weapon.* Garnet curls. Golden-brown skin. Eyes jade and amber,

angular and shy. Broad, strong, yet still so weak. I was not made for this world, but this world made me, bred me, warped and ripped and molded me. I am clay.

"The other colonies expect us to lose," Coach continues. "They want us to lose. We are nothing to them. An underdog, a failure. A loser and a laughingstock. I am the *only* one who believes in you, and I won't stop pushing till you see gold. Because you are not a laughingstock. You are not a loser or failure. No, you are a dark horse. A stardamn powerhouse, if you let yourselves fall. Nyo, come here."

The lean athlete approaches, blue-black skin dewy with sweat, cornrows tight against zes neck. "Yes, Coach?" Nyo's voice is deep but soft, the rock to my storm. Ze glances at me, and zes large onyx eyes blink, slow, as if to say: *It's okay, Cam. It'll all be okay.* Ze knows me too well—ze and Arada, my family, my home.

"Punch Camroc again," Coach says.

Nyo starts a punch. Coach grabs zes arm, and ze freezes.

"This was your mistake," Coach says to me. "Extension is a vulnerability. Nyo has reach, because ze's tall, but you have force, because you're not. Center yourself." I center myself. "Ground yourself." I ground myself. "Then grab zes arm, and flip zem over your shoulder. Claim zes momentum as your own. Throw zem off balance. Go."

Uneasy, I grab Nyo's arm, twist, and pull. Ze doesn't budge.

Coach scrubs his face. Freckles dance beneath his frustration, and small hazel eyes pierce me with disappointment. "There are no champions here."

"If you don't hurt zem," I say, Nyo's arm still in my grasp.

"If you don't hurt zem, someone else will," Coach snaps.

"That's why we're here—to hurt, to heal, to make each other

THERE ARE NO CHAMPIONS HERE

better than we'd ever be alone. Tomorrow, you fight *against* each other for a spot on the Olympic team. In one week, you fight *with* each other for a spot on the seedship. Do you want to qualify? To survive? To lead this team—this planet—to safety? Or do you want to damn us all? This is on you, Camroc. You have the potential to be stronger than everyone, but you're afraid. There's no room for fear at the end of the worlds."

I'm angry, not afraid. Nyo is my sibling—chosen, not given. We're all orphans, so we became family. I don't want to hurt anyone here. I can't afford to lose anyone else.

"Do it, Cam," Nyo whispers. "Flip me. I'll be fine."

Ze relaxes in my grip and leans forward, aiding me. I grit my teeth and flip zem over my shoulder. Ze lands on the mat, winded. I wince.

"Ze helped you," Coach notices. He notices everything. A huff of disgust whips through my blood-red hair. "No one will help you tomorrow. This is your battle, Camroc. I can't teach you anymore. Practice is over. Sleep well tonight. Stars bless you all."

Coach leaves the gym without further farewell. Evam, Trebor, Ronoc, and Yelir smile, sympathetic, then head toward the bunks to shower.

"Rat ra. A naegil ra lud," Arada says in Quatic. Come on. Let's go. She tosses me and Nyo shawls, then wraps a chunky scarf around her wiry frame. Her narrow black eyes shine with mischief as she re-braids her sleek black hair with deft brown hands.

"Ac tiah?" I ask. Where? I tie my shawl around my shoulders, and Nyo does the same with zes.

"Hcama," Arada says. Out.

"We don't have time," I say in Common. In new worlds, old

ways must die. "You heard Coach."

"We'll be back early, promise," Arada says.

"Ri-ri-"

"Shut up, Cam. We need this. Tomorrow, we leave. I want to say goodbye to Quate. We might never return home; if we do, we will die here. Tonight is our last night to be normal, to be free."

"We were never normal or free," I say. Followed since childhood, scanned and scrutinized, the worlds tore us apart before we could piece ourselves together. Guards have always sheltered us, isolated us—symbols on a pedestal, flesh treated like metal. Coach is our father, but he is also our master, forger of blades and blacksmith of souls. I am a dagger, a sword, a scythe. Death melted me from an early age.

"Get out of your head," Arada says. Her sunshine is blinding today, brighter than our actual sun, rusty as gore and dying on knots.

Nyo uses a medscanner to heal my nose and wipes blood from my face. "You're too kind, Cam," ze says. "You've always been too stardamn kind."

"And too mopey," Arada says, slapping my cheek. She's small but spunky and takes nobody's shit. "C'mon, Grump Supreme, race you to the top."

She sprints away before I can answer. Nyo follows, serene. I wish I had zes calm, but I don't. Nor do I have Arada's flames. I often wonder why Coach recruited me all those years ago. Quate has many orphans from many famines. Why me? Why not the others? I was timid then, I'm timid now, and I've never outgrown that worry, that angst. Maybe the Games will change me—or break me.

"Hurry up," Arada calls from the gym's exit.

THERE ARE NO CHAMPIONS HERE

She opens the door. Sunset invades: fat, pink, and watery. With Nyo on her heels, she darts outside. Reluctant, I follow, and Quate engulfs me. Hills and valleys, lakes and streams, green limned red, land rolling thunder. The sun squats on the horizon, tired and dying. She waits while we dash up a slope—feet sliding, hearts pounding—and reach the crest of the nearest hill.

Rodents scurry through heather at our feet. Thatched roofs sprawl beneath us. Stone houses glow with lanterns while greenhouses and factories close for the night. Citizens drive aircars home through fields of wheat and potatoes. Cigarette smoke feathers through open windows. Laughter bubbles with wine and whiskey, then something splits inside me.

Quate is a friendly world—fiery when necessary. We're poor but warm, and there's no chance in hell that we'll win. This is over. This is the end. In too few days, we'll all be dead. *If you lose, you kill us all.* Coach was right. I will lose, and I will kill them all. *Fight!* I fought. Failed. There's no more to give. I am no dark horse, nor powerhouse. I'll let my team down, my friends down, my world and people and our Houses down. We are ants. Prime will squash us. If not Prime, then Dion, or even Tertia. We are the worst of the worlds—tied with Quin for bottom rung. At least Quin is rich. They'll die in style while we die in screams.

"Cam, darling, breathe," Nyo says, zes hand on my arm. I breathe. "Count." I count. "Relax." I can't.

"We'll die," I say. "We'll all die because of me."

Arada snorts. "Overachiever. Only some of us will die because of you."

"Not helping, Ri-ri," Nyo says. Ze turns to me. "This is on us all. We're a team. We fight together, die together, and if we die,

we die in peace."

"And if not peace, then flair," Arada says. "Lighten up. It's only death. You didn't kill the sun, Cam. No matter how self-centered, big-headed, and broody you are, this is not your fault."

"If I could only—" I start.

"Stop," Nyo says. "No more ifs or doubts. Tomorrow, we fight for team placement. I *will* make the Quatic team, and I want you by my side." From anyone else's mouth, it would sound like arrogance, but from zes, it sounds like hope. "Okay?"

"Okay," I say.

"And me?" Arada asks, dark brows raised.

"You'll be number one," Nyo says.

"Damn right."

"Always so modest."

"Modesty is overrated," Arada says. "Life is, too. Cheer up, Cam. Live or die, it was a hell of a ride."

Wind whistles between us, over hills, through valleys of this ghost-ridden world. "Si aerb moil ut," I whisper. I love you. "I love you both more than the stars. Never forget that."

"And we love you," Nyo says.

"Are you two drunk?" Arada asks.

"I'm serious, Ri-ri," I say.

"I know, and I love you, too," she says, "but if you get more maudlin, I'm gonna vomit on that fern."

"Spare the fern," Nyo says.

"Then I'll vomit on you."

"I didn't start it."

"But you encouraged it. You know Cam's a sucker for soaps. In another life, he'd be an actor."

"No, his face is too..."

"Bitchy?" I offer.

THERE ARE NO CHAMPIONS HERE

"You do have resting prick face," Nyo says. "It's a good thing." "It'll scare the competition," Arada adds.

"Or make them wonder why I'm constipated."

We laugh together as broken bells, as untuned fiddles. Hearts a drum roll, we pray to the moons.

* * *

Night rains stars on wounded souls.

Pain. Echoes. Fear. Ghosts. Cry me a river, then drown in your tears. Weak as weapons. Strong as words. Swords saw through rotten dreams. You are not ready. You will never fly free.

I gasp awake. Blood sears my veins. Air chafes my lungs. It wasn't real. I'm not real. No monster can kill a shadow.

"Cam, you okay?" Nyo hisses from zes bunk.

I whisper, "Yes." Never again.

"Liar. Come here."

"No."

"Camroc." Nyo spins my name like a spell, and I listen. "I'm here. Ri-ri is here."

"Unfortunately," Arada says, voice thick with sleep.

"We all are here," Nyo says, though the others snore, oblivious. "I'm broken," I breathe.

My fists tighten into wrecking balls, and I chain the rage inside me. *I cannot fall apart*. Our people rely on me. If I lose, they die. I am a killer. *Killer*. A murderer. *Murderer*. Fire flames within me. Static crawls up my limbs. Thoughts roar—*let me out, let me in*—as I palm my temples in silent terror. Mouth agape. Eyes clenched tight. Veins a net to cage me.

"Yes, you are," Arada says. "So take your broken shards and fight." She turns over and falls back asleep.

Nyo stays awake. "Cam." I don't answer. "Camroc." I flail on a sinking raft in a boiling sea. "Brother." I pause in the dread-ridden dark. "We're all broken."

"Then we'll all lose." We'll all die.

"Scars are the toughest skin," Nyo says. "They're numb and strong."

"I don't feel numb or strong."

"Because you're picking at scabs. Let yourself heal."

"No time." Panic shivers through me. Cold sweat. Hot blood. Scorching breaths. Heart a hammer. Mind an ocean. Life a memory.

"There's always time," Nyo says. "Too much time. Breathe. Count. Relax. You are in control."

"I'm chaos's bitch."

Nyo chuckles. Arada pointedly snores—awake again, asleep again. Empty. *Empty*. I've always been empty. A robot. A tool. They raised me to save them. A brittle shell. A hollow statue. I am nothing. *Nothing*. Breath on the wind. Sobs in the storm. *Erased*.

"Sleep," Nyo says. "You're ready. Have faith in the training and rest. If you don't, you'll sabotage yourself."

Fists and drums, hand-twisted iron, I sink, swim, wait in between. Night shimmers around us.

"I'm not ready to die," I whisper.

"I am," ze whispers back, "but I don't want to, so *sleep*, Cam. You'll feel better tomorrow."

"For stars' sake, shut the fuck up," Arada snaps. She rustles her covers, turning over. The others remain asleep. Fear doesn't kidnap them as it kidnaps me. I am horror's hostage. *Run.*

"Sorry, Ri-ri," I say.

"Go to sleep, Camroc, or I swear on all the fucking stars in

THERE ARE NO CHAMPIONS HERE

this stupid bloody galaxy that I'll kill you myself. Then you won't need to worry about letting anyone down."

A smile twitches my lips.

Nyo smiles, too. "You heard the queen."

"Go to hell, Nyo," Arada spits. "Keep spewing that wise shit, and I'll kill you, too. It is bed-fucking-time, time to fucking sleep. If I hear so much as a stardamn burp from either of you, I will slit both your throats in the night."

"You take tough love to a whole new level, Ri-ri," ze says.

"My knife is in my hand."

Nyo falls silent, amused, but pads across the room to squeeze my shoulder. That squeeze says, We'll be okay. And if we're not okay, we'll be together. Ze tiptoes back to zes bunk and falls asleep. Ri-ri does, too, but panic plagues me. I'll crash and burn. Pressure. Sleep. Failure. Go to sleep. Disaster. Go to fucking sleep, Camroc.

I don't. Can't. Must.

Breathe. Count. Relax.

Slow. Steady. Stable.

Rest. Rest.

Heart calms. Lungs cool.

Home. Home.

Done.

A whispered prayer: "Life, you've made me strong. Now, have mercy."

Yes, We'll Die, but First, There's Cake

Ketra

at," Mother says.

I do not eat. I can eat, but I will not eat, because this is no time for cake.

"No one wants a skinny princess. You reflect Quin's welfare. If you are thin, the world is thin, and if the world is thin, the world is weak. *Eat*." Mother uses her royal voice. She grates each syllable against her teeth, shredding words into weapons.

"I am not thin, and Quin is not weak," I say.

"No thanks to you." Mother is Queen Ora now. She is no longer the woman who made me, but the woman who carved me from Quin's frozen tundra. I am her prize centerpiece. *Shine.* I shine. *Glow.* I glow. *Give them hope where there is pain.* I slice open a smile and bleed over the snow. Her iron-gray eyes cut me with disdain. She tucks a silver-blonde strand behind her ashen ear and braids her scrawny fingers. We're both short, but I'm soft where she's sharp, curvy where she's cruel. *Save me.*

"Tomorrow is important, Ketra," Mother says.

Ketra. *Ketra*. I have only my name, not hers, not my late father's. Family is found. Deserve loyalty, and earn every drop of success.

"Trials set the tone for the Games," she continues. "Tell me who will make our team."

This is a test. Servants retreat to the ice palace's walls and wait, heads bowed, while Queen Ora judges across the table. I gaze out the frosty windows to the staff's igloos. My reflection tickles the glass: pale with freckles, storm-gray eyes, wild starlight hair. I resemble Mother. Mother does not resemble me.

"Tell me," Ora presses.

I feign thought, but I know her games. Mother does not want my answer. She wants her answer. She wants praise. I learned long ago to be timid. Submission hurts less than subjugation. Yes, Your Majesty. Always, Your Majesty. I am but your humble tool.

Quiet and shy, I say, "Isrik."

"Good," Ora says. "Give me two more."

"Kire and Ekris."

"Valo and Urat are competent." Another test.

"No ambition," I say.

"Akina and Iram show promise."

"No power."

Mother hums in approval. Unlike the other planets, she chose our Olympic team. Tomorrow, our alternates will let the others win—will let *Mother* win. She's always right. She *must* be right. Quin is strict, standoffish. No local plants, no local animals. Greenhouses provide a fake life. We're rich but worthless with inflation and high prices. Ghosts are devalued here, while on Prime, cybercurrency soars. I spent my whole life shunning

that desert, but fire always melts ice.

"Eat," Mother says again.

I eat. My willpower is tissue compared to her titanium. "Em emmelouk," I say in Quinish. We'll die.

Mother hates our language. She hates our people more. In Common, she says, "Yes, we'll die, but first, there's cake."

She has little faith in victory and less faith in me. But she'll cheat her way up, no matter the cost. There are no consequences for her. She killed my father, a poor ruler, to claim the throne as a worse ruler. I never met him, and I never understood her. Mother craves power. She starves for control. I doubt she'll cede to me, and I hope we die before a civil war.

Mother faces a servant. "Add extra security to Isrik, Kire, and Ekris."

"Yes, Your Majesty," the servant says and leaves the room.

Then Mother turns to me. "Tell me why I did that, Ketra."

"Protection," I say. Another bite of cake. Sugar gags me. *Eat.* "Tell me what they would need protection from."

"Assassinations. Sabotage. The athletes are important."

"The athletes are *vulnerable*. They know how to play, not how to fight. We must protect them from the other worlds. The Games are toxic. Their players are under a massive amount of pressure. Imagine the weight of the world, the survival of your people, on your shoulders."

"I cannot." I can.

"Do not lie, Ketra." A test. I fail. "You are not so different from the athletes. I was proud after your first assassination attempt. I had worried about your soft demeanor, but when that servant drew his knife, I saw you in a new light. He was the first to view you as dangerous. Fear is a shield. Use it. Hone it."

"Yes, Your Majesty," I say.

Fear is no shield. Fear is a sword. After that assassination attempt, I crumbled beneath its bite. Mother shelters me even more now. She isolates me in an icy bubble, and loneliness knocks at its skin. I am her heir, thirty and still weak, while she's sixty and too strong. We have much to survive before the throne switches riders. I wish I weren't royal, but I am. I wish the crown weren't a claw, but it is. Nerves branch in my gut at the chains.

I face a servant and ask, "Could you please refill my water?" "Yes, Your Royal Highness." The servant obeys. She must.

"Stop," Mother says. The servant stops. "Again, Ketra. A princess who pleads has little power. A woman who asks has little control. Tell her what you want. Demand it. You are Princess of Quin, heir to the throne. Make her bow."

The servant bows, but Mother says, "Stand." The servant stands. "She did not earn your bow, not yet. Ketra, again."

"Never mind," I mumble, chewing my lip, picking skin off my fingers. I am not this woman, this princess, this pawn. Mother always reprimands me: *Too kind, too sweet, too tame, too nice.* I care about people. She cares about power.

"Ketra, again," Mother—Queen Ora—orders.

So again, I cave. "Refill my water," I whisper.

The servant starts, then stops when Ora lifts a skeletal finger. "Questions do not need question marks. That was a plea, not a command. *Command* her."

I do not command her. Instead, I sit and wait for fate to claim me.

"If you don't make her, I will," Mother says.

The servant twitches, eyes me with desperation. *You, not her. Never her.* They know me for mercy, but they know Mother for murder.

I mock-cough and mouth, "Iskeetna." Sorry.

The servant flashes a smile, then smooths her expression into compliance. *I understand*.

My face hardens as I straighten my cloak. "More water." My voice is not my own. Neither are my words. But Mother beams, and the servant sighs. Yet Ora needs more. Always more.

As water flows, I slap the glass from the servant's hand. Crystal shatters on the floor. The servant looks shocked, but her shoulders relax. We both pretend and perform.

"Clean it," I snap.

"Yes, Princess Ketra." The servant cleans. Mother claps.

"Wonderful," Ora says. "A lovely touch. And then, in the end, in the cold fist of fate, the light of a thousand suns will spark across time." She quotes Scripture. A success.

"May the stars bless you," the servants murmur in reply.

"Finish your cake, and get your parka," Mother says. "The Council of Five starts in ten minutes."

I finish my cake. Retrieve my parka. Listen, follow, obey, and break. *I am not the monster you made.* I am.

* * *

Delegates from all five worlds attend the virtual call, planets behind tablets, power behind screens. We speak Common, the original tongue that spawned dialects then new languages from lack of cross-colony interaction. To preserve fuel and limit disease, worlds do not visit each other, apart from the Games.

This is our second sun. We lost much in Earth's Exodus, but we found more here, in our strange new home. There are five worlds. All share size, rotation, and atmosphere. Gravity is the same. Days are the same. The colonies sit in the same time

zones on every planet. The system is in sync. It's impossible, yet so are we. Like attracts like. But we stayed too long, waited too long, and death comes to those who wait. All good things must come to an end, though this was never a good thing.

"How would Quin respond to disqualification?" Priman Dictator Ribaj asks.

"That is a rather severe implication or insult," Mother says. I sit beside her in royal furs, satin threaded with silver, and frown. She expects me to frown, to sit, to purse my lips, to jut out my chin as she taught, she taught.

Dictator Ribaj dips his head on the screen. "I meant neither, Your Majesty."

There's not much technology left: screens, cells, tablets, panels. It's basic. Embarrassing. We should be gods by now, but tech is the autonomous, omnipotent one. We no longer understand or control its updates or advancements. It tends and improves itself. We surrendered too much control and yielded too much power. Mother thinks us dependent and reliant, but weak worst of all.

Ribaj adds, "I simply wish for the honest execution of the Games."

Queen Ora plays along. "In that case, if you're concerned about execution, disqualification carries the utmost consequences on Quin."

To his credit, Ribaj does not flinch. I do. Mother spits darts at his heart, and he sneers through pain. Prime is rigid, militant. They pride themselves on structure. However, during their latest drought, there was a scandal among their defense contractors. Someone stole food for their family, and Ribaj pardoned the offense. Mother pardons no one, not even me.

"Understood," Ribaj says. "And you swear on Scripture that

your athletes don't use moxies?"

"I swear on all the stars in the sky," Ora says. "Our athletes' performances need no enhancements."

"What about Makers?" asks Senator Farsa from the Dionese Socialist Democracy.

"Yes, do you filter them out?" Representative Aseret adds. Tertia is anarchy. They rule themselves, and Mother hates them for their courage.

"This sudden suspicion concerns me," Mother says.

"We're thorough," says Speaker of the Houses Esrioas, though she's behind it. Quate doesn't trust Quin, so they sow rage with fear. We two underdogs spawn twin wolves. They hate us, and we hate them. They also hate Prime, but Prime is a fortress. Quin is flesh between armor. We hurt and bleed.

"Quin removes Makers at birth. There is no plague here, though I cannot speak for the other worlds."

Esrioas fidgets. Quate has a surplus of Makers, evolved humans who use thought energy to Make matter. They literally think things into existence, but there aren't many left. Quin marginalizes magic and crucifies creators. Mother is the thorough one.

"Moving on," Dictator Ribaj says. Prime rejects drama. "Tomorrow, skippers will chauffeur athletes to Starstop. The location is neutral, so I expect cooperation. Since the space station orbits the sun, make suitable preparations for the heat."

Another advantage. Prime is hot. So is Starstop. The colder planets are unused to warmth. But this is "fair"—as fair as a red-hot supergiant ready to supernova. She was already giant when our ancestors settled, so the expansion has not affected us—a pity. I'd prefer Mother melted. If we win, if we reach our third home with binary suns, perhaps she'll fade to steam.

"Because of population growth since Earth's Exodus, only one colony can fit in the seedship," Ribaj says. "We would have ferried in groups earlier, but the seedship needed extensive repairs, ones its internal systems just completed. As such, given the supernova's aggressive timeline, we cannot take multiple trips. The Games' victor will win the seedship's seats for their planet. Deceit or deception will face grave punishment."

He reminds us of rules we breathe, we dream, even though it has been three thousand years since the last Olympics. As an ancient Earth tradition, it seems appropriate. We link the apocalypses with this tribute.

"After Trials tomorrow," Ribaj continues, "in a week, the Opening Ceremony will occur. Next will come qualifiers then a final in all five events: combat, racing, obstacles, airball, and trust. Gold medals earn one hundred points, silver medals earn fifty, and bronze medals earn twenty-five. The planet with the most points wins."

Simple. *Savage.* Law binds him to reiterate these terms at every Council of Five. It's hammered into our heads, so we cannot claim ignorance or innocence. Win or die. Conquer or crumble. The universe is barbaric, full of cruel surprises—like Mother

"The Council has delivered uniforms to all worlds' training facilities," Ribaj drones on. "We printed athletes' names across the front and planets' names across the back. All are gray, one piece, and formfitting; loose uniforms are not permitted. Indicative stripes outside the arms and legs designate planetary ownership: orange for Prime, green for Dion, yellow for Tertia, blue for Quate, and violet for Quin. Teams may not remove or modify these stripes. If uniform alteration occurs, the penalty is disqualification..."

Ribaj rambles guidelines and disciplinary measures. I tune out. Mother does not. She's cold as ice. Harsh as death. Bitter as a blade.

"Listen, Ketra," she hisses.

"I am," I say.

She mutes the call. "No, you hear them, but you do not listen. Every word from Ribaj's mouth is a threat. Read between the lines: disqualification, execution, deception, punishment. These Games will be brutal. Trust no one."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Mother scoffs. "You do not understand. If you did, you would say 'thank you' instead of 'yes.' You're too much like your father. Smart as a whip, but thick as a brick."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

"Too late, Princess. Too late, indeed."

Shame heats my ears. Mother unmutes the call. Ribaj rattles off more rules and regulations. I frown, sit, listen, wait. *You will never be enough.* I am too little. Mother is too much. Imbalance breaks our world.

But the Games will break us all.

Even Without Paper, There's Paperwork

Allebazi

o, don't auto-translate," I say. "Last time you did that,
I asked their queen if I could eat her nipples."
A pause. Muttered frustration.

"Then find someone who speaks Quinish, and run it by them before I ask another royal to braid their pubes."

Another pause. Grumbled swears.

"I know it's easy, but it's also wrong. Language is complicated. You can't program translation. 'It's a pleasure to meet you' can become 'I'd like to pleasure you' if you're not careful. No, I don't want to fuck their queen. Okay, I do, but that's beside the point."

A third pause. Reluctant surrender.

"Good. Send it to me before I finish my coffee." I cut the call and slam the cell on my desk. Fucking politics. Even without paper, there's paperwork.

"Need any help?" Efia squeaks. My new assistant is young and shiny. Bright blue eyes and curly orange hair. Bronze and short. Big and beautiful. She knits hats for charity. I give away nothing for free.

"No," I say.

"Great, I'm here if you need me!"

The perfect helper. So happy. So peppy. It's annoying. And arousing. *No.* Love is a turd. It gets everything dirty and is a bitch to clean up. *I want to lick her.* Stop it. Behave.

I clap my hands and turn to my dozen staff. "Trials are today, people. I want constant updates on athletes, coaches, and colonies. Get me stories. Dig for lies. Scroll PicTic. Find viral posts, and piggyback off their keywords. We are the voice of the Space Olympics. Sing a good song. Go."

They go. Within minutes, a hundred pitches cross my desk: filtered photos, doctored muscles, a nipple here, a groin shadow there. Familiar, not scandalous. They'll do. For now. I trim the brain dump into five lightning bolts: "Ten Reasons Why Prime Is on Top," "Shocking Confessions from Dionese Athletes," "Tertian Coach Reveals Team's Secret Diet," "Five Things You Don't Know About Quate," and "You Won't Believe How Quin Trains." They're cheap, but cheap makes money. People are lazy. Spoon-feed them ease.

"Boost Prime and Quate," I say. "Play off their feud."

"On it, Bazi," Efia says.

All five articles blow up www.orlds. In seconds, traffic storms our site. M2O buckles beneath the assault, but my brain baby sails on. We're the best for a reason, the most trusted media company in all the worlds. Yes, we bought that trust. Nothing is free. Except Efia's hats.

"Use proxy accounts to post extra comments," I say. "Trick

the algorithm."

"Already done," Efia says.

Goody two shoes. I want to untie those laces. Enough.

"The athletes will arrive soon," I say. "I want half of you in the field and half of you here."

M2O is on Starstop, our space station that orbits our dying sun. The station came from Earth with the seedship, then it broke: no wings, no escape. It's dead, but we like dead things. The Olympics will gnaw this phantom's corpse. Tensions are high. Fuckery is higher. Sooner or later, everything will crack.

That's why M2O's here, to capture that crack. We left our worlds and live in an adjacent barracks with artificial gravity and synthetic lives. Our office is a small cube with desks, tablets, and wall screens. Blue-orange seams shine along dark metal walls. Everything has that fake candy glow. One windowed wall overlooks the bloody supergiant. That's real. Too real. A constant, gory, fear-swamped reminder. *You're all gonna die.* It's about time.

"Take a break if you need it," I tell Efia. "Once Trials start, we'll be busy nonstop."

"Thanks, Bazi," Efia says. I hate when she uses my name. She acknowledges I'm a person, not a thing, but I like being a thing. People have feelings, and feelings are messy. "I'm going for a walk. Want to join?"

"No," I say.

"Another time!" Always so sunny. Fuck the sun. That's why we're in this mess. Efia pauses, then turns and adds, "Do you have people? Friends, I mean?" Blush blisters her cheeks. "Sorry, I didn't—"

"No," I repeat. "I don't do friendships. Or relationships. People will always leave or let you down."

Efia beams. The happy, annoying shit. "Yep, that's the healthy outlook. Well, if you want...people...you know you can—"

"Go."

"Going."

Gone.

She's bold today. Then again, today is the beginning of the end, so this is our one last chance to be bold, to be brave. I don't want to be bold or brave. I want to die a boring, painless death. No friends. No lovers. *Everyone will die.* Shit, I need to chill. *Calm the fuck down.*

I leave the office and head into the hallway kitchen. Cupcakes, that's what I need. Fancy ones with frosting and shit. Sprinkles, too. And gumdrops. No, fuck gumdrops. *Relax.* I am. *Flour, sugar, salt, baking powder, vanilla, milk, butter, eggs.* All fake. Our greenhouses grow food and nurture livestock, but it's fragile. We're fragile. We're fake, fragile, *fucked*.

Breathe. *Breathe*. We'll all die, yes, but that was always a given. No one lives forever. This just squishes our timeline. *Measure, pour, whisk, blend.* Faster. *Rougher*. Beat the living shit out of death. *Ironic*. I know.

My cell beeps. A call. I answer. "Hello?"

"Are you stress-baking again?" It's Camroc.

"Are you panic-calling again?" I slop batter into a tin and toss the cupcakes in the oven.

"Yes," he says, honest and pure. Camroc is a gentle boy. Life is not gentle to gentle boys. "Sorry, I wanted to...never mind."

"Cam, vent," I say. Our whatevership started with his childhood interview on Quate, and he latched tight.

"No, you're busy," Camroc says.

"I'm always busy, but I'm a multitasking monster, so spit." I worry about him. He's kind and sweet. The Games will eat him

alive.

"Trials are today."

"Yup."

"I can't do it, Bazi."

"Then don't."

"I must," he says.

"No one's forcing you, kid," I say. "Well, they are, but you can bow out, fuck up."

"You're supposed to give me a pep talk about courage and strength."

"Give yourself a pep talk. I'm here for truth."

He sighs. Stress seeps through that sigh, so I soften. "Listen, Cam, I know it's hard. Impossible, even. They put the weight of your world on your shoulders and expect you not to fall. But every world needs a sun, a star to anchor it, a reason to keep spinning. Find a sun. There. Pep-talky enough?"

"I don't understand," Camroc says through the cell.

"Find a reason to fight," I say. "It doesn't need to be Quate's reason, but you need a reason. Got it?"

The athlete hesitates, considers. "My team is my reason."

"Then fight for them."

"But what if I fail?"

"I'm too old for ifs, kid. Fake it till you make it. Fuck it till you break it. Be a pompous asshole. You got this."

"I don't."

"Then channel my pompous assholiness."

He chuckles. Good. "Thanks, Bazi."

"Anytime, Cam. Go be epic and shit."

The call ends, and Efia rounds the corner. *Dammit.* Saved by the oven. I remove the cupcakes and frost them hot. Icing weeps down the sides. I dump sprinkles on top and stuff them

in the freezer with the rest of my stress spawn. I sell some at bake sales, with stupid signs like "Bumcakes" and "Enoughins," but bake sales can't keep up with me. Neither could my ex. *Move on.* I know, but hate burns, and I love fire. *Learn to live again. Love again.* Therapy can kiss my half-century ass. As I said, love is a turd, and my self-worth is a clogged toilet. People suck. Some suck better than others. I mean more.

"Was that Camroc?" Efia asks. Her mouth opens in awe. "He's from my world, you know."

"I know," I say, cleaning the kitchen.

"Could I get an exclusive with him? He is so cool."

Youth is wasted on the...well, young. "No, let him be."

"He's nervous, isn't he? I'd be shitting myself. It is *awesome* that you know him, Bazi! Like so, so, so wicked awesome! How did you meet him? You're from Tertia, right? What's it like there? I heard it's gorgeous. You all are so creative! No wonder you made M2O!"

"Can you take your joy somewhere else? You're fucking with my vibe. Can't mope with you around, and I do love to mope."

"Of course, Bazi," Efia chirps. "Sorry, so sorry. Mope away. See you later!"

Damn her. Deserve her. I don't. Let her go. Wait. "Hold up," I say.

My assistant turns around.

"Fight back."

"Sorry?" Efia asks.

"Don't let people treat you like shit. I was a twat. Sorry, rough day. But call me out on my twattery next time. Okay?"

She shifts, uncomfortable. "It's fine, don't worry."

"It's not fine, and I do worry." For fuck's sake, now is not the time to care. Live as a grumpy fool, and die as a grumpy fool. But

EVEN WITHOUT PAPER, THERE'S PAPERWORK

my lips mutiny. "You're good, Efia. Talented. Smart. Don't let a jaded fuck like me ruin you."

"You're not jaded. I understand your concern. And you've helped me *so* much. I'm *so* grateful for you."

"Then you need to raise your standards, darling."

Efia reddens. "Thank you, Bazi. I will, Bazi."

Silence hangs between us. I want to say more. Do more. Have more. No. No. I can't. I won't. Fold into death, and leave in peace. But Efia reaches toward me. On tiptoe, she brushes my golden cheek, and her fingers slip through my graying mahogany hair. I'm tall, broad, but in this moment, I'm weak. Rose petals. Butterfly wings. Snapped twigs. Autumn leaves. Tangent much? Shut up, subconscious. Deal with my weird shit.

"Sorry," Efia whispers. "You had...frosting."

"Frosting," I repeat. *Dumbass*. I clench my jaw, narrow my thin brown eyes, don the armor that builds me, breaks me. "Check PicTic. Find more stories."

She clears her throat. "Right, yes. Stories. On it."

A message buzzes my cell. "For fuck's sake." This is the third time this month. People are stardamn animals.

"What is it?" Efia asks.

I don't answer. Instead, I link my cell to the office intercom, and the speaker coughs on. "A reminder," I announce, "to please refrain from drawing pictures of the ancient Earth celebrity Nicolas Cage under toilet seats in the company bathroom. These images—which are well done, by the way—have caused several urinary accidents, and the janitorial staff would like us to practice caution when relieving ourselves. Thank you."

Efia stifles amusement and returns to the office. I follow her inside, and we fall back into routine. We both pretend it's not awkward as the morning grinds on, the athletes arrive, and the

Games begin.

Glory Is a Virgin's Dream

Camroc

oodbye, Quate. Farewell, Home. Shine. *Burn.* Blink. *Go.*Skippers ferry us from Quate to Starstop. We're here. *Here.* All those years for *now.* I choke on fear. Beside me, Nyo brushes my arm. Ze is calm. Arada is not calm. She bounces, ready, on the space station's floor.

"Coach Racso," a reporter calls ahead in the dark metal hall. "Can we get a statement?"

Coach grunts, relents. "Sure, you have five seconds." The crowd swarms us like wasps. We are food. *Hope*. Freedom. *Escape*.

"Thank you, Coach Racso," the reporter says. Happy. Too happy. Death is on the swing. "Any predictions for who will make your team? Quate has been quiet regarding training."

Blue and orange lights dance over Coach's sweat. It's hot and clunky here. Chains of glory and cages of grief. "I have faith in

all my athletes. Fate will decide their fortunes."

The crowd surges toward us, but Coach pulls us through. We reach our barracks, and he slams the door behind us. It's simple: bunks and a bathroom. *Meat.* That's all we are now.

"Are you ready?" Coach asks.

"Yes," Arada says.

"No," he barks. "You are not ready. You could never be ready for this. Always remember that, and nothing will surprise you. I don't know what the future holds, but I prepared you the best I could. Don't make me proud. Make yourselves proud. Stretch, change, and get in line. We're up next."

Coach is blunt. No frills. No flair. He strikes his club against destiny's dungeon, and the underworld welcomes us. We stretch and change into gunmetal uniforms with blue stripes on our arms and legs. "Camroc" brands my ribs, and "Quate" brands my shoulders. A person, a planet, a plea, a prayer. Fight for them. I will. Be enough. I might.

Too soon, too late, it's time. We line up behind the door. Coach has no pomp for us. Thoughts hoard his words. We trained our entire lives for this moment, this dream. Now, it's flimsy and fake. *Break*.

The door opens. The crowd stampedes. I clutch Nyo and Arada as we swim through people. Behind us trail Ronoc, Yelir, Evam, and Trebor. We're seven candles on a charred cake. Flashes. Shrieks. Look at me. Bleed for me. Questions assault us. Are you nervous? Scared? Ready? Prepared? Coach waves them away. Guards flank us. We are bait.

After an infinity, we reach the arena. It's huge. Quiet. *Dead.* Colony representatives and M2O reporters fill the stadium seating. Judges wait in the shadows, faceless and anonymous, two from each world. They knot our strings. The floor is empty,

GLORY IS A VIRGIN'S DREAM

waiting for us. A dome stretches overhead. Fists squash my heart, squeeze my lungs, rip my throat. *Breathe. Count.* Flames rage in my gut. Ice stabs my mind. *Here and now.* It's time.

No ceremony or pleasantries. Those are in six days, but today is stark. *Tear open your skin, and show us your bones*. Same skills, some from each event.

Nyo goes first. Ze knows the routine. We've practiced since we could form memories. It's the heartbeat of a million dreams. Ze drums that rhythm, perfect and precise.

First, combat: measure strength. Front handspring, side aerial, back handspring, backflip, double back layout, triple spinning kick, stick landing. Nyo has wings. Zes body is air. Ze executes the skills without flaw. During the event, ze'll also fight, but the judges preserve our bodies. For now.

Second, racing: measure speed. Three loops around the track in a falcon, a hovercraft. Nyo straddles the middle seat and grabs the controls. *Faster. Harder.* The silver boomerang hits all ten targets.

Third, obstacles: measure logic. It's a simplified course, and Nyo scales ladders, climbs ropes.

Fourth, airball: measure ambition. Ze shoots the ball in the hoop from five locations.

Fifth, trust: measure instincts. A card game. Academic, not athletic. Read faces. Find lies. Ze finds them all.

Nyo's done. It's zes best performance yet. Ze pats my shoulder. "Pretend it's easy, and it is," ze whispers.

"But it's not easy," I whisper back.

"Hence, pretend. Everything is only what we pretend it to be."

"Wise-ass," Arada murmurs.

"Next," Coach barks.

Ronoc: mediocre but respectable performance. A wobbly landing in combat, and two missed targets in racing.

Evam: nervous. Skips the layout, misses all targets and hoops. Yelir: good but not great. Strong on four events, then fails trust.

Trebor: decent. Sloppy aerial, missed target, forgets a rope, skips a hoop, but nails trust.

Arada: perfect as Nyo. She shines like sunlight and completes all events the fastest.

Me: *shit.* I'm up. I'm last. *Fight for them.* Stop. *Don't think.* I can't see the crowd. They're a shadow. *Silent.* I'm alone. Muscle memory guides me through combat. The tumbling feels right. *Turn, snap, pop, launch, land.* But this is predictable. The actual event will add blood.

Next, racing. The falcon scalds my fingers. It's hot on Starstop. So stardamn hot. *Trust your body, not your mind.* I let go. Nine targets out of ten. *Imperfect.* Imperfection is a window to panic. *You'll kill them all.* In obstacles, I regain my footing. Ladders and ropes are safe, controlled. In airball, I miss again. A hoop. A hope. *Shit. Fuck. Breathe. Count.* I can do this. I *must* do this. The Games are my fate.

Last, trust. Mouth dries. Heart pounds. Lungs knot. Sweat scorches. Stomach churns. Body shakes. Trust is about instinct. You can't train instinct. Sure, you can practice to read faces, learn cues, but it's not enough. I'm not enough. I have nothing to anchor myself. *Find a sun. My team.* I will fight for them.

The proctor steps forward. She holds a card; its back faces me. "In my hand, I hold Quin."

True or false? Right or wrong? If correct, I say, "Stars bless." If incorrect, I say, "Stars burn."

I scan her face. She is stone. Glass. Metal. Rust. Lips relaxed.

GLORY IS A VIRGIN'S DREAM

Still head and eyes. No blinking or blushing. No smiling, sweating, or fidgeting. Looks like truth. But most lies do. She could have trained her reaction, conditioned new tells. Sin looks different on everyone.

"Stars bless," I rasp. Truth.

She pauses, nods. One done.

"In my hand, I hold Prime," she says.

Same statue. Same demeanor. Then she blinks. But everyone blinks. A blink doesn't always mean a lie. Another blink. She's tricking me. No other tells, so I say, "Stars bless."

Another nod. Two done.

Last card, then Trials are over.

"In my hand, I hold Quate," the proctor says.

She moves. A lot. Blinks. Fidgets. Blushes. Sweats. Lips quiver. Head swivels. Another trick? Looks like one. An obvious one. Or is it a double-cross? Does she want me to guess true again, because her lying tells are too obvious, too exaggerated? Then it is a lie. A lie masked as truth, masked as a lie. Yes, that sounds right.

"Stars burn," I say.

Pause and panic. A slow, subtle nod.

It's over. *I'm done.* I failed. Two mistakes: missed target, missed hoop. It's not enough. I won't make the team. I let everyone down. Fall. *Crash.* Burn. *Explode.*

"Cam, calm down," Nyo says.

"I fucked up," I say.

"You didn't fuck up," ze says.

"I made mistakes."

"Everyone made mistakes."

"Not you. Not Ri-ri."

Coach squeezes my arm. "You did well, Camroc, but you

could have done better."

"I know," I say. "Sorry, sir."

"Don't apologize to me. Apologize to yourself. Back to the barracks."

We file through hallways. I trained my life away for a moment, and that moment was a failure. Over too fast. Insignificant. *Cracked.* No one is perfect forever, but everyone can be perfect for one moment. Not me. *Why me?* I buckled, broke. *Choose someone else.*

Reporters shadow us. PicTic erupts. Questions and comments flood the corridor about team speculations and placement buzz. I hear Nyo's and Arada's names, but not mine.

"For honor and glory," an overzealous intern shouts.

"Honor is a whore's prayer, and glory is a virgin's dream," Coach spits back. We reach our barracks. "Nyo and Arada, brilliant. The rest of you, do better." He shuts us inside and leaves without ceremony.

"When will we hear results?" Trebor asks.

"Later today," Evam answers.

"Arada and Nyo are definite," Yelir says.

I was supposed to be definite.

"Best of luck, everyone," Ronoc says.

The four of them huddle while Arada, Nyo, and I gather together. The three of us. It was always supposed to be the three of us. I fucked that up and everything else.

"Stop beating yourself up," Arada says.

"My life serves one purpose," I say. "I could have done better."

"Yeah, you could've, but you didn't, so shut up."

"Ri-ri, chill," Nyo says, then turns to me. "Cam, you did fine. Relax. You'll probably still make the team."

"Fine' is not enough," I snap. "And I didn't come here for

'probably."

"Snap at zem, and I'll snap your neck," Arada says. "You want truth, Cam? Well, here's the bloody truth. Yes, you fucked up. You should have beaten us all. But you're afraid. So fucking afraid. And fear is crippling. A self-fulfilling prophecy. Run toward it, not away from it, you stardamn coward."

"Ri-ri, not helping," Nyo says.

"I don't want to help him. I want to heal him. We *need* him, Nyo." Arada lowers her voice. "The three of us together could do anything. I don't trust the others. I don't want to fight beside them. I want to fight beside *you*."

Shame. *Regret.* Guilt. *Defeat.* I sink in the ocean. Drown in the sea. Fear is a beast I can never beat. It ices my blood. Frosts my veins. Clots my limbs into rock.

"You aren't committed," Arada says. Her tiny brown body trembles with fury. "You aren't dedicated. You don't believe. We've worked our asses off for today, and you flopped. I'm sick of your starshit. Winning *hurts*. Embrace the pain. But you don't. You flee. You keep looking for excuses to escape. Life is a bully. Pain forges champions. The strongest survive, and you are a weak piece of shit. If you can't stand up for yourself, how can you stand up for our people?"

"Enough, Arada," Nyo says. Ze blocks me with zes tall dark frame.

Arada flips us off, then joins the others.

Only two of us now.

Nyo sighs. "I'm sorry, Cam."

"I'm the sorry one," I say.

"No, I mean, I'm sorry I agree with her." Ze notices my surprise but doesn't comfort me. "She's right. You quit. You give up. Every day, you try less and less. We love you—you know

we do—but if you don't respect yourself, you don't respect us. Why are you here?"

I swallow hard. "To fight. Win. Save our world."

Ze shakes zes head. "That's Coach's spiel. What's yours?"

"I don't know, Nyo. Quate chose me, so I'm here."

"Quate also chose me, but I chose me, too. You're fading away. Do you want this?"

"Yes," I say.

"How much do you want this?" Nyo asks.

"Don't know. I fought for this team. I swear I did. But there's something wrong with me. A missing piece, or some other shit. I don't feel whole. I don't feel *right*."

"And this holds you back?"

"No," I admit.

"Then what does?"

"Fear. Nerves. Pressure. You know."

"Welcome that fear. Nurture it. Encourage it. Become comfortable in its presence. It's going nowhere, and neither are you."

"I failed," I say.

"Failure is part of success," Nyo says. "Take risks. Fall to fly. Break to build. Grieve to grow. Defeat is an opportunity for reinvention, so reinvent yourself. Conquer yourself. I know you can do it, but you need to know you can do it, too."

"I know nothing."

"Then you'll lose everything." But Nyo is not mad, sad, or disappointed. Ze is steady as the setting sun. "Be brave. I'm right here."

"I don't deserve you," I say, leaning against zem.

"Nobody deserves me, darling," ze says, and we both laugh.

* * *

I take a walk.

I shouldn't take a walk. It's dangerous to take a walk. But since there's a slim chance I'll make the team, I take a fucking walk. Lose the guards. Find the shadows.

"You shouldn't be out here, kid," Bazi says. She finds me fast. Closest thing I have to a parent, besides Coach. "Heard you fucked up." Of course she did. M2O is elite media. They know everything first.

"Heard you wrote the headlines," I say.

She shrugs. "I wrote nothing. PicTic did my job for me while I boosted the best posts. Though 'Quatic Queef' does have a nice ring."

Rage flickers. "Fuck you."

"Good, you grew some balls. Come on, walk with me."

I walk. Bazi leads. Through metal bones. Past windowed eyes. Out of uniform, no one recognizes me. A symbol, that's all I am. A symbol, an icon, a brand. *Melted*. I'm nothing now.

"When will they announce the teams?" I don't want to know, but I need to know. Everything I am, I am because of the Games.

"Soon," Bazi says.

"Do you already know?"

"Some of them."

"Did I make it?"

"Can't tell."

I punch the wall. Pain, bruises, blood. Freedom.

"You're an angsty one, aren't you?" Bazi runs a medscanner over my hand. *Erase. Delete. Nothing changes. Make no marks.* "Guess all you athletes are. Too much pressure. Grow up too fast. It's the best life, though. Better than the rest. As an athlete,

you're protected. You don't want to know civilian life."

"I'd rather be a civilian," I say. "No duty, no responsibility."

"No agency, no legacy," she says. "Civilians wait around to die. Is that what you want, to be helpless? Powerless?"

"That's how I feel now."

Bazi lounges on a windowsill, haloed by our dying sun, and watches me with curiosity. "Why'd you fuck up today, Cam? You could pass Trials with your eyes closed. You missed a target, a hoop, and your tumbling was sloppy."

Truth nags me. A rat. A roach. "I think I—"

"Wanted to fail?"

"Yes," I whisper, ashamed.

Bazi understands. She flips her dark hair over her broad shoulders, then closes her eyes and breathes. "It's easy to fail, isn't it?"

"Yes," I whisper again, again ashamed.

But Bazi feels safe. She's always felt safe. The media exec stands, opens her eyes, and places her golden hands on mine. She's warm. I'm cold. She's power. I'm panic.

"Do you want to live well or die well?" she asks. "Cause right now, you're dying pretty stardamn well."

"I don't know how to push past fear." And summoned, fear festers. Panic is septic. Dread infects my soul. I'm wrong. *Broken.* An error. *A failure.*

"Then don't push past it. Stop trying to fight it. Fear is powerful, so use it. Misdirect it. Take its momentum, then flip it over your hip. Like combat."

"That's what everyone says, but I—"

"Can't? Or won't? Listen, kid, no one can help you but yourself. Though I'm here for you, fuck-up or not." She winks, then stiffens as strangers approach. "Your Majesty. Your

Highness." Two slight bows.

"Allebazi, how far you've flown," a Quinish accent says.

Two women face us: one severe, one soft. Both have pale skin, blonde hair, and gray eyes, but the shades differ between them—the flavor, too. Bitter and sweet. The older one is scrawny, scrappy. Her lines are slashes. The younger one is kind, curvy. Her lines are cursive.

"Queen Ora and Princess Ketra, it's always an honor," Bazi says tightly. "Let me introduce Camroc, one of the Quatic athletes. Camroc, allow me to present Quin's royalty."

Royalty. Quate doesn't have royalty. Houses order our world. But Quin is a different beast—a wilder one, some would say. Another underdog, more like a wolf, they're our rival, gnashing at our heels.

"Quate," Queen Ora says, the word ash in her mouth. "Lovely." "Best of luck," Princess Ketra says.

Her mother scowls. "He is our opponent. Wish him nothing." The princess flushes red as blood. "Right, sorry. Good...I mean, good day."

Ora rolls her eyes. "Useless."

Fury flashes with the heat, the dying sun, the hellish day, and the decades of training. Twenty-five years of suppressed anger pierce the surface, and I say, "It is a good day. Thank you, Princess Ketra." I ignore the queen. Nobody ignores the queen. But I'm now nobody.

There's an ugly pause. In it, I grin. Queen Ora does not grin. Neither does Bazi. Princess Ketra does, but she hides it.

Bazi saves me. "And thank you, Queen Ora, for your gracious attention."

"Have him thank me," Ora says, "the little shit."

"He is a little shit," Bazi says, "but he's also the best athlete

here."

"Then it's a tragedy he slipped up today. Poor boy." Ora bristles beneath her cloak and raises her regal chin. Ketra shrinks beside her. "Well, we're off. Busy. So busy. We look forward to your reports, Allebazi. Learn some manners on Starstop, Camroc."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Bazi says. "Goodbye, Your Highness."

"Goodbye, Your Highness," I say, but I don't address the queen. Ora sneers, smug and satisfied. I fulfill her worst expectations. *Quate is a backward world, full of uncivilized peasants.* Perhaps. And perhaps I should be more uncivilized. Perhaps that's how I can harness fear.

When the royals are gone, Bazi relaxes and says, "Now that you've got balls, keep 'em in check."

"Where's the fun in that?" I ask.

"Glad you're feeling better, but careful, Cam. Ora's got friends in low places. She's dangerous."

"So am I."

"You're a puppy with a plastic sword. Stay in your lane, and she'll stay in hers."

"Hmm," I say. "The princess seems nice."

"She *is* nice," Bazi says, "but she's also the queen's daughter. Play by the rules a little longer. If all goes to shit, then you can wreak havoc."

"Everything already went to shit, Bazi."

"No, kid, this is only the beginning."

What's the Magic World?

Ketra

other is disappointed. She is usually disappointed, but today, she's also disgusted.
"He's Quatic," Mother says. We weave through the space station, flanked by servants and guards. "And you wished him luck."

"It doesn't hurt to be polite," I say.

"It *always* hurts to be polite, Ketra. Polite is pretty. Pretty is weak. You are neither. You must be better."

Her chains are ragged today. They crush my wrists, shred flesh like cheese. "Yes, Your Majesty."

She's right, of course. She's always right, viewed through the royal lens. But Camroc was...nice. I couldn't help wishing him luck. He deserves luck. *It is a good day. Thank you, Princess Ketra.* Not like our athletes. Not what I expected. And he stood up for me—in a way. He showed me respect, but not Mother. I shouldn't smile, yet I do, with equal parts guilt and satisfaction.

Goodbye, Your Highness. His moonlight voice. Quatic accent. Dark red curls. Amber-jade eyes and angular gaze. In memory, I trace his golden-brown shape. Broad and strong, yet gentle. Shy. Tension hardens his jaw, coils his limbs. He clenches his fists like he wears the same chains. His world is on his shoulders, and my world is on mine. No. No. We are nothing alike. Mother allows no mirrors. Reflect yourself.

"Pay attention, Ketra," Mother hisses. "Something is not right." She puts an arm in front of me—protective of my title, not my person.

I sniff: hot metal. Listen: tinny echoes, hyper conversations in six languages. Watch: blue-orange blinks, teeth flashes, fans and reporters and athletes giving interviews. Starstop looks normal, though I've no basis for normal. The Games are new—well, new for us. But something feels...off.

"Your hair," Ora says.

I reach up. A shock. My wild hair riots. "Static," I say.

"Too much. There's a Maker here."

Excitement seethes within me. I've never seen a Maker. Quin has none. Mother kills them all, because she doesn't trust magic. It's too powerful, too unpredictable. Though most Makers are mild—or so I've heard. They Make small things, insignificant things. But the risk of something more damns those infants in their cots. What if they Make a weapon? What if they summon a sword? Though I see royalty wielding weapons and swinging swords, not Makers.

"Where?" I ask.

Again, I upset Mother. "You're eager. Don't be eager. They're a plague. If they roam free, there will be no freedom for the rest of us. We must control them, and you must understand why."

"I understand why." I understand her why. "They're danger-

ous."

"Worse than dangerous. Makers are a lethal threat. They look like us and can hide in plain sight. That frightens most."

"As it does me."

"It should not," Mother says. Yet another test failed. "Let nothing frighten you. But they should concern you."

"Of course they do," I say.

"You lie worse than that Quatic boy."

Crack. Screams. At the end of the hall, the crowd lurches forward. Guards stand firm. Sobs. *Shrieks.* Chaos. *Run.*

Mother pulls me aside, but I break free of her grip, pretend the crowd pulls me along. I want to see, to understand why she scorns magic with a visceral hate.

"Please, it's for my dad," someone weeps. I push through the throng till I see a skinny woman holding up her hands. "He's sick. He needs water. I Made a little, that's all. Can't Make more, costs too much energy. I don't want to hurt anyone. I only want to help him."

An officer thrice her size shoves the Maker to her knees. The rest of security watches, eager. "First water, then you'll Make a stargun."

The crowd panics as the Maker begs. "No, I'm not good enough, I swear. And the ones who can aren't like that."

"You're the ones with starguns," the Maker's father says. He's tiny, hunched, and sickly, but his feral eyes meet the officer with challenge.

The officer slaps the man's face. The crowd gasps. Almost cheers. *Save us from ourselves*. "You a freak, too?" the officer asks.

"No," the woman interjects. "He's normal. Like you. I'm the only Maker in my family."

"Think I'm stupid?" the officer booms.

"Yes," the father says. Another slap. The man crumples, but those eyes: *Try me, you bastard.*

"Magic is genetic," the officer says. "If it's activated in your daughter, then you Made something after she was born."

"I've Made many things," the tiny man says, "and I regret nothing."

"If you'd kept your hands shut, she'd be dormant. Safe."

A Maker parent must unlock their child's power? Mother told me nothing of what she deems a curse.

"There is nowhere safe in all the worlds," the Maker's father says. "I'd rather she were ready than safe. Magic isn't illegal. Let us go, and we'll leave in peace."

"Magic isn't illegal, but assaulting security is," the officer says.

"Assault?"

"Verbal assault. You called me stupid."

"Indirectly."

A third slap. "Both of you, to the brig."

"I'll go, but she stays. She deserves to watch the Games," the father says. I never met my father, but I wish he was like this man. Though I know he wasn't. Mother wants them spineless and gutless.

The officer opens his mouth. Starts to object. Stops. Chokes. A knife spears his tongue. The blade stabs his throat. Blood soaks his teeth. He thumps on the floor, and the crowd screams as his daughter escapes.

The father taunts the remaining officers, "Make me a monster, and I'll Make you the same."

Security binds him, but the father Makes another knife. It drains him, though, Making something from nothing. Thoughts are not enough to sustain him, and static drops

WHAT'S THE MAGIC WORLD?

in the air. It's over. He's over. Snipping his bonds, he slits his own throat.

"I die free," he gurgles through his red, frothing neck. "I die by *my* hand."

This is the beginning of the end.

The father falls. The crowd bawls. *We're all dying*. That will be us soon, if our athletes don't win the Games. Death reminds us of stakes. I don't want to die, but I can't live a lie.

Security orders the scene and ushers us away. Mother waits for me around a corner, livid.

"The Makers did nothing wrong," I say before she can be ate me. "The daughter was only helping her father."

"Then her father killed a man."

"To save his daughter. The distraction helped her escape. And the officers provoked him."

"He could have filed an appeal in the brig," Mother says. "Then everyone would have lived. There was no reason for bloodshed, but that's all they are: violence. Remember this, Ketra. Remember his choice. When offered mercy, he stabbed his savior's throat."

"Mercy? Security would have arrested them for nothing. How the hell is that mercy?"

I expect Mother to snap. Instead, she sighs. "You're thirty, Ketra. You have much to learn and more to suffer. Pain hasn't broken then built you yet."

I expect to sigh. Instead, I snap. "I'm not a child. I'm heir to the throne, and I demand to know why we discriminate against Makers."

"You can't discriminate against weapons, Princess, and that's what they are: weapons. You don't fight for a blade's right to cut or a gun's right to shoot."

"Most people are weapons, regardless of magic."

"But magic could render them invincible."

"Could, not-"

"Stop, Ketra," Mother says. "You're not thinking straight. You saw a Maker summon two knives from nothing and kill an officer then himself."

"He was protecting his daughter," I say.

"He was making a statement. His daughter was an excuse. The officer was innocent, with family and a home. Makers are vile, all of them, in every way."

"Not his daughter. She Made water."

"She was in on it, too. You're gullible. Naive. Trusting your eyes and not your mind. You want to be friend a bomb, like your father, but you don't have the luxury of stupidity. Your duty is to Quin."

"If we win the Games. If we don't, nothing will remain to rule."

Mother's lips curl with cruelty. "We will win. There are many types of victory. If you want to survive to see our triumph, stop running off. Without guards, someone could have killed you. It's not safe for royalty to stand alone. It is us versus them, always and forever."

"It is never us versus them," I say. "It is some of us versus some of them, and the rest fall in between. Nothing is clear-cut. Please, Mother, I want to learn more about Makers."

"Another 'please." Her nostrils flare with contempt. "And you can't. There are no Makers on Quin."

"There might be. Did you know parents need to Make after their child's birth to activate their child's power? What if there are dormant Makers on Quin? Like children whose parents protected them, who never used their power. A frozen

WHAT'S THE MAGIC WORLD?

bloodline. Orphans. People never activated because their parents died. We'd never know."

"There are no Makers on Quin," Mother repeats. "Makers are greedy. They always use their power. If any hid, we'd know. Return to our suite. Guards will escort you. M2O will announce the team results soon."

"I already know the results," I say. *You rigged them.* Isrik, Ekris, and Kire flourished while the others fake-failed, letting them win.

"You know Quin's results. There are four other worlds. Don't forget that. I raised you in a bubble; now, let it pop. Your pet, Camroc, might make it. Or not. Doesn't matter. Quate has no chance."

"Why?"

"They're poor. Famines steal strength. They're no match against us, and certainly no match against Prime."

Worry twists my stomach for this stranger, though I don't know why. Stop. *Stop.* I do know why. Camroc was the first person to show me respect—true respect, not the required respect demanded from servants—and I am a desperate fool. A little kindness melts a lot of ice, but I am a glacier. Mother froze me into a statue for a reason. I can't let a few words ruin me. Numbness settles between my bones. How empty a life I've led if the smallest spark starts the largest fire. *Forget him. Remember Quin.*

"Yes, Your Majesty," I say.

Guards lead me toward our suite as cheers bounce through metal halls. The results. A guard notifies me that Mother's choices made the Quinish team. No surprise. I ask about the other teams. They list Prime, Dion, and Tertia, but Quate's results are delayed.

"Delayed?" I ask.

"Yes, Your Highness," a guard says. "First and second are solid, but the third spot is close. They're recalculating."

"Please let me know when they announce Quate's team." *Another "please.*" Shut up, Mother. Kindness is a power, too. Camroc wielded it well. *Best of luck, stranger.*

"Of course, Princess."

"Thank you." It is us versus them, always and forever. Go away, Mother. I don't believe in you, and I don't believe in Quin, either.

In the hall outside our suite, I glimpse the skinny woman, the Maker. My guards do not recognize her. Without magic, she's invisible. She buries her hands in her pockets and trembles, horrified, because I know who she is, where she is, what she is. If I tell my guards, they'll lock her in the brig. I hold her future in my hands, but I let it fly free.

"Lost?" I ask.

A nod. She is. She lost her father, her anchor, her home. So did I. Mother is no anchor. She is a shipwreck. *She was in on it, too.* Or not. I know neither this woman's soul nor her life.

"If you head to the observatory, you can book an apartment," I say. "They announced the results. What world are you from?" Confused by my mercy, the woman says, "Tertia."

"I think Ocram, Aifos, and Eleda made your team." *I won't tell. You're safe with me.*

The woman calms, understanding. "I'm glad. Eleda is my favorite."

Guards ping-pong between us, tense and suspicious. Quin doesn't condone small talk, but we're not on Quin anymore. *Thank the stars.*

"Anoub anutrof," I say. Good luck. I speak little Tertian, but I

WHAT'S THE MAGIC WORLD?

know a few phrases. It's polite. Polite is pretty. Pretty is weak.

"Eizarg," the woman says. Thank you. She hurries off toward the observatory, and the guards relax.

"Queen Ora would not approve of you speaking Tertian," a guard says.

"Queen Ora would not approve of a great many things," I say. "In new worlds, old ways must die."

"Yes, Your Highness."

They agree. They must. And there lies my power: in change. I am not my mother. I am different. Dangerous. I am the rage of my world wound into one.

Wild Hope Burns All the Way Down

Allebazi

hat the absolute bloody fucking starshit do you mean, 'Quate is delayed'?" I snap at my staff.
Efia beams, unfazed. "I know! So annoying, isn't it?! The judges are recalculating Quate's results. Third spot is wicked close. Treat?" My assistant offers a cupcake. I throw it across the office. Immature, yes, but it feels so stardamn good.

"Do you realize what this does?" I ask.

Efia beams brighter. "Nope!"

"This singles Quate out," I say. "Paints a target on their back. Makes them special with extra consideration."

"Is that bad?" Efia asks.

"It's fucked-up starshit." An intern cleans up my slaughtered cupcake, because I'm a dick. I give zem a bonus, because I'm a flaccid dick. "These Games are life and death. There are already high tensions and assassination threats. If the judges give Quate extra attention, they will exacerbate hostility between

the colonies."

"But it's only a recalculation because of close scores."

"That's not how the other worlds view it," I say. "They see favoritism. The judges spend more time with Quate's results than the others. Even if it's logical, logic means nothing now. This is an apocalypse. Fight-or-flight instincts are at an all-time high. People are thinking with their groins, not their heads. Twats'll be twats, and pricks'll be pricks."

"Can we spin it?" Efia asks.

"Spin it how?"

"Erase the target. Play off Quate's underdog status. The judges are recalculating *third* spot—not first or second. This doesn't make Quate special; it makes them fragile. They're weak, not a threat."

Not bad, Efia. "Maybe, though it could still attract aggression. People like to prey on weakness."

"People like to prey on envy more," Efia says. "Remove jealousy. Quate is nothing, neutral. A placeholder, not an opponent. That should earn them pity and save them from attacks."

Damn, she's good. "Do it."

Efia dives into her tablet. She weaves lies and plants subliminal decoys. M2O's site bubbles with articles about team results: "Prime Shows Strong as IIa, Ramo, and Daas Make Olympic Team," "No Surprise at Dionese Superstar Team of Zifa, Razag, and Maasib," "Ocram, Aifos, and Eleda Are the Tertian Olympians," and "Quin's Powerhouse Team Shines with Isrik, Ekris, and Kire." *Those* are the threats. Aim your weapons *there*. Then a feeble headline about the fourth world from the dying sun: "Quate Awaits Judgment After Mediocre Performance." They're decent, adequate. Neither weakling nor

threat. Efia did well. I want to smash a cupcake in her mouth and lick her lips clean.

That escalated.

"Good," I say. *Perfect.* "And sorry. I know they're your world." Efia's blue eyes twinkle, and she winks. "Don't write us off yet."

"Oh, I'm writing no one off. These are unprecedented times. The Games will be erratic. Nothing is guaranteed."

"Bazi," a writer calls across the office. He waves at a wall screen: the Quatic results.

Shit. "Has anyone else received these yet?"

"No, the judges want you to break the news."

"When?"

"ASAP."

Of course.

"Would you like me to post it?" Efia asks.

"Thanks, but I've got this one." I post on our site and PicTic account. Quick and dirty. A bandage. A wound. "Quate's Results Announced: Nyo, Arada, and Yelir Make Team." *Sorry, Cam.* This will break him. Or free him. No, definitely break him. He's an alternate with the other three who didn't make the team. They trained their lives away for this moment, for this infinity, and it's over. He's benched. Sidelined into obscurity. *Forgotten.*

My cell rings. It's him. *Fuck.* I'm not good at handholding pick-me-ups. But it's Cam. So I try.

"Efia's in charge," I tell my staff. "Don't fuck up," I tell Efia. Then I duck into the hallway, alone, and answer: "Hey, buddy." "Bazi," Camroc croaks, "help."

"\A/\----\" I --\-

"Where are you?" I ask.

"I don't know what to do. I don't know who I am. I tried, I

WILD HOPE BURNS ALL THE WAY DOWN

swear I tried, but I was so scared, and I—"

"Where are you?" I repeat.

"The observatory."

"Stay there. I'm on my way."

"No," he says. "Don't come. You already did so much. Sorry, I don't know how I feel, and I don't know how I'm supposed to feel, and I have no fucking idea what the hell to do now."

"Calg liana niahmohd," I say in Quatic. Take a deep breath.

Cam does. Then he asks, "Aren't you Tertian? How do you know Quatic?"

"Learned a few words in the field. We are the smartest world, after all." A poke. A tease. Then: "Htics a naegil. At ut traec og roel." Relax. You're okay.

Cam calms enough to string together a sentence. "I'm relieved, Bazi. I shouldn't be relieved, but I am. I want to fight for my world, for my people, but I'm not the best choice. I never was."

You are the best choice. You are the only choice. "Then I'm glad things worked out," I say. "It was close, you know, between you and Yelir." You may choose your battles wisely, but you can never choose your war. Damn Scripture.

"Yelir deserves that spot. I'm happy. Really, I am."

You're free. He wants escape. But there's no such thing.

Calls. Demands. Panic. Chaos.

"Listen, I gotta go," I say. "You gonna be good?"

"I'm fine, Bazi," Cam says.

Liar. "Don't be alone now. Okay?"

"Okay."

"You can come here. Keep me company and shit. Or I can come to you."

"No, that'd fuck stuff up for you," he says. "Can't show favorites."

"What makes you think you're my favorite?" I ask.

I hear his stilted laugh through my cell. "Later, Bazi."

"Later, kid. Don't break too much shit."

"Don't burn too many bridges."

The call ends. Guilt, shame, and regret knot my insides. Cam's hurting. Everyone's hurting. And he's right: I can't show favorites. M2O is objective, like all media outlets throughout history. *Sure.* We at least wash the taste of ass off our tongues to pretend we don't feast on every opportunity. *Do what you will with me.* Time to work.

"I want interviews with all Olympic teams," I tell my staff. "Get quotes from lead athletes. Get a few from alternates, too. And get government reactions. No sob stories or preferences. No focus on Quate's delay. Write the articles in Common. Also, a reminder that when you submit these stories for my approval, 'reply all' messages the entire company, and the entire company—including your wonderful and generous boss—will be privy to your profanity-strewn complaint about said boss's leadership style. Thank you."

Blushes and murmured apologies trickle through the room. *Yes, Bazi. Of course, Bazi. On it, Bazi. Right away, Bazi.*

"I want it all done this week," I say.

They scatter.

Shit. Shit. Camroc's done. It was supposed to be him. It was supposed to be him, star-fucking-dammit. He's perfect. Bloody fucking perfect. His whole life led toward this moment, and he threw it away. No. No. He made a choice. They submerged him too long, and he chose to drown. But Quate won't win without him. Yelir is a piece of a different puzzle. Nyo and Arada trust Camroc, and that's victory: trust. Trust. Doesn't matter. We're all gonna die, anyway. But not him. Never him.

WILD HOPE BURNS ALL THE WAY DOWN

This is not supposed to happen.

Freedom Sings an Ugly Song

Camroc

Preedom. Bloodthirsty freedom. No pressure, pleasure, power, or pain.

This is not me. This was always me. They choose glory; I choose release. Through the observatory's dome, the sun throbs scarlet. Swollen and tender. A wound bleeding dreams. I'm dying. I know. Her starving tongues lick the stars, and she roars into the dark: I don't want to die. But all monsters and men end the same. Her crimson beast thrashes in its cage. Five worlds circle its carcass, vultures itching to kill, to survive.

The crowd thins after they hear the results. Time for drinks and parties. Soon, I'm alone on a Starstop bench beneath a sun-drenched dome.

"You fucking coward." Not alone. A flute-like voice. Rush. Punch. *Copper.* Kick. *Red rain.* "You gave up." Smack. *Bang.* Batter. *Crash.* "That was *your* spot, and you fucking blew it." Gore clogs my throat. Blood smears my face. "Did you mean

what you said? That you love us? More than the stars? Or are you a lying piece of shit? You don't care about anything but your own skin." Pain skitters along my limbs, through my veins, as Arada beats the shit out of me. I deserve it. "You weak, pathetic asshole. I believed in you, Camroc, and you fucked us over. We are *family*. Does that mean anything to you? Because it means *everything* to me."

"Ri-ri, wait, I can explain," I say.

Arada doesn't care. Tears fill her thin black eyes. Braids whip me as she pummels wiry brown fists into my chest, stomach, arms, face. "I trusted you. Like a fucking idiot, I trusted you, Cam." She claws at my shirt, unhinged. "You didn't even try."

I raise my hands and say, "I *did* try. I tried so hard. But Yelir was better."

"Yelir got lucky. He failed trust, and he'll fail so much more in the actual events. He's not ready. He's not *you*."

"Thanks for the confidence." Yelir appears beside us. He crosses his lanky pale arms, reddening at the insult. Nyo and Coach arrive behind him in the observatory, but Arada keeps punching me. Bruises blossom on my cheeks. Blood gushes from my nose. Pain breeds over my bones.

"Ri-ri, stop," Nyo says. "They can't see us like this. We must be a unit."

Ze squishes between us and holds Arada back with a long blue-black arm. Arada flails against zes hold, but ze is taller, older, steadier. Sorrow wells in zes onyx eyes, and ze turns to me, hurt. Hurt. I crumble. Tears join the blood on my face. Sobs bludgeon my body in the wake of Arada's punches. Beat me up. Cut me down. Make me kneel before you. I failed them. Worse, I wanted to fail them.

Nyo releases Arada. Ze hugs me, and I bury my fingers in zes

cornrows, holding on for sanity.

"I wanted to lose," I weep into zes shoulder.

"I know," Nyo whispers, zes voice deep and soft.

"It was my worst fear."

"And your greatest dream."

"We won't win without you," Arada snaps.

"Some things are more important than winning," Nyo says, but ze slumps within our embrace. Ze was counting on me, too.

"You all suck," Yelir spits, embarrassed. This is his triumph, and we ruin it, soil it, grind it beneath our heels and let it rot in the muck.

"Stop," Coach barks.

We stop. We're conditioned to stop, trained to obey. Attack dogs. Show ponies. Colonies of ants. Nyo releases me, and we all face Coach.

"Stop acting like children," Coach continues. "Stop playing favorites and acting like fools. Yelir earned that spot; Camroc did not. *The end.* I will hear no more of it. Arada, assault a teammate again, and I'll disqualify you myself."

"Yes, Coach," Arada murmurs, head down.

"Nyo, no preferences. Yelir is your priority now."

"Yes, Coach," Nyo says.

"Yelir, take Arada and Nyo with you to the arena. Train on Starstop equipment. Study the other teams. Bring guards."

"Yes, Coach," Yelir says.

He leaves with Arada and Nyo. I've lost them all. I've lost myself, too. But I've found another side of me, a free and flexible side, a side that yearns to grow into a different tree.

Coach crosses his beefy arms and narrows his hazel eyes. Sweat beads on his russet skin and glitters in his buzzed gray hair. He's pissed. "When they brought me Arada, I signed her

FREEDOM SINGS AN UGLY SONG

on the spot, because she kicked the nurse and gave him a black eye. She had fire. When they brought me Nyo, I thanked the stars. Even so stardamn young, ze had that thousand-yard stare. Ze had balance. But when they brought me you, I sent you back. Did you know that?"

I shake my head. I don't trust my voice or any part of me at this point.

"Yes, I sent you back," Coach says. "Not once, but four bloody times. You were a baby, an orphan, but I could tell then, and I can still see it now. You've always been different, Camroc. You've always been *this*: gentle, kind, sensitive, shy. Should've trusted my gut and not the orphanage, but I didn't, and we both gotta live with that."

"Sorry, sir," I squeak. Meek. Coward. You're nothing but a rat.

"You're not sorry, so don't say it." Coach purses his chapped lips and cracks his meaty neck. "You didn't choose this life, and I didn't choose this life for you. *They* did, for some reason. The bigwigs, the higher-ups, saw something in you—or needed something from you. Don't know. I'm the grunt, not the guns. Anyway, what I'm trying to say is, you let the ball drop, kid. You messed up. You made mistakes. And that's okay. That's life. But you're not out of the spotlight yet, and if they pass you the ball again, you better be ready to catch it. You're still an alternate. You're still Quatic. Stop sulking. Some would kill to be this far, and you might go farther yet."

Coach runs a medscanner over my wounds. No more pain, but there's still blood on my clothes.

"You know," he says, "I was in love once. He was a young librarian, so fucking smart. I almost gave up everything for him."

"Why didn't you?" I ask, though it's not my place to ask,

though I don't know where my place is anymore.

"He wouldn't let me. The people who love you most won't let you give up on yourself. Remember that, Camroc. Arada is a ball of rage, but she adores you. Nyo is a stoic statue, but ze will crack for you and only you. Help them now as they've helped you. And help Yelir, too. They'll need your full support in the days to come. You're still a part of our team, and you're still a part of our world."

Couch slaps me on the back, winds me, revives me, then leaves the observatory with a temple salute. Guards linger behind, my personal shields. Even as a failure, I'm a target. *This is where Quate wastes its hopes. That is the person they pegged as their prize.* I'm fool's gold. Rock salt. Common as dirt. Helpless as our dying worlds.

Someone sits beside me on the bench. Others filter into the observatory. Conversations bloom. Excitement blossoms. Guards halo athletes and VIPs. The sun bathes the dome in red. We're inside a heart, beating wild. Life pumps into death. Fate races through brittle arteries. Purpose pounds against my skull. Help them. Save them. You're still a unit. Still a team. Fine. Fine. Arada and Nyo need me, and Yelir needs me, too. I'm twenty-five, a child no more, so I must get off my ass and push. Push.

"Sorry about the results," says the person beside me. She has a quiet voice, a sweet tone. I lean into her words and fade away. "It should have been you."

"No, this is right," I say.

"So you're happy about it?"

"I'm at peace...after a bit of obligatory angst."

"One should never underestimate the power of obligatory angst," my benchmate says.

FREEDOM SINGS AN UGLY SONG

"True," I say. "A well-honed scowl is a useful tool."

"Yes, and a sad but not desperate pout comes in handy, too."

"As well as the intrigued yet unconvinced eyebrow raise."

"Plus the curious but not curious enough for small talk grunt."

"And let's not forget the cool but not tryhard collar pop plus coat swish." I demonstrate with my shawl, but the limp fabric surrenders against my tunic. "Still working on that one."

My benchmate laughs so hard she snorts. "Sorry," she says, covering her mouth. "You bring out a new side of me. Mother makes me dull."

I turn toward her. She looks familiar: storm-gray eyes, silver-blonde frizz, pale with freckles, soft and short and curvy. "Have we met before?" I ask.

She snort-laughs again, nervous and awkward. "I rarely leave such a dearth of an impression, but there is a first time for everything."

Best of luck. Shit. Shit. She's wearing royal robes, embroidered with violet and silver. Quin. "Princess Ketra," I say, then stand and bow. "My sincerest apologies. My mind hasn't been right. Fucking stars, I'm such an asshole. Fuck. Shit. Am I not supposed to swear around you? So sorry, Quate has Houses, not royalty."

But Princess Ketra smiles. "Please, by all means, swear your heart away. It's a relief to be treated as a person and not a prize. I expect you can commiserate."

"To a degree, though I'm no prince."

"You're a type of prince, a king to many. Come, sit. I'm already short enough without you standing over me."

"Shit, sorry. Dammit, sorry again." I return to the bench. My ears warm, head hums. Our arms brush, and there's another reason to live. "Well, I have managed to insult you on every

level. Good thing I didn't make the team. No manners."

"Manners conceal our deepest lies," the princess says. "We're better without them."

"You shouldn't be here," I say. "It's dangerous."

"I have guards. Besides, if we lose, we'll all die, anyway." I blanch, and she adds, "Oh, sorry. Mother isolates me. I don't meet many new people. Should we not speak of death?"

I grin. "No, we should. It's refreshing. Coach shelters me, too, so I understand."

"Then death it is. Silly to put so much weight on it." She watches me, then notices my bloodstained clothes. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, fine. My friend beat the shit out of me."

"Your friend?"

"I deserved it. Coach healed me, so all's good."

"Can you...teach me to fight?" Ketra asks.

"Your mother would flay me," I say.

"What about your friend?"

"She's...abrasive. For both of your interests, I'm gonna say no."

"Pity," Ketra says with a sad but not desperate pout. "I've known so little pain."

"There are many different types of pain. I'm sure you've known plenty."

She scans my face, intrigued. "You are a wise one, Camroc of Ouate."

"And you are an odd one, Ketra of Quin." I expect the guards to scold me for calling her odd, for forgetting her title, but Ketra beams, and they follow her lead.

"Ketra of Quin," she repeats. "Thank you for that."

"For what?"

FREEDOM SINGS AN UGLY SONG

"For seeing me as human and not as the heir."

"It's my greatest pleasure to disrupt custom, Your Royal Lowness."

She snort-laughs a third time. "I bet it is."

"I like this side of you," I say. "Don't let your mother get to you."

"She's Queen of Quin. I must listen to her."

"Yes, she's queen of a dying world, and you're princess of the future."

"Look at you, whipping out your unsolicited wisdom with all these people around," Ketra teases. "Okay, I'll try if you try, too."

"Try to what?" I ask.

"Try to win."

"I can't. I'm not on the team."

"There are many different types of victory," she says with a wink.

"Damn you," I say, "in a respectful way." An uncomfortable pause. Thrumming tension. "Well, I should go. I've used up my twattery quota for this month and owe some apologies."

"I should go, too. I have many chairs to sit in while I practice my pretentious snobbery in front of important people."

"Best of luck."

"You, too, Camroc."

I smile as we part. I shouldn't smile. We shouldn't part. But we're from different worlds with different chains. Then again, all cages feel the same.

Impending Doom Is No Reason for Indecency

Ketra

t's been days since I've seen Camroc, yet his voice lingers. Ketra of Quin. Your Royal Lowness. Mother would call it stupid to drain interest on him. He's low-born. A commoner. A foreigner. An enemy.

And yet...

"The Olympic Ball is tomorrow, and the Opening Ceremony is in two days," Mother says to our servants and guards. "Our athletes all passed their physicals. No Makers or moxies. Ensure they train light and rest. We don't want anyone to strain themselves before the Games begin."

"Yes, Your Majesty," the servants chorus.

"Right away, Your Majesty," the guards reply.

"With gusto," Mother, Queen Ora, commands. "Impending doom is no reason for indecency. I want shine. Polish. I want everyone's envy."

Repeat: "Yes, Your Majesty. Right away, Your Majesty."

They disperse into duty. Mother turns her fangs on me.

"Ketra, come," she says. After a few minutes' walk toward the skipper docks, she adds, "There's been an incident. The Council has asked us to contain the situation."

"An incident?" I struggle to match pace with Mother's aggressive stride. "What? Where?"

Mother narrows her iron-gray eyes. "After all those lessons, articulation still fails to bless you."

I was articulate with Camroc. I was a person, not a princess. It was freeing, exhilarating. *Right*.

I clear my throat. "What happened, Your Majesty?" The "Your Majesty" and question are jabs, but Mother likes pain.

"Tertia happened, that backward world," Queen Ora says, chin held high and morals held low. "A Maker family robbed a market. They killed five people with Made daggers and stole one thousand ghosts via cyberhacking. As I told you, they're a threat. No one knew the criminals were Makers till weapons materialized from thin air. People fear them, and fear means power. As long as people fear the Makers, they hold all the power. That power should be ours, Ketra. We must reclaim our fear and our power."

"Why did they steal?" I ask, confused. The Maker woman Made water to save her father. The Maker father Made knives to save his daughter. From my (albeit limited) experience, there were reasons behind every stroke of violence.

"That is the wrong question to ask, Princess. As you are heir to the throne, bother yourself with commands, not questions. Now, command something."

I command nothing. "I don't understand. If this is a Tertian incident, why call Quin?"

"Because this is not a Tertian incident. This is a human incident, and Quin has been the most successful colony to rid itself of Makers. There's a war on the horizon, if we do not enforce preemptive measures."

"This doesn't feel like war. This feels like genocide."

Mother sneers. "You're bold today. That's good. Different. But 'genocide' is a big word, and big words carry big weight. Be careful when you play them. Some situations are delicate and will shatter beneath their weight."

We reach the docks and board a skipper: a rickety hopper for interplanetary use. Harnesses dig into our shoulders, and the ship bucks beneath us. Skippers aren't often used; citizens aren't allowed to travel between worlds, or so the old rules said. But in new worlds, old ways must die, along with everything else.

Over clanging metal and beeping electronics, Mother shouts, "Our mission is to ease tensions and re-establish control, if possible with an anarchic government. Representative Aseret will meet us on the surface, and we'll return to Starstop tonight."

"But what if this is an isolated incident?" I ask. *Questions be damned.* "We should give them the benefit of the doubt. Since Tertia is impoverished, what if they stole to support their families? What if the deaths were accidents? This violence may not be representative of all Makers."

"Murder is never an accident, and poverty is Tertia's fault. They value art above analysis, fun above function. Their bureaucracy is slow, their justice slower. That is why we are here, Ketra, to speed things along and tie this up. Makers upset the Tertian system—convoluted as it is. Don't assign sympathy to criminals."

The skipper lands with a teeth-grinding crunch, and we

transfer to an aircar: a clunky hovering vehicle. It works, at least, not that we could fix it if it broke. We lost much knowledge in Earth's Exodus, and knowledge is strength. Technology is autonomous and cares for itself far better than humans care for each other.

We float over Tertia, a strange new world. It's so different from Quin, so alive. Everything is bright, vibrant, bursting with color. Flowers bloom rainbows. Birds sail through the blazing sky, and insects cloud the rolling hills. Villas squat beside dusty paths, and vineyards stretch to blood-soaked horizons. Here, the dying sun is large and angry. Red rage pulses over the balmy world, clashing with fragile peace. *There's nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.* Death claims every soul.

The aircar slows and parks before a large central villa. A red-clay roof stretches over lemon-stucco walls and arches. Guards lead us into the central courtyard where stone benches surround a bubbling fountain. Representative Aseret rises from a bench, arms outstretched, beaded toga shimmering, cheerful despite death's looming shadow.

"Otunevneb," Aseret greets. "Welcome." He gestures for us to sit across from him, and we arrange ourselves on the benches. The fountain sprays me, and I flinch, unused to water. Everything on Quin is ice.

"Sotiik isatsaja," I say. "Thank you for your time."

Mother grimaces. I shouldn't have spoken Quinish, but Aseret spoke Tertian, and we're here to "ease tensions." That's Mother's excuse to spy.

"Take us through today's events," Mother says in Common. She sits, straight-backed, on the bench. Everyone shrinks in her presence. She's not royal here, but she's regal everywhere, and people lean toward power. *Bow.*

"I apologize for the efforts you've made to visit, but the event was minor, unnecessary of Council intervention," Aseret says. "A local family robbed a farmers' market after the parents lost their jobs. There was peripheral violence—accidental, of course—and the parents paid a fine."

"They are Makers," Mother says, tone sharp, gaze shrewd. "They Made weapons, killed five people, stole lives plus money, and you fined them." An accusation, not a question.

"The fact they are Makers holds no difference. Any Tertian can find a weapon. What happened was a simple misunderstanding. These are desperate times. We have compensated the victims' families."

"You bribed them to keep quiet." Another accusation. It lands with a fleshy thump.

"We paid them to keep the peace." A weak parry. Blood in the water, in the ice.

And Mother is a shark. "The Council sent us here, because Quin has no Makers while Tertia has many. You mate with them and spread their infection. Soon, they will overrun this world."

Aseret bristles. "We are not as inept as Quin likes to think. Though we do not kill Makers in their cribs, we control them through other means."

"Tertia has lost control, and Makers will take advantage."

"The Games start in two days. What difference does justice make now?"

"It makes all the difference. How we die reflects how we lived."

"So is this your legacy? Massacre? Genocide?"

Mother's features harden into stone. "My legacy is loyalty. Humanity is lost, and Makers are temptation. *Do not mistake a*

lion for a lamb."

Aseret smooths his toga, unruffled. "Quoting Scripture? Didn't think you were the religious type, Queen Ora. Though I do not support Makers, they are also human. They look like us, sound like us. They kill like us, too. Hard as it is for Quin to comprehend, they deserve the same rights. In the words of Scripture, Danger seen is danger held. Power feared is power owned."

"They kill with their bare hands," Mother snaps.

"So do we," Aseret says.

"They Make weapons out of nothing."

"Again, so do we. Trees become clubs. Mines become swords. Fires become guns. True, it takes us a bit longer, but we are not so different, Your Majesty."

"We are nothing alike," Mother says. "If you are not careful, ignorance will cost you your world. The Council has given me full jurisdiction in this matter. Throw the Maker parents in prison. Enroll their children in a juvenile detention center. Double the compensation for the victims' families. Last, offer a thousand-ghost reward to anyone who informs on Maker neighbors or colleagues."

"Pay citizens to betray each other?" Aseret grunts in disapproval. "Tertia is about community—a foreign concept to Quin, but it is the root of our culture. I cannot ask my people to turn against one another."

"They already have, and this is not a request. It is an order from the Council of Five. The other leaders have already signed the decree."

"But we cannot afford the rewards."

"Quin can. We will loan you the money."

"I don't want to owe you anything."

"You already owe us everything."

Aseret tenses. "And what do we do with the accused Makers?" Mother sighs, unimpressed. "For all Tertia's creativity, you lack imagination in fundamental matters. Dispose of them, or I will do it for you."

"Most of us will die soon. Why go to all this trouble?"

"Because we won't all die. We are about to anoint a new home, our third home. Do you want the same shadows to follow us?" "Makers are not shadows," Aseret says.

Mother stands, done. "Regardless, we appreciate your cooperation. Report back by nightfall, and I will send you an advance for the rewards."

Aseret slumps, defeated. Mother doesn't only win; she destroys all in her wake.

We exit the central villa on a wave of tension. The aircar waits, our getaway. Rewind through hills, between vineyards, toward the bloody sun. We board the skipper and leave in a dusty cloud.

"Will they listen?" I ask Mother.

"No questions." She *tsks* me. *Unteachable*. "And yes. Regardless of Aseret's bravado, he signed the decree after our meeting. Tertia will obey. They value anarchy, spontaneity, and will sacrifice Makers to preserve their barbaric lifestyle."

"So they want to appear open-minded and enlightened," I say, "but in reality..."

"They're like us. That's what you want to say. Don't be spineless like your father. If you want to call us rigid, bigoted, prejudiced chauvinists, then have the guts to do so."

I gape, flap my lips, a fish and her prey.

"Yes, I know what they say behind our backs, because I planted those rumors. I crafted our culture to protect us. Let others

think us biased. Let them hate us for our dogma and fear us for our cruelty. Fear keeps us safe. Hatred harnesses control. They don't bother to attack, because they think us inflexible. No one can change or conquer us. Fighting is futile. And close your mouth, Ketra. Gawking is uncivilized, and we must remain civilized at all costs."

I close my mouth. Lower my eyes. Realize escape is futile, too.

"You will hurt people by doing the right thing, but you will hurt more by doing the easy thing," Mother says. "Choose wisely. We have a world to rule."

Before I can reply, the skipper jolts. I lurch against my harness. Alarms shriek bloody murder. Red flashes. Dissonant whines. Assault. *Strike*. Hammer. *Smash*. The skipper spins through the atmosphere. A fiery tail whips behind us. I panic. Mother does not panic.

"We are being attacked," Queen Ora says, calm—annoyed, even.

"Yes, Your Majesty," a guard says.

"Well, counterattack."

"Right away, Your Majesty."

Our skipper flips. My stomach squirms. Lasers shoot from our turrets. Return shots graze our hull. Our ship jerks then hurtles forward.

"Who's shooting at us?" I ask, blood rushing in my ears.

"Who doesn't matter," Mother says, frustrated at my questions, at my obstinacy, at the ways I resemble her and the ways I refuse her. "Only the what matters, and the what is that someone is attacking us, and attacking us makes them an enemy of the throne. Eliminate them."

"Yes, Your Majesty," a guard says.

The pilot yanks on controls. The skipper flips back. Guards aim and fire. Red stars. Scarlet suns. *We're dying.* My harness pops. I smack against metal. Bruises and blood. Bones batter flesh. Agony leaks through me. A cry. *My cry.* A scream into the void as the void swallows us whole.

Somewhere in another sky, Mother calls my name. Leave me. Save me. Steal me. Escape me. The skipper leaps free. I thud against the floor. Darkness says hello. Tar stains my eyes. Night jams my ears. My mind rings with pain and promise. There are more stars than you can see. Scripture. Surrender.

Gag Me With Cupcakes, and Stuff Me With Shame

Allebazi

"Is there such a thing as too much frosting, though?" Efia asks me.

"Is there such a thing as relevant small talk?" I return. Stop being a twat. Shut up, baggage. I know, I know, I know. "Sorry." I cram a cupcake into my mouth to clog my mutinous gullet. M2O pulses with electronic splashes. Dark metal echoes through the blue-orange glow. Cells beep with updates, and tablets blink on my staff's desks. Wall screens list the fifteen Olympians and their stats. Cam should be on that list. But he's not. Get over it. Through the window, the sun shines redder. Fuck you all to hell.

"Don't apologize," Efia says.

She beams that incisive joy. Her blue eyes are a stardamn ocean. Those orange curls are fucking fire. Her large bronze body feels too much like home, and I'm a shit poet, so I gag

myself with another cupcake.

"I value your honesty," she adds. "Integrity builds character."

"You give me too much leeway. Don't sugarcoat my assholiness." I clear my throat and tap my cell into the office intercom. "An all-hands reminder to delay naps till lunch break or after work hours. A second reminder for some employees to address their snoring severity. A third reminder for a couple employees to desist from replacing their colleagues' pillows with whoopee cushions. Thank you." My employees fidget, and I close the channel.

"Is everything okay, Bazi? Not that it's my business, but if it were my business, I'd want to make sure you were. Okay, that is. So are you? Okay?" Efia blinks and smiles. Is it possible to be that happy? Looks painful.

My cheeks remain at a cynical neutral. "Besides the looming apocalypse where we all burn to death as the sun shits the bed? I'm fine."

"Sarcasm is a sign of progress! Glad you're feeling better!"

"Have you finished the Olympian interviews?" I ask.

"With all five teams," Efia chirps.

"Did you get quotes?"

"From leads and alternates."

"What about government reactions?"

"Done."

"Even Prime?"

"Dictator Ribaj submitted his quote first. Lovely chap, when he's not shouting orders. Did you know he knits, too?"

Reluctant, I grin. "You bring out the best in people, Efia."

"Because I learn from the best!"

"Kiss my ass anymore, and I'll be shitting lipstick."

Efia blushes maroon.

Jerk. I know.

Clearing my throat, I salvage my latest shipwreck. "What was Ribaj's quote?"

My assistant scrolls through her tablet, flustered but determined. *Wouldn't kill you to be kind*. Yes, it would. Kindness killed the cat. Wait, that was curiosity. Wait, do we even have cats anymore?

"Here," Efia says. "Ribaj said, 'Aanamata na zufay malaela la'aladfa.' May the best world win. Priman is a beautiful language."

"They're a beautiful people, too." When they're not breaking my heart.

Damn Idsura and her desert beauty. She cut me deep and let me bleed out in that steamy canyon alone. I can still smell her linen romper, tossed in a corner, can still feel her legs, entwined with mine. But she spewed starshit on those moonlit dunes—"It's me, not you!"—so now, I'm here, swapping lips for cupcakes.

"That's a mistranslation," I say. "Ribaj said, 'I hope the best world wins,' not, 'May the best world win." At Efia's confusion, I add, "I dated a Priman. She worked here for a bit." M2O employees can travel between worlds for interviews and coverage, but civilians aren't allowed—weren't allowed? Fuck change.

"Ah," Efia says, but she doesn't press. "Don't they mean the same thing?"

"Not to Primans. 'I hope' is respectful in their language. Ribaj used it as a verbal bow to the other worlds, a sign of deference. 'May' carries an aggressive edge, an insinuated superiority."

"So sorry, but I don't understand."

"To Primans, 'may' suggests: 'May the best world win, because we are the best.' Ribaj wants to appear humble with an 'I hope,' since he knows the other worlds hate Prime for its elite status. Their military dictatorship works well for them: hard exterior, warm interior. Despite their rigid reputation, Primans have big hearts, good souls, and love their leader. Ribaj has worked hard to unite his people in purpose. His usage of 'I hope' protects his athletes from assassinations—or attempts to, at least. Everyone expects Prime to win, so he wants to minimize the target on their backs."

"Got it," Efia says. "I'll change it to 'I hope.' Thanks for catching that, Bazi! You're amazing!"

For fuck's sake. I want to shove all her exclamation points down her throat—or between her legs. Stop it.

"Publish those articles today, and post to PicTic," I say.

Efia taps her tablet, then says, "Done!"

Another bloody exclamation. Another muffled cupcake grunt. I'd rather die of frosting than fire. Maybe sprinkles will kill me first. Better than a supernova—or love, stars forbid. *Such a turd.* Me or love? I guess we both are at this point. *Stop talking to yourself.* Nah, life is better crazy. And I'm not talking aloud. I'm spiraling in my messed-up, star-fucked, love-ruined brain.

The ceiling alarm saves me from insanity. It bleeds red. *Emergency*. Panic mobs the wall screens. *Bloody stars*.

"Bazi," Efia says, face gray. "There's been an attack."

I grab my cell. Twenty missed calls in the last five seconds. Messages explode across my screen. We need you to cover this NOW. Release ASAP. Quinish throne attacked. Tertia suspected. Queen furious. Princess in critical condition. I dial the Council Administrator's number. Aya answers, poised as always.

"Hello, Allebazi. How can I—"

"What happened with Quin?" I interrupt. Aya is a "neutral" party. She's Priman, but this dispute is between Tertia and Quin,

so she can be objective. Should be objective. Might be objective. *Fuck.*

"Ah, yes," Aya says. "The Quinish queen and princess visited Tertia on Council orders to settle an incident with Representative Aseret. Makers caused a disruption on Tertia, and Queen Ora provided a resolution. The discussion went well. Upon the throne's return to Starstop, an unknown skipper attacked. Queen Ora is unharmed, but Princess Ketra is in critical condition. Her harness snapped during evasive maneuvers. Medical staff are treating her in the Starstop infirmary now."

"Aya, I could get all that from teenagers on PicTic," I say. "Tell me *who*. Tell me *why*."

"We know neither perpetrator nor motivation, but we are investigating the incident."

"Incident? Sounds like sabotage to me."

"The Council does not jump to conclusions regarding serious matters," Aya says. "We will update you when ready."

"Well, the Council better jump to something, because people are about to flip the fuck out." I end the call and turn toward Efia. "Did you eavesdrop?"

Efia sputters, "No, no, no, so sorry. I mean, I did hear a few things, but your volume is loud, not that loud is bad. I like loud, and—"

"Good, then I don't need to repeat it. Give me three leads. Who attacked the throne and why?"

My assistant stalls.

"In the next thirty seconds," I say. "Fuck the Council. I want answers *now*. I've seen your scores. You're brilliant. A genius. Solve this case, Efia. I know you can."

Efia blushes again—hotter, darker. She has no confidence, and if there's one thing I can give her, besides cupcakes, it's that.

"Um..." She coughs and starts again, surer. "Okay, so Maker violence on Tertia plus Quinish diplomacy equals...sabotage, you're right. Three leads. Aseret is one. He was there. Two more? One of the guards. The pilot could have been a spy. And last?" Her face falls in realization. "Queen Ora. But her daughter...she wouldn't have, would she?"

"You tell me. Narrow it down. Aseret, the pilot, and Ora. Those are your leads. Now, give me their reasons."

"Aseret is Tertian. They love anarchy. But a person is not a world. In politics, Aseret is often cautious. I doubt it was him." "Good, and the pilot?" I ask.

Efia pulls up a file. "Nothing unusual. A Quinish servant. Wait, that means he works for the queen. Still, his record is clean. And the skipper's flight logs show nothing unusual. Nobody tampered with the ship."

"What about the other skipper?"

"It's gone. Self-destructed after the attack. No proof."

"All the proof. Only one world includes a self-destruct."

"Quin," Efia guesses, stricken. "The throne attacked itself."

"The throne attacked the princess," I clarify. "The queen weakened her daughter's harness and ordered the attack. Why?" "To gain sympathy for Quin."

"Exactly. Quin is an underdog, a hated world with a harsh culture. They need support. No one likes the queen, so Ora used her daughter. Their people adore Ketra. They call her *Uttetsakar*, which means 'Beloved.' All their attention is on the princess now, wishing her well, loving their world while suspecting others. Patriotism, that's why Ora did it. She orchestrated this whole mess to direct their focus where she needed it."

"What about the Tertian Makers?" Efia asks.

"That was her excuse," I say. "Maker violence is common

on Tertia, but it's usually handled with a softer touch. Ora convinced the Council to take drastic measures to get Ketra off Starstop, to make her vulnerable."

"That's awful."

"That's Ora."

"We should release this now," my assistant says. "Tell everyone what Ora's done."

"No," I say. "There would be mass panic, especially this close to the Games. We can't afford hysteria."

"What? But the princess! What her mother did—"

"We will tell the princess, but only her. Let the articles read 'Unmanned Skipper Malfunctions and Injures Quinish Princess,' or 'Princess Ketra Recovering After Technological Failure,' or something catchier. I don't care what it says, but blame technology, not people, and don't mention sabotage. We know the truth, and the princess will know the truth, but the Games must go on. We can't risk chaos, or there will be no winner, and no winner means no survivors. Understand?"

Efia fidgets, uncomfortable, but agrees. "I'll work on the article."

"I'll be in the infirmary if you need me, but don't need me," I say. *Twat.* Yup.

I leave behind Efia and my staff as I barrel through metal corridors toward the infirmary. Crowds gather in every shadow, murmuring about murder, magic, and Makers. That must change. *Focus on the Games*. Time to clean up this fucking mess, and this time, the dumpster fire isn't my fault.

Okay, it's somewhat my fault. I should have sensed Ora's play, warned the princess, and handled Tertia on my own without Council intervention. M2O has mediated before, but love is a turd, my mind is a sewer, and no matter how hard I try, I'm

still stuck in this toilet. *Starshit, you like it here.* Misery loves company, but she loves maniacs more. *I hope you know how much I love you, how hard I fought for you, how far I'd go for you.* Enough. *Enough, Bazi.* The past is the past, and the future is a whore.

I reach the infirmary. The retinal lock scans my eyes and opens the sliding doors. I enter, and the doors close behind me with a clunk. Scrubbed doctors and nurses flurry between steel beds with gray sheets. There are cries of pain. Groans of agony. A sterile stench. A fluorescent glare. There aren't many patients—some hungover idiots and a few athletes with sprains. In the corner, surrounded by an entourage of guards and servants, lies Princess Ketra, asleep.

"How is she?" I ask a passing nurse.

The nurse shrugs. "It's minor. A few aches left. Medscanners got most of it. She can leave, but the queen wants her here."

Surprise, surprise. Milking the pity tit. "Can I speak with her? Alone?"

"You can try, but I doubt her guards will allow it." He smirks. "Then again, you do have a talent for getting your way, Bazi. Good luck."

"Thanks, Aj. How're the kids?"

"Feisty little demons."

"Like their fathers."

Aj laughs and ushers me through. As I approach the princess, she opens her eyes—not asleep, or never asleep—and faces her entourage.

"Allebazi has sensitive information to share with me," Ketra says. Her quiet voice carries new authority. "Please allow us a few moments of privacy."

The guards and servants obey, and the circle widens around

the princess. She props herself up on pillows and waves me forward. A braid coils her silver-blonde hair, and she's paler than usual beneath her freckles. I sit in her bedside chair, taller even though her bed is higher.

"You may talk freely," Ketra says. "They cannot hear us, and even if they could, they are loyal to me. I assume you have discovered that my mother caused the attack, using the self-destruct mechanism on the hostile skipper as proof. Sloppy for her. She must be desperate. I further assume that you are here to tell me you cannot release this information to the general public for fear of mass hysteria."

I blink, impressed. "Yes and yes. Many underestimate you, Princess."

"Underestimation is a shield. Better to play naive than a threat." Brilliance flashes in her storm-gray eyes, so like Ora, yet so different, too. Ketra is the change Quin needs, a familiar force to drive them into the future, if her mother stops risking her life. "Who else knows?" the princess asks.

"Only you, me, and my assistant," I say.

"Can your assistant keep a secret?"

"Yes, she's kept many."

"Do you trust her?"

"With my life, and more importantly, with yours."

Ketra tilts her head, then assesses me. In that gesture, I see her mother. "You're one of the good ones, aren't you, Allebazi?"

"Depends who you ask. We all have friends. We all have enemies, too."

"Hmm, true, though if we share both, that makes us allies, no?"

"Princess, I'm unsure I understand your question," I say. Damn royalty with their insinuations and implications. *Say* what you mean. But they can't. Speaking in circles builds walls around them, and without those walls, they'd all fall down.

"You came here to the infirmary to tell me—only me," Ketra says. "You could have sold this story to outlets. You could have released it yourself and made a ton of ghosts. You could have slandered Quin—with good reason—and banned Mother from the Games. But you didn't do any of those reasonable, justifiable things. So, with all due respect, Allebazi, I'm unsure I understand your logic."

"I must protect the Games. Without the Games, there are no survivors. Without the Games, there is no future. That is my logic."

"That is your excuse, but there is something more."

"There is always something more, Princess, but my something more serves you well. I request you leave it at that."

Ketra inspects my face for lies, for fear, but I'm naked now, an open book. She can't read the words, but they're there on the pages, raw and true and dangerous. One day, you'll understand. Perhaps you'll forgive me. Perhaps I'll forgive myself.

"These Games are important to you," she says.

"They're important to everyone," I say.

Merciful, Ketra releases me from scrutiny. "I trust you. I believe you. I don't know why, but that's faith, right? *Follow the souls who yet shine with fear, for fear is true, and truth is a compass.* I see fear in you. I see truth, too. Mother hates that line of Scripture, but it's one of my favorites. She weaponizes fear while I worship fear. It's one of few things hard to hide. We can mask much of ourselves, but we can rarely mask fear—there's always a tell, a twitch, a crack. Even the best liars can't erase all their humanity. Though you erase little. You are honest and sincere. I thank you for that, Allebazi."

"Most call me a hot mess or a dumpster fire, but I'll take honest and sincere." *You lying piece of shit.* In some ways, to some people, when necessary. But not here.

Ketra chuckles. "So what now? We share a treacherous secret between us, one we cannot act upon. Life goes on, for some of us. And Mother will reign till the end."

Shut up. Walk away. Don't add gas to a wildfire. But bloody stars, I love to watch shit burn. "What happens now is your decision and yours alone," I say. "This is your fight, not mine, nor anyone else's. Quin is your birthright. The fate of your world is none of my business, nor is it the Council's."

"Yet you came here to warn me."

"And it seems my warning was redundant," I say.

Uneasy, I pause. Hesitate. Spiral inside my head. *Be neutral. Be impartial.* I'm supposed to gather news and shoot it out clean. I am *not* supposed to rabble-rouse treason or sedition. Though Ketra is heir. She is the throne. It's not technically a rebellion, right? Ketra and Ora wear the same crown. I'm supporting transformation, not encouraging insurrection. Yeah, let's go with that.

"Princess, your people love you," I continue. "If you choose to stand, they will stand behind you. Remember that. Use it, if you want. But remember it, always."

Ketra understands too fast and too much. "Mother thinks me spineless, says I am too much like Father. She killed him, did you know that? Killed him to claim the throne. He was a dreadful king, but she is a monstrous queen. What if I am no different?"

"You've been different since birth. Everyone sees it, and your mother fears it. We are not always the sum of our parts. Many times, we grow beyond our blood. Sometimes, we grow

wings. Sometimes, we become more. Sometimes, we fight with everything we are. And sometimes, the only way forward is to burn the sun. Your Mother is sharp, I'll give her that, but you are sharp, too, Princess. Some swords have curves. Some blades are soft. Don't let others underestimate you so much that you underestimate yourself." *In time, I will tell you everything. In time, I will beg you to understand.* But not today. *I'm sorry.* Sorry is never enough.

Princess Ketra ponders my words. "You care," she says. "Few care anymore, but you care, Allebazi, even if you often hide it. Thank you for not hiding it now, because I care, too."

"I know. That's why I'm here." Before we wax poetic, because stars forbid I share my feelings in a healthy and mature way, I add, "But this conversation never happened. I can't walk this road with you. Being here is a risk. Anything further, and I could lose my job. I can't lose my job, Princess, same as you can't lose yours. People depend on us. Lives depend on us, too."

"I understand and am grateful for all you have done," the annoyingly responsible princess says. "Thank you, Allebazi, and *onnea*. Good luck."

"Anoub anutrof," I answer in Tertian. Good luck. We used to be one people, one language, but we've flown so far from Earth's cradle, and we must fly even farther to our new suns.

The infirmary belches a visitor into our midst. "Let me see her! Please, for stars' sake!" Camroc shouts at the guards. *Shit.*

Ketra recognizes his voice and says, "It's all right. Let him through."

The guards part. A rattled Camroc barges in. His eyes flash amber, and curls explode around his horrified face. "You're okay?" he rasps.

The princess smiles. "I'm okay. It was a...technical malfunc-

tion. Nothing major. Nothing important." She winks, but Camroc misses that and everything else.

"Oh," he says, straightening his tunic and shawl. He pulls his leggings down and bounces on his toes, embarrassed. Out of uniform, he's a lonely man in an infinite sky, vulnerable and exposed. He could be so much more if he only—

Stop it, Bazi. He made his choice, and you made yours.

"The princess should rest," I say, and Camroc notices me at last.

"Bazi?" he asks. "Hi. You're here? You're here. Right, okay. Yes, she should rest. Sorry, Princess. Feel better. *Hda rom.* Good luck."

I grab his arm and drag him out of the infirmary. Once in the hallway, out of eyeshot and earshot, I spin him around. He falls against the wall, pop-eyed and open-mouthed.

"What the *fuck* were you thinking?" I hiss. "There is an investigation surrounding the attack. Do you want to incriminate yourself?"

His red brows creep up his golden-brown forehead. "What? An investigation? An attack? I thought it was a malfunction."

Shit. Fuck. Star-fucking-dammit. "It is, but she's royal. They always investigate when it comes to the throne. Don't give them a reason to suspect it's anything more." If I'm an expert at anything, it's backpedaling through starshit.

Camroc shrugs his broad shoulders. "Doesn't matter. I'm nothing now."

"You're never nothing. You're still here. You still represent Quate. And Quin and Quate have been at each other's throats forever. Don't add to that fire. You're smarter than that. Your world and her world *must not clash*. Not here. Not now. The Games *must* go on. Do you understand me? No Games mean

no survivors mean no fucking future for the human fucking race. *Any* disruption could cause widespread catastrophe. I know you care about her, but *think*, Camroc."

"Then why were you there?" he challenges.

I scowl on the outside, but inside, I smile. Failure has been good for him. He's stronger. Fiercer. Ready for what comes next. *But are you ready, too?* No. Never.

"For M2O," I say. "This is a delicate situation. The Council wanted me to interview the princess to help calm political waters." *Stir the starshit cauldron*.

But he buys it. "Oh."

"Yes, *oh.* Don't forget who I am, Camroc, and don't forget who you are. Most of all, don't forget who *she* is. Ketra is the bullseye on a volatile board, and Queen Ora is pissing off all the wrong people. Focus on the Games—*nothing* else."

"You're not my mother," he snaps.

"No, I'm better," I snap back. "Your mother left you, and I will never leave." *Bitch.* I know. But it strikes home. For us both.

Camroc wobbles on his feet, hit hard. I don't apologize. He needs the blow. "Sometimes, you're a real asshole, Bazi," he says, strained.

"I'm always an asshole, kid," I say, "but I'm also always here." He grits his teeth, then whispers, "I know."

"Good. Get back to work. Fate ain't done with you yet."
"Fate's a bitch."

"But she's always right."

He huffs and leaves. Then returns and hugs me. We need each other, fucked up as we are. "Thank you...for staying," he says into my shoulder.

"Thank you for letting me," I say. "Now, go before we both start pretending we have functioning souls."

GAG ME WITH CUPCAKES, AND STUFF ME WITH SHAME

He laughs—Camroc again, strong again, ready again. "It's okay to cry, Bazi," he calls as he leaves.

"My tears are acid. I'm saving everyone the pain."

Again, he laughs. Again, I break.

Mother Suns, save his soul. If nothing else, bring him home.

10

Practice Makes Power, and Power Makes Poison

Camroc

gain," Coach barks.
Sweating, heaving, Nyo retreats a few steps. Crouch.
Lean. Run. Ze twists, arches, flips backward, and lands a punch near Coach's cheek. Coach blocks with focus mitts and grunts, annoyed.

"If you punch my cheek, you'll piss me off," Coach says. "Anger stokes power. You'll make your opponent fight better. Don't piss me off. Knock me out. Punch my chin or temple. Yelir, your turn."

The Starstop arena roars with other worlds' coaches and athletes training. Blood, sweat, and tears bind us, but nothing else, but nothing more. I'm the only alternate here today, from all worlds. A few reporters tried to interview me before Coach scared them back into the stands. They want to know why I'm here while all other alternates accept defeat, but all other

alternates don't have Nyo and Arada. I'm here for them. I stay for them.

Still, I feel guilty. I apologized to both many times, enough times that Arada started mocking my "constipated rat face," but it's not enough. They're no longer angry with me, but I'm still angry with myself. I let them down, but it's better like this. Yelir is steady in a way I never was, and he'll score predictable if not remarkable. No one expects us to win, to survive, but at least this way, we'll go out with honor if not glory.

Yelir faces Coach and repeats Nyo's sequence. Crouch. Lean. *Run.* Twist. Arch. Flip. *Punch.* He clips Coach's forehead, and Coach sighs.

"You both are tall," Coach says to Yelir and Nyo. "You have farther to fall, so you freak out at the last second. Trust you will find a way through the storm. Follow through. Embrace the fall. Commit to the punch. Welcome the loss of control, and harness chaos to do your bidding. Arada, show them."

The tiny woman steps before Coach. She doesn't hesitate. Crouch. Lean. *Run.* Twist. Arch. Flip. *Punch.* Coach's focus mitt thuds near his temple. If he hadn't blocked her, she'd have knocked him out—or more.

"Again," Coach says.

Arada repeats the sequence, flawless and strong. Her brown limbs slice the air. Her wiry body bends and whips. She is a weapon. Her aim is true. She knows what she wants, and she nails it again. Coach grunts in approval.

"But she's short," Yelir says. "It's easier for her."

"It's easier for her to flip and aim," Coach says, "but it's harder for her to get within reach and gather enough power. She overcomes both with speed. You two are taller with a longer reach. Use these strengths to mask your weaknesses. Nyo, try again."

Nyo adjusts zes uniform and faces Coach again. Breathe in, breathe out, *go.* Crouch. Lean. *Run.* Twist. Arch. Flip. *Punch.* Clenched jaw. Piercing eyes. Zes punch lands on the focus mitt near Coach's temple.

"Better," Coach says. "Your aim is good, but use more power. Yelir, try again."

Yelir stretches his gangly limbs, then confronts Coach. Crouch. Lean. *Run.* Twist. Arch. Flip. *Punch.* His punch misses Coach.

"You have the opposite problem," Coach says. "Good power, bad aim. Breathe before, like Nyo did. Air is your fuel. Don't run on empty."

They practice flip-punches for another hour, then move to ropes. Nyo and Yelir climb twelve ropes ten times each, and Arada doubles them both. My body itches to join them, but this is my place, on the sidelines as support. I still train light in the mornings, but I've been resting for the most part, or moping—in Arada's opinion. At first, I was devastated when I didn't make the team, then I was relieved when the pressure lifted. But without the pressure, I'm naked. *Empty*. This was always my purpose; without it, I'm blank. I at least accept it now, and acceptance is progress—in Nyo's opinion. Ze is still my rock, even though I'm supposed to be zes.

Training ends with stretches and cool-downs. I join them for this part, and this part only: saying the end, farewell, goodbye.

"Tomorrow is the Olympic Ball," Coach says, pacing before us. "The day after tomorrow is the Opening Ceremony. That's when the Games begin. You've trained hard, you've passed your physicals, and you're ready. I'm proud of you all, regardless of performance. Know that, but fight like hell. Give it all you've

got. Remember every Quatic citizen, and let their lives boil your blood. You don't need me to remind you of the pressure, so let me remind you of the privilege. We have one chance to win, one hope to survive. You can make a change, a difference, because you are the best of Quate, the best of the worlds, and *you can win*. I know you can win. Yes, we are not Prime, but we are rough, rugged, a people built on dreams.

"No matter what happens, no matter your mistakes or the scores, the Games aren't over till they're over. Fight till the end, and I'll fight alongside you. It takes courage to be vulnerable, and it takes bravery to heal. So fight. Heal. Win. Live. In new worlds, old ways must die. You may choose your battles wisely, but you can never choose your war. And this is your war. You did not choose this fight, but you can choose victory, because that's what victory is: a choice. Choose to win, and sleep well tonight. After tomorrow, nothing will be the same."

Coach bows to each of us—even to me. Tears film his hazel eyes, and he lets them fall, proud. Then he leaves us behind, because he is right. This is our fight. This is our war. No, this is *their* war. I am the messenger. Nyo, Arada, and Yelir are the warriors.

"What a crazy ride," Arada says in a split. She pinwheels her legs before her and bends at the waist.

"I don't want to die," Yelir says, nervous.

He's steady in training, but anxious in all other things, because we can control training, not life. I understand, though I hardly understand him. We've known each other forever, but we haven't even met. Practice and pain flooded our lives from the start. We learned to swim in the same choppy river, but we never connected beyond camaraderie, and we never became family. Nyo and Arada clicked at hello, while Yelir was always

with Ronoc, Evam, and Trebor. But they aren't here now. That must destroy him. They abandoned the team. I almost abandoned them, too.

"There's a line from Scripture that always comforts me," Nyo says. "Death is your oldest friend. He will always return at the end."

"Sounds like a load of depressing starshit to me," Arada says.

Nyo chuckles and runs a medscanner over zes bruises and scratches. They're from today's training. So many tiny wounds in a sky full of damage. "That is one interpretation, Ri-ri," ze says.

"What is another?" Yelir asks.

"Death is familiar. We've been here before. If we've known death before, maybe we'll know life again. Maybe this is one end of many."

"Not comforting," Arada says, jumping to her feet. "Even if we live again, what about the people we love? Will we find them again? Will we love them again?"

"Or we'll find better people to love," Yelir says, then panics. "Not talking about you all, of course. Just...you know...yeah."

He lost his friends, then he lost himself, but he's still hanging on, still pushing through. Ronoc, Evam, and Trebor left him. I couldn't survive if Nyo and Arada left me.

"You deserve better," I tell Yelir.

"They're dicks," Arada says.

"Ri-ri," Nyo warns.

"It's the truth," Arada says. "They're dicks, they suck, and I wish them all a severe bout of explosive diarrhea at the most inopportune moment."

"Is there ever an opportune moment for explosive diarrhea?" Nyo asks.

Yelir and I snort while Nyo surrenders to zes smile.

"I pity all who dare face you, Arada," Yelir says.

"Same to you," Arada says.

"No, you're fierce. I'm only...consistent."

"Consistent is important," I say. "It's why you made the team." "But you have such passion," Yelir says.

"And I always burn out. It's better to sail steady, Yelir. Believe me." Though I miss the passion. *Follow the fire. Find freedom. Believe.* Believe in what? I believe in the team, not in me, but for the first time in my life, I'm happy. *Content.* Joy comes from peace and balance, not from ambition or success. Yet there is still something missing. *The fire will start again.* Or not. I don't want to burn alive, but I also don't want to freeze to death.

"Where are you, Cam?" Nyo asks me. Ze pulls me and Yelir to our feet, and we follow Arada out of the arena. Guards flank us, scan the crowd, always on edge, always our shields.

"Nowhere," I say. "Everywhere. I don't know. Things feel good but not right, if that makes sense? I always expected... never mind."

"You're mourning a future you thought guaranteed," ze says.
"That makes me sound like a self-absorbed, arrogant asshole, but yes," I say with a grin.

"You're not an asshole." Ze pauses and grins back. "Well, you're not always an asshole. You're grieving a dream, Cam. Let yourself hurt. Life will right itself, if it's a true life, a good life, and you are true and good."

"When I'm not a twat."

"When you're not a twat, yes."

"Thanks for sticking by me, Nyo."

"Thanks for the same."

"No, you've done far more for me than I've done for you," I say.

Ze turns and faces me, disturbed. "Do you really believe that?" I shrug. "It's the truth. You're a star."

"Suga si ut om nairhg." And you are my sun. "You are my reason to shine. Yes, I'm a catch," ze says with a wink, "but you're a whole bloody ocean—no, a whole fucking sky. Something's coming for you. Something big. I feel it. I know it. Hold out a little longer. You'll see."

We pause while we walk through manic fans. Guards wave them away, and we reach the next hallway, disheveled.

"You have such faith in me," I say.

"No, I have such faith in my gut," Nyo says. "It's never led me wrong, and it led me to you."

"You're creepy," Arada calls over her shoulder.

"Better creepy than crazy, darling," ze teases back.

"Crazy gets the girls."

"Crazy gets the crazy girls."

Yelir hunches, left out, so I say, "I can't wait to eat tomorrow." Arada raises an eyebrow. "Did you segue from girls to eating without intending the obvious innuendo? Camroc, sweetheart, you need to get laid."

A laugh escapes Yelir, and I relax. Even if this is my one contribution to the team, humor at my expense, at least it's still something. At least *I'm* still something.

"No argument there," I say. We all need release. Training was our lives, and now? I don't fucking know.

"What do you want to eat?" Nyo asks. Arada snickers, so ze adds, "For *food.*"

"Anything besides potatoes," I say. "Too many fucking potatoes on Quate."

"I made a potato bomb before we left," Arada says.

"No one's surprised," Nyo says.

PRACTICE MAKES POWER, AND POWER MAKES POISON

"What about you, Yelir?" I ask. "Anything you want tomorrow? There will be dishes from every world."

"Something Tertian," Yelir says. "Something with extra garlic." "Go easy on the garlic," Arada says. "Learn from my experience."

"Please don't elaborate," Nyo says. "I don't want to know."

"I want to know," Yelir says.

"Then you're braver than I am."

They continue joking, the three of them, a unit. There. *There.* I fixed it. No, *they* fixed it. Still...I'm not useless. *Right?* Fuck me. Fuck fate. I'm floundering here, stuck in the mud, a half-dead fish hoping for mercy. No. *No.* I'm okay. *Steady.* I'm where I need to be if not where I want to be. That sounds wise and stable, even if I'm a bomb in the final-five countdown. I can do this. I must do this. *Hold it together for them, for Quate.* It's almost over. It's almost done.

I'm almost over and done, too.

11

Heyo, Hey, Come and Steal My Heart

Ketra

The Olympic Ball is tonight, and I'm late. Mother will kill me. Good. I am the future, and the future is late.

As I rush through hot metal halls, a Quatic jig pulls me toward the arena.

When the stars burn down, we bow, we dance.

When the sky is red, we take our chance.

When your dreams are close, come and hold my hand.

Then we'll grow our wings to fly from this land.

Heyo, fly high. Heyo, fly far.

Heyo, fly free. Heyo, hey, come and sing your part.

Heyo, fly high. Heyo, fly far.

Heyo, fly free. Heyo, hey, come and steal my heart.

The music is lively, spirited, everything like Quate, nothing like Quin. Claps accompany the beats, and a few ambitious souls attempt a dissonant harmony. Laughter rings throughout the chorus, and the tempo increases. Again. Again.

Heyo, fly high. Heyo, fly far.

Heyo, fly free. Heyo, hey, come and steal my heart.

By the time I reach the arena, I'm humming along. Mother catches my eye and wants to gouge it out. She does not approve. Well, fuck her approval. She used me as bait to lure in our world, a world that hates her, a world on its deathbed. For the first time in my thirty years of life, I ignore her, my mother, Queen Ora of Quin, the throne herself.

Damn, it feels good.

The arena teems with athletes, coaches, reporters, government officials, and patrons from all five worlds united under one sun. One last night to live, to let loose. Beautiful chaos, that's what it is. A gorgeous mess. After a lifetime cooped up and shut down, this feels like freedom, like home.

I wade through the crowd, winged by guards, making slow progress. Tables and floating lanterns litter the arena. People gather beneath the dome, hugging and kissing, singing and dancing. There are dozens of dishes: crab cakes, honey-roasted duck, spinach-stuffed salmon, sautéed oysters with garlic crumble, caramelized pumpkin fries, pickled beets, lemonmarinated scallops with port jelly, onion fondue, lobster salad, balsamic mushrooms, beer-brined chicken, potato and leek stew, squash risotto, brioche with shaved almonds and chili vinegar, tomato tart, avocado mousse, bourbon doughnuts, chocolate cheesecake, coconut sorbet, and hazelnut gelato. All are old Earth recipes. Our greenhouses perpetuate our past, but tonight is the beginning of the end. Perhaps in our third home, we'll move on, break free.

Guards flank me closer as I move deeper into the arena. I pass Priman Dictator Ribaj. He bows, and I reflect him. To

his side, Tertian Representative Aseret stiffens. He mouths an apology—for the skipper, for the attack—but I wave it away. *No harm done.* It was Mother's mess, after all. Next, I spot Dionese Senator Farsa speaking with Quatic Speaker of the Houses Esrioas. Neither woman notices me, so I hurry on toward the Olympic teams.

Lead athletes wear uniforms, while alternates wear world-specific dress clothes: Priman rompers, Dionese shifts, Tertian togas, Quatic tunics, and Quinish robes. They blend in among reporters, officials, and civilians, so it takes several minutes to locate Camroc. When I do, I lock onto him and nothing else. The room dies, and the Ball stills. People fade. Music stops. Lanterns flare and burst.

Camroc doesn't notice me. He chats with the three Quatic leads: Nyo, Arada, and Yelir. Muscle and ambition halo all four athletes, but they unwind tonight, because they fight tomorrow. I've studied them, as I've studied everyone—Mother encourages stalking. She forges knives from knowledge, bribes Tertia with loans to erase Makers, and claims Quin's sympathy at my expense. *Twat.* A smirk tickles my lips. I doubt anyone has called Queen Ora a twat, at least not out loud, but tonight is a night of change. The air sizzles with anticipation. Everyone can feel fate's knotted strings.

"Your Royal Highness." Nyo sees me first and bows. Yelir and Arada twitch toward me and copy zem. Camroc stalls, in shock. He gapes, mutters something in Quatic, then closes his mouth and bows, too.

"Apologies, Your Highness," Camroc says, flushing. "I meant no disrespect. Too much whiskey." He points at an empty glass in his hand.

"No such thing," I say, and the four of them relax. "Though I

HEYO, HEY, COME AND STEAL MY HEART

doubt it was the whiskey." I motion behind them at the empty bottles of wine, beer, vodka, gin, rum, and tequila. "More likely the tequila."

"Tequila always takes the blame," Nyo says.

"For good reason," Arada says.

"Because nobody starts with tequila," Yelir says. "It's always the last bad choice that sends you over the edge."

The three leads slur a touch, but they're close to sober. I shoot Camroc a questioning glance, and he tilts his head, guilty, swaying on his feet.

"Mind if I borrow him?" I ask.

"Steal him away," Nyo says. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Princess Ketra."

"The pleasure was mine. Good luck tomorrow."

The leads mumble thanks and offer more bows while I usher Camroc toward the dome's outskirts. It's quieter here. I ask my guards to fetch a couple glasses of water as we climb the stadium seats to the top. With the sea of people beneath us, the crowd's buzz ebbs. Guards hand us our waters, then retreat a few rows below as I order Camroc to drink.

"It wasn't *all* me," he protests, but he downs his glass, then mine upon request. "Not like I'm competing tomorrow."

Pain scrunches his golden-brown face, but he shudders it away and runs a hand through garnet curls. His eyes are bright tonight, all jade and no amber, green and gentle as Quate's rolling hills. Navy leggings hug his strong legs, and a matching tunic wraps his broad frame. Beside my royal satin robes, embroidered with violet and silver, he looks so...real. And I look so fake. I am the castle my mother built, the glass facade begging someone to break it.

"I'm glad you're better," he says. Though he stumbles over

his words, his voice is soothing, and I lean in. "Sorry about the attack."

"Unless you shot me out of the sky, you have nothing to apologize for," I say.

His face grays. "Of course I didn't. I would never—"

"Chill, Camroc. I'm joking."

"Oh. Are you allowed to joke? As a princess, I mean." Humor teases his drunken gaze. Damn this sweetheart boy and his swollen heart. He leaves too much open. Queen Ora would slay him in a second. But I'm not my blood. Thank the fucking stars for that.

"Mother disapproves, but I've grown rather fond of her disapproval lately."

"Spoken like a true heir."

Camroc slides closer to me on the bench and rests his head on mine, red against blonde, ruby against diamond. Surprised, I tense, but I don't move away. Few dare to speak with me, and no one risks touching me, but Camroc is not no one. After a hitched moment, I lean against him, too, my ear against his shoulder, and he wraps an arm around me.

"I suppose this is forbidden," he says.

Whether he's referring to our proximity or whatever *this* is, I don't know. It doesn't matter. We won't have time to find out. One world will win, and we are from different worlds, so we can't both live. *Focus on the Games. Don't look at the sun.* The worthy will survive, but what is worth? And is it worth survival? But rules are rules, and death is death—the end, the end, *the end.*

I don't answer Camroc, because he's right. Everything about us is forbidden.

"You're far too serious," Camroc says. "Your mind is spinning

with something way too important. I can tell."

"Oh?" I ask, pulling away to face him. "How exactly can you tell?"

"When your mind's moving a mile a minute, you don't move at all. You're still when you're worried."

"And you're maudlin when you're drunk."

"Is there any other way to be drunk?"

"Some are angry." But not Camroc. Liquor shows truth, and his truth is soft—like me. The sun will eat us both alive.

"No fight left in me," Camroc says with a weak smile.

"On the contrary," I say, "I think your fight is yet to come."

"I'm too drunk to decipher that, so let's dance."

"Sorry?" I ask.

"Dance, you know, with our feet and shit," he says.

"Camroc, I can't dance to save my life." Mother views all art as a waste.

"Well, we're all gonna die, so now's a great time to try."

He tangles his fingers with mine and races down the stadium seating, guards at our heels. Conversations rise. Thrill and panic. Joy and fear and pain. Doomed romance and damned battles and star-crossed hopes and dreams. We will not win this war, but we can win tonight, forget tonight, ignore the guards who trail us always. I let Camroc lead me into one last dance, and we dance with death up a storm on a razor's edge. This is our one last chance at freedom.

A Quatic song filters through the swarm, faster than the first, stronger than "Heyo." It's frantic yet cheerful, despite everything and everyone.

When the worlds are on fire, and the sun keeps bleeding,

We'll dance hand in hand, and we'll never stop singing.

'Cause tonight's our last night, but our hearts are still beating.

Till these bones turn to dust, bet we'll keep on living.

So live on, live on. Live hard, live free.

I'm ready to fly. You can't take that from me.

So live on, live on. Live hard, live free.

I'm ready to die, so live on for me.

"Follow me," Camroc says.

I copy his feet, awkward but free. Hands warm upon my waist, he guides me through twists and twirls as the song builds in prayer, as the dance builds in power.

So live on, live on. Live hard, live free.

I'm ready to fly. You can't take that from me.

We swing around, winded and wild. Hop. *Skip.* Leap. *Switch.* Camroc is a blur. I've never seen him like this, at peace. In this moment, he is himself, not an athlete, not a man burdened with the weight of his world. So I release my chains, too, cut anchors to swim in the sea, and join him in blissful neglect of duty, of birth, of the sharp, jagged crown.

So live on, live on. Live hard, live free.

I'm ready to die, so live on for me.

"I like this one better," I shout over the crowd.

"What?" Camroc shouts back.

"I like this song better than the 'Heyo' one."

"Heyo' and 'Live on' are the same song. Well, they started that way. Then they grew apart, but you can sing them together." Like the worlds. Damn symbolism. "Listen, they're blending them."

I listen, and he's right. The two songs fold into each other as if they were always meant to be together. More fucking symbolism.

Heyo, fly high. (Live on.) Heyo, fly far. (Live hard.)

HEYO, HEY, COME AND STEAL MY HEART

Heyo, fly free. (Live free.)

(I'm ready to fly.) Come and sing your part.

Hop. Skip. Leap. Switch. Camroc spins me round and round.

Heyo, fly high. (Live on.)

Heyo, fly far. (Live hard.)

Heyo, fly free. (Live free.)

(I'm ready to die.) Come and steal my heart.

Hop. *Skip.* Leap. *Switch.* Camroc dips me toward the ground. *Heyo, live on. Heyo, live hard.*

Heyo, live free. Heyo, hey, come and die with me.

Camroc pulls us together, and we pause, red-faced and wideeyed and breathless. "I'm desperate to kiss you right now, but I don't want your guards to punch me. The one on the right looks particularly constipated. He might take out his fiber-lacking diet on me."

I snort-laugh as only he makes me. Inappropriate and irreverent. Common and unbecoming. Mother brings out the weapon in me, but Camroc brings out the woman.

"They won't punch if I kiss you first," I say, and I kiss him. Right there, right then. In the middle of the Ball, in the crowd of cursed worlds. Within the power of promise, of people, under death's threatening countdown.

My lips smash his. There is nothing beautiful about this kiss, yet it is the most beautiful thing I've ever known. Spontaneous. A spark. A fire right and raging. I press against him, and he presses against me. Our skeletons grind together as we grasp for each other's souls.

"Camroc, Ketra, Princess, Your Highness!"

A shocked chorus reaches us, and we pull apart, reluctant.

"We pissed off a few people," I murmur into his ear.

"You did, Your Royal Lowness," Camroc teases. "I was an

innocent lad till you corrupted me."

I snort-laugh again, then notice the figures of the chorus: Mother, Coach Racso, Allebazi. *Oops.* But we're all gonna die, so I kiss Camroc again. It might be our last time. One last chance to live. One last kiss to say goodbye.

"Ketra," Mother says. Her fury zaps the air.

Heyo, fly free. (Live free.)

(I'm ready to die.) Come and steal my heart.

"Camroc," Racso says, his anger quiet yet fierce.

Heyo, live on. Heyo, live hard.

Heyo, live free. Heyo, hey, come and die with me.

"Perfect, got the photo," Allebazi says, holding up her cell. "Sorry, Coach and Your Majesty. This is my fault. I'd asked them to stage a kiss to show Princess Ketra's recovery. Alliance could ease political tensions between Quate and Quin. In retrospect, this article was a tactless idea, and I should have asked you both for permission first. So sorry, can't hold my whiskey anymore."

"She's covering for us," Camroc whispers. He steps apart from me, and I follow his lead.

Racso rolls his shoulders and exhales. "It wasn't tactless, Bazi, but yes, next time, please ask permission. I request that you not run the photo. As Camroc is an alternate, I'd prefer media attention to focus on the leads."

Shit. Low blow. Or is it? No, Coach loves Camroc. He's shielding him from my mother, the queen. It works. Ora relaxes—in the only way she knows: straight back, pursed lips, condescending stare.

"I see," Mother says. "An ill-advised idea, but not unwise. I understand your reasoning, Allebazi, but I also request the deletion of the photo. However, feel free to run a different article detailing Ketra's recovery."

HEYO, HEY, COME AND STEAL MY HEART

A recovery necessary because of your abuse. But I hold my tongue.

"Of course, Your Majesty," Allebazi says. "It would be my honor."

Mother and Racso leave, appeased, but Allebazi lingers behind.

"Thank you," Camroc says. "Stars, thank you millions, Bazi."

Allebazi grins. "Always happy to save your ass, Cam, though I wish I didn't need to quite so often. Surprising as it might be, I do have a life outside defending your virginity."

Camroc blushes crimson as his curls while Allebazi motions toward the woman on her arm. The two reporters smirk and walk away.

Camroc shrinks beside me. "Well, that was beyond embarrassing. Sorry to have kept you so long. I'm sure you've got better things to do."

Foolish boy. "I'm a virgin, too," I say, but I'm not embarrassed. Mother sheltered me as Coach sheltered Camroc. They busied us with studies and training, and along the way, we forgot to live. Three decades of death before tonight's first life. "Seems a pity to die a virgin, though."

I thought it impossible, but Camroc blushes deeper. "Your mother would murder me."

"Better her than the sun."

Camroc doesn't answer right away. He lets music weave between us as desire blazes in his eyes, pupils blown out, gaze blinding and bright.

Heyo, fly high. (Live on.)
Heyo, fly far. (Live hard.)
Heyo, fly free. (Live free.)
(I'm ready to die.) Come and steal my heart.

BURN THE SUN

Heyo, live on. Heyo, live hard.

Heyo, live free. Heyo, hey, come and die with me.

"Camroc, we're going to die," I whisper, and at last, the truth is a hammer. I feel it, all of it, and I want to feel something better, something more. "I'm ready to die, but I don't want to die before I can live. I want this, and I want this with you. Even if we weren't going to die, I'd still want this, need this, crave this with you, so free me, if only for tonight."

"Are you sure?" he asks, and his eyes blaze hotter.

"Positive."

"Because I want you more than I've ever wanted anything before." He winces. "Sorry, that was cringey."

"I like cringey," I say and take his hand. "This time, follow me."

And he does. He follows me into the end. Dreams are wild, feral things. Even bleeding, they fight on, fight free.

Live on, Live Hard, Live Free

Allebazi

h, shit. First love and all its fuckery. Yes, I was an ass, but I can't cheer for Camroc. I'm unbiased, plus a load of other starshit.

"So Camroc's a virgin?" Efia asks. "That's so cute! Oh my stars, I never would've guessed! He's so hot and handsome and nice! Few people are so kind! He's a real sweetheart, not my type, but I'd think he'd be so many people's type!"

Yes, your type is power bitches and bloodthirsty twats. Actually, that works in my favor. Instead of replying, I send a company memo: Though I appreciate accurate anatomical representation, please avoid drawing genitalia on the wall screens. If you have questions regarding your own genitalia's size or shape, you are welcome to visit the infirmary after work hours. Thank you for your compliance.

"I know I've said it before, so many times, but it is so, so cool that you know him, Bazi!" Efia says. "He's so lucky to have

you!"

For the love of the stars, stop talking before I fuck you till you can't see straight. Dammit, food makes me horny. Okay, Efia makes me horny. Fuck the Olympic Ball, and fuck the dying sun, and fucking stars, let me fuck Efia. Behave. Make me. Wait, you can, because you're me...never mind.

"His life was one long training session," I say. "He had no time to live."

"Looks like he's living now! I mean, how cute are they together?!" Efia screeches. She smooths her periwinkle tunic—a tunic that's more like a gown—and *beams*. She's too happy, too peppy. We're all gonna die. Doesn't she know we're all gonna die?

"They're not together," I say, glancing down at my black toga—a toga that's more like a sack. I hate dressing up. I hate smiling. I hate fancy shit like this Olympic Ball where we engorge ourselves on food and booze to forget the solar bomb outside every window.

"But the picture was a cover," Efia says. "You can tell me. My lips are sealed, promise."

"Drop it, Efia."

You're a dick. Or three.

But she drops it, stiffens on my arm, and lets me lead her through the arena crowd. Instead of facing my emotional turmoil like a grown-ass adult, I try to message the Council, then swear at yet another company prank. I'm glad they're in high spirits, but I'm in low sludge, so I again rage-message all staff: To the unnamed employee who has been reprogramming autocorrect, reset all company settings to default. "NICOLAS CAGE IS GOD" should not replace the common phrases of "thank you," "talk soon," and "all the best." No one knows who Nicolas Cage is

LIVE ON, LIVE HARD, LIVE FREE

except hipsters, so find another ancient icon to worship. Thank you.

The angry burst calms me, so in a shadow out of earshot, I say, "Sorry. I've been a proper twat lately, and I apologize. There's a lot going on, a lot more than you know."

"You can trust me," Efia says with a rare stroke of seriousness.

"It's not about trust," I say. "It's about protection, and ignorance is protection in this case. The less you know, the better."

"So you're trying to protect me?" She blushes, and I blush, and this is not the door I wanted to open tonight.

"You could say that, yes."

"By keeping me in the dark?"

Damn her. Fuck her. Give me the latter. "Yes." Please.

"I'm not a kid," Efia says. Her big blue eyes beg to differ.

"You're twenty-two, and I'm fifty," I say. "When you were born, I was already on my third existential crisis. You're young, Efia, so let yourself be young. Let yourself be free."

"No one's allowed to be young today, and mass extinction kind of puts a damper on freedom."

So she does understand. Though she usually chooses not to show it. Now, she shows it. Her bronze features sharpen with frustration. She's not beaming anymore.

"I'm not stupid, you know," Efia continues, tying her orange curls into a bun. She means business, and this is doing nothing to ease my thirsty loins. *Thirsty loins?* Shut up.

"Of course I know," I say. "You're brilliant, as I often tell you."

"But you treat me like I'm stupid. Like my happiness is stupid. Like anyone who can put on a smile in stormy weather is stardamn fucking stupid." Her high-pitched voice cracks on the last word, and I crack with it.

"No, Efia, that's not...I never...I didn't mean—"

BURN THE SUN

"You're miserable, Bazi. I get it. We all get it. And you want us to be miserable, too. But I work so hard to bring everyone up, while you work so hard to bring everyone down, and it's exhausting."

She pulls away and crosses her arms. *Shit*, she's gorgeous. *Shit*, I fucked up. Again, again, again.

I lean against the arena's wall, mirror her pose, and say, "You're right. I am miserable, and misery loves company. It's not good. Not right. But I'm not like you. I envy how you can hold your head high, no matter the weather, and I wish I could do the same, but I can't. Anger is my shield. Without it, I can't function, and I must function awhile longer. I'm sorry. It's not fair to you. I understand if you wish to resign." *Don't resign*.

Efia blinks, taken aback. Her arms loosen, uncertain, then she recrosses them. "Resign? I don't want to resign. I want trust. I want you to rely on me...to need me."

So live on, live on. Live hard, live free.

I'm ready to fly. You can't take that from me.

The wild music urges this conversation in a dangerous direction. I should turn around and ride back to familiar territory where I smother feelings with stress-baked cupcakes, erasing truth with frosting. But I don't. I ride on, and I ride far. This is our last chance to walk this path before the sun burns everything away.

So live on, live on. Live hard, live free.

I'm ready to die, so live on for me.

Beneath the feral song, I whisper, "I do need you. I've always needed you, Efia. Yes, you're new, but since you started at M2O, I've relied on you too much. That's why I protect you. I'm worried I can't work without you."

"So this is about work." Her bottom lip trembles.

LIVE ON, LIVE HARD, LIVE FREE

"It was never about work. That's why you scare me."

"I scare you?"

"You terrify me. You bring out a side I've buried for a long time."

"I'm confused," Efia says. "You're...chaotic. Sometimes, you're nice. Other times, you're mean—no offense. No, fuck that, offense. You're encouraging and supportive, but then you push me away, then you pull me back, and I don't know what you want."

"I want to fuck you so hard that we both forget our names." *Oops.* Bad whiskey. That was supposed to be a thought.

Her jaw hangs open. "Wait, w-what?"

I shrug, sheepish. It's not a good look, the drunken sheep. What the hell are you doing? Fix this. Right. Backpedaling, I say, "You want trust? Okay, here's trust. Camroc is from Quate, and Ketra is from Quin. Their worlds hate each other, yet they're falling in love—in forbidden love. They're both volatile hearts of delicate situations. I'm happy for them, but they could cause political trouble.

"That's what I'm supposed to say as the M2O executive. As his friend? Life is short. Theirs are almost over. I hope they go for it with everything they've got. This is their last chance to live, to love, so I hope they live hard, like the bloody song. I also hope we live hard, because this is our last chance, too, Efia. I hope we live hard and love hard, so if you want this, let's find a closet and fuck ourselves senseless. If you don't, no hard feelings, but do me the favor of wiping this horrendously embarrassing interaction from your mind."

Efia pauses. A bloated pause. A pause in which I hear the creaking gears of all five worlds squeak around our dying star. "I don't want to forget this," she says, quiet and tentative, a tendril

of sunlight. "And I also don't want to forget you." Another pause. A weighted swing of fate. The hammer hits, and the pendulum breaks. "But no closet, and I don't want to love hard. I want to love gentle. Show me who you are. Rough is easy for you, but I want you soft. If that's too much to ask, I understand."

I wait, delay, ball my fists, then surrender. "It's not too much to ask." *It is. Oh, stars, it fucking is.* "Follow me."

She follows. I lead us through halls to M2O's barracks, then lock the door. Everyone else is still in the arena at the Ball, living hard, but we're here, living gentle. I place her on my bed and lie over her, propped up on my hands. My long legs straddle her short ones, and I try to remember why we shouldn't, why this will hurt tomorrow or sometime soon, why I've avoided warmth for so long, why I've shunned comfort like a curse, but I can't remember, won't remember, so I let whiskey erase regret. No, not regret. I regret nothing about this. It's guilt, because she's pure, and I'm jaded. She's diamond, and I'm coal. I shouldn't be this fucking lucky after everything I've done, but I am.

"Are you sure?" I whisper. My gray-streaked mahogany waves curtain our faces, and it's her and me, just us, just one.

"Got esim," Efia says in Quatic. Take me.

Slow and soft, I slide off her tunic and slip off my toga. Efia opens for me, big and beautiful and blazing flames. I chuckle into her core, deep and throaty, and her answering moan ignites me. We burn in fire and drown in the sea—live on, live hard, live far, live free. When she cries my name, I cry hers. Then everything shatters between us, within us. For this moment, for this infinity, there are no walls, no castles, no cages, no lies. It horrifies me. And it strengthens me. That's what fear is, the oldest coach. It bends then breaks then builds you up again.

LIVE ON, LIVE HARD, LIVE FREE

But I'm still broken, staring into her eyes.
I'm still broken and bent, and I'll never be whole again.

Heyo, Hey, Come and Die With Me

Camroc

"Okay," I say.

"Okay," I say.

We find a utility closet—less than classy, more than I hoped for—then order the guards to wait around the corner. They're sworn to secrecy. If they tell anyone about this, including the queen, Ketra could have them killed. She won't, of course, but they see her mother in her, and that's more than enough to make them behave. But since they're behaving, it's time for the next part. No excuses. No regrets. Fucking stars, I'm so bloody scared.

"I have no idea what I'm doing," I say, the worst pick-up line in history.

But Ketra doesn't mock me. Doesn't scoff and run away. I can be myself with her, messy as that is. "Me neither," she says, "so let's have fun. I don't expect you to be a sex god."

"Good. Set your standards as low as they go."

"Camroc, relax." She cups my jaw and kisses me, ignites me, then whispers, "I want *you*, so give me *you*."

I harden against her and kiss her back—fierce and hungry, a thousand-year-old grudge. "How'd I get so fucking lucky?"

"Because I'm so fucking horny, so drop your pants."

"Yes, Your Lowness."

Raw and nervous, we stumble out of our clothes, laying them on the floor as a makeshift bed—navy, violet, silver, lust. It's dark in the closet. We see each other's silhouettes at first, curves and corners and hints of desire. Then Ketra turns on the light and everything else.

"Holy...bloody...fucking...stars," I breathe.

Ketra shines in the dim light. Her curves flow against darkness, moonlight on a river. She closes her legs, covers her breasts. Vulnerable. *Awkward*. Divine. *Mine*. And I'm hers. All hers. She is cursive; I am clay. She is ice; I am melted. I reach for her, beg for her, need her more than I've needed anything before. Modest and shy, she leans toward me. Her hands rest on my shoulders. She pulls us together, chests hard with passion, skin damp with longing. Our pale and golden-brown limbs entwine. Then she loosens her legs and allows my furious desire to rise between them.

I kiss her, and this kiss is a pledge. This kiss is an oath, a vow, a promise to protect her. No, not to protect her. She doesn't need my protection, but I need hers. This is a promise to *see* her. To always see her, to cause that devilish smile, to make her snort-laugh in public. *You can always trust me.* Belief is in this kiss. Belief and faith and something more, something great. *Too fast. Slow down.* But death has a way of rushing life. With some people, you just know. *You know from hello.* And she is my hello. She is the day I start to live.

BURN THE SUN

Ketra lies on the floor, on our clothes, in this small, dingy closet. I lower myself to my knees, then lean forward and sprawl between her legs, a hand on each thigh. She shuffles down, and I kiss her below. I don't know what I'm doing, but it doesn't matter. Only *this* matters, only us and tonight and my feverish kisses on her core. Within minutes, she grabs my curls, breathes my name, and bucks her hips against my tongue. I crawl up her body, and she yanks my face against hers.

"Take me," she pleads, tears in her eyes. "Take me hard."

"I don't want to hurt you," I say between our lips.

"I want you to hurt me. I want only you to hurt me, Camroc." She reaches between my legs and guides me, shuddering and groaning, toward her hot, wet prayer. Instinct possesses me, and I thrust but remain outside. She's locked. Impatient, she pushes against my painful want. I calm her, stroke her, open her with one finger then two. Slick and scalding, she relaxes as I twist, moans and pleas escaping her lips. *Take me, take me, take*

Slow and gentle, I inch inward. She grips my arms, face flushed with pain and pleasure. Her hands slither around my waist, then she grabs my ass. I slam into her, and we both cry out.

me hard. I trail my fingers from her hips to her breasts, teasing

her nipples with echoed moans, then try again.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry—" I start.

"Shut up. I want this. Do it again."

So I obey. I slide out, slide in, again and again. Tears film her storm-gray eyes. Sweat drenches her starlight hair. But her strength keeps us both going.

"Harder," she says.

"Ketra, I can't—"

"Then get on your back."

Again, I obey. She straddles and sheathes me. Wincing, she rocks her hips—slow, then fast, then fuming. Our thighs slap together, and she tosses her head back—in bliss, in beauty, in unflinching bravery. Her rhythm escalates, and all we feel, all we are, is each other. I sit up. Brace one arm against the floor. Hold her waist with the other. Then I crash into her as she crashes into me.

"Camroc, come for me," she orders, "because I'm coming again, too."

As if I have a choice. She rakes her fingers over my chest, kisses me rough, and we both break. Pleasure racks my body in tides, and I fall against the floor, drowning in ecstasy. Ketra collapses over me, pulsing around me, still inside her. We twitch, moan, surrender together. As the storm retreats, we clutch each other, innocent no more in any way.

"Fuck," she finally says.

"Fuck, indeed," I say.

"That was my first...everything. I never...came before. Too much studying. Too many guards. No privacy."

"Me neither. Too much training, and no privacy, too. I could never let go till you. Was it...good for you?"

Ketra quirks a silver-blonde eyebrow. "Considering the fact that I was howling like a rabid wolf? Yes, Camroc, it was good for me, far too good. What about you?"

"It was...incredible," I say. "Thank you, Ketra."

She laughs. "Are you thanking me for sex? Oh, sweetheart, you're such a softie."

"I know, too much of one."

"What?" She props herself up on my chest and frowns. "No, not too much at all. You're perfect, Camroc. I don't want you any other way."

BURN THE SUN

"Then you're the first." *Stop it. No one cares about your self-pity. Shut up and shut down, like everyone else.* But I'm not everyone else. I never have been.

Ketra kisses me, tender now. "We live in a fucked-up time, a time that turns most people into stone, but not you, Camroc, and that's courage. It's brave to remain soft. It's bold to remain kind. And you're both. You're soft and kind, sensitive and shy. That's what makes you stronger than everyone, because you feel. You believe in a better tomorrow while everyone else pines after yesterday. I know your life has been training to this point, and I know they see you only as a warrior athlete, but I see you as so much more. You're a beautiful person, Camroc. Don't hate the best parts of yourself."

I kiss her back, less tender. "You should be queen. You could raise an army with your words alone."

"Mother will never relinquish the throne, not till she's dead, and she plans on living forever. The sun has other ideas, of course."

Anger boils within me. "I know it's not my place, but I hate how she treats you, Ketra. You deserve better."

Ketra shrugs. "I am already a princess. I have far more than most. Enough politics, though. Teach me something Quatic, another song or dance."

"Hmm," I say, thinking. "Well, I know you like 'Live On.' I could teach you the naughty version."

She widens her eyes in mock-surprise. "Naughty version? You mean Quate isn't filled with pure and innocent souls?"

"We're poor and bored, and innuendoes are free." I wink. "Unless it would offend your royal sensibilities, of course."

"You ravaged my royal sensibilities bloody." She rocks her hips and bites my neck, drawing a hiss. "Teach me." With a dramatic cough, I clear my throat and sing off-key: "So fuck on, fuck on. Fuck hard, fuck me. I'm horny and glum; come and swallow my seed. So fuck on, fuck on. Fuck hard, fuck me. I'm ready to come; fuck me till I bleed."

Ketra snort-laughs till she cries. "So poetic. So subtle."

I laugh with her till alarms blare through the halls. Beneath the closet door, red flashes. *Shit*. Something's wrong. *Something's broken*. Besides me.

"Emergency situation," the intercom announces. "Athletes, return to your barracks. Officials, return to your suites. Civilians, return to your apartments. Lockdown in two minutes."

We scramble to our feet and dress. The door flies open. Guards wait for us—guards for Ketra and guards for me. This is where we part. Again, again, again. I kiss her one last time and whisper in her ear, "Don't forget me."

"Don't forget yourself," Ketra whispers back. Then she's gone. We're gone. Anything we tried to have is gone, gone, gone.

* * *

I'm the last one back to the Quatic team's barracks. The door shuts behind me, and lockdown begins.

"Cam, thank the stars," Nyo says. Ze wraps me in a hug.

"Were you with Ketra?" Arada asks, hugging me, too. "Is she okay? Are you okay?"

"Fine, she's fine, I'm fine," I say, flustered. "What's going on?" Neither answers. That's when I notice tears in their eyes.

"What happened?" I ask.

Nyo points at Coach, who's crying, too, whose edges blur, whose anguish splotches his face, tall yet small and broken.

Everyone quiets to listen to him, to anchor against his strength. But his bark is a whimper, and his power evaporates.

"Tonight..." he starts, then stops. Red rims his hazel eyes. His gray hair clumps in tufts, as if he tried to rip out his thoughts, his memories, his very mind. *Take it. Erase it. Leave it all behind.* He scrubs his russet face, breathes, and tries again. "Tonight, you lost a brother. Tonight, I lost a son. You are all..." His voice cracks. "Losing a child is the worst thing that can happen to someone, and you are all my children. I view you as my own, better than blood, and I always have. Though I'm tough on you, I hope you all know how much I love you, how far I'd go for you, how hard I'd fight for you. I hope he knew that, too."

His stocky frame collapses. He sinks to a bed, head in his hands. Tears drip between his fingers onto the indifferent metal floor, tinny and foreboding. "Yelir...is dead. We don't know who did it, and we don't know why, but he's gone. He's gone forever, and he's never coming back."

Grief strikes me. Fists. Clubs. Brick walls and airtrucks. *Yelir's gone.* Someone killed him. And I didn't notice his absence till now. I was so absorbed in Ketra, in me, that I didn't notice my missing brother. We lost a sibling tonight, and the rest of us fall down. We brace on beds, leaking tears, bleeding sorrow. Who did this? Who tore out our hearts and charred them to ash? I want to kill the worlds. I want to burn the sun. Though I didn't know Yelir well, he was always one of us, and he was always family.

Coach was close with Yelir, as he is with us all. Other coaches are slippery, abusive, but Racso has always been our surrogate father. Sure, he's gruff, but with a kind undertow. Now, he's devastated. Destroyed. Damaged beyond repair. He turns to me and brands me with Yelir's soul. "Your Trials' score is next.

Camroc, you're on the team."

Panic lashes me, whips of fear. No. No. Not me. I let go. The judges chose Yelir. He was better. The right choice. Now, he's gone. And I'm here. Though I made peace with failure, I'm not ready to fly. Pressure smothers me. Horror buckles my limbs. I can't breathe, can't think, can't move, can't flee. Hell has no freedom. Heat flashes through me, then chills, then ice. I tremble, sweat, choke, gag. Pain webs my chest, then my gut. Cramps. Nausea. Tremors. Terror. My heart pounds, a splintered drum, faster and harder, a train off its track. Dread's noose strangles me, and knives pierce my skull. I'm numb, dizzy, tingling, faint. Fall. I fall. Break. I break.

"Breathe, Cam," Nyo says.

I try to breathe. Can't. *Doom.* Danger. *Death.* We're all gonna die. Yelir already did. No control. No escape. Nothing is real except chaos and grief.

"Breathe," Nyo says again. Arada rubs my back. Coach kneels before me. When did he move? Or did I move? Did we all move to hell, or were we here all along? My world is the three of them, the four of us. Ronoc, Evam, and Trebor weep in a different corner. They abandoned Yelir when he needed them, and they abandon me now. Fuck them. Fuck me. Fuck the sun. Let me free.

"Breathe," Coach says. Conditioned to obey him, muscle memory possesses me, decades of training kick in, and I breathe. "Count." I count. "Relax." I can't. "You are in control." I'm nowhere close. "Breathe." Again, I breathe. "Count." Again, I count. "Relax." Panic and pain fade a touch. "You are in control." The noose loosens. "Breathe." I breathe deep. "Count." I count slow. "Relax." I sink back to Starstop, to this damned space station around a cursed star. "You are in control."

It's real. Yelir is gone. I am on the team. Realization hits worse than grief. "I can't do this," I sob. "Pick someone else. This is not me."

"Sometimes, the stars need us to become someone we're not," Coach says, voice low and soft. "Sometimes, we must change. Sometimes, we must fly. Sometimes, we must become strong enough to lift those who cannot lift themselves. So grow some bloody wings, Camroc, because I *know* you can do this. I have always known, and I have never doubted you, not for one fucking second. You are so much more than what you believe. This is your second chance. Not everyone gets one, but you deserve one, and this is it. You are your own worst enemy, so conquer yourself first, then conquer everything else. And I am *always* here for you."

"As am I," Nyo says.

"Me, too," Arada says. "We need you, Cam."

Something clicks inside me. They need me. They've always needed me. It's not what I want, what I fear, but where I'm needed that matters. And I'm needed here. I can make a difference here. This is my purpose, my meaning, my choice. Before, Quate chose me, but now, I choose Quate. I choose this. I am this. I will not let you down again. Fear retreats, then panic, too. Yelir will not die in vain. He will spawn my wings. Grief will set me free.

As Coach said, I must change, I must fly, I must step up to honor Yelir's memory—and I must honor my world's memory as well. Even if we don't win, honor is victory, too. I trained, failed, fell, broke. Yes, I was relieved. After Trials, I accepted the fall and drew comfort from defeat's release. Not anymore. I welcome the pressure, the stress, the soul-crippling tension. I accept this purpose and meaning. This is my second chance,

my second life. I promise. I commit.

"Okay," I say. "For Yelir. For Quate."

"For family," Coach says.

"For family," Nyo and Arada repeat.

"Now, find Ketra," Coach says. "Don't act confused. I know about her, and I know Bazi covered for you."

"I'm sorry," I say. "It won't happen again—"

He holds up his hand, and I clamp my mouth shut. "You need her, and she needs you. Keep her close. Moving forward, you will need as many people to support you as possible. This is not an easy journey, but it is also not impossible. People make life worth the pain. So go. But return soon. We need you, too."

Tears fill my eyes. Again, again, again. "Thank you, Coach." I turn to my teammates, to my family. "Thank you all for everything." I hug Nyo and Arada, and they kiss my cheeks. Lockdown lifts minutes after it started. Quate's corpses garner little safety and less sympathy.

"Go," Nyo says.

"Kiss her for me," Arada says.

I roll my eyes, then smile, then go, then leave for a moment, for an infinity, for a brief, fleeting dance on the edge of the breach.

14

Today Lives Between Broken Yesterdays and Strange Tomorrows

Ketra

elir is dead. Camroc is on the Quatic team.

Mother repeats those words to me twice. Repetition makes her unhappy. She calls me dull and inattentive. There were times she called me worse. Thrill rises inside me. This is right. But Yelir was family to Camroc, and someone killed him. The first assassination, though not the last.

"Today lives between broken yesterdays and strange tomorrows," Mother says. "Yelir was a broken yesterday, and Camroc will be a strange tomorrow."

I nod. I must. Mother leaves. Thank the stars. A guard approaches a minute after her exit and motions toward the suite's door.

"Your Highness," the guard says, "lockdown has lifted, and you have a visitor."

"A visitor?" I ask.

"Yes, Princess. I assumed you'd wish to wait till after the queen's exit, stars bless her soul."

Camroc. "Let him in. And please keep this between us."

"Of course, Your Highness."

The door opens. Camroc enters. Tears stain his face. Grief knots his forehead, and anguish spiders his limbs. But he's here. He's alive. Rushing forward, he collapses against me.

"Yelir's gone," Camroc weeps into my hair. "I'm on the team." "I know." I rub his back, taut with stress, with an unbearable burden.

"Tell me I can do this, Ketra. Fucking stars, tell me I'm not going insane."

"You can't go insane if you're already insane."

Camroc chuckles against my forehead and kisses me. He bleeds into this kiss, soft and unsteady. I catch him, remember him inside me, over and under me, firm yet gentle, golden and glowing, all planes and corners and blades. His body is a statue from training, but it hasn't hardened his heart—not yet.

"The worlds think I'm weak," he says. "My placement leaked on PicTic, and everyone thinks I'm weak."

"Camroc, you're not weak," I say. "You're gentle, and you feel too much. The worlds don't understand you; they never will. But they have no power over you. Only you have power over yourself. They can't take that away from you. Live on. Live hard. Live free. Don't let them shake you, or get to you, or make you smaller than you are. Fight for your people, for yourself, for Yelir's memory. Fight for a kinder future, and fight for me. Bring my memory to a strange new tomorrow."

"I can't do this without you," Camroc says. "If we win, I'll lose you."

"You'll never lose me. We are the people we love, forever."

"Love?"

"Love. I love you, Camroc. I know it's fast, and I know it's soon, but—"

"I love you, too, Ketra. Always have. But I don't deserve you, and I don't deserve this. Death earned me that spot, not skill."

"You deserve the stars. And may Yelir rest in peace, but it always should have been you. Trials rocked you, but this is where you belong. One thing at a time. Focus on the Games. Give them your all. Everything else will fall into place."

"Don't leave me," he whispers in my ear.

"If anything, *you* will leave *me*," I say. "But like I said, one thing at a time. Don't think about the future. Think about now. You should head back to your barracks. Your team needs you. But I'm always here, Camroc. Always. I promise."

"Thank you." He pulls me close, ties us together with flesh and tears. "I wish I didn't need you, but I do, Ketra. Stars, I fucking need you so bad."

"I need you, too, as bad, so take me again before everything falls apart."

His eyes spark with lust, and something more. "Here?" "Here."

No more pause. No more hesitation. Clothes flutter to the ground, petals plucked from dew-dropped roses. I bend over the bed, and he curls behind me. Clenched sheets. Crumpled quilts. Pillow-muffled gasps and cries. He pounds into me, and I push against him, and it hurts, and it burns, and it's beautiful and bright. I jump first; he jumps next. Rise. *Rise far.* Fall. *Fall hard.* We collide and cling to each other through fear. *Panic.* He's on the team. *Horror.* One or both of us will die.

But not yet. Not now. Now, we tangle, cradle each other. We are safe. We are here. And we stretch now into eternity.

Death Is Full of Stars

Allebazi

Starstop observatory. Dying sun. Bleeding stars. Weeping flesh and crying souls. One is ash. Red washes the feeble gathering. They stand near the dome's edge, before a bench. Black mourning shawls wing their shoulders: Coach Racso, Nyo, Arada, and Camroc. The alternates aren't here; they abandon their team. Someone, some world, assassinated Yelir. For security, only Quate is here, plus me and Efia. Though Efia is Quatic, so she belongs, too.

As a Tertian, I keep my distance. Personally, I'm here for Camroc. Professionally, I'm here to show M2O's support in the wake of tragedy. That's why I offered my company to host this funeral, despite backlash and bias. Media aren't supposed to show preference, but fuck that. If I'm gonna die, I'm gonna die human. The Games save nothing if the survivors lose compassion. I care for Camroc. I hurt for Quate. So I'm here. M2O's here. And we'll be here till the charred, bitter end.

I check my cell. PicTic explodes with assassination headlines, criminal speculation, and rising political tensions. The Olympic Ball still rages on elsewhere—the Games stop for no one—but it's quiet here. Calm here. A broken family and a newborn ghost.

Efia officiates. She stands over Yelir's memorial plaque on the bench, his ashes inside, and reads from Scripture. "The stars are our sanctuary, our refuge and strength. Have mercy on us, Mother Suns, for in you we seek shelter. Shield us with your fiery wings till shadows melt before our moons."

Camroc shudders. His back trembles with stifled sobs. Nyo reaches over and steadies him, zes arm upon his shoulder. Arada rests her head on Camroc's other shoulder, and Racso hugs his team—a bear, a guard, a shield, their wings.

"Though we walk through night-soaked valleys," Efia says, "we fear no evil, for you are beside us. Blessed are those who fly among you, for they will know love, for they will know peace. Peace we leave you. Peace we give you. Peace we rest in. May Yelir rest in peace. May his heart take flight. May his soul soar. May his shadows sleep. May his ashes free him. May his memory always be a blessing."

"May his memory always be a blessing," the Quatic team repeats in tear-fogged echo.

"Mother Suns, keep him." Mother Suns, keep him. "Mother Suns, shield him." Mother Suns, shield him. "Mother Suns, love him." Mother Suns, love him. "Mother Suns, comfort him." Mother Suns, comfort him. "Mother Suns, bring him peace." Mother Suns, bring him peace."

Camroc staggers. Nyo catches him. Coach clutches them together, the crooked spine. He holds them up, as he has their whole lives.

DEATH IS FULL OF STARS

"Tonight, we pray for Yelir," Efia continues. "Let our tears lift his spirit. Let our prayers guide him home. Circle us, stars. Keep hope near. Circle us, moons. Keep peace here. Long may his fire burn."

A sob-misted reply: "Long may his fire burn."

"Time is a wheel. It never stops, never ends. We will see Yelir again. Till we do, may the stars hold him in their hands. He lives on in our hearts, in our memories, in our souls, so lose not heart, for that is his home. He is not gone. Death is full of stars. For he is a star now, in a different sky—one with life, one with time. Spare him the fall, and grant him wings. Long may his fire burn."

A weeping whisper: "Long may his fire burn."

"Yelir's life is a scar, but his death is a star. Let pain we suffer become power we remember. Fate has a plan for us all. When our time comes, let us join his soul. Let his legacy live on through us, within us. Live and let live. Die and let die. Mother Suns, give us the grace to surrender and the glory to shine. Long may his fire burn."

A rasping rustle: "Long may his fire burn."

"May Quate remember her son in her hills and valleys. May moors sigh his name, and may lakes mirror his memory. May the wind sing his song, our song, a song older than a people and stronger than a planet."

With a sweeping breath, they sing "Fly On" in response, Quate's funeral version of "Live on," a song that's conquered time.

"So fly on," Efia sings. Fly on, the Quatic team responds. "Fly far." Fly free. "You're ready to run." Join the stars for me. "So fly on." Fly on. "Fly far." Fly free. "Go and burn the sun." Fly on. Grow wings.

BURN THE SUN

Tears rain from every eye. Backs crack beneath grief's lashes while legs wobble with anguish.

"Heyo, fly high," Efia sings on. *Heyo, fly far*, the team replies. "Heyo, fly free." *Heyo, hey, you live in my heart.*

Sobs bubble beneath the service, and Efia chokes out, "So let it be."

"So let it be," the team responds.

"Nals, Yelir," Camroc says, voice tight. Goodbye. "Og iannaebm an iatlaer uht." May the stars bless you.

The service ends. The people stay. They each touch Yelir's plaque and murmur a memory, a blessing, a prayer. Efia wanders toward me, wiping her eyes, and breathes deep, centering herself. Guards watch us from shadows. Their presence reminds us of the constant danger, the faithful threats to all our lives.

"That was...perfect," I say. "Thank you for doing that for Quate, for Camroc."

Efia shakes her head. "I read Scripture. Nothing fancy. Nothing groundbreaking."

"The way you read was both. I've never heard words said in that way, like they were precious, like they were loved. It was art, Efia. True and stunning art." Shut up. Stress-bake cupcakes. Go back to crude yesterdays and abrasive befores. Too tired to try. Too hurt to lie.

"You're scary when you're nice," Efia says, tearing me from worry.

Well, you wanted me soft, so here I am, melted. But I can't say that or any of my lust-smeared thoughts. Yes, we fucked, but the sun's still dying, and the worlds are still turning, and the Games are still tomorrow. Tomorrow. Everything starts and ends tomorrow. In public, Efia and I must remain strangers,

DEATH IS FULL OF STARS

because we are strangers. We're from different worlds, and we live different lives. Even if I burn for her hotter than ever, even if that fire is cruel and angry and vicious, we must live and die apart.

"This must be hard for them," I say, pointing at Camroc and his team, shifting attention from us to them. "Quate is a family, more so than the other worlds. They grew up together, and they care for each other. With three alternates now, they're at a disadvantage. The other teams have four, and the Games will be brutal."

"Can they get a replacement?" Efia asks.

"No one else completed the rigorous training. There were seven athletes, because only seven could pass all tests. They're the absolute best. That's why they're here. I hope six is enough, though I doubt we'll win."

"We?"

"I mean they. But Camroc is like family. If he survives, I survive, too."

"That's adorable!" Efia exclaims.

"No one's called me adorable before, so let's not start with that unpleasantry now."

"There you are."

"Bazi the bitch?"

Efia flares pink. "No, no, no, I didn't mean—"

"Chill, kid. I know it and own it." I glance around, make sure no one's listening, then say, "Who are the suspects?"

"The Council has released no names."

"And they won't, because they don't care. Use that brain juice and think. The judges singled out Quate by taking longer to decide their scores and lead placements. That put Quate in the spotlight, making them a target. Who stood to gain from this?"

BURN THE SUN

Efia chews her lip, and I ignore the oil-glazed flames between us. "Not Prime."

"Why not?" I ask.

"No motivation. They're already the best. They gain nothing from kicking an underdog while they're down. And Dictator Ribaj is beloved. I doubt he'd tarnish his reputation right before the Games."

"Good. What about the rest?"

"Dion is peaceful. They have a chance of winning, too. No incentive to target what's beneath them. Tertia is tricky—no offense. There was that whole Maker debacle, but they didn't take preemptive action then, so I doubt they would now. They're too impulsive to plan ahead. Anarchy thrives on spontaneity. I doubt it was them. That leaves Quin."

"And Quate."

Efia's blue eyes widen. "They'd do this to themselves?"

I shrug. "These are desperate times."

"But who would want to kill Yelir?"

"Wrong question. Who would want Camroc on the team?"

Realization strikes her. "You think it's one of them." She eyes the grieving team. "No, they wouldn't...would they? You think they'd kill their own family?"

"I don't know what I think, but we can't rule anyone out."

"Queen Ora. She organized the...well, you know."

The attack against Ketra. I don't want to be in this web, spinning secrets, but there are too many spiders at play, and we're stuck in the strings. Behave. Keep the peace. Keep the bloody fucking peace.

"No, it wasn't her," Efia adds. "Ora did that to gain sympathy for Quin. She wouldn't risk losing that sympathy or throwing that sympathy toward Quate. This tragedy steals her spotlight.

DEATH IS FULL OF STARS

She didn't orchestrate this. That leaves...Quate."

"I agree."

My assistant pauses. "Bazi, if word gets out that Quin and Quate attacked themselves, the implications are catastrophic."

"That's why word won't get out," I say. "This conversation ends here, between us. The Council doesn't care about their underdog worlds—hence why they're underdogs. And the worlds are focused on the Games. No one needs to know."

"Except us. Why?"

"As I said, Camroc is like family, and family protects each other. Family watches each other's backs when no one else will, and no one else will right now. Someone wanted him on the team badly enough to assassinate Yelir, one of their own. What if that someone doesn't want him on the team anymore? He's in danger."

"Then who did this?" Efia asks.

"Not the alternates," I say. "They don't care about Camroc, and with the assassination, they're still not leads. That leaves Coach Racso, Nyo, and Arada."

"And Camroc."

"It wasn't Camroc."

"You said yourself that we can't rule anyone out. He stood the most to gain, and now, he's on the team."

Damn her. Anger simmers in my throat, teasing acid, raising bile, but I hold my tongue. "It wasn't him."

"You can't know that," Efia says.

"I can, and I do. He was relieved after Trials. He wanted to fail. Pressure was suffocating him, and failure felt like escape."

"Yet now, he commits."

"To honor Yelir's memory. It still terrifies him. If there were another option, he'd take it in a heartbeat. Hell, he'd resurrect Yelir if he could, but he can't, so he commits and chooses for Quate, for family. I know him, Efia. Camroc wouldn't do this. He'd kill himself before killing anyone else, and he misses the relief of being an alternate. He's self-sacrificial, too much so, always compromising himself to appease others."

Efia inhales uncertainty, then exhales suspicion. "I don't know him, but I know you, Bazi, and I trust you. If you say he didn't do this, then I believe he didn't do this. So you're right, that leaves Coach Racso, Nyo, and Arada."

"And Esrioas," I say, remembering, "the Speaker of the Houses. Though I doubt it was her. She's too focused on what she terms 'Quate's Maker infestation' to give much mind to the Games. Magic has distracted her. No, it wasn't her, and it wasn't Racso. He's the closest thing they have to a father. Like Camroc, he's self-sacrificial, and he'd do anything for his team. If his actions led to an athlete's death, he'd kill himself in punishment. It's Nyo or Arada."

"Yes, and they'd do anything for him." *Do anything. Kill anyone.*

"Shit. Oh, shit."

"Yep, mega shit."

Efia faces the bleeding sun and swears in Quatic under her breath. Scarlet fingers creep over her bronze skin. She tugs her orange curls, understanding. "No one can ever know."

"And no one will." I eye the Quatic team as they move from grief to glory. "The Council will rule it an overdose. Alcohol poisoning because of the Ball. They'll sweep it aside, and the Games will go on. The Games *must* go on. They're our last hope. Our only shot. And now, Quate might win. They have a chance, because of Camroc, because of the change in him.

DEATH IS FULL OF STARS

Yelir's death was the push he needed. Whoever did this knew that."

"Between us, do you think it was Nyo or Arada?" she asks.

"Doesn't matter. Either would destroy Cam."

Camroc waves, and I wave back but keep my distance. He's on the team now. He must fight, after all. I wish there were ceremonies surrounding him, but he prefers it this way. I know him too well. We all end up where we're needed in the end, and he's needed here with them.

Coach leads Camroc, Nyo, and Arada away, the four of them bonding, then bantering, then healing as a family. Efia leaves, too, after I order her to cover the Quatic news. *You may choose your battles wisely, but you can never choose your war.* That's what this is now, a bloody war.

I glare one last time at the crimson sun. Her flames lick the indigo sky. Save me. Help me. I don't want to die. Neither do I. And neither does he. A cloaked figure in the corner of my eye. Near the bench. Over the plaque. Molding metal with magic. A Maker. A human being. He sees me. I see him. We freeze. Nod. Truce. Peace. If you let me go, I'll let you go, too. He gestures toward the plaque, then flees.

In his wake, I study his work. A knot. The Quatic Knot. The symbol for their people, an ancient blessing and a powerful prayer. It ripples the plaque's top. In its shape live a thousand words: Sleep well, my son. Mother Quate sees you. Mother Quate blesses you. Life is short, and death is long. You're home now. You're free. Burn the sun, and find your peace.

16

Carry a Torch, and Let the Games Begin

Camroc

et the Games begin," the announcer booms.
On the podium, Nyo and Arada stand tall beside me, with Coach behind us. We wave alongside the other teams at the feverish audience in the arena. The crowd is wild and wrought, hyper and hysterical. Today is the Opening Ceremony. Today, the Games begin. The end begins, too. One world will survive. One people will carry on. The rest will die. *Die.* Gone. Like Yelir. *You cheated your way here.* No. *No.* I wish he were alive, but in his wake, I carry his flame.

"Welcome. Abahram. Natubmas. Otunevneb. Etliaf. Aolutevret." Greetings in Common, Priman, Dionese, Tertian, Quatic, Quinish. Our anthems play together, dissonant and deadly, as alternates hoist our flags: orange, green, yellow, blue, violet. They're solid. Blank. No symbols or words. Wash it all away. Erase us. Erase this place.

"Anikrab," the announcer says in Priman. Bless us. The desert world's military marches in rhythms and patterns. Stomp. Turn. Salute. Bow. Their rich and rigid culture thrums through the troops, hooded and ironed but no weapons. No one's armed, except the guards, to keep the peace. War. Yelir, brother, rest in peace.

Next, Dion. "Halitakreb imak." Bless us. Dancers mimic the jungle's plants and animals. Tropical life prints their bikinis and trunks. I recognize none. They're exotic, or I am, or we all are, on this second system around this second sun in this second life, second choice, second chance. The dancers sway, their limbs water, and end their performance with a pyramid that collapses. We rise. We fall. We are oceans of land and sky.

Third, Tertia. "Icicideneb." Bless us. A choir improvises over an ancient Earth melody. Al allets oro'd allirb lus eram. On the sea glitters the gold star. Their beaded togas bounce in rhythm, in remembered cypress and olive breezes. Al etton animmac a issap itnasep. The night walks with heavy steps. They're poor yet free, and add a complicated clap. Icatrop onatnol. Carry us far. Harmony boosts melody. The song widens, strengthens, then bursts. The final chord rings through the arena, slicing the crowd into tears.

Now, Quate. "Hgiannaeb nnis." Bless us. Candles wreathe the step dance, flicker with rippling shawls, sputter under twirling arms. We are hills and valleys and lakes. We are home. Home. Yet a stranger. Unknown. This is a civilian tribute, and I was never a civilian, was never normal or free. But they are free. They are Quatic. These are my people, my strangers, I must fight to release.

Last, Quin. "Aanuis atiem." Bless us. Ketra's people. They sculpt ice into swords and spar till they melt. Eet atsunim esa.

Make me a weapon. Furs rip with dying swords. Parkas tear with parries. Blood leaks from wounds, used as paint to mark victors' eyes. But medscanners don't heal gashes till the chant stops. Quin is a strict and vicious world. A frozen tundra. A dead and devastated place. Ketra doesn't belong with her legacy.

"May the stars bless you," the announcer says. May the stars bless you, the crowd rumbles in response. We are a tidal wave. A waterfall. A cliff dropping into the sea. Gone. Gone forever like me. "Scripture teaches us two things: fear and hope. Some would call them the same, the threat and desire for something greater, something more. A wish for safety, a prayer for peace. We live on different worlds, and only one of those worlds will survive. Yet we are one people, and our people will survive. The stars are our sanctuary, our refuge and strength. We will persist. We will prevail. Freedom is in our hearts. And then, in the end, in the cold fist of fate, the light of a thousand suns will spark across time. You are those suns. Your souls are their light. Even gone, you will shine on."

The announcer rambles on in Scripture-punctuated starshit. I drift away, scan the crowd, ground myself here and now. I find Bazi with Efia, tapping on tablets, posting to PicTic. Then I spot Queen Ora with Princess Ketra, stifling her with judgment and guards. Fury threads through me. That is not her. That docile, compliant, dutiful woman is not my Ketra. She bows to Ora, but Ora should bow to her.

Nyo follows my gaze toward the Quinish throne. "All will right itself," ze whispers beside me.

"If it doesn't," Arada adds, "we can right it ourselves after the Games."

"Ri-ri, we've talked about this."

"I know, I know. No pranks on Starstop. I'll keep my laxative

tea to myself...for now."

"There's this wonderful cerebral device called a filter."

"Don't make me call my podiatrist."

"What?" Nyo asks, confused.

"My podiatrist...to get my foot out of your ass...because I kicked it," Arada explains, then huffs in annoyance. "A podiatrist is a foot doctor."

"I know what a podiatrist is. Are you insinuating that my ass is so firm and exquisite that you'd break your foot trying to kick it?"

I snort and smooth my face. The worlds are watching.

"If you two don't shut up," Coach says, "you'll both need a proctologist."

"A what?" Arada says.

"An ass doctor, because you won't be walking after I kick yours."

"Well done, Coach," Nyo says.

"Zip it."

Giggling, nervous, we straighten and face the announcer. Athlete introductions have started. "Representing Prime, welcome Ila, Ramo, and Daas." Roaring applause. "Representing Dion, welcome Zifa, Razag, and Maasib." Thunder. Rain. Crackling lightning. "Representing Tertia, welcome Ocram, Aifos, and Eleda." Weaker acclaim, but still respectful and polite.

"Representing Quate, welcome Nyo, Arada, and..." The announcer reads a tablet where my name replaces Yelir's ghost. "...and Camroc." Silence. A splatter of fragile applause. No respect or honor. *Not yet.* Ketra claps loudest, though Ora scolds her. The princess lifts me from darkness to grow flame-feathered wings.

"Last, representing Quin," the announcer continues, "wel-

come Isrik, Ekris, and Kire." Deafening applause. An ovation. Shouts. Filled with fear. Heavy with horror. The queen paid for their support and threatened to chop off their tongues if they didn't cheer. So they cheer. They howl. They scream for Quin. But Ketra remains silent and catches my eye. Live on. Live hard. Live free. Fight for your people, for Yelir's memory. Fight for a kinder future, and fight for me. I'm strong enough now. Brave enough now. Powerful enough to greet the future with fire and fists.

"We are here, because we bled before," the announcer says, tying a knot. Closing remarks quiet the crowd. It's the end of the beginning of the end. "We are here, because we lived before, died before, survived before. Yes, we are good at dying, but we are better at surviving, and we have survived again and again. Over millennia, strewn across two solar systems and six different worlds, we have survived on Earth, Prime, Dion, Tertia, Quate, and Quin. Death chases us. *Death is your oldest friend. He will always return at the end.* So as death returns, we must run again, but this time, we must run faster and farther. We must run till we grow wings to flee these ghost worlds. Bring everything that defines us: ambition and freedom. Take everything that made us: grief and glory. See our people to a new home, our third home. We must set them free.

"There hasn't been an Olympic Games in three thousand years, but Earth hosted many. We honor our ancestors with this tribute now. Millennia ago, Earth died. Its climate withered, shadows in the night. Now, our five new worlds will die as well. As our second sun nears supernova, our seedship can only save one world. We have thrived here. We have grown. But fate will prune us again before we can flourish. The winning colony will escape this grave. This worthy world will carry humanity's

legacy to our third home, as Council Administrator Aya carries this torch now"

The Administrator parades through the arena, flanked by guards. Graceful and elegant, she lifts the torch above her head. She is supposed to be neutral, but no one is unbiased. The Olympic torchbearer is Priman, and that sends a message, a boast: We will win. Die in peace. But the Games aren't over yet.

Aya lowers the torch into a central cauldron. Fireworks burst behind the podium. *Orange, green, yellow, blue, violet. Prime, Dion, Tertia, Quate, Quin.* Fiery flowers. Soon nothing, soon gone. Fear's monster snarls within me. Fangs snap. Claws rip. Muscled arms squeeze my chest. *Pressure, stress, you are worse than the rest.* The old, sweltering forge yawns open in my mind. Gold, silver, and bronze medals melt down my throat. One hundred, fifty, twenty-five points of suffocation. *You will fail. Lose. Suffer. Die. You will kill them all.* Dread spears me. *You are not enough. You deserve nothing and no one.* No. *No. I am* enough for this, and I *do* deserve this. I won't return to that magmatic prison, won't boil beneath lava again.

Closing my eyes, I unsheathe the sword from my throat. Gold, silver, bronze, blood. Trickling red, I sever my past. I am not that person anymore. Panic's echo shrieks through my soul. You need the chains; they anchor you. You need the cage; it steadies you. Without chains and cages, you'll drown beneath chaos. Again, fear beckons. Use it. Fear is a beast we must train, not ignore. Left wild, it will turn feral, rabid, and then I will lose everything. Never again. Nyo and Arada are my family, my home, and Ketra is my heart. Fight for them. I will. Win for them. I might.

My gunmetal uniform tightens, strangles, constricts each breath and pump of steaming blood. *I can do this. I will do this. There is one way free, and it's us, it's me.* Blue stripes brand my

arms and legs. "Camroc" marks my front, and "Quate" marks my back. I am a person, a planet, a warrior, a world. Fireworks fade. Candles gutter. The torch smokes, dead and gone. The Games have begun.

I have begun, too.

17

Make Me a Monster, and I'll Make You the Same

Ketra

e's beautiful.
Atop the podium, Camroc's ruby curls flash with fireworks as the Opening Ceremony ends. His uniform hugs his golden, broad figure, and he stands proud. Brave. *Ready*. He's ready.

Yelir's death changed him. He commits now, pledges himself to the Games, to his world, and I pray this promise won't break him. *Mother Suns, have mercy.* They won't. Mother mirrors their image. She watches me, disappointed, as usual. I ignore her, unfazed, because I changed, too. And Ora hates change more than she hates Makers, the changers, the symbol for chaos, the enemy of control.

"Salute our athletes," Mother orders.

I salute, a puppet, but I cut my own strings. The arena thunders, a storm from every world. Guards usher athletes

to shelter. The audience oozes through exits, restless and relentless. We pour into corridors, along Starstop's arteries, but a scream, then another, whips through the crowd. Guards surround Mother and me, a wall of bodies, a human shield. We can't move. The crowd thickens. A nest of fear and panic imprisons us. Feel our bars. Suffer our pain. Freedom is borrowed. Avenge us. Liberate.

"Stay calm," Mother says.

"I am calm," I say.

"Then you are a fool. There is static in the air."

Static. Makers. My hair stands on end. They're here.

"Make me a monster, and I'll Make you the same," a woman's deep voice proclaims. It's what the father Maker said before he slit his throat to distract the guards, to save his daughter's life. "To them, we are monsters. To us, they are monsters. We see what we want to see, but we are the same. We live the same, die the same, yet they shun us. They refuse us. They tell us we can't play their Games and damn us to die. On Quin, they kill us at birth. On Tertia, they sell us out. They call our power violence and label us as dangerous when they are the ones who slay our infants in the night."

Protest sings through halls. Rallies to fight. Calls for change. We are all trapped together in rage.

"Get us out of here," Mother snaps, her usual iron gone.

Genuine terror twitches her pale face while guards search for escape, but there is none. We're stuck. Confined. Caged by hate. People bristle, forcing us toward the crowd's front.

The Maker speaker stands on a chair before a window. She is a silhouette, a shadow, a human cut from stars. Our dying sun haloes her in red, bathes her in blood, as she opens her palm to Make a megaphone from thin air. Cries rise as she lifts the amplifier to her lips.

"Let them hate us," she booms. "Let them hurt us. There is no peace without pain. No success without struggle. No freedom without fear. Rise up, and we all grow wings. No one is coming to save us. We are our own heroes. There is magic in our bones. You are a miracle, blessed and sacred. Be thankful for who you are, for what you have, for why you're here. Don't let their hatred make you hate yourself. Love yourself so hard that love becomes a shield for yourself, for our family. The Council separates us, because community is the greatest power. Help yourself to help our people. What hurts one, hurts all, so heal all together. You are beautiful and strong. Our souls are an empire, and this is our legacy."

Mother finger-combs her silver-blonde hair—smooth, untangle, unravel, unwind. Her skin blanches, ashen and sickly, while power thrums around us. Static buzzes, dragonflies in the air, as Makers cast off their shadows. I hear the silent, and I see the invisible. The speaker spots me, notices the crown, but I nod and she nods back. Mother pinches me. Let her hurt me. Let her hate me. This is right. *Let them speak*.

"We are alive," the Maker says into her megaphone. "We have survived. As survivors, we have a duty to our descendants to conquer cruelty, to defeat discrimination, to triumph over bigotry so our children will not suffer the same. Prejudice is the beginning of a generational prison. Release demands sacrifice. Justice demands strength. Panic paves the path to freedom, but we must walk on, climb up, win it, and seize it again, again, again. Because freedom yields peace. Let the future remember our wings. Let history remember our fangs. We are strong together. Brave together. Bold and kind and proud together. Fear is our friend. Pain is our heritage. If fear and pain walk

beside us, then we are walking in the right direction."

Cheers breach corridors. Shouts ring through halls. Mother hisses something about "despicable behavior" and "stealing athletes' thunder." I block her out and let them in.

"Change is a revolution," the speaker continues. "It does not happen in one night but over many. If you do not stand, they will stand on top of you. If you do not speak, they will speak over you. Silence is surrender. Protect each other. Save each other. Together, we can fly on, fly high, fly far, fly free. Burn the sun, and find your peace."

More cheers. Shouts. Blood-curdling power. Our guards find an exit, and roars fade behind us as we retreat.

"Unacceptable," Mother says when we reach our suite. "They're dangerous. Weapons playing victims. Vile and repulsive, if you ask me."

No one asked you, and that's why you're pissed. Makers are a minority. Magic is marginalized. They evolved into these beautiful creatures, and we persecute their beauty. It's wrong, pure and simple.

"Not all dangerous things are weapons," I say. "Blades can both break and build. Fire can both burn and warm. Weapons are only tools in the wrong hands."

"And their hands can turn thought energy into matter," Mother says, clicking her tongue. "You are naive. Worse, you are hopeful. They staged a civil-rights protest after the Opening Ceremony at the first Olympic Games in three thousand years. That is a threat, Ketra, nothing more. We do not let them play, so they call our precautions 'prejudice.' Makers look like us. They hide in plain sight. They can think anything into existence. That is fatal."

"Not anything. It takes immense energy to Make. Few are

powerful enough to consistently create, and power does not equal violence. It's about choice, and they deserve a choice. They've lived here as long as we have. Earth detected the first Makers during her last days, and they may have existed before in secret. Hell, they could have existed as long as we have. They are an extraordinary evolution. We are doing ourselves a disservice by judging them as a whole based on isolated accidents. A few Made weapons in self-defense or in desperation, so the rest now carry a terrible stigma. A people is not a person."

Mother seethes with rage and false supremacy. "You researched them, and you saw what you wanted to see, found what you wanted to find. Activism is for civilians. Let the Makers fight their own battles. We have a war to win."

"The Games are not a war."

"You are frail, Ketra. Do not let the worlds see you this way. Chin up, shoulders back. Pretend you are more than my unruly pet."

Fuming, I spit, "I am not your pet."

"You bite when cornered. You are an animal, nothing more."

"Keep treating me this way, and I'll become a beast."

Mother scoffs. "Stop, Ketra. Self-righteous doesn't look good on you."

"You wear it worse," I snap, but doubt creeps in. Doubt always creeps in when it comes to her. Ora plants uncertainty in my veins, waters it with insults, coaxes it to grow into insecurity, anxiety, weakness—

No. I am not weak. I will tear her cursed weeds out by their roots, no matter the fear, no matter the pain. Fear is our friend. Pain is our heritage. If fear and pain walk beside us, then we are walking in the right direction. The Maker spoke truth. This is the right direction: away from Mother, toward the future. If I die,

I die with wings. Let the future remember our wings. Let history remember our fangs. So I bare my fangs.

"Sit," Mother says. She perches on my bed and pats the spot beside her.

I do not sit. I stand. If you do not stand, they will stand on top of you. If you do not speak, they will speak over you. The words I needed to hear when I needed to hear them.

"Combat qualifiers begin today," Mother continues, unperturbed. "Combat measures strength. We are strong, Ketra. Our team will do well."

Our team will fail. Qualifiers pit all teams against each other, then determine which two teams will face off for the final. Third place after qualifiers earns bronze. Second and first place after the final earn silver and gold. If we're lucky, we'll win bronze, but we don't deserve luck.

"Shouldn't we watch?" I ask. "Wouldn't our presence encourage them? We should be supportive, no?"

"No," Mother says. "Qualifiers are tedious. If our team reaches the final, then we will watch. Now, our time is better spent elsewhere."

Dread knots my gut. Mother has plans. Her plans are schemes. Her schemes are lethal.

"My time is best spent in the arena," I say.

Mother ignores me. My words wisp into nothing, into no one, like me. "We have a sponsorship," she says.

I stiffen. Sponsorships are not forbidden, but the Council discourages them, because sponsors become bribes, and bribes become blackmail. "Who?" I ask.

"Ice Enterprises."

Dread turns to wrath, and I boil fear away. "No."

"They are an electrolyte vitamin company," Mother says, "the

perfect Olympic sponsor."

"Their slogan is 'pure is the cure.' They are anti-Maker."

"So is everyone else. And they are not openly discriminatory."

"Their subliminal messaging propagates slander," I say. "They insinuate support of true human ideology and believe Makers are mutants, are wrong."

"Stars, I hate when you read philosophy. So many unrefined theories. Makers *are* a mutation, and mutations *are* wrong."

"No, mutations are changes, and change is not wrong."

"Inherited change is. Magic is a genetic curse. Makers are a plague. They stain bloodlines, soil humanity. People are not meant to wield such power."

"They are misunderstood—"

"Enough." Mother stands from the bed and grabs my arm in a vise. Her fingers are claws as she leads me to the suite's door. "Ice is our sponsor. There is a photo shoot in five minutes. You will attend. You will behave. This is how you support our athletes. Make powerful connections, and earn them money. They need their princess strong now, so pretend you are strong, Ketra. Pretend you are pretty and worthy. Pretend you are not a constant disappointment in every single way."

Queen Ora shoves me out of our suite and slams the metal door behind me. Guards wave me down the hall, and I follow, incandescent with fury and injustice. I cannot be the face of bias. I will not perpetrate her corruption and cruelty.

So I don't.

I run.

Past the Maker rally.

Toward the arena.

I lose the guards, remove my royal furs, and buy a hat to cover my silver-blonde hair. Alone, I'm free, and stadium seating

looms before me. I climb up halfway, then nestle between two Quinish families—two normal, ordinary, civilian families. This is where I'm meant to be, with my people.

"*Uttetsakar*," one of the fathers murmurs. *Beloved.* The families turn to me, dumbstruck, and start to bow.

I stop them. "Emmelo aisialnamas," I say. We are the same. "Rise, and let the Games begin."

Within minutes, Mother messages me, furious, so I type back: "Make me a monster, and I'll Make you the same."

Dig your grave, and I'll dig mine.

Fight Like Hell, Grow Teeth and Claws

Allebazi

elcome to M2O's coverage of the Olympic Games!" Efia chirps into her headset.

My assistant shuffles through a couple tablets on her desk and pulls up her research, though she doesn't need it. Her memory is divine, but she has no confidence, so she clutches data close and reads from her mind. *I would cry over your corpse.* Not the best pick-up line, and the least appropriate time.

Moving on.

"Combat qualifiers have begun," Efia continues. "Combat measures strength and combines skills from acrobatics, gymnastics, and martial arts. Prime is off to a strong start, though Dion and Tertia are not far behind. Quate and Quin have given respectable showings thus far as we approach the last rounds."

Wall screens glow with replays. Highlights flash across the small, metal room. Five teams, ten rounds, fifteen athletes. For

each round, two leads fight in hand-to-hand combat: Prime versus Dion, then Tertia, then Quate, then Quin; Dion versus Tertia, then Quate, then Quin; Tertia versus Quate, then Quin; Quate versus Quin. Third earns bronze, twenty-five points. The top two compete in the final to decide silver for fifty points and gold for one hundred points.

All worlds fight each other, but not all athletes do. Some colonies choose their best athletes to compete every round, but this early in the Games, that is risky. Burnout is a constant threat, so in these initial stages, most worlds use their weaker athletes. Though with Prime, their weakest is still better than everyone else's strongest. They decimate the other planets.

"Prime is a desert world graced with stunning canyons and dunes," Efia narrates over the bloody replays. "A rigid and militant people, they value defense and security, as is evident during these qualifiers. They train from birth, adhering to a strict schedule through famine and drought. Dictator Ribaj rules this wealthy colony, a leader both beloved and revered. Daq kukirabuy umujunla. May the stars bless you."

As Efia vomits filler, I send yet another company-wide warning: To all employees, if you must use the facilities during a virtual meeting, please mute yourself for fecal exorcisms. Thank you.

On the wall screens, the Games continue. Prime's punches shatter Dion's jaw and crack Tertia's ribs. Their kicks snap Quate's shins and crush Quin's hips. Every defeated world crawls away in agony as Prime stands tall, stands deadly. They win every match against them. After each round, medscanners hum over wounds, mending broken bones and knitting torn flesh. Nyo waves at the camera, weak yet determined. Ze did well against Prime, all things considered. Although ze is one of

Quate's best athletes, Quate's best is Prime's worst. Over the afternoon, Dion and Tertia climb the ranks while Quate and Quin sink into obscurity. All as expected. Fortune defines fate, and Prime is fortunate. That's what luck is: fortune, money.

Two more rounds: Tertia versus Quin, then Quate versus Quin. Ocram from Tertia and Kire from Quin enter the arena. They approach the center and shake hands. Unnecessary, a pleasantry. But the judges oblige. They wait in shadows while guards litter the floor. The crowd writhes with suspense.

"Zoom in on their faces," I say into my cell. "I want to see their eyes." My field reporters shift, and screens update with new angles. *There.* Fear. Hunger. Greed. *Need.* Tensions are high, but honor is higher. The athletes drop into fighting stances and begin.

Ocram and Kire are dark with brown eyes. Both shaved their heads for the Games, but the similarities end there. Ocram has speed; he's fast and lithe. Kire has power; he's strong and squat. Opposites and enemies. Ocram bounces around Kire, keeps his distance. Kire crouches, pivots with his opponent. Ocram lunges, and Kire unleashes a fist. Nimble, Ocram leaps back, changes tactics. Close range favors power. It would end the fight, cinch victory for Kire.

Quick and spry, Ocram dances around Kire. He feints, throws light punches, but preserves his energy. Kire blocks every punch. Ocram disorients Kire, dizzies him with bluffs. Kire falls for every trick, then catches on and stops. Ocram adapts, turns bold: a backflip-kick, fast as lightning. Kire leans back. Ocram's foot grazes Kire's cheek. No damage. As Ocram lands, Kire drops, rolls, and fires a devastating punch at Ocram's stomach. The thud booms through the arena. The crowd gasps. Ocram wheezes. But it's pretend. This is a distraction. Ocram

is smart. He boosts Kire's confidence. Because Kire thinks he's winning, but this is part of Ocram's plan.

Ocram stops dancing. He stands still to save his strength. Feigning fatigue, he lets Kire in—not close enough to harm, but close enough to tempt. Kire punches Ocram's limbs, and Ocram lets him, taunts him, urges these energy-draining strikes. Enraged, Kire punches harder, but nowhere important. Ocram recoils with every punch, absorbing pain with motion. Bruises blossom, but there are no cracks, snaps, or crunches, no ruptured organs or broken bones.

Kire tires. Still, he punches. Ocram leaves himself open, and Kire strikes every window. He wastes himself on trivial blows while Ocram waits to counter. Ocram fakes weakness and slumps forward, leans on Kire. The powerful man tries to retreat, but Ocram pushes down and reveals his face. Kire takes the bait. He supports Ocram's weight, tires further, and lifts his arm to punch Ocram's nose. At the last second, Ocram moves—toward Kire, not away. They hook arms, grapple, stumble. Ocram gives Kire another opening. Kire takes it and misses again. Ocram leans harder on Kire, and Kire wilts beneath his opponent's weight, but Ocram wilts, too.

Ocram sways then jabs Kire's nose, swift and brutal. Blood spurts between them. Cries sprinkle the crowd. Kire blinks, stunned, as Ocram jabs again, again, again. Fewer hits, more havoc. Too close to gain power, Kire struggles beneath Ocram's spider hold, limbs entwined over the stocky man's shoulders. But Ocram struggles, too. The fight taxes them, so Ocram makes a mistake, and it costs him.

Muscles quaking with exhaustion, Ocram drops his arm an inch. Kire seizes his chance. He rockets a ruinous punch at Ocram's jaw. *Crack.* Ocram staggers, mouth crooked, lips

misaligned. Kire grins. The audience yelps. They believe the Tertian's ruse, too. Ocram hurts, but he's been through worse. I've followed his training, and this is nothing. He's suffered injuries more grueling and gruesome. This is a show. This is how Ocram wins.

The Tertian athlete continues to stagger. He falls and harnesses that momentum. Twisting, he turns the fall into an aerial aimed at Kire—too close for the Quinish man to escape. Airborne, Ocram cartwheels sideways. He lands a five-strike combo with his last dregs of energy: left foot kick, right foot kick and land, lunge to head-butt, left jab, right cross. The kicks crush Kire's nose, and the head-butt shatters his jaw. The one-two punch pounds his temple, and Quin falls—hard.

Half the crowd cheers. Half the crowd whines. But it was a fair fight. They broke no rules and went to knockout. Quin loses. Tertia wins. Medscanners glide over Kire's and Ocram's injuries, and the former wakes, pissed. Guards escort them both from the arena.

"Congratulations!" Efia says.

"Sorry?" I rip my eyes from the screens.

"Tertia won! You won!"

"Right, thanks. Well, I did nothing but sit on my ass, eating cupcakes."

Efia frowns, then her tablet flashes. "Oh my stars, Camroc is up next!"

Fear curls in my stomach, a slumbering serpent ready to strike. "Against whom?"

"Ouin."

"No shit," I snap, and Efia flinches. *Calm the fuck down.* I grit my teeth and ask, "Which Quinish athlete?"

"Isrik," Efia says.

Fuck me. Isrik is a crowd favorite. Worse, she's a good person. Honorable, even. The oldest Olympian, she's made a comeback after a horrific spinal injury. She broke her back in training a few months ago, but she expedited recovery to compete here, to fight for her world. It's part of Queen Ora's sympathy crusade, to include an athlete who's overcome age and pain. Pity Quin. Pray for Quin. Pretend Quin isn't a lethal menace. Even if her queen is. As for the princess? She "hides" in the stands, escapes her mother's chains, but royalty always shines bright. I let Ketra think she's invisible as I order extra security to protect her. She is the future and freedom. She is the only way toward peace.

Anyway, Isrik will beat the bloody starshit out of Cam, even if their fight means nothing, even if the two underdogs have both lost every match. It's a battle for last or second-to-last place, but when you're at the bottom of the barrel your whole life, any victory is a revolution.

"So who do you think will win?" Efia bubbles. "Not that the match matters. Prime, Dion, and Tertia are already top three."

"Every match matters," I say. Not in numbers, but in people. *Make them love you*, I will toward Cam. *Make them follow you. Gain their support.*

"Of course! I didn't mean to offend! But for combat, the top spots are claimed. There are four more events, though, so there's still a chance!"

There was never a chance, and there is not one now. "Get close-ups of Isrik and Camroc," I say. "Give their backgrounds, but don't show bias. Explain combat rules for the untrained civilians. Tell a story. Make it a good one. Gotta go."

```
"Go?" Efia asks, orange brows pinched.
```

[&]quot;Yup."

[&]quot;Where?"

"Out."

"Okay!" she trills. "If you need me-"

"I won't." Efia slumps, so I add, "Of course I need you, but I need you *here*. You're in charge. Oh, and while you are, remind the idiots who work for me to stop the ongoing roar contest. That number is an intern's cell and not the Council's customer service hotline. They're scaring the poor kid."

I leave the office. She follows. Stops me. Begs in the hall.

"Wait, Bazi," Efia calls after me. The metal corridor is empty. Everyone is either in the arena or asleep. "Where will you be? If there's an emergency, I mean."

"Dammit, Efi, leave."

"Efi?"

Shit. Pet names are problems. I need to think.

"Stop pushing me away," my assistant says. "Don't fuck me, then discard me."

"Discard you?" I snap, then lower my voice. "I gave you temporary leadership of M2O, and that's not the first time. If I discarded you, then I'd fire you, but I need you as I told you. Now, I want to be alone. And if you must know, I'll be in the arena. Don't follow me."

"I won't." Efia's plump lips tremble, but she crosses her arms. I want to trail my fingers down those glorious bronze arms. Slide a hand under her sleeve, reveal her shoulder, unveil the rest. Peel off her clothes, bare her chest. Make her come like a hurricane, cross-eyed and slack-jawed, limbs limp and skin slick with desire. I want to pop her free, make her insides weep. Melt our oceans, fuse our fires. Taste her warmth, tangle her core. Fit the broken pieces of me inside the beautiful pieces of her. I want her to heal me, save me, release me from this hell.

But I made this hell, so I must end this hell. Secrets. Shame.

Guilt. Regret. Burn the worlds all the way down. I owe Camroc everything.

Before I go, I grab Efia's waist, pull her into a kiss, and leave her swaying, confused, in the hall.

"Run my company," I shout over my shoulder.

"Say please," she shouts back with a smirk.

There. More of that, less of before. You are the sun. Shine above the rest.

"Please, Efi," I say.

She blushes, and I wink before I turn the corner. *Don't ruin my heart*.

But sometimes, you need to burn bridges to protect the ones you love, and stars know I've burned the sun.

Run in Circles, and Chase Rainbows

Camroc

e've already lost. I don't need to win. That's why Coach chose me for this round. Quate and Quin are the two bottom rungs. It doesn't matter who—No. It matters. I matter. How I fight today matters through time. My world still rests on my shoulders. I represent Quate, her people, and I must honor Yelir's memory. Rest in peace. Live in power. Quate is power. We are wild and free. Fly free.

"Athletes, enter the arena," the announcer booms. "Welcome, Camroc of Quate and Isrik of Quin."

We approach the arena's center, cocooned in cheers and jeers, whistles and taunts. The judges wait in the shadows, safe and removed. Quin lost to Tertia, and Isrik looks ready to avenge Kire. The oldest Olympian, she used every one of her forty-eight years to sharpen her soul into a sword. Her name floats on the crowd—"Isrik! Isrik! Isrik!"—as they praise their favorite and glare me a grave. Isrik has a powerful story and earned

her spot more than anyone. After a horrific spinal injury, she's here, intent and adamant. Her miraculous comeback gains her unanimous support. But I have no sympathy, no powerful story. I have only my blue brands against her violet boasts.

Isrik crouches her burly frame, narrows her silver eyes. She's large yet quiet—pale, hairless, and wrinkled. There's kindness in her silence, goodness in her stillness. If we weren't here, beating the shit out of each other, we'd be friends. She honors me with a dip of her head, and I know she thinks the same.

Though that won't dampen her punches or kicks.

Isrik salutes Queen Ora, and I salute Speaker Esrioas, then the judges signal we begin.

I hang back, wait for Isrik to attack, as fear curdles in my veins. Isrik does not wallow or wait. She lunges, swift, and twists, sharp. I pivot to block, but she strikes the back of my skull. *Dirty. Smart.* Agony branches over my bones. I stumble, disoriented, to distant applause for her.

"Get up," someone hisses, a voice in my heart. Nyo.

Then Arada: "Get the fuck up, Cam."

Get up? I'm down. Right, I'm down. When did I fall?

"They're about to call knockout," Coach barks. "Stand."

Stand. One word. Every command. On jelly limbs, I wobble and stand. Another rabbit punch. Skull strike and stumble. I don't fall this time, but I can't feel my legs, so I don't feel when Isrik stomps my foot. She pushes me, and I lurch forward. Stars. Crouch. Breathe. Count. Relax. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

Isrik faces me. She feints, and I follow. She bluffs, and I block. A smile bunches her flesh. Fans call her nickname: "Ice Pick." She smiles wider, a gnarled nightmare, and harnesses brutality with power and strength. I must fly. *So grow some bloody wings*, Coach echoes in memory.

When Isrik lunges next, I fall back, handspring. My feet kick her jaw. She grunts, hobbles, then grabs my left leg, yanks me down. My speed crumples into oblivion. She twists my ankle. *Crack.* Slams my knee. *Crunch.* Kicks my groin. *Down we go.* Pain, panic, nausea. *Drown me.* Never. *You'll never breathe again.* In a faraway sky, with foreign stars, the crowd stalls. *Dirty.* She fights dirty. *So dirty.* I'm done. *No.* If I lose, I lose with glory.

Isrik raises her heel to stomp my shin. I wait, twist, jerk. She misses. I somersault away and hop to my feet, then bounce on one leg. Coach shouts from the sidelines. I hear fury, not words. He begs the judges to rule fouls, to disqualify, but they remain silent, and the crowd's cheers rise.

"Isrik! Ice Pick! Isrik! Ice Pick!"

The arena boils with bloodlust. I feint, lunge, turn, backflip, and smash her throat with my heel. Isrik gasps, winded, but doesn't bend, but doesn't break. In a breathless rage, she retaliates, grips my collar, and throws me forward, then elbows my neck. I also gasp, winded, but I bend, but I break. She punches my eyes. *Sparks. Darkness.* I sink to my knees, yelp in pain, roll to my feet. I can't see. *Terror.* I'm blind. *Maelstrom.* Fists batter my skull. Blood smears my face. Tears scorch my cheeks. Hot and metallic, I melt, I fold.

Isrik's knuckles rip me apart, bludgeon my resolve. Nyo and Arada cry to block, to counter, to jump and fly and do impossible things. Pain chains me, but I do not, *will not*, fall again. So I stand, and stagger, and accept the feral night.

Light blinks. Color flashes. Vision returns, and Isrik's pulpy mass charges. I duck. Dodge. Flip, kick, and counter. I cannot win, but I can hold off defeat, and that is a victory, too. This is for Quate. For Yelir. For Coach, Nyo, and Ri-ri. This is for Bazi, Ketra, and me. *For me.* I'm broken, but I belong. I'm doomed,

but I'm strong. Pain becomes power, and I face Isrik's wrath with honor.

Isrik lunges. I hop back on one leg, my other dangling: shattered kneecap, sprained ankle. She lunges again. Catches my neck. Bashes my face against her knee. My nose crunches. Blood suffocates me, copper down my throat, fire across my cheeks. Pain is my heartbeat, begging me why-why, why-why. Isrik lunges a third time, brawny hands aimed for my neck. She is a blur. I am a phantom. Pretend you're weak. It's easy to pretend.

She loops thick fingers around my throat. I let her, want her to strangle me away. Her grip tightens. She crushes my Adam's apple. Then I spring. My hands hook her thumbs, break the hold. Quick as shame, I jab a fist toward her jaw. It lands. *Crack.* Isrik coughs, confused, as her teeth fail to find each other, mouth crooked and flapping, a monster's maw. Again, I punch. Again, it lands. *Snap.* Her cheekbone collapses beneath my knuckles. Desperate, I release a flurry of punches. *Hook, jab, cross, uppercut, hook, one-two.* Isrik twitches with each impact but doesn't fall. It's not enough. The punches tire me more than her. I balance on one foot, throw half-power strikes. She waits, and schemes, and lets the crowd think this is a fair fight, that I stand a chance against her eternal ice. *Surrender. Fail.* Not now. Not yet.

Weak, bloody, and choking, I lean forward too far. Isrik spots my mistake, a shark to my gore. We grapple. She wins. Catching my wrists, she tosses me across the floor. My shoulders dislocate. My wrists fracture on impact. I can't lift my arms. Can't throw another punch. Medscanners won't save me till after, till failure, but I refuse to yield, to let this be the end. I won't win—I know it and own it—but I can still fight.

So I stand—again. So I wait—again. And the crowd loses their minds as I refuse to back down.

"Come on, Cam," Nyo and Arada shout. Coach remains silent. He knows it's over, knew it was over since the salute.

Agony leaks from every pore. My bones throb. My muscles ache. Blood clogs my nose, my throat, and splatters the arena with defeat. The judges rule no knockout, and Isrik sneers at my stupidity. *You are a fool, Camroc of Quate.* Better a fool than forgotten.

Isrik bounds toward me, then punches. Her left hook obliterates my jaw. My body sounds every siren till I am only pain. Everything hurts. Everything breaks. To balance, I lunge, cling to Isrik's shoulders, try to pull her down, but she is a glacier—stubborn and secure. She yanks me closer, then knees my gut. Ribs shatter. A lung pops. Breath gusts away. Yet I still stand—clutching her, sure, but if I fall again, we fall together.

Her sweat greases my fingers, yet I hang on. She head-butts my nose, yet I hang on. Knees my groin, yet I hang on. Swings her heel into my shin—splitting skin, splintering bone—yet I still hang the fuck on. Electricity dances through the air. Darkness beckons, and I tell it to fuck itself. Isrik tries to knee me again. I let her connect, then wrap my crumpled leg around hers. She topples, dragging me down. Her back hits the floor. *Thunder.* I fall on top of her. *Rain.* Pin her with my legs. *Hail.* Crush her throat with my fractured wrist. *Lightning.* She pushes. *Shit.* Throws me off. *Fuck.*

My skull slams the floor. Isrik's fist pounds my temple. Pain and night chase me. *Tag, you're it.* It's over. I'm done.

When I die...

Burn the sun.

Ashes, ashes, we all fall down.

Burn the sun. Set me free.

When I die...

Sail down the coast.

A ring of roses. A chalice of blood. Fall down, Camroc. We all fall down.

Burn the sun. Set me free. Take this all away from me.

When I die...

Sail down the coast. Dance on my ashes. Sing with my ghost. *Grow wings, my child. Grow wings, then fly free.*

* * *

I wake to the hum of medscanners, to the ache of a galaxy of wounds.

"You are, without a doubt, a massive idiot," Arada says beside me. She and Nyo kneel by my arms, sheltering me from the raucous crowd. We're still in the arena.

Nyo warns, "Ri-ri—"

"You are also, without a doubt, the bravest person I know," Arada interrupts. "So bravery relies on stupidity."

"Thank you?" I ask, chuckling. Doctors and nurses worry over my battered body while Coach ruffles my hair—my only undamaged part.

"You did well, kid," Coach says. "Foolish, but well. Should've let Isrik win. The match didn't matter. Tertia won bronze, and Prime will face Dion in the final."

"You told me to stand, so I stood," I rasp.

"In the beginning, not after she beat the living hell out of you."

"I came here to fight, so I fought."

"Yes, you did," Isrik croaks. She parts the medical staff, all healed. I'm nowhere near. "It was an honor, Camroc of Quate." She bends to take my hand, and we shake. I wince. My wrists are still fractured. Nurses and doctors scowl, but Isrik laughs. "Yes, the match didn't matter to the Games, but it mattered to me, Coach Racso. Camroc fought like a starforsaken demon. He honored me with a good match, and he has my respect for fighting without fear. I won't forget that; neither will the worlds. And if the sun wants to burn us all, I say we burn the sun first, then meet her in hell. Watch this one. He's going far, farther than us all." With that, Isrik pats my dislocated shoulder—agony spasms—and disappears into the crowd.

Coach stares after her. "Well, you've made a friend, a friend of our enemy, no less. That's power, there. Danger, too." He clears his throat and awkwardly tries to grin. "You lost well, kid. Everyone can win well, but not everyone can lose well, and since we've all been losing for a long time, that hits home. Listen to the crowd. They're calling your name, not hers. They're giving you a standing ovation." *Camroc. Camroc. Camroc.* "You're a symbol. Even if you lost, you didn't lose hope in the end. Rest up. The Games aren't over yet."

My name drifts through the crowd as doctors fret over my bloody body. "He needs surgery," one of them says. "Get him to the infirmary."

A stretcher jostles beneath me. Nyo and Arada follow me out. "We've lost sight of where we came from," Nyo whispers near me, "but you remember, Cam. Your bones remember. I see their memories in you, the ghosts we left behind. And I'm proud of you. We all are. See you on the other side."

"Don't die," Arada says.

Then they leave, the arena leaves, Starstop and the worlds and the dying sun leave. I'm alone now, all alone. A skeleton, a memory, a curse, a ghost.

* * *

Something sweet wakes me. Not pain or fatigue, but...frosting? I crack open my eyes, lids heavy with sedative. "Bazi?"

"Hey, kid. You did well."

"You came?"

"Of course. Misery loves company."

"Misery loves cupcakes more." I point at her dessert.

Bazi shrugs beside my bed. "You were out awhile. Got bored." Blinking away fluorescence, I try to sit. Can't. Drugs flood my system in pain's wake.

"Easy," a scrubbed doctor says. She prods my limbs, then checks my monitors. "You had a sprained ankle, shattered kneecap and jaw, broken nose and ribs, both shoulders dislocated, both wrists fractured, shin with a compound fracture, collapsed lung, facial lacerations, and a concussion, not to mention the minor injuries and contusions. You're all sewed up and healed, no scars, but don't train for the rest of the day. Your body needs time to rest. Go easy."

She leaves to attend the many other patients in matching steel beds with gray sheets. We are clones, copies, stamped through time in different bodies.

"Cupcake?" Bazi asks. She opens a box of flamboyant treats while Coach, Nyo, and Arada nap in nearby chairs.

"No, thanks," I say.

"I wasn't asking you." She offers the box to Ketra, and the princess plucks a red one. I didn't recognize her with the hat,

but here she is.

I should beg her to go, to leave for her safety, for her people. Instead, I whisper, "You're here."

"She watched you get your ass handed to you on a silver platter," Bazi says, attacking a second cupcake.

"You watched the match?" My mouth dries, and my tongue flutters against my teeth, a dying dragonfly.

"Yes," Ketra says. "You fought well. You changed."

"I had to. I was shit before."

"No, I mean, you changed something else. You changed the people. You reminded us that the Games transcend victory, that we should maintain our humanity through hardship and cruelty."

"Mmm, what she said," Bazi mumbles around a mouthful of frosting. "Anyway, gotta go, kid. Efia's been running M2O, and I gotta pop my head in, pretend I know what the fuck I'm doing. Bunch of articles to write about you and 'unifying the worlds into one people' or some starshit." She nudges Coach and shouts, "Up and at 'em, Racso."

Coach startles, then wakes Nyo and Arada. He shoots Bazi a death glare. "Some shame wouldn't kill you, Bazi."

"Oh, I've got fuckloads of shame, but none for you, buddy. Go. Scram. Give the lovebirds some space."

Ketra and I blush as Nyo and Arada wink, trailing Coach out of the infirmary. *Coach, Nyo, Arada, Bazi, Ketra.* Thank the bloody stars for every one of them. *Family. Heartbeats. Home.* I lost, but I'm still lucky. Too lucky.

And luck is fickle.

Bazi lingers a minute, then says, "Shame won't be the death of me. No, I want to die of pride. If I reach my death, and pride outweighs shame, then I've won. I'm not there yet, but

I'm also not dead yet. You, kid, are my greatest source of pride. Don't let it go to your head. Also, my guards will protect you till you leave. Don't make eye contact, or they'll want to talk, and they're shit at small talk, unless you like flower arrangement. Later."

She leaves us alone—with an army of guards. They circle the bed, block us from view, face out so we can face in. The doctors and nurses know who we are, but no one else can.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

Storms brew in Ketra's gray eyes. She twists and braids a starlight strand of hair. "Nothing."

"It's not nothing."

"Well, it's nothing important, not compared to you."

"You are heir to the Quinish throne. I am a second-rate athlete who lost a match."

"You won the people's support," Ketra says.

I reach over and steal her pale hand. She shivers but does not pull away. "Ketra, what's wrong? It's only me."

Tears limn her slate gaze. "It's never been 'only you,' Camroc. You are an Olympian, a world, a people and power you've barely started to discover. And here I am, the prodigal princess, always running and returning, running and returning." She chews her cheek for a moment, then confesses. "Ice Enterprises is sponsoring Quin, and Mother is thrilled—well, as thrilled as she gets. But they're anti-Maker, and I'm not."

Ketra eyes me, testing, but testing for what? *Oh.* Quin has no Makers. They purge their world. So Quin's princess, errant daughter of discrimination, thinks I discriminate, too. Though Quate is a struggling world, we are not backward nor upside down.

"You care," I realize. "You care about Makers, even though it's

wrong."

"It's not wrong," she snaps.

"I know, but that's what Ora teaches. Stars, you're incredible." "And you're high on anesthesia."

I chuckle then wince at lingering pain. "Yes, but you're still incredible. What you're doing is brave, and you have my support every step of the way." Tears drip through her freckles, over her soft cheeks, and I wipe them away.

"Stars, I'm falling," Ketra sniffs. "I'm falling so fast, and I'm so fucking scared, because I'm falling from Mother, from Quin, and I'm falling for you, Camroc. It's messy and crazy, but it's the end of the worlds, so you might as well know."

I squeeze her hand and beckon her closer. She curls around me on the bed, gentle on my raw flesh, recently healed then torn open again. *Rip open my chest, and pierce my heart.* She does. She did. From the moment we met. I know. She knows. But she's brave and bold.

"Sorry, it's stupid," Ketra mumbles into my neck. "I didn't mean to say that. But I feel like I know you, and you know me, and there's no one else who does. I'll go. Shit, I fucked up again. Yes, I'll go now. Sorry, Camroc. Feel better."

She tries to sit, but I pull her back down. "No." Words tumble through my drug-addled mind, but I focus on the brightest, then fish through the abyss. "No, Ketra."

"No, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said it," she whispers.

I pause, drunk with blood loss, dizzy from surgery, faint at the thought that she feels the same. Then I surrender, and then I commit.

"No, Ketra," I say. "We don't fall in love. In love, we rise."

Still Waters Run Deep, but History Remembers Fires

Ketra

leave Camroc to rest, to heal in his barracks, and return to the arena. That is where he belongs, and this is where I belong.

In love, we rise. We can't afford love. Not here. Not now. So I push him away to focus on Prime and Dion, the final two. Combat is almost over. One event is almost done. Only four more till war's end, then night's fire will eat our souls.

"Athletes, enter the arena," the announcer booms. "Welcome, Ramo of Prime and Maasib of Dion."

Both are gods. Ramo is brown, muscular, charismatic, and arrogant. Maasib is dark, tall, lean, magnetic, and patient. Ramo salutes Dictator Ribaj, and Maasib salutes Senator Farsa, then the judges signal they begin.

From their first motions, I sense the massive difference in this fight. Camroc and Isrik fought dirty, scrappy. There were bruises, blood, and broken bones galore. Not with Ramo and Maasib. They're experts. The fight is smooth and clean, tight and professional. A dance, not a brawl. They glide over the floor, sway like a breeze, and roll like an ocean as they duck, dodge, ebb, flow, and match attacks with parries in an intricate waltz. The crowd screams with desperate passion. This is the final of the first event, the first chance toward securing seedship seats. Whoever wins this fight is on the way toward survival, toward escape.

Ramo jabs. Maasib dodges. Ramo grabs Maasib to block his counterattack. Maasib drops to a knee and aims for Ramo's gut. Ramo parries outside and leaps on Maasib's shoulders. He launches into a twisting back layout as Maasib rolls forward then up.

They face each other again, bounce on their feet, crouch and hunker, bob and weave in figure eights. Every few seconds, one springs up and throws a punch. The other always parries or dodges. No bruises, no blood, no broken bones yet. Maasib drops his shoulders. Ramo lunges to strike. Maasib flips in a pike, then pinwheels his long legs. Ramo dive-rolls away from Maasib's lethal heels. Maasib lands on one foot, then flips again, sideways this time. Ramo again rolls out of range, handsprings toward Maasib, then launches himself in a triple back tuck.

The crowd cheers as Ramo again leaps on Maasib's shoulders. Maasib kneels, grabs Ramo's ankles, and throws. Ramo sails through the air, then lands light as rain. Maasib charges. Ramo pivots and punches. Maasib sidesteps, squats, and head-butts. Ramo catches his skull. Maasib punches blind, his head a shield, but Ramo swerves in time. They break apart, breathe deep, strike again.

Ramo drops his back hand. Maasib throws a power shot.

Ramo blocks and jabs. Maasib swats the punch, then hooks a haymaker at Ramo's temple. The extension compromises Maasib's balance. Ramo catches his forearm, then drives the wild momentum past. Maasib soars, tucks, rolls, reverses. He backflip-kicks Ramo, but Ramo somersaults beneath, and both gain no ground.

"One punch, that's all either needs," says a high-pitched, highenergy voice beside me.

I jump, yank my hat over my ears, and the voice chuckles.

"We need to discuss your disguise, Princess." At my confusion, she adds, "Bazi sent me. I'm Efia. Figured I'd do some fieldwork."

I scan the bubbly, blue-eyed woman beside me. Her bronze face beams, and her hair bobs in orange ringlets. I recognize her from the Olympic Ball, on Bazi's arm. She's short, soft, and whip-smart. Intelligence flashes in her gaze.

"I promise I'm harmless." Efia reclines her large build in the seat and taps her tablet.

"No one is harmless," I murmur.

"Well, the worst I can do is talk you to death. My joy is aggressive."

"Joy is aggressive?"

"In the right hands." Efia taps faster, logs the match, then posts to PicTic and M2O's homepage. She's brilliant, a visionary. In seconds, she translates the combat dance into words, pictures, and hope.

"What did you mean before, about one punch?" I ask.

"Great question! Ramo and Maasib are extraordinary athletes, so either only needs to land one punch to win. Prime and Dion focus on evasion and knockout punches. The other worlds train to take hits instead."

"Why not copy Prime and Dion, if their training is so good?"
"It's their mentality," she says. "The other worlds assume they'll lose, so they teach their athletes to weather the blows. Prime and Dion tell their athletes they'll win, or come close."

"So that's why Camroc's match was...bloody," I say.

"Yes. Quate and Quin surrender to brutality, to primal methods of fighting, no offense."

"None ever taken." I grimace against memories of Quin, echoes of ice and parkas and Mother, always Mother. "We are a brutal world. Though Quate and Tertia aren't. They could be better. They could be more."

"You think too highly of us and too lowly of yourself."

Ramo flip-punches as Maasib backflip-kicks. Both miss as the crowd shouts ever louder.

"Who do you think will win?" I ask.

"Prime," Efia says without hesitation. "Ramo respects Maasib's skill, but both know how this will end."

"Then why not end it earlier?"

"For the same reason Isrik let Camroc fight longer."

"Isrik let him?" I ask.

"Of course," she says. "Isrik could have knocked Camroc out in half a minute, but she respected him, so she let him fight. Didn't stop her from beating the shit out of him, but that was a gift of honor. Ramo gives Maasib the same gift. They've both trained their lives away. Though from different worlds, the athletes are of one mind, one people. They understand each other in a way no one else does. Shared struggle holds tremendous power, and they've all struggled the hardest. In as many ways as the Games divide us, they unite us in double the ways. Yes, they pit us against each other for survival, but there is more than one way to survive."

"I don't understand. Victory means life. Defeat means death. There is no middle ground."

"The middle ground is the largest. There are many types of life. Art is immortal. Is that not life? Words are eternal. Is that not survival? And actions speak louder than words. What happens today, and during these Games, will echo through time. Their memories will survive because of how they fight, because of honor and honesty, greatness and glory. Generational trauma, generational triumph. How we act in darkness determines whether we deserve the light." A switch flips, and bubbles return. "So sorry! I tend to ramble."

"You should ramble more often," I say.

Efia blushes and clears her throat. "Anyway, yes, one punch will decide the fight, most likely Ramo's."

And it does. Ramo leaves himself wide open, cocky yet courteous. Maasib takes the bait and throws a straight punch. Without looking, Ramo hooks Maasib's temple. The Dionese man falls. Prime wins. It's over and done. Quick and clean.

Half the crowd erupts with victory. The other half wails in defeat. Brawls break out, and guards struggle to keep the peace. Efia publishes an article that announces the medals: Prime defeats Dion in worlds-shattering blow. As such, Prime wins gold and currently holds one hundred points. Dion wins silver and holds fifty points. Tertia wins bronze and holds twenty-five points. Quate and Quin tie for last place and hold zero points. Combat is closed. The first Olympic event ends. Stay tuned for racing coverage shortly.

"You should leave, Princess," the reporter says. "It's about to get messy."

"I like messy," I say. I'm falling for you, Camroc. It's messy and crazy, but it's the end of the worlds, so you might as well know. And

this is indeed a beautiful mess.

"So do I, but I meant royally messy. Her Majesty has sounded an alert for you. If you don't return to your suite in ten minutes, she threatens to halt the Games."

"Shit, sorry. I'll head back." Damn you, Mother.

Efia waves as I stand. "You know, Princess, you should ramble more often, too."

Bitter, I exhale. "Thank you, Efia, but you are the only one who feels that way."

"Not the only one," she calls after me. "Camroc does, too."

* * *

Mother is in a mood. No, Mother is a mood. She crosses her arms and glowers at me, iron-gray eyes molten with the rage of a thousand dying suns.

"You ran away," Ora scolds. "The heir to the throne ran away, like a bloody teenager. You are thirty years old, Ketra. You have a duty to your people, a duty you shirked when you offended Ice Enterprises. We are the crown. We do not have the luxury to choose our obligations."

Mirroring her pose, I toss my hat on the bed. "I did not run away. I supported our athletes in the arena, and our athletes are more important than anti-Maker slander."

"Truth is not slander, and everything is connected. If you cannot see that, then you are blind."

"Makers have nothing to do with the Olympics. We ban them from competing, yet you blame them for our current state. The sun is dying, Mother. That's no one's fault. It's the fucking apocalypse. Isn't it time to let go of hate?"

"Hate is far too simple a word to encompass the complicated

sentiment I hold toward Makers. You want to start a revolution, but revolution overthrows order. People focus on rebellion and forget retribution, but there is always retribution and sometimes revenge. The cleanup is not worth the chaos."

"Don't you care?" I ask, seething. "About anything?"

Her rage cools into steadfast wrath, the abiding fury of the Quinish throne. Short and scrawny, she is a dagger, an ashen blade, shredding dreams with stoic will. "I care about *everything,*" Mother says, caustic. She juts out her chin and flips her silver-blonde hair away from her cruel face, death's curtain parted. "I will not apologize for leashing my emotions. Passion exists in many forms, Ketra. While you whine to the skies, I whittle from within. Control is more important than complaints. By supporting Makers, you disobey and dishonor me, yourself, and the crown itself. Think of Quin. Remember your heritage. I have worked too long and hard to let Quin's might crumble beneath your influence. We are ice, not air. Enduring, not fleeting. If you must learn this lesson the hard way, so be it."

Mother twirls and leaves my room of our suite. Her royal furs shimmer in her exit. She wears our world despite Starstop's heat, boasting our unyielding culture like a keloid scar. We are numb. Unfeeling. Ruin made stronger by wrath and rage. Guards lock the door behind her. Trapped, I fume in the metal, windowless room. I am a prisoner. This is my cage. No, Mother is my cage. She has jailed me since birth, has barred me against hope, against love, life, and dreams.

Behind the guards, a woman steps forward. She tilts her hooded head in apology. Fear trickles down my spine. Her cloak billows as she raises her arms. The air between her palms glitters then solidifies: a dagger. Mother brought a Maker here to Make this weapon, to teach this lesson. After, she'll kill her.

"I'm sorry," I say.

Tears splash the blade, splatter on the floor. "I'm sorry, too," the Maker says. "If it's any consolation, this is not my choice."

"I know."

"The money...I need it. My family is starving."

"Tna nim Prime," I say, recognizing her accent. You are from Prime.

"Lah htadahatat Priman?" You speak Priman?

"Taqaf deab itamilakla." Only a few words.

"Edib tamilak rahtka nim nitaifak. Narkuhs akil." A few words are more than enough. Thank you.

I bow in gratitude. "Congratulations on your win in combat."

The Maker frowns beneath her hood, fingers frozen on the dagger. "You are a difficult one to hate, *Uttetsakar*."

As I honored her with her language, she honors me with mine: *Beloved*.

She adds in Common, "Your mother, on the other hand..."

We chuckle together, though we know what comes next, what she must do to save her family.

"Cut deep," I say, "or Mother will cut deeper."

The Maker grimaces. "With this Made blade, I bless you, Princess." The air glitters again, and static hums in my ears. A blushing lotus blossoms on the dagger's hilt. Its stem entwines with diamonds through the metal. The dagger and flower are one. "With this Made bloom, I offer you peace. We are not only weapons."

Again, I say, "I know." Panic knots tighter, but I breathe, but I count, but I stand straight if not tall. "Mother thinks you are. That's why she fears you."

"And you?" she asks.

I smirk. "I'd be a fool not to fear you, given your power, but respect outweighs fear."

The Maker bows. "We thank you for your respect and beg for your forgiveness."

"There is nothing to forgive. Mother is the monster, not you. Begin." See, Mother? No pleas or requests. *A princess who pleads has little power. A woman who asks has little control.* But I am something more than both. I am the heartbeat of a million dreams.

The Maker approaches. Gentle, she slices off my clothes. Naked, I stand proud before her. The guards watch. They must report back to Mother. With a shallow breath, the Maker plunges the dagger into my gut. I choke, crumple. Blood glugs over my soft stomach, then gushes onto the floor. Gore stains my toes, sticky and warm, and I embrace agony through gritted teeth. Mother wants pain to become fear to become hate, but I am stronger than all three. The Maker twists the blade inside me, and the lotus tickles my ragged flesh. I can't do this. I *must* do this. Pain. Promise. Passion. *Power*.

That's it: power. Power is story. Story is a place for all lost and lonely souls to escape, to relate, to find each other in darkness under stars. So I tell myself a story. As the Maker carves my mangled gut, I pretend I am the blade, not flesh. The quiet princess born to a bomb. A wild child forged in a cage. The sweet leaf among the sour plant. Too smart to do nothing, too nervous to do everything. Too weird and awkward to fly before the crown's claws hack my wings to fleshy ribbons.

Agony eases its hold on my gut. I stare at the ceiling. I must have fallen. Most remember the fall, but I remember the rise. *In love, we rise.* I must rise. Not now, but after. When it is over. Because it will end. It will stop. Everything dies and fades to

ghosts.

"Cut her," a guard shouts in my periphery.

My vision clears. The Maker straddles me, skin drenched with sweat, blade scarlet in her trembling hands. Making the blade, the blossom, drained her. She realized thoughts into existence, changed energy into matter. Beneath her, blood surges from my ravaged stomach. The skin is serrated, the flesh tattered. Skin flaps with each wheezing breath. I am meat. An animal. The monster at the edge of the breach.

"Cut me," I croak.

The Maker scans me, exhausted but intent. "May I give you a gift? A secret?" she whispers as she again cuts.

Blood floods from my cavernous wound. Red soaks the bed. Agony pins me to stained sheets. *Pain. Power. A tower of strength.* "A gift?" I ask.

"You have a big heart. Let me protect it."

Engulfed in fear and pain, fighting both, I say, "Okay."

She lifts the knife to my neck, digs the tip into my throat, then slices a cherry line down my chest, between my breasts. The guards grunt their approval. Ending at my gaping gut, she slides the knife sideways, beneath my wrecked flesh. With wet squelches, she eases my skin up, off my ribs, one side then the other. She stops below my heaving breasts and covers my chest with her cloak. The guards see her move, hear me scream, so they leave us alone as she works.

The Maker wriggles her hands beneath my flesh, over my bones, and closes her eyes. One second, two, and nothing happens. Then pain, *excruciating*, as metal webs from her fingers. Molten and glowing, smoky silver slithers over and between my ribs. It coats the cage that surrounds my heart and lungs: no holes or gaps. The Maker hisses with the effort,

BURN THE SUN

quivers and quakes, then wills the metal to cool and harden. In the center, the shield ripples, and a symbol appears: the letter "M" surrounded by a lotus.

"It's tungsten," she whispers. "A strong metal for a strong soul. When I'm gone, remember us this way: a flower on metal, a shield of peace." With one last wave of her hands, she heals my chest, but leaves my stomach open and raw.

"You can heal?" I ask.

"Some of us can. Healing is part of Making. Though I can't mend your gut—so sorry, too much damage. And your mother wants proof." The Maker holds my gaze through mirrored tears. "Still waters run deep, but history remembers fires. Become a fire, Princess. The worlds await your storm. Don't stay quiet any longer."

With a whispered apology, she digs her blade into my liver, then collapses over my bleeding carcass.

Guards separate us. They dump her body on the floor, then wrap mine in a tarp. I hear Mother re-enter my room in the suite, order the Maker's death, and tap her foot as a guard slices the woman's throat. The Maker dies because of me to save her family. While Mother cursed me, the Maker blessed me. Ora used her as a weapon, yet the woman died a saint, a shield around my heart.

Remember. I can never forget.

Become a fire. I'll burn the sun.

Guards carry me to the infirmary as I sink. Down, down, down we go and grow into a glow that eclipses a hundred generations.

* * *

[&]quot;Go," an alto voice snaps. "You shouldn't be here."

"Neither should you," a deeper, soothing voice counters.

"I can afford to break rules. You can't."

"Fuck the rules. This is criminal."

"This is political. We can't interfere."

I blink open my eyes. Bazi and Camroc flank my bedside. Their broad bodies cast shadows over me, their golden-brown skin bathed in fluorescence. Guards form a wall around us in the infirmary, further blocking us from view. Mother is not here. A relief, not a surprise. The queen's job is done. She thinks fear, pain, and hate turned me anti-Maker, but they turned me anti-Ora instead. Fury steams within me, then I remember the blooming "M" under my chest, the metal shield on my ribs beneath my skin. I am a lotus. Peace and calm. I am the fire of candles in a lonely sunset, not torches and pitchforks in a venomous night.

"Do you know what happened?" Bazi asks. Her thin brown eyes narrow, and she tucks a graying strand of mahogany hair behind her ear.

"Yes, I remember everything," I say, then touch my chest. Below it, I lift the sheet to survey the damage. My stomach is sore yet healed, scarred yet strong. My belly button is gone, and my rumpled skin whorls around the loss. The wound was too brutal to fix, but I need the reminder. Pain is my power. Trauma is my triumph.

Camroc flinches at my disfigured flesh. Muscles twitch in his jaw, in his arms. His angular eyes flame with jade rage, his gentle amber burned away. He shouldn't be here. He's still healing after Isrik. "Bloody stars, I'm so sorry, Ketra. I should have stopped—"

"No one can stop my mother but me," I interrupt.

"You can't return to her." He frets, panics, tugs his garnet curls

BURN THE SUN

into disarray. "This is abuse, Ketra. I won't stand by while—"

"You have no power here. Bazi's right. This is political. Your world's rules do not apply to mine, and Mother has broken none of our laws. Quin allows this—accepts this, even."

Camroc balls his hands into fists and punches the wall behind my head. Metal rings. The guards remain facing out, though they tighten their circle. Then Camroc falls forward on my ruined stomach. Tears breach his eyes, and he sobs against my mutilated skin, stroking scars with his fingers. "I hate this," he weeps. "I want to tear apart the person who did this—"

"I can fight my own battles, and I need you to fight yours," I say. "The Games are your arena, and politics are mine."

"The Maker tortured you."

"Mother hired her. The Maker gave me a gift."

"We know," Bazi says, voice soft. "Ora doesn't know, though, and I bribed the staff to keep your secret."

"You didn't need to do that."

"And you didn't need to defend the Maker, yet you did and still do, despite the damage and scars."

"It wasn't her fault," I say.

"Most would disagree," Bazi says. "The fact that you can look past fear and pain to see truth speaks stars. That's why she blessed you with the engraving. The lotus symbolizes peace, but the 'M' symbolizes respect. She respected you, Princess. I respect you, too."

"She's dead now."

"I know."

"Because of me."

"No, she's dead because of your mother."

"Don't you *dare* blame yourself for this," Camroc says. "You are a fucking *hero*. If not for the Games, or the sun, or the

starforsaken apocalypse, I'd kill your bitch of a mother myself." "Cam," Bazi warns, "calm down."

"This is me fucking calm, as calm as I can fucking get after that stardamn fucking bitch did this to her own daughter."

"Shh. That stardamn fucking bitch is Queen of Quin. Unless you'd like to move up the assassination roster, cool it. You're more use to Ketra alive, so live. Fight. Survive. There may come a time for revenge, but today is not that day."

"I am *sick* of standing still, of behaving and obeying, while people get away with *this*—"

I interrupt Camroc with a kiss. He freezes, then melts, then deepens the promise. His fingers thread my hair as I part our lips with a mutual sigh. "Camroc, darling, I appreciate the bullheaded bravado, but as I said before, I can fight my own battles. I have power, privilege, and prestige, but I don't have kindness. *That's* what I need. Humor, too. But I have plenty of anger, and I don't need more from you. I know it's hard—"

"Impossible," he whispers.

"—but try for me. Be what *I* need, and I need *you*. Not a warrior or fighter, but you."

Camroc grits his teeth, then nods. His hands drift to my destroyed stomach. Tender, he caresses the scars, the twisted flesh, healed but unhealed, frozen forever in agony's snapshot. My skin goosebumps beneath his gentle touch, and he covers my stomach with the sheet. "It suits you," he says.

"What does?" I ask.

"All of it: the scars, the metal. You are tougher than the rest of us combined, because you bare your heart every second you're alive. Instead of becoming cruel—becoming your mother, your world—you remain loyal to yourself. Ora wants you to think you're weak, because you're stronger than she'll ever be, and

that terrifies her. She holds you down, because she knows once you rise, you'll never return to ground. You left her cages, and she's losing control."

Tears sting my eyes, and my bullheaded bravado leaves, too. "I'm scared, Camroc."

His face crumples, and he clutches my hands. "I'm scared, too, Ketra. First the skipper attack, then Yelir, now this. Something bad is coming."

"The sun is dying," Bazi says, but she scrutinizes Camroc, worry naked on her jagged face.

"Besides the sun. I can...sense it. Maybe I'm wrong, but I feel in my bones that something big and bad is coming for us all."

"Well, most of your bones were recently broken, so you're feeling the effects of your—"

"Stupidity?" Camroc scoffs at Bazi. "Fine, write me off as a fool. But when you've trained as long as I have, when your body is a weapon and your mind is armor, you notice every shift in the atmosphere. There is a definite shift here, a looming change."

"You're away from home, on Starstop, surrounded by political unrest and civil upheaval. I'm not discounting your concerns, Cam, but you can't ignore the physical differences before jumping to the spiritual. You're sensitive to the effects of Makers in a confined space, the static, the—"

"You sure know a lot about Makers," Camroc snaps, squeezing my hands.

"I'm a reporter. It's my job." Bazi clicks her tongue and exhales shakily. "You want to lash out? Okay, lash out at me, but suspicions become accusations. Watch what you're throwing around before we all end up splattered in shit."

"And a Maker saved me," I say, stroking his thumb with mine.

"A Maker did *this.*" He motions at my covered stomach.

"Because of my *mother*. Ora paid her. The Maker's family was starving. She hurt me to save them, but she didn't need to give me this, yet she did." I disentangle our fingers and rest a hand over my heart. "With her last breath, she protected me. Remember that, Camroc. When you see my scars, remember my mother. When you feel my shield, remember the Maker."

Camroc opens his mouth to protest, but a guard interrupts us.

"Camroc, Coach Racso requests your presence in Quate's barracks to prepare for racing tomorrow. Allebazi, Efia requests your presence with M2O media triage after the recent medal announcements." The guard bows and turns back around, a meat brick in a human wall.

Bazi swears. She pats my shoulder and murmurs a warning to be careful. "If you need me, Princess, you know where I am."

She leaves. Camroc doesn't. His green fire sears me, but amber pulses again in those anguished eyes, my mirror of pain.

"Go, Camroc," I say. "I can take care of myself."

"I know," he breathes, "but I can't take care of myself."

"I know." I chuckle, then wince. My gut still aches. I'm raw, a butchered slab of Mother's wrath. *No.* I am a machine, rebuilt into something fierce yet kind, powerful yet gentle, the being I must become to lead, to survive.

Camroc stifles a sob at my pain. "I wish I could take it all away."

"Then you'd take away my strength, too. I need this. I *want* this. Besides, I watched Isrik beat the shit out of you, so this is payback."

He shudders with another repressed sob. "Tell me how I can help. I can't leave you and do nothing."

"You're doing everything. You're fighting for Quate, and I'm fighting for Quin. So go, Camroc. Go and fight. Your team needs you, and I need you with your team. All the anger you feel, all your frustration and vengeance, channel it into your next event." Fly on. Fly far. Fly free. Join the stars for me.

"This isn't goodbye," Camroc says, intense and afraid. "Promise me this isn't goodbye."

"I promise." I hope. "Now, go."

He leans down, kisses my forehead, and lingers. "When we met, I was an athlete. That's all I ever was: single-minded, devoted, a two-dimensional cutout. You make me so much more than I ever thought I could be. That's why you frighten me, because you see things in me that I never knew were there...and because only one of our worlds can win."

"The Games aren't over yet," I whisper. "We might both lose. We might die together."

"I'd rather die together than live forever without you."

"You're drunk on fear and pain, on love and hate."

"No, Ketra. For the first time in my life, I'm startlingly, strikingly sober. But I'll go. If I don't, Coach will kick my ass, or you'll kick my ass for him."

"It would be my pleasure."

His lips dip to mine, and he kisses me again, warm and strong, gentle and kind. "Don't die without me."

"Don't forget to live," I say.

Then he's gone. And I'm alone. All the fear, pain, love, hate, horror, strength, power, agony, and anguish I fought to suppress rise within me, pull me down, drown me, overwhelm me, bury me with unconscious reprieve. Welcome the dark. Only in the dark can we find the light.

21

Rats Race When Pigs Sprout Wings

Allebazi

"Racing qualifiers are almost over," Efia chirps as we raid the kitchen for cupcakes. "Prime is dominating, as usual, though Tertia is doing well—"

"Efia," I interrupt, "for the love of all things sugary and alcoholic, wait to assault me with adulting and responsibility till I've consumed at least three cupcakes and two cups of bourbon coffee."

"So sorry, Bazi! I assumed, since it's afternoon—"

"I slept like shit, and I'm cranky as fuck. Don't lecture me on social decency." After Camroc's defeat and Ketra's abuse, I couldn't sleep last night. In the morning, I snagged a couple hours, and I am a bitch well rested, never mind overtired.

"I would never lecture you!" Efia exclaims. "It's just that so much has happened, and it's so interesting, and—"

"Fine," I say with an angst-riddled sigh. "Update me on stats, if you must."

"My pleasure! Prime won all their matches. In an unexpected upset, Tertia won against Dion, and the Council expects them to win their upcoming matches against Quate and Quin, which would qualify them for the final with Prime. Dion won against Quate and Quin, and will most likely win bronze. Their loss to Tertia was surprising, though their loss to Prime was a given. Quate and Quin are again looking at no medals, unless a miracle happens. Quin could tie Dion for bronze if they beat Tertia and Quate, but I doubt they will beat Tertia."

I finish three cupcakes during her gunfire rant and gulp two cups of coffee. Much better. "So Quate is last."

"Unless they win against Tertia and Quin. Both are unlikely, though. My world is not known for speed."

I drink a third cup of coffee, because fuck it. "The Games are rigged."

Efia's blue eyes balloon. "Rigged? No, never! They are an objective system to determine—"

"Save the starshit for the tabloids," I say. "They're rigged because of socioeconomic differences. The Council denies entitled opportunities to impoverished worlds like yours, no offense."

"Tertia's poor, too, but your world is doing all right. And Quin's wealthy but struggling."

"But we're rich in spirit, and it fuels us. Quate lost hope long ago, except for your songs—again, no offense. And there's a lot of pain in your songs." I chug a fourth cup of coffee. My bones buzz with duty. I'm ready. *Ready*. I can face the bleak music. "Also, Quin is rich but a piece of shit. Rich doesn't mean entitled, and Ora works her damnedest to paint them in an unflattering light."

"Hmm, true. And no offense ever taken. I love to learn, and

learning requires an open mind!"

I stare at her. She stares at me.

"Right, got it," Efia says. "Dialing down the joy to a more suitable level."

"Turn it off for today." *Twat.* Yup. But I watched Isrik beat Camroc to a pulp, then saw Ketra's mangled stomach, and I've no room for joy when rage is more fun. "Go do your commentate-replay thing."

Efia frowns, bites her lip, but before she can speak, reporters rush behind us, back to the office. She waits for the hallway to clear, then says, "I don't know what I am to you, but I'm not your punching bag, and I'm sure as hell not your fuck toy." She shivers, nervous, but charges on. "I am a happy person, and I will not compromise my happiness for your benefit, or for anyone else's. This might come off as young, stupid, gullible, or naive, but I need to say it, and you need to hear it. If you can't be nicer to me, then be gentler to me. I love your fire, Bazi, and I never want to dim that, but you have a habit of burning bridges, and I don't want you to burn ours."

I smile. Then I laugh. It's rough and unused. A squawk. A cackle. A belch from Tartarus's whores. "Attagirl."

Efia's bronze skin blushes, and she crosses her large arms. "What? I finally stand up for myself, and you laugh in my face?" She tosses her orange curls behind her shoulders. "I don't get you, and I don't know what you want—"

"This is what I want," I interrupt. "This is what I've always wanted, for you to advocate for yourself. Took you long enough."

"Wait, so this is why you've been a—"

"Dick? Yup. Well, I'm also a grouchy turd in general, but lately, yes. Before the Games, I told you not to let people treat

BURN THE SUN

you like shit, but you didn't change. So I acted like shit to boost your ego."

"Hold on, let me get this straight. You wanted to piss me off so much that I snapped and stood up for myself?"

"Yup, and it worked."

"You could have talked to me," Efia says.

"I did talk, and you didn't listen," I say. "Besides, you can't talk your way to confidence. You need something to shove you over the edge, and I'm great at shoving. Actions are older than words, more powerful. You needed a push."

"So you pushed?"

"So I pushed."

"That's fucked up."

"So am I."

"No, super fucked up, Bazi," Efia says. "I thought you hated me. You made me feel so special at the Ball, then you made me feel so alone after."

"You *are* special, Efia, so fucking special, but you are also alone. We are all alone. Nothing and nobody is guaranteed. I might not always be here, and you need to stand alone before you can fly free. I saw how you latched onto me, how desperate you were, how hard you clung—"

"Stop," Efia says. Her blush darkens to crimson. "Fucking *stop*. You think you know what's best for me? You think you have *the right* to treat me like a stardamn *child*? To manipulate and control me like that?"

Shit. "No, no, that's not what I meant, I swear."

"But it's what you did. And actions are more powerful than words, right?" She parrots my words and scorches my heart. "Because you know *so* much about what's best for everyone except your dumpster-fire self."

RATS RACE WHEN PIGS SPROUT WINGS

Hurt whistles through my nose as I exhale, center, ground, drown. Time to lie low and take the high road. "I deserved that—"

"You deserve much more."

"—and I'm sorry. You're right. It was insensitive and arrogant of me to assume I knew what was best for you."

"It was downright belittling."

"I intended the opposite." I sigh and take a large painful breath. "Idsura, my ex, said the same. When I care about someone, I care too much. I try to help, but I end up hurting."

"I don't need your help, and I don't need a hero," Efia says. "Assuming either is insulting. And if you think mentioning your ex will gain my sympathy—"

"I don't want your sympathy. I want your understanding."

"Oh, I understand why you're an asshole, and I understand why you want to help everyone but yourself. It's easier that way, changing the worlds instead of changing within. You have baggage, Bazi, and it's leaking everywhere. I'm here if you need me, but you've made it clear that you need no one."

"I didn't say that."

"Yeah, you did. 'We are all alone. Nothing and nobody is guaranteed."

"Okay, I fucked up," I snap. "I fucked up again, and I'm fucking sorry, all right? But I wanted to *elevate* you, because I *value* you, and I hate watching the worlds stomp on you. You are so stardamn *smart*, so fucking *happy*, and I'm sick of people equating joy with foolishness, with innocence, because you are neither. That's why I worry, why I try to protect you. I see now how that's condescending, but I don't know how else to be there for you, because I *care*, Efi. I care *a lot*, and it fucking *hurts*."

There. There. My baggage on display. I rip open the luggage and spill starshit everywhere. Maybe the sun will have mercy and explode now. Save me from the raw, vulnerable, miserable shitstorm I've unleashed.

"I know you care," Efia says, voice soft, "but I need you to care in a different way, because I care, too, and I can't function like this. Your protection smothers me. Yes, it made me lash out and stand up for myself, but that's not how I want to learn. I don't want to grow in anger. I want to grow in strength. You rely on rage, all the time, against everything. Anger is your catalyst, but it is not mine. That's not what I need."

"Then what do you need?" I ask.

"I don't know." She falters and sucks air through her teeth. "And don't think I don't appreciate it. No one's tried to help or protect me before. But assuming someone needs help and protection is offensive. I'm not weak."

"I never thought you were weak. I tried to help, because you are strong, so strong, far stronger than me. How can I fix fuck-up number two hundred and forty-three?"

Efia furrows her brows. She's young yet wiser than I'll ever be. An old soul, balanced in her core. No, she doesn't need me at all. I was a fool to believe I could offer her anything she doesn't already have.

"I'll make this easy," I add. "I'll pretend nothing happened between us. We'll work together, but I won't impose. Unless you'd like to resign. In that case, I'll write you a glowing recommendation with my fanciest words."

Efia huffs. "Everything is so dramatic with you. As I told you before, I don't want to resign. I love my job. But I need trust between us."

"You want me to rely on you and need you."

"No. I know I said that before, but I was wrong, and I admit that. Trust isn't about need. Trust is about belief. I believe in you, but you don't believe in me, not if you keep trying to help me. Don't you see how that implies I'm broken? That I need someone to fix me?"

I slump against the opposite wall and bang my head against metal. "Yes, I see. No, that was never my intent." *Deflect. Shield. Arm yourself to the teeth.* That's how I wade through life's everflowing starshit. But Efia is right about so many things. I try to fix the worlds instead of fixing the heaping fuckery inside me.

"I know it's not what you meant," Efia says, "but it's what you did, and it hurt."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Change. You want to elevate me, but I want you to empower me."

"Those are the same thing," I say.

"No," she says. "When you elevate someone, you reach down a hand and pull them up. When you empower someone, you wait nearby and let them become strong enough to pull themself up."

I cross my arms and lean against the wall. "So elevating you would be walking across the hall to kiss you? But empowering you would be waiting for you to walk across the hall to kiss me?"

Efia grimaces, an odd look on her usually cheerful face. "This isn't a game."

"I'm not playing a game. I'm trying to learn. And I'd apologize a thousand times, but it'd never be enough, so I'm trying something different. If you don't want to kiss me, that's fine, but if you do, I'm here."

She shuffles, skittish. "Don't you have somewhere to be?"

"I have many places to be," I say, "but nowhere else I want to be. Though you could tell me to fuck off, and I'd go back to being a grumpy troglodyte. It is what I do best, as you well know."

"You're infuriating."

"You're incandescent: brilliant and passionate."

"And furious."

I grin. "That, too. So, before I deplete my withering cache of snazzy words I could use for your possible resignation, make a choice, Efi. I don't have all day, and neither do you. Do you want me or not? I'm fine either way—well, that's a blatant lie, but stars forbid you see how smitten I am. It's your call."

Efia's lips tremble. "You're smitten?"

"You know I am," I say. "Hence, my ill-fated attempt to boost your confidence, a failure of Herculean proportions. But I'll return to rage-eating cupcakes and criticizing baking shows if that would make you happy."

Her brows knit together. "You would leave to make me happy?"

"Of course. I care so much, a disgusting amount, that I would let you go to set you free."

She pauses. "That would not make me happy."

"Good, me neither."

Tension froths between us. Starstop's metal walls pulse with blue-orange arteries, glowing with anticipation. *Love me, or leave me. Take me up, or let me go.* Efia is a puzzle, and I am a wrecking ball. Though I try to see her picture, I keep fucking up all her pieces.

"What do you want, Efi?" I whisper.

Her eyes drop to the floor. She knots her fingers, then says with a rush of fire-strewn air, "I don't want to kiss you."

And flood slams fire. "That's fine. I under—"

"I want to fuck the worlds away."

I blink. "Oh." Absorb. "Oh." Fire's revenge. "Okay, then. Our barracks is empty."

"Get in, then lock the door."

I obey. Clothes torpedo away. Efia pushes me on the floor. I collapse on my back. She straddles me, then pins my wrists to my sides. A knee rams between my legs. *Sparks. Shit. Dammit. Undone.* Her naked glory perches over me. She grinds against my thigh as I grind against her knee. We harden and melt. Our breasts peak together, and we burn below till we boil over. *Holy stardamn blazing suns.* Bliss rockets through my body. Tides of rapture. The starving anguish of a million ghosts reborn. We buck against each other, strings cut, bones jelly, hearts in puddles, electrified by lightning.

Efia does not fall. Instead, she grips my shoulders, fingers taut, as pleasure flows through us in star-soaked waves. After the storm, she watches me, gaze glacial. I wait beneath her, heaving and sweating, back stuck to the metal floor.

"I don't need your protection," Efia says.

"Understood," I say.

"And I don't need your help."

"Got it."

"But I do need this."

"Me, too."

"So don't fuck this up." She swings a leg over my torso, stands, and dresses. "Time to do my commentate-replay thing."

I smooth my hair and dress beside her. "You're in charge of M2O. I have a call to make."

We leave the barracks. Efia returns to the office, and I wait outside to listen for a minute.

She narrates over the racing replay from Dion's loss to Tertia: "Dion is a jungle world. A wealth of exotic plants and animals thrives in their tropical environment. The second planet from the sun has a healthy market economy. Senator Farsa represents the Socialist Democracy on the Council of Five. An easygoing and peaceful people, the Dionese excel at dance. They live in treehouses, hammocks, and hangbridges near oceans and rivers. *Agomes gnatnib itakrebmem adna.* May the stars bless you."

Efia's a rainbow, and I'm fool's gold. She sees me, spots my rot, and holds me to a towering standard. I'm not comfortable up here, above the clouds. It's too clear, too bright, too cold, too light. Darkness is my home. I live in shadows, burrow beneath the ground, but she digs me up, yanks out my roots, and replants me in a foreign field.

Stop it. Right. Damage control first, dumpster fire later.

Before I can act, an intern joins me in the hall. He yells at the coffee machine, slaps it, then abandons it. *Oh, those fucking assholes...*

I wait till he leaves before tying my cell into the office intercom. "A reminder to all employees that the coffee machine is not, in fact, voice activated. A second reminder that increasing the decibel level of your attempt will not change the outcome. A third reminder that I will dismiss any employee who aids in this misconception. Thank you."

I unlink from the intercom and call Camroc in the harsh, tinny hall. "No panic-calls in the last twenty-four hours. Have you replaced me with someone well adjusted and appropriate?"

"The horror," Camroc murmurs from the other side. Stress coats his words; anxiety laces his breaths. "You know I could never replace you, Bazi."

"Because I'm one of a kind?"

RATS RACE WHEN PIGS SPROUT WINGS

"Because they recalled the rest of your model."

Good, keep him joking. Nerves throttle the seconds between us, and silence simmers with his brewing panic. "I'm a limited edition," I say.

"You're a defunct collectible," he says.

"Make that my epitaph. You training?"

"Yup. In the arena now."

"How's Coach Brick-of-Steel Jaw doing?"

Camroc chuckles, a strained puff of air. "As usual. He's resigned to losing every match, but he's handling it better than the rest of us."

"The Games aren't over yet."

"Yeah, they are. I expect starshit from others, but not from you."

"It's not starshit, King Curmudgeon," I say. "Combat and racing favor the stronger worlds, but there are more types of power than strength. Have hope for the later events."

Camroc pauses. "You sound weird. Did you get laid?"

"You sound cranky. You should get laid."

He doesn't answer, and I know I've hit truth.

"This is about Ketra, isn't it?" I ask.

"No," he snaps, then he sighs. "Maybe. Sorry. She doesn't want pity or protection, but fucking stars, I feel so bloody useless."

"If it makes you feel better, someone told me off for doing the same thing."

"You let someone tell you off? The lay must've been gold."

"And you made it weird."

He chuckles again, less strained this time. *That's better*.

"Let it out, Cam," I say. "Don't constipate your emotions." "Like you?"

"Like me."

He breathes, unsteady, and vomits his heart. "I love her, Bazi. Fuck, I love her so stardamn much. She told me to fight, to let her take care of herself, but shit, I'm so bloody afraid. What the Maker did to her...what she took from her—"

"That was Queen Ora's fault, not the Maker's," I say.

"I know, I know, that's what I meant. But am I supposed to stand by and do nothing while her mother abuses her like that? I don't give a fuck if it's legal on Quin. Legal doesn't mean right."

"Ketra is stronger than you realize."

"I know she's strong. She's stronger than us all."

"This is a battle only she can fight—"

"But she doesn't need to fight alone."

"—and a war only she can win," I finish. "Yes, she does, Cam. If you deny her the power of freeing herself, of overthrowing her mother, she will never forgive you for that."

"Then what can I do?" Camroc asks, tortured. We are far too alike.

"Ketra needs to fight this alone, but she does not need to *be* alone, so be there for her. Talk to her. Hold her, when able. Build up her strength in private moments, so she can face the public storm. If your hero complex rages against that, vent to me, not her. I'm here for you."

"I know. Thank you." He hesitates, and I hear him tell his teammates he'll be there in a second. "Fucking stars, I want to slaughter the queen."

"Then the Council would disqualify Quate from the Games, Quin's barbaric laws would punish you, and Quin would declare war on Quate," I say. "You'd never see Ketra again, and her people would view her as weak since she didn't kill the queen

RATS RACE WHEN PIGS SPROUT WINGS

herself. Also, you shouldn't ideate assassination over the cell network."

"Luckily, I know a paranoid someone who encrypts all her calls. But I get it, I do. It still sucks."

"Like a well-oiled whore."

"Didn't need that image."

"It's on the house."

Camroc chuckles a third time, and finally, he unwinds. "One more thing, before I train hard to lose hard: Why does Ora hate Makers so much? Why discriminate? Why not exploit them? Make them produce shit, you know? Not that slavery's right, of course, but it's more logical to use them as a resource instead of all this murder and hate."

"They're too unpredictable to warrant production," I say. "Their power drains them, so they aren't reliable. As for Ora's hatred, the queen likes control, and she can't control Makers, so she paints them as chaotic monsters. She doesn't understand them, and she fears what she doesn't understand. Their gift is invisible. They look like us, can hide among us, and that terrifies her—plus most others. Fear is her greatest asset and weapon. Ora highlights propagandized Maker violence and uses setups as excuses for discrimination and execution."

"But could a Maker potentially enhance an athlete? Like Ketra's ribs?"

"Potentially, but it's not allowed. After you arrived on Starstop, all athletes received physicals. They scanned for moxies and Maker enhancements. Believe me, the Council takes every precaution to subjugate Makers at all costs."

"And you? What do you believe?" he asks.

I wait a breath, a blink, then say, "I believe the worlds are broken. I believe Makers are the best of us, not the worst. But I'm head of M2O, so I'm 'unbiased.' On the public record, I'm sickened by the recent attack against the princess, but I do not assign blame to the Maker. People infer, though, and fill in gaps with their own beliefs. Doesn't matter." I pause a second, then continue. "Listen, Cam, I know you love Ketra, and I know you're worried about her. Those are beautiful things. You both will get through this. Everything comes to an end, and this will, too."

"Thanks, Bazi," Camroc says. "I've always cared too much, believed too much, and I agree with you. Magic exists, and it's hard not to hinge all my dreams upon it, even if it's dangerous."

"I know, kid. You get that from me—from talking with me too much."

"There's no such thing as too much Bazi."

"Suck-up. Go train."

"You should get laid more often. I like you like this."

"Hanging up now," I say.

"Coward," Camroc says.

I cut the call and grin.

Then grimace.

I have failed you in a thousand ways. Forgive me, Camroc. Forgive me, and forget me. I fought my hardest to give you the best, but it's not enough, and nothing changes. I have too much fire but not enough warmth, and I'd burn the sun to grant your wings. Please, stars, let him live. Let pain, hardship, anger, and anguish drag him kicking and screaming away from here. Give him a future. Mother Suns, save him.

"Praying?" one of my reporters asks. He stands in the M2O office doorway, and I hear Efia chirp stats behind him.

"Talking to myself," I say.

"You believe in the stars?"

RATS RACE WHEN PIGS SPROUT WINGS

"Return to your desk before I find faith in your replacement." He blanches and scurries away. I close my eyes, fall against the wall, and let Efia's commentary wash over me. "Racing measures speed. For this event, each athlete receives a falcon—a hovercraft. They fly five circuits around the arena while they attempt to hit ten targets, two targets per loop."

Hold on a little longer. But I've been saying the same thing for the past twenty-five years. Where is the light at the end of this blood-smeared tunnel? *Death.* Well played, Reaper. *Are you afraid?* Not of you. *Of life?* Always.

The Quick and the Dead Cat Bounce

Camroc

o, Ri-ri!" Nyo shouts. "Go, go, go, go, go!"

Arada swings around the far edge of the loop with her falcon, behind Eleda from Tertia. They straddle the silver boomerangs and clutch the front controls, hovering above the arena's transformed floor, now a racing course. Rising around us in stadium seating, the crowd borders the massive circuit. They cheer for Eleda, jeer at Arada. Quate won some respect from Quin, but Tertia is higher up the ladder. M2O field reporters rattle off stats while Arada charges Eleda, a beast unleashed. Her brown skin reddens with anger, with ambition, as she barrels toward her opponent, a bat out of hell.

Coach chose Arada to race this round, because she's tiny and aerodynamic. But she makes up for her small size with her big mouth. We're lucky the judges haven't disqualified her yet. Before the match, a reporter mentioned her youth, so she called him a "scrotum-less douche-turd." Another discussed Quate's

losses, so she called her a "festering nipple blister." Neither reporter was wrong, but youth is a pressure point for Arada. Most assume she's naive, yet she's gullible as a crook—and loss means failure means death. She's not good with death. Death isn't something she can outrun or punch away.

Arada whips past us, on Eleda's heels. Her sleek black braid swishes like a tail while her thin black eyes glower at Eleda's back. A blurry "Tertia" smears yellow across her opponent's spine. Maybe if we race fast enough, we'll rip off our chains and burst through the cages that define and confine us. No. *No.* We've tried that before, but nothing can stop this fatal flood.

They're in the final lap, the fifth circuit, and they've both hit six out of eight possible targets thus far. Two more hits or misses, and it's over. Eleda weaves, blocks a slingshot. She's nimble and snippy, like Arada. In short, they clash. At large, they collide. M2O's aircams fly alongside them and zoom in on Eleda's sneer. Her honey eyes glint in her olive face. She tightens her rose-gold bun, then slows, stalls, flies hands-free. Cocky. And clever. It throws off Arada.

Eleda leaves an opening. Coach shouts to ignore the bait, but Arada takes it. Eleda waits till Arada is beside her, shoots the penultimate target, then slams into Arada. Their falcons crash with a grating screech. Metal crunches. Eleda's wing smashes Arada's chest, throwing her into the alarmed crowd. I scream as Nyo falls silent. Coach rushes through the stands. I try to follow, but Nyo holds me back.

"No," ze warns. "You'd disqualify Ri-ri. Only Coach can help her during a match." Ze gestures up toward the hanging screens where a time-out flag flashes yellow.

"Disqualify Ri-ri?" I ask, appalled. "What about Eleda? Contact is illegal in racing."

BURN THE SUN

"The judges won't call it contact. They'll call it a technical malfunction. The falcons crashed. Eleda's falcon hit Arada, but their bodies didn't touch."

"That's bloody ridiculous."

"I know, but it's what they ruled." Nyo points to a screen with M2O's updates, and ze's right. *Technical malfunction*. Fucking insane.

Hunched, Arada emerges from the stands, clutching her stomach, helped by Coach. Broken ribs, most likely. A medscanner will fix her after, but she must suffer through the rest of the race. Arada shoots me a savage smile, one I can't return. Instead, I scowl at the judges, hidden by shadows, faceless and soulless. They hate Quate. They hate our Makers and singers and dreamers, so they take it out on us here, at the Games. This is beyond unfair. It's just plain wrong.

"Calm, darling," Nyo purrs beside me.

"I hate this," I say. "Ri-ri could've won. That should've been a penalty, at least."

"But it wasn't, so let it go. And win or lose, she won't go quietly."

"That's what worries me."

It worries Coach, too. He squeezes Arada's shoulder, whispers something in her ear. She shakes him off. He throws up his hands, then returns to our team area. The alternates, Ronoc, Evam, and Trebor, chat behind us, oblivious and disinterested. Yelir's ghost echoes my glare.

"This'll get messy," Coach grunts as he joins us.

"I'd expect nothing less," Nyo says.

"She's playing with fire."

"Is there any other way to play? These are the Games."

"She's one of our best," Coach says. "I can't lose her."

"They won't disqualify her," ze says.

"I'm not worried about disqualification."

Before they can further unpack Arada's death wish, Ri-ri mounts her damaged falcon. She revs her engine and flinches with pain. Eleda hops on her falcon. She and her craft are barely scratched. The time-out flag disappears, and the race resumes. Screens flash with the score: seven targets to Eleda, six to Arada. Eleda takes the lead for the rest of the final lap.

Arada darts forward, catches Eleda, and flies in her wake. Dropping back, Eleda again bangs her falcon against Arada's. The crowd bellows with approval and complaints. Arada holds on by the skin of her teeth as Eleda crashes into her again, again, again.

"Penalty," Coach shouts above the distraught audience. "For stars' sake, that's a bloody penalty."

The judges ignore him. Eleda moves to crash into Arada again, but this time, Arada leaps from hers to Eleda's falcon. The hovercraft dips beneath her weight. Its belly squeals against the metal floor. Arada launches off the tail. Eleda spins out from her jump. Arada mounts her falcon and takes the lead. The crowd screams for Arada.

Then the judges call halt. A red penalty flag pulses on the screens. *Penalty: Quate. Illegal contact.* Arada's score drops from six targets to five, and the crowd protests in uproar.

"How the hell was *that* a penalty while Tertia's wasn't?" Coach yells beside me. "Going by your logic, Arada didn't even touch her."

The judges answer Coach with another penalty. *Penalty: Quate. Unsportsmanlike conduct.* Arada's score drops to four.

"Fucking stars," I swear. There's no way we can win. One target left, and Tertia's three ahead. Not that winning would

change anything, but we were so close, and injustice adds salt to failure's sting. No, this is worse than injustice. This is corruption, and it wrings blood from my heart.

Nyo is the only one who keeps zes cool. "Finish the race," ze mouths at Arada. "That's all you can do. Finish the race."

She rocks with rage but nods. The two athletes move back into position, and the judges flash the green flag. *Resume*.

Eleda and Arada both hit the last target, eight to five. Tertia wins. Quate loses. Side by side, they race toward the finish line. Eleda would win, regardless, but she chooses to win dirty. One last time, she crashes her falcon into Arada's. The crowd hollers. The judges stay silent. Arada leaps and spins as her falcon flips over, then lands on its belly and steers with her feet.

"Legend," Nyo murmurs beside me.

Eleda crosses the finish line. No one cheers. Ten seconds later, Arada finishes on a backward, upside-down falcon. Her engine smokes; her roof grazes the floor. The crowd howls like wild animals. Arada dismounts and grimaces, but she grasps her stomach and waves.

"You're a fucking bitch," Arada spits at Eleda. She turns toward the judges. "And you're—"

"Always right," Coach cuts her off. He bows to the judges, then waves a medscanner over Arada's torso. She straightens, healed—but still raving mad.

"It's starshit, Coach," she says. "It's fucking starshit."

Coach checks behind him for reporters, then says, "Yes, it is, but keep your mouth shut. Talk any more smack, and they'll do worse than disqualify you."

"It's not smack. It's truth. And what would they do, *kill* me?" She snorts. "We're all dying, Coach. Might as well go out with a bang."

THE QUICK AND THE DEAD CAT BOUNCE

"There are worse things than death. Cool the fuck down. You did great, Arada. Now, chill."

"I do not chill."

"Leave it."

"Fuck that."

Coach motions to Nyo and me. "Would you two talk some sense into her?"

"She's making perfect sense to me," I say, arms crossed.

"Not helping, Cam," Nyo mumbles under zes breath. Then ze says louder, "Of course, Coach."

The arena buzzes while reporters, judges, and staff prepare for the next match. Tertia must win against Quin to make the final. After their match, we race Quin, too. Nyo will compete. Once again, it won't matter if ze wins.

"Those judges are assholes," Arada snaps. We pull her into a pocket of crowd, a shadowed nook where she can rant—because rant she will, like no other. "Bloody, sun-fucked, starforsaken hell goblins with microscopic genitals and raggedy-ass dingleshits. I want to skewer them tongue to twat with a red-hot crowbar, then slice open their guts and weave their intestines into a fucking toilet, so I can shit in their entrails every day of my stardamn life—"

"Okay, Ri-ri," Nyo says, holding her shoulders, "let's take it down a notch."

"Fuck that, Nyo," Arada says, shoving zem. "Eleda broke a dozen rules, but they penalized me and Coach. She cracked my fucking ribs, that bloody bitch. It was starshit, and you know it."

Ze raises zes hands in surrender. "I never disputed that, but if you swear any louder, you'll disqualify the entire team for the rest of the Games." In a quieter voice, ze adds, "That is a death sentence, Ri-ri. Think of Quate. Think of our people."

"I never forget them, but they always forget me." She aims her wrath at me. "What about you, dipshit? Gonna say something, or gonna let Nyo take all the heat, as usual?"

Annoyance jerks within me, but I temper myself with a tight-lipped breath. I look at this tiny firebomb of a person, at my friend, my sister, and smirk. "You never change, Ri-ri."

"I don't need to. I'm already perfect."

"My bruises say otherwise."

She punches my arm, and I yelp. "Forgot how fragile you are."

"Cam's not fragile," Nyo says. "He's gentle. And you should be, too. We aren't your punching bags, Ri-ri. Vent all you want, but don't lash out at us. We're a team. We're family."

I warm at Nyo's defense. Arada doesn't.

"How many fucking times have I been there for you two morons, huh?" she spits. "And you can't be there for me now when I need you?"

"We are here," Nyo says, "but you're rather vicious at the moment."

"So what, because I don't want to hug it out or fuck it out, you can't handle me?"

"No one can handle you, Ri-ri," I say, voice soft. "That's why we love you, but it's also why you scare the shit out of us."

Her mouth quirks in a reluctant smile. "You've always known how to sweet-talk me, Cam."

"I have excellent survival instincts."

Arada's smile cracks into a laugh, and I relax—a smidge. She's still a chaotic, abrasive force of nature. Never know when she'll wreak havoc next. For now, she's calm—but never tame.

Behind us, the next match rages on: Aifos from Tertia versus Kire from Quin. They began while we were talking Arada down, though they restarted twice because of falcon sabotage. Reporters trill about conspiracy and subversion. Then an audience member throws a smoke bomb at the course. The crowd shrieks. Fog unfurls through the arena. Coach murmurs that it's nothing, it's fine, while janitors hurry to siphon smoke through vents. Guards escort the perpetrator off-site and exile them back to their world. Tensions rise like wildfire.

"Life's a bitch," Arada says.

"And death's a bastard," Coach adds.

A cry rises from the stands. Flashes of falcons. Quin spins out. Tertia overtakes them. Aifos flips Kire off as ze passes. The judges do nothing.

"Fuckers," Coach mutters.

"This is starshit," Arada says.

"We heard you the first hundred times, Ri-ri," Nyo teases.

"But this is extra starshit. A clogged intestinal tract backed up to the—"

"For stars' sake," I say, scrubbing my face.

Arada glowers. "Easy for you to say. Stress makes you liquidshit, but it makes me constipated."

"That is more than I ever wanted to know about either of you," Nyo says.

Aifos skids into zes final lap. Ze hits both targets. So does Kire. Their falcons slice the air as the crowd stands, seethes, shouts glory, glory, glory. Final curve. Kire slingshots around Aifos. Quin wins by a fingernail. The crowd cheers.

Then the screens flash violet. *Disqualification: Quin. Foul start.*

And the crowd detonates.

"What?" Coach cries. "That's starshit."

"As I've been saying," Arada murmurs.

BURN THE SUN

"They waited till the end to call a foul start?" Nyo asks. "That makes no sense. If Quin started too early, why not call it then?"

"Because Quin didn't start too early," Coach says.

"They did." I point at a nearby screen. The replay shows Kire gun it a hundredth of a second before the green light.

"That's doctored," Arada says.

"Bazi wouldn't do that," I say.

Summoned, my cell vibrates with a text from Bazi: Fucking turd monsters. The judges knew but waited till the end to embarrass Quin, to give them false hope. Tell Nyo to be careful.

I show Nyo the cell, and ze nods.

"After Quin's disqualification," the announcer says, "Tertia wins and will compete in the final against Prime."

Kire melts with crushing defeat. Aifos fought dirty and won on a technicality. The audience explodes as guards escort both athletes to safety.

"You're up," Coach tells Nyo.

Ze exhales, calm. "A meaningless match."

"No match is meaningless. Yes, we won't medal. Yes, we won't make the final. But that gives you flexibility, Nyo. Remember that."

"Flexibility, Coach?"

"Flexibility and freedom. You might not win, but you can still make a mark."

The announcer thunders, "For the last match of the racing qualifiers, allow me to welcome Nyo of Quate and Ekris of Ouin."

The audience still protests Quin's disqualification. Guards still struggle to contain the threat of mass hysteria. No one acknowledges the two athletes as they enter the arena and mount their falcons. The announcer gives no introductory

pomp. Nobody cares about this match. The final is decided. Prime will win it all. No. *No.* We can still try. Yes, this race means nothing, but we mean something. Come on, Nyo. Give us a confidence boost. No, a confidence rocket.

"I'll make you proud, Coach," Nyo says.

"Don't make me proud," Coach says. "Make me jealous."

The Quinish coach approaches Ekris on her falcon. Pissed at Kire's disqualification, he spits cinders, churns fury. He hisses something acidic at Ekris. She says something back, blue eyes filled with tears, then he slaps the athlete's cheek. Ekris shrinks, tiny and demure. She raises her umber arms to shield her face, but her coach grabs her cropped black hair, then yanks her head back. He whispers in her ear. She quivers, frantic. He slaps her again. Tears spill down her cheeks, and her coach punches her. In front of the judges, the crowd, the worlds, he punches her.

And no one interferes.

Abuse is legal on Quin. Ketra taught me that. Memories of her scarred stomach, of her metal shield, scorch my throat. *Burn the sun and everyone down.*

Ekris almost falls off her falcon. Hands trembling, she grips the controls as her coach retreats. A bruise blooms over her face, and her left eye swells shut. She stares at the arena floor as Nyo stares at her. Zes large onyx eyes scan zes opponent, and zes blue-black fingers curl into fists. Ze runs a hand through short black cornrows and straightens zes tall frame, tense as a bowstring. *Ze's angry*, I realize. Nyo's rarely angry. Ze's usually the calm one, the steady one who saves Arada and me from disaster. Not now. Nyo looks ready to create zes own disaster. *It's about time*.

Nyo catches Coach's gaze and cocks zes head, a question. Racso mouths, "Do what you must."

"Three," the announcer says, "two, one, mark!" *Green light.*

Ekris shoots forward. Nyo soars behind at zes leisure. The crowd shouts to fly faster, but ze is flying free.

Ekris looks across the course at Nyo, half a lap back. Their falcons dance around the wheel. Silver boomerangs revolve around choice, a choice to lose, a choice to let Quin win. Ekris is quick, but Nyo is quicker, so ze stalls to let her advance.

"Go," Nyo shouts across the track. Zes deep, soft voice booms beneath the audience's clamor.

Ekris pauses, loses speed, but Nyo urges her again.

"Go," ze repeats.

The match is fast, boring, done. Ekris hits every target. Nyo hits none. Quate loses. Quin wins. We've won no matches, but our losses are leaps. Ekris and Nyo dismount their falcons. The crowd hails both athletes even though Quin and Quate don't medal or make the final. This match doesn't matter, yet it matters most.

Coach tosses Nyo our medscanner, and ze heals Ekris's face. Her bruise fades, and her coach scowls. No one notices him. Ekris hugs Nyo, and Nyo raises their arms. The crowd cheers for both victory and defeat. Nyo let Ekris win. That was zes choice, a symbol of community, of solidarity. The athletes gain agency after lifetimes of quiet obedience. *Take control.* We did. *Grow some wings and fly.* We are. Some things are more important than life and death. This moment is one of them. For two worlds at odds, so often rivals, Nyo and Ekris bridge the gap.

Coach nods to both, respects both. Isrik from Quin, who beat me in combat, honors Nyo as she honored me. She shakes Nyo's hand, then shakes mine again. "Good team, great people,"

THE QUICK AND THE DEAD CAT BOUNCE

she rasps. "We honor you, Quate. *Nooktanuis tedhat aunis.* May the stars bless you." Isrik curtsies her burly frame. She winks a silver eye, then leaves to congratulate Ekris.

M2O reports facts over the intercom, but pride sparkles beneath Efia's careful words. The Council is furious. These are their Games. Athletes are their tools, and the Council controls the boards. Tools should not choose, and boards should not change, but the future is fire, and ideas are not slaves.

A hush blankets the crowd as the front row bows. They hold their arms forward with their thumbs together, hands down in an "M."

"It's their symbol, the Maker Bow," Coach whispers. "They honor us."

Quiet bleeds through the audience, then outrage. Fear spreads. Shock escalates. Tabloids retort. *Backlash.* Ice Enterprises, Quin's sponsor, gawks at the Makers' display. They're anti-Maker, but Ekris isn't. Ketra isn't, either. A person is not a people, and a people is not a person. Quin is not Ora.

And Ora is no longer Quin.

Hold Fast to Cages of Freedom

Ketra

here's a library on Starstop. I found it by accident. It trapped me on purpose. No books, but millions of memories.

Screens line the windowless walls. The room is a tiny cylinder with a black leather ottoman in the middle and a glowing blue ceiling. It is not inviting. It does not welcome intruders. Instead, it challenges us with hostility, not hospitality. *You'll find no answers here.*

My stomach still aches. The scars beg attention. *She ruined you to summon us.* Blood in the void. No, the void is numb. I sit on the ottoman, legs crossed and hands clasped. "Show me Earth," I order the room. Mother would be proud of the command. Mother can also go to hell. I've avoided her, and she's avoided me. It's best this way, on the brink of change.

Screens blur, then clear. *The blue marble.* Turquoise oceans swirl around emerald and gold continents. Snow whitens the

poles. This was before everything died, before the climate, the seedship, Earth's Exodus, these five worlds. *Was that home?* No. We never had a home, and we never will. Humans are wanderers, vagabonds, nomads the universe vomits through chaos.

An intercom crackles above my head. "Prime wins the racing final. They earn gold, one hundred points, with a total of two hundred points. Tertia earns silver, fifty points, with a total of seventy-five points. Dion wins bronze, twenty-five points, with a total of seventy-five points. As it stands after two events, Prime is in the lead, Dion and Tertia tie for second, and Quate and Quin tie for last with zero points each."

No surprises. Well, there was one surprise: Nyo. Ze lost so Ekris could win, so Quin could win, because ze saw our coach's abuse. Corruption. Rot from top to bottom. I took pain for granted, bore it and buried it, then my corpses escaped their graves.

Quin didn't medal. We earned no points, but we earned Quate's respect. Camroc's world mirrors him: kind and sacrificial. *Powerful*. Because surrender is a type of power. Respect is a type of peace. They gave us both, and we took it all. We're in debt. Mother would say there's no such thing, but I know what we owe.

"Thought I'd find you here." Camroc walks through the sliding door in civilian clothes, a dark gray tunic with leggings. His gaze gleams with jest then pity as he tries—and fails—to ignore my stomach. My lilac robe covers the damage, but Camroc sees through me.

"Stalking me now?" I try—and fail—to tease.

"Not now, always." His golden-brown face shifts into a pained grin. Muscles strain beneath his clothing.

"Shouldn't you be in the arena?"

"After our match, they reduced the audience to essential personnel."

"Because of Nyo?" I ask.

"And the Bow," he says.

"You Quatic athletes, always getting in trouble."

"Anything for Quin." His ruby curls spring with his stuttered breath. He hesitates. Clears his throat. Then sits on the ottoman and wraps an arm around me. He's warm, and I'm cold. Between us brews the storm of our worlds.

"That was incredible, what Nyo did for Ekris," I say. "Thank you, from all of Quin." I lean against his shoulder and rest. Camroc makes me soft, makes me whole, and both are dangerous things.

"Thank Nyo," Camroc says. "I would've raced."

I mock-punch him in the gut. "I would've, too."

"Then what was that for?"

"You're punchable."

"And you're Quinish."

Though it's a joke, I blanch as Camroc realizes what it insinuates. Quin is a brutal world, and her people are abusive weapons.

"No, no, no," he says, anguished. "I didn't mean...shit, Ketra, I'm an asshole."

"No, you're not," I say. "We're the assholes."

"No, it was a stupid joke, and I'm sorry. I meant it as a compliment, that you're savage and badass, but I'm shit at saying the right thing."

"It was the right thing. I'm glad you think I'm savage."

His garnet brow furrows. "You *are* savage. Don't let your mother get to you."

I slump at her mention, and he pulls me closer.

"Sorry," he says, "I shouldn't have said anything, and I'm trying to give you space, to let you heal, but fucking stars, it's so damn hard. And I shouldn't admit this. I should stay cold and aloof, but I'm burning inside at what Ora did to you."

"Cam—"

"No, I know. Let you fight your own battles. I'll shut up."

"Don't shut up," I say. "That's the last thing I want. Yes, I must fight my own battles, but I also need someone to light the way. I can't see in the dark."

"Lucky for you, I can," he says.

"Cocky bastard."

"Cocky orphan. That's next-level arrogance."

Shame ice-washes me. Camroc feels so grounded now that I often forget he has no roots. "Shit, I'm—"

"Relax, Ketra. It's nothing new, and it's nothing bad. My parents were most likely jerks, anyway."

"You're not curious?"

"Of course I'm curious, but it doesn't matter, and it changes nothing. Coach is like my father, Bazi is like my mother, and Nyo and Arada are like my siblings. I have a family, the best family. Never have I been alone."

I shouldn't ask, but I need a distraction from Mother's wrath, from her cruel words and vicious hands, tongue, and teeth. Flesh tears. Blood surges. Ripped skin. Ravaged gut. Organs. Agony. Metal. Bone. Memories sear my mind, reopen my stomach, carve my heart, so I blurt out, "And me? How do I fit into this ragtag group?"

Camroc studies me with those striking amber-jade eyes. He's gorgeous in a quiet way, an ancient god reborn from pain. "Ketra, love, that sounds like a passive-aggressive request to

confess my overwhelming feelings of affection, and you're far better than passive-aggression." A glimmer of mischief. "Give me true aggression, or give me nothing."

I give him nothing. "Never mind." I stand to leave, but he calls after me.

"Wait. You know you're my heartbeat, and if you don't, that's my fault. How do you fit into my family? You don't, because you're not family. You're more. Okay? Don't get me wrong, I adore the others, but what we share...well, it's different, isn't it?"

"If you say so." I walk toward the door.

"I won't chase you," Camroc says, voice low—and fierce. "I won't grab your arm to pull you back. Both are insults, that I own you, that I have the right to force your choice. I don't hold that right, and I won't steal it. If you choose to leave, to walk through that door, I will not stop you." He draws a tattered breath. "However, I beg you to hear me out for a minute. Is that all right?"

I murmur my agreement and face away so he can't see my tears.

With my permission, he continues. "You're hurting. I see it. Feel it. And I hate that I can't take it all away. You cage everything inside, and you hold fast to these cages of freedom, because that's what you think freedom is: a cage, control, the chains your mother's bound you with since birth. But you will explode if you don't release the hurt. Believe me, love. I've trained for years, through so much pain, and when I didn't vent, it destroyed me. Nyo and Arada were there for me then. Let me be there for you now. Let yourself bleed. I'm here to clean up the mess—or help you make a mess. Though if you push me away, I'll let you. I pray you won't, but I'll let you go, if that's

what you need."

Silence pulses between us. Doubts thicken the air. The dark metal room swells with agony as we stare at each other with biting vulnerability.

"That's not what I need," I whisper.

Gentle as a raindrop, Camroc leans forward, elbows on his knees, and asks, "Then what do you need, Ketra?"

Again, silence descends on heavy wings. My vision fogs with anger and tears. What do I need? A new life. A fresh start. No. *Never.* Then I wouldn't know Camroc.

"I need co—" A cough cuts me off. Grief scalds my throat. A lump claws its way up my esophagus, and I gag, clamp my lips, steady myself against the wall.

Camroc doesn't move. His features sharpen with agony, but he waits for me. "Ketra?" he breathes.

The lump grows into a dragon's egg, and the hatchling scorches my throat with hatred. Stay silent. Don't speak. Nothing you say matters. Your problems are meaningless. Mother's lessons stain my mind.

"It's stupid," I croak around the fire-breathing lump.

"It's not stupid," Camroc soothes.

"You don't even know what it is."

"I don't need to. Nothing you do or need is stupid, love."

"Mother would d-disagree," I stutter as the lump throbs with sorrow.

"And everyone disagrees with your mother." He chews off each word with bitter rage. "What do you need, Ketra?" he asks again.

The lump bursts, unravels, a ball of yarn blazing bright. A sob escapes, then another, then a fleet. "Damn you," I say between sobs. Breath gusts out of me, and I hyperventilate against the

wall. "Damn you to hell."

Camroc stiffens, but he still doesn't stand. Tension coils his limbs. "I'll go," he says.

"No, d-don't," I say. Then I break. Shatter. Sink to the floor, and wail.

Torment twists Camroc's face. "Ketra, please, what do you need?"

"Comfort...okay?" I bawl. "I need someone to hold me like a fucking child and tell me everything is okay when it's not. Someone to rock me like my mother never did, to whisper in my ear and rub my back like a stardamn baby. Someone to feel my scars and tell me I'm still me, despite my broken edges." I swallow a sob and pause. "Told you it's stupid."

"And I told you it's not," he says, incensed. "Can I be that someone?"

"I can't ask that of you."

"I'm the one asking. For stars' sake, *please*, Ketra. I'll get on my knees if I must. Or tell me to fuck off, because I need explicit instructions. I'm an athlete, not a poet."

I wipe my nose on my robe, then heave beneath the lurch of another savage sob. "Be my someone, please."

Finally, Camroc stands. He rises and crosses the room in one fluid motion. In half a heartbeat, his arms cocoon me. His body warms mine, and I melt against him. He holds me like a child, rocks me like a baby, rubs my back, strokes my hair, whispers that everything's okay when it's not. *It's not*.

"Your scars are stunning," Camroc breathes against me. His hand finds my stomach, and he traces circles over my belly button's ghost. "But more than that, your scars are powerful. Your world is broken, but you're not. No, you're this kind, loving person in a jagged, ruthless place. The pain you feel is

because of them, not you."

"I was wrong." Weeping into his tunic, I clutch the fabric like a toddler would a toy. "I don't want your lies."

"They aren't lies."

"You can't find *this* attractive." I yank up my robe, reveal my mangled gut, the grotesque flesh gnarled and cursed.

Camroc rests a hand against my ruined skin. His fingers pulse heat through my core. "You tell me." He hardens against my back.

"Liar," I hiss. Hope hitches in my sore throat.

"Dicks don't lie, darling."

I snort-laugh. "Ever the romantic." Then I pull down my robe, but he doesn't move his hand. I glance behind me. Desire blazes in his wild gaze. "They're ugly," I whisper.

"They're beautiful," he says. "Scars symbolize survival, and what is more beautiful than survival?" His fingers caress my stomach, and I shiver. "I like you better this way. They're part of you, a tribute to all you've overcome. Be proud of them. Scars show your strength."

"No," I whimper, "scars stole my strength." I didn't want to admit it before, but falling apart showed me the pieces I need to rebuild my foundation. I'm at rock bottom, ground zero, creation's womb. Weak, soft, helpless, worthless.

"Did they?" Camroc cocks an eyebrow. He releases me, then shucks off his tunic and lays it on the floor. The ceiling's glow bathes him in blue as he eases me down and rests above. "Then steal your strength back." He kisses me, but I shirk away.

"Wait." I trail a nail down his chest, and Camroc holds his breath. He's solid muscle, decades of training forged into a man.

"There's no rush," he says. "We don't need to do anything. But

I thought you might like to—"

"Fuck everything away?"

He chuckles and strokes my arm.

"I can't, Cam. It's hideous."

"It's gorgeous." He bends to kiss my tortured stomach. Scars mute his lips. I'm almost numb. Tears prick my eyes again.

"I can hardly feel you," I say, cheeks wet.

"It's your armor, one of many shields." His hand slides up my stomach, between my breasts, over the metal that protects my ribs. His breathing races. He tilts his head, asking permission.

"Sorry," I mumble. "Not now."

Camroc kisses my forehead and fixes my robe. I curl against his side, on his tunic over the metal floor. My fingers trace his bare chest in patterns.

After a quiet minute, he says, "Never apologize, not to me. I'm the one who's sorry. I never should have pushed you, but I burn for you, Ketra, more now than ever before. I thought it'd help, but it hurt, and I'm an idiot for thinking with the wrong head."

"You're an idiot for burning for me," I say. "We just met."

"Time is irrelevant. You can know someone your whole life yet not know them at all, or you can know someone for a heartbeat yet know their soul. I understand you, and you understand me. We always have, and we always will. That's far more important than some arbitrary, society-approved length of time."

"This is infatuation. Lust, not love."

"If it was lust, you'd have jumped me before, but you didn't, because this is more."

"Now who's being passive-aggressive?" I ask.

"I would never," Camroc mock-exclaims. He sits and pulls

HOLD FAST TO CAGES OF FREEDOM

on his tunic, dragging me with him. "See? Only passive." He springs to his feet and helps me up, too. I fall against him, revel in his aura for a moment, for a lifetime.

"I have to go," I murmur against his chest, the sound dull, a distant battle cry.

"Go?" Camroc asks, confused. "Go where?"

"To Prime." I point at my cell, at the blinking message. "Mother wants me to congratulate Prime on winning two golds in a row."

"Aren't cross-colony visits forbidden?"

"They were, but the Games are changing everything. Ora wants me to take advantage of traveling freedom to make political connections. She's too busy with the Ice Enterprises sponsorship to come with me. Plus, after our coach's public abuse, people want a friendly face, not a feral one, so she's sending me. At least I'll be alone this time."

A muscle spasms in Camroc's jaw. "For the record, I hate her." "So do I," I say, "but it will be nice to leave Starstop, if only for a short while. I feel trapped here."

"Me, too. The station is claustrophobic."

"If you weren't an Olympian, I'd ask you to join me."

"And I'd say yes, but Racso'd chase me to Prime and fuck up all the political machinations. He's a good soul, not a delicate one."

"I wish he were on the Council," I say. "Then we'd get shit done."

"I'd pay good money to see Racso put Ora in her place," he says.

"We all would." A nervous pause. "See you soon, Camroc of Quate."

He brushes his lips against mine—a promise and a prayer.

"Till next time, Ketra of Quin."

* * *

Prime is breathtaking.

The desert world billows with dunes around the sole city. Dwellings grace each side of a towering, sun-soaked canyon, and a parched river trickles through the center. Dictator Ribaj meets my skipper on a clifftop landing pad. His smattering of guards mirrors my own. We salute each other, then bow and descend a tunnel of stairs to his office. The walls and furniture match the canyon's sandstone, carved into and from the rock face. Ribaj gestures for me to sit beside him on the covered balcony. We face the opposite canyon, the other half of the desert city. The desperate river glitters below.

I don my political face. "Allow me to offer my deepest congratulations on your two gold medals, Dictator Ribaj."

"Thank you, Princess Ketra," Ribaj says. "Your presence honors us."

Our guards rustle behind us. The sun is strong; the heat is stifling. I thought Starstop was hot, but this is an oven. Removing my cloak, I roll up my robe's sleeves. Silk sticks to my sweat. Ribaj notices my discomfort and tells a guard to fan us. It helps a bit. The breeze is still iron-hot, but it's moving air. Ribaj removes his hood and adjusts his orange linen romper. The heat does not bother him, or he does not let it show.

"Do you knit?" he asks.

Thinking I misheard, I ask, "Sorry, sir, knit?"

"Yes, knit." His guards bring him two footlong needles and a skein of violet yarn. With deft fingers, he loops string over the needles, then clicks them together in staccato.

HOLD FAST TO CAGES OF FREEDOM

"I cannot say I've ever had the pleasure." I eye his needles; they boast a swath of knotted cloth. This is not the military leader I expected.

"Do you know why I knit?" he asks.

"I do not, but please tell."

"I knit as a reminder. Needles are weapons. That was their original intention, as defined by my people. Skinny daggers that could hide in a sleeve to pierce a throat—or three."

I force my breath to remain steady. His tone is not threatening. He is not Mother. "But you use those weapons to create, not destroy."

Ribaj's face brightens. "Exactly. They told me you are smart, and you do not disappoint."

"You flatter me."

"No, Princess, I do not practice flattery. I state facts. You are smart; that is a fact. These needles are weapons; that is another fact. Violence is a choice; that is a third fact. Sometimes necessary, oftentimes not. I knit to remind myself of this: If weapons can change, so can people."

"I see why you are beloved," I say.

"And I see why you are, too," he returns. "In your mother's hands, these needles would remain weapons. But in yours?" He lifts the growing strip of cloth and shrugs. "A different fate."

"You speak in riddles, dear Ribaj."

"And you see riddles where there are none, lovely Ketra." Ribaj's dark eyes roam my storms. "Life has not been kind to you lately. For that, I apologize."

I look away, ears red, heart hammering. *Don't see me.* "There is no need to apologize. You have done nothing wrong."

"I know, but life has no manners. It does not apologize for itself, so I must apologize for it." He waits a second, then adds,

"The queen also lacks skills in apology."

"Queen Ora has much on her shoulders," I monotone, reading the script I've practiced for years. "The Games weigh on her, our losses especially."

"She deserves to lose," Ribaj says. Before I can protest, he continues, "But her people do not. You do not. Quin is a cruel world because of her, but you are not cruel, Princess."

"I do not understand your insinuation, sir."

"As with riddles, I also do not insinuate. Prime is a rich, militant planet that thrives on blunt honesty, structure, and defense. We would not survive this harsh climate without those three pillars. But we do survive, and you will, too."

"With all due respect, only one world will survive, and it's looking like yours, not mine."

"The Games aren't over till they're over, and there is more than one way to survive."

I breathe in the dry desert air, wipe sweat off my forehead, and squint at the dying, bleeding sun. Prime is the closest colony to our scarlet star. Death shines red here, glistening and bright. They cannot ignore the gaping wound in the sky. Since Quin is farther away, we have distance from death, but Prime faces the catastrophe every day.

"Thank you for your kind words," I say. "They are appreciated."

"As are you," Ribaj says. He holds up a completed scarf, violet like my world, knitted by his Priman hands. Hope. Prayer. *Connection.* "Burn this first, then burn the sun."

I sift the soft cloth between my fingers. "I cannot burn something so beautiful."

"Beauty should burn. It reveals the truth within. I made this for you as a symbol of trust, so please trust me when I request

HOLD FAST TO CAGES OF FREEDOM

its incineration."

"When should I burn it?"

"Now." He hands me an ancient lighter and flicks the spark wheel with his thumb. A flame dances in the sweltering heat.

I lay the chunky scarf upon the sandstone, kneel beside the violet cloth, then lift the lighter from Ribaj's fingers. "It is a tragedy to destroy this."

"Weapons built it. Let peace destroy it."

Weapons and peace. Queen and princess. Mother and me.

I tilt my head to face him. "A metaphor, Dictator?"

His lips twitch with amusement. "A fact, Princess."

"If you say so." I lower the lighter. The scarf catches. Flames lick the string. Fire devours the cloth. In seconds, ash remains. The stench of charred yarn stings my nostrils.

"What truth did that reveal?" Ribaj asks.

I shrug at the cinders. "That everything burns?"

"Yes, but some things burn longer than others." He kicks aside a clump of cinders, revealing a sole ember, orange and bright. "Become that ember, Princess. Hold on. Burn on. Then use your fire to burn the sun."

At Your Wits' End Lie Dodged Bullets and Red Tape

Allebazi

The qualifiers for obstacles are almost over!" Efia exclaims into her headset. M2O broadcasts her bell-like voice to every colony on every world. "Prime won all their matches again—no surprise there! However, there were surprises in the later matches! Dion won against Tertia and Quin, and Quate won their first matches against Dion and Tertia. This means either Dion or Quate could compete against Prime in the final! Tertia won against Quin, but neither has enough wins to make the final. There is one last qualifier, Quate against Quin. If Quin wins, Dion will compete in the final, because they have more points overall. But if Quate wins, Quate will advance to their first final!"

Her exclamation-drenched speech pauses while she gulps air. I smash a cupcake in my mouth. Pink frosting and sprinkles

confetti an employee's desk. He ducks his head against the confectionary onslaught. I add extra ghosts to his paycheck through www.orlds. Money mutes all mouths.

"While we wait for Quate and Quin to compete in the last qualifier, let's dive into Tertian culture!" Efia cheeps, then beams at me. This is my planet, and she thinks I care. "Tertia is a temperate world with multifamily villas among the many hills. They have a creative and spontaneous culture, encouraged by governmental anarchy. Representative Aseret stands for Tertia on the Council, but Tertia rules herself. Her people are rich in spirit and the arts. *Ehc el ellets it onacideneb*. May the stars bless you."

Plus, we're dirt poor, bureaucratically constipated, and prejudiced against Makers. At this moment, neighbors betray each other, turn each other in for Quin-loaned blood money. On second thought, let's sugarcoat. Another cupcake, please.

"There has been considerable backlash to the Maker Bow," Efia continues. "During racing qualifiers between Quate and Quin, Nyo of Quate let Ekris of Quin win—"

I interrupt with a cough. She wants to say, *after a disturbing example of Quinish abuse—*I see her notes—but we must remain "unbiased."

"—after an upset Ekris mounted her falcon. The Games have been hard on us all," Efia finishes. Good. *Great.* Lie it all away. "But we persist. Obstacles measure logic. They're mental as well as physical challenges. Two identical courses sit side by side in the arena. The first athlete to finish or the one who makes it farthest wins."

Efia babbles nonsense she's repeated before every match. Repetition means familiarity, and familiarity means comfort. That's what we all want deep in our ruined hearts: comfort, safety, security, warmth. *Hold us. Calm us. Make us a home.* Before, I'd gag on mawkish psychology, but now, near death, I stay silent...and jam another cupcake down my throat.

If Quate wins their next match against Quin, the last obstacles qualifier, they'll make the final. Then they'll fight Prime and medal, win or lose. In the batshit-insane possibility they beat Prime, they'll earn gold. Gold is hope. A chance to survive. The door cracking open for escape. One hundred points...they could earn a century. No. *No.* Enough joy. Disappointment stalks desire's heels.

I pull up the M2O site on my cell, click a recent post, and swear as it redirects. Fucking pranks. Yes, fun is great at the end of the worlds, but not here, not live, not when so much is at stake.

So I rage-type: Please discontinue redirects from company pages to full-screen images of Nicolas Cage. Our website is live on www.orlds, and users have been filing complaints. Thank you.

Then I turn to Efia and ask, "Want a front seat?"

She silences her headset's mic and raises an orange eyebrow. "Really?"

"Yep."

Her lips crack into a blinding smile. "I'd love one."

I tell the cupcake-casualty employee to hold down the fort while I escort Efia to the arena.

The dome hums with suspense. In the massive stadium seating, the crowd vibrates with brittle anticipation. Fever grips government officials, M2O reporters, and audience members. For obstacles, the floor transforms again. Two identical courses twin down the center. All obstacles qualifiers have used the same tracks, but they will change for the final.

"Athletes, enter the arena," the announcer booms. "Welcome,

Arada of Quate and Ekris of Quin."

Efia and I claim front-row seats as the tiny athletes take the floor. Their black hair is gelled back. Their brown hands shake, a sign of respect, of honor and understanding. These underdogs, these enemy worlds, have bonded after Camroc's loss to Isrik and Nyo's surrender to Ekris.

The crowd boils over. Cheers thunder the arena. Arada salutes Speaker Esrioas, and Ekris salutes Princess Ketra—Queen Ora is absent, a mercy—then the faceless judges signal they begin.

There are five hurdles in the obstacles qualifiers: rope swing, broken bridges, net climb, wall crawl, and cliff jumps. Arada and Ekris start the first obstacle and sprint up their sets of stairs. At the top, they leap and catch twin ropes. Ekris slides a couple inches, burns her palms, winces. Arada clings to the rope, swings, and launches herself onto the next platform. Ekris lands a second later, cradling her hands, red and raw. The crowd roars for them to move faster.

Next, bridges. Metal planks wobble over a central pole. Without balance, they'll tip and drop athletes to the ground—as many have fallen thus far. Arada pauses. Ekris does not. The Quinish athlete hops from plank to plank, landing her feet on either side. She centers her weight, then races across before Arada begins. Arada steps in the middle, avoiding the rocky ends. The plank tips. She almost falls. The crowd gasps. Then she wobbles, steadies, and repeats Ekris's technique. By the time Arada completes the bridge, Ekris is halfway up the next obstacle.

The net hangs from a frame, upside down. Arada leaps and grasps the knotted ropes, then chases Ekris up, up, *up* as they scurry to the top. They reach the peak together.

BURN THE SUN

Now, wall crawl. Two clear walls rise on either side of them both from the floor to just above their heads. This is how Quate won against Dion and Tertia in their previous matches. Their opponents slipped here, fell dozens of feet to broken bones and concussions. Ekris pauses, remembers those brutal falls, the crunch of shattered skeletons. Arada does not pause. She jumps and sticks her hands and feet to the walls. Her palms and soles grip the plastic as she shimmies across the fifty-foot gap. The floor beckons below, a metal maw of temptation. Failure is destruction...or death. Ekris follows, but her palms sting from rope burn. Sweat beads her forehead. She slips an inch, a foot, and the crowd yells. Arada gains the lead. *Come on, come on, come on.*

Arada finishes the wall crawl and starts cliff jumps. Ekris slips another foot down the walls. The crowd shouts for her to hang on, but she squeaks down two more feet. Arada jumps from the top cliff to the next, a twenty-foot drop. Her legs buckle beneath her, and she rolls. Ekris skids down the walls another couple feet. Arada jumps from the middle cliff to the floor, rolls, and races to the finish line. Ekris falls, surrenders, and breaks both legs. Arada wins. The Quinish coach waves a medscanner over Ekris's wounds, then smacks her cheek. Arada balls her hands into fists, but Nyo leads her into the Quatic zone.

"Quate wins!" Efia exclaims into her headset. "They will advance to the obstacles final against Prime, their first final of the Olympics!" Quate is her world, and she leaps from the front row, hands in the air, screaming her lungs to dust.

I post to PicTic and update M2O's homepage: "Quate heads to their first final against Prime." Simple, stark, not clever, no guessing. I want the news to shine bright as the dying sun.

"You did it, Ri-ri!" Nyo shouts as ze embraces her.

"Of course I did, darling," Arada says.

Camroc hugs her next, then Coach Racso, then the alternates. The Quatic team erupts with joy—fierce and fragile, daring and dangerous. This type of joy is a torch in a storm. It won't last, and they probably won't win the final. But hope is too beautiful to smother, so I let them burn.

"Bazi!" Camroc calls from the Quatic huddle. "Bazi, we did it! We made the final!"

"Never doubted you, kid," I call back.

Arada clears her throat.

"Or you, Arada," I add.

Efia rustles beside me. "She's cute, isn't she?"

I turn toward her, feel that flaming knot in my gut, the one only she can light. "Is that jealousy, Efi?"

Efia blushes crimson. "No! No, of course n—"

I interrupt her with a kiss. It's jagged and rugged, all power and no prestige. "I have eyes for only you. And cupcakes. But don't let it go to your head. And don't get jealous of my cupcakes."

She wobbles. Her blue eyes blink stars. "Got it!" she singsongs.

The crowd mirrors her mood. Excitement stampedes the stadium. Conversations gust through stands, and cheers rain down from every level. Whoops branch the arena like lightning, and chants thunder over us. Quate is an underdog, but she is also a new favorite. Their team has earned respect, something Queen Ora tries to steal, but you can't thieve honor, and you can't fake glory.

The sea parts. I stand alone in the middle. The crowd belongs together, to the walls.

"What's wrong?" Efia asks. She does not beam or exclaim

this time.

"Nothing," I say, because it is nothing, I am nothing, and we'll all fade to nothing in the end.

"I don't like that look."

"Then look away."

"Bazi, we talked about—"

"My twattery?"

Efia grins. "Yes."

But I can't tell her the truth, that I've done something awful. That with every love I lose, I lose part of myself, too. That there's so little left of me to love, and I'm worried I'll lose her, too. I can't tell her she owns the largest part of me, that I wish I had more pieces of myself to give her, but the best of me has rotted away. Doesn't matter. We'll die soon, anyway.

"Sorry, Efi, the Games are a lot," I say.

Now, she beams. "Totally, I mean, talk about shared trauma!" She forces a frown. "That came out wrong."

"No, I wish we were all so bold." And I wish the others were you, Efi. I wish I gave my heart to clones of you, that this is you merged, the broken hearts once again whole. Because I can't stop loving them, but I wish I had only ever loved you.

"The universe is a scary place," Efia says amid the celebrating crowd. "Do you think there's hope, Bazi? Hope for change? For something more?"

"Hope is all we have," I say. "There are always people speaking up and fighting back, and there is hope in that, in the resilience of that hope. People never stop doing terrible things to each other, but people also never stop doing beautiful things to support each other. Trauma breaks and bonds us, and through it all, we hope, because hope is a wild, stubborn, powerful thing. Hope will not go quietly, and hope will never burn out. As long

as we focus on lighting that torch, I think we'll be okay, kid."

She tilts her head, confused. "Is that optimism? Am I rubbing off on you?"

"Don't get used to it," I say.

"Stars forbid you are predictable." Efia winks, and I roll my eyes. "Even in our darkest hour, humanity shines through."

"I wouldn't call this humanity." I point at the savage crowd.

"Of course you wouldn't, my dear ornery Bazi. I'm sure humanity to you is far worse."

"I was holding us to a higher standard, but thank you for your confidence in my long-practiced cynicism."

"You *are* a devout worshiper of misery and despair. Can't blame me for jumping to conclusions."

"Well, I earned this misery and despair." I mean it as a joke, but truth muddies my words.

"And I'm guessing if I ask why, you won't tell," she says.

If I tell, you'd leave, everyone'd leave. It'd ruin everything I've done, every mistake I've made for a greater purpose, even if that greater purpose destroys my soul. Too tacky. Won't say it, can't say it. Instead, I say, "Nope, it'd ruin my dark and mysterious reputation."

Efia laughs, and her laugh is sunshine, a release from the stress inside me. She thinks I'm hard on myself, that I beat myself up for no reason, but I have every reason to smash my soul to pulp. Her trust feels like redemption, and I don't deserve redemption after all I've done.

Unbidden, I remember him, the him I lost, the him I knew for a moment, for an infinity. His big eyes and tiny hands. His downy hair and feather-soft skin. When he cried and I calmed him. When he slept and I soothed him. When the universe rested in the palm of my hand.

BURN THE SUN

One memory rises, a rash on my psyche. Before I lost him, he gave me a gift, a chance to bond over suffering. When he was still small, so fragile, a stomach bug found him. Hours after he went to sleep, he woke up caked in vomit. I will never forget his bile-coated shrieks, his hands shaking with hysteria, clothes and sheets thick with regurgitated chunks.

That night, though exhausted and sleep-deprived, I became a stranger, a version of myself I never knew before. Calm and grounded, I peeled off his filthy clothes, hushed him with lullabies, and quieted him with whispers. "I got this, I got this, I got this," I chanted in his ear, while my heart stammered, I c-c-can't do this, I c-can't do this, I c-can't do this. But I did do that. I washed him and his bedding, cut the soiled rug away, and salvaged stuffed animals that escaped the retch.

For years, I've cherished that moment, despite what came next. But I can't tell Efia. No one can know of my sawtooth wound. It's over, and he's gone, I remind myself. The sun is dying, and you'll join him soon. No. I can never join him, and he can never join me.

"Quate! Quate! Quate!" the crowd shouts, and Efia shouts with them. I tell memory to fuck off and return to now, after a short prayer.

Mother Suns, shield him. Live on, live free, in a feral forest, surrounded by fireflies. Soar among living lightning, with dancing stars in the breathing night. Break your back to build your wings, then fly on, and then fly free.

A Can of Worms in a Hornet's Nest With a Bone to Pick and a Cross to Bear

Camroc

ou're up," Coach shouts above the howling crowd.
"Sorry?" I shout back.
He points at the arena. The course has changed for the final. It's longer and more complicated than the one used for qualifiers. Identical gauntlets of glory. "You're up," he repeats.

Fear roots deep. "I don't understand. Nyo and Arada won qualifiers. They should compete now."

"I was saving you for the final. You're the best at obstacles, always have been, so show me your best."

"N-n-no, I c-can't-"

"Cam, breathe," Nyo says beside me. Zes hands rest on my shoulders, root me to the floor.

Panic floods my throat. My lungs pop. Chest bursts. Heart

pounds. Bones powder. Fall all the way down. No control. No power. Failure, doom, danger, death. That's where I will lead us: death. That's where this path ends: death. Sweat greases my clammy skin. My puppet limbs sag, limp and floppy. You are a doll, and dolls always break. I scramble for thoughts, for reason and purpose, but sense races away, a cliff-bound train. Drown in dreams of glory.

No glory. This isn't about glory. This is about respect. Tributes. Honoring Yelir's memory. Yes. Yes. Yelir's memory. And Ketra's scars. Those beautiful scars. Fight for those. But my lungs are still popped balloons. My throat is still a braided noose. My heart still stampedes against my rib cage, a war drum and a battle cry. Worry rushes me. Focus flees me. Remember. I remember. Regret. I regret too much.

"Count," Arada says, somewhere near, nowhere here.

Numbers don't exist for me. Only pain, fire, flashes, cramps. My stomach heaves, and I retch. Coach catches the sick in a bucket, hushes my bile-coated shrieks, and stills my trembling hands.

"Camroc, listen to me," Coach says. He, Nyo, and Arada face me to block out reporters and the crowd.

Suffocating and sinking, I wait for him to save me.

"You can do this. There is no doubt in my mind. You can win, if you let yourself fight. Commit to the fall. We will catch you." "I-I-I'm t-trying, Coach," I rasp.

"Then try harder," he says, firm yet kind. "You are in control of your cage. You are your own anchor. Don't let fear hold your leash. One step, then another. One obstacle at a time. Adapt, don't stall. And don't catastrophize. You've trained your entire life for this moment, and you are our best chance."

"You are," Nyo agrees. "You can do this, Cam. You can win."

"Only you can win," Arada says in a rare instance of humility. She squeezes my sweat-drenched hand, and I squeeze back. Okay. Okay.

"Here goes nothing," I say.

"Here goes everything," Coach says. He pats my arm.

Breathe. Count. Relax. Commit. This is happening. The weight of Quate is on my back. No, I am on Quate's back. She raises me up, enables this chance. Fear still prickles my skin. Panic still pumps through my veins. But I've come too far to fall short again.

"Athletes, enter the arena," the announcer booms. "Welcome, Camroc of Quate and Ramo of Prime."

Ramo and I approach each other. We do not shake hands; we bow, low. Still respectful, but too much is at stake to bridge our worlds with friendship now. Godly and brawny, sinewy and lethal, he's a powerhouse, brown body rippling with muscle. But Ramo's charm shines through his power. A smile washes his face, there then gone, and I return the favor, swallowing my terror.

The crowd screams, a horde of banshees, as I salute Speaker Esrioas. Ramo then salutes Dictator Ribaj—recently returned from Prime, from his meeting with Ketra. *Ketra. Think of her scars. Mother Suns, give me strength to see this through.* Before I'm ready, the judges signal we begin.

Ramo and I face the twin courses, the identical deathtraps or lifeboats. One will sink; the other will swim. We sprint toward the warped wall, fish out of water. Our gunmetal uniforms blur as we windmill our limbs. Before us, our names; behind us, our planets. Orange stripes grace his arms and legs; blue stripes brand mine. I tune out the crowd, my team, my family, and focus on the course—on salvation or damnation.

I race up the wall, run up the curve, leap and grab the top edge. Ramo grips his overhang in sync. We move as one, heave ourselves over and up. Adrenaline scorches me. Heart pounds. Blood gushes. *Die like the sun, on the back of the world.* No. *No.* If I can win anything, I can win this. The universe is me and him. Before, I sold my soul to fear. I built a cage of comfort and curled inside the ever-shrinking pit. Now, I buy my soul with freedom and grow wings from ghosts of courage and grit. *Be brave.* I'll try.

We reach the rope climb. Ramo shimmies up in seconds, a spider in reverse. When he reaches the top, I start at the bottom. The climb is easy; I fly up behind him, arms and legs starving. Let us win, or let us come close. At the top, another rope, a gap, a platform on the other side. Ramo is already across. Shit. I grab the rope and jump too soon. My hands slide an inch; the rope cuts my palms. Blood coats my fingers. The rope swings short, too far from the platform. The rope swings back, too far from victory. I hike my body up the cord, swing my legs, then catapult myself toward the platform. My shoes skid over the lip, and I throw myself forward, then fall to my knees. Weak. I know.

Below me, a drop. Ramo lands at the bottom. He tucks, rolls, then springs toward the next obstacle. I'm still stranded at the top. *Fuck*. I ignore the crowd's cheers and jeers. Lean. *Leap*. Jump. *Fly*. I crash. *Hard*. Fifteen feet of free fall drill into my left leg. My knee gives, then my ankle. Sprain or worse, and pain. *Agony*. My oldest friend. Ramo is two obstacles ahead. *Do this. Be this. Become something more*.

I push myself to my feet. My left leg buckles. I wobble, balance. Can't walk, so I hop to the seesaw and crawl. *Pathetic*. But pathos wins wars. On hands and knees, pain drives

me forward, up the seesaw's center, then the plank tilts. I somersault down.

Next, dancing stones. I focus on me, not Ramo. *Faster, faster, fly, little demon.* I hop on my right foot across metal rocks. Can't fall. Can't fail. Can't touch the ground. Each landing spikes up my heel, and my left leg dangles, useless, in surrender. No. *No.* I won't surrender. This is messy, crazy, wild, free. And that's life, wild and free. So I swing my arms, hop the last stone, then duck and roll to safety. *Danger.* There's no safety here. "I'm dying," says the sun. And I'm trying—*doing.* Yes, I'm doing. Doing, doing, *done.*

Before me, a gap. Ramo is still two obstacles ahead. Time to throw all the desperate, brutal, bloody punches. I lunge, leap, grab the zip line's handle. Feet free, I zoom across the divide. At the end, a wall. I release the zip line and clutch the edge. My fingers grasp the lip and slide, sweaty and shaking. I inch my good leg up the wall to scramble over the top. Deep breaths, chug air. No rest, no stops.

The wheel is next, a man-sized hoop. I crawl inside, stand on one trembling leg, hook my fingers and good foot into handles. Leaning sideways, I roll. My injured leg throbs with each rotation. I urge it quicker till it bangs against the trampoline. Ramo's one ahead, on the trapeze. That's the last obstacle. He swings; he wins. No. *No.*

Ignoring the shrieking pain in my leg, the wailing crowd, my howling team, I throw everything I was, am, and will become at that bloody trampoline. On one foot, I bounce, flip, bounce, flip, till I reach the platform as Ramo grips the trapeze. He risks a sideways glance, eyes wide with surprise. *I'm here*. And I don't need legs for this one.

We jump together. Grab the bars. Release the first trapeze,

then grab the second, then the third. *The end.* I leap. The finish line is a chalked scratch against metal ground. I land on one leg, my bad leg, but don't fall. Biting back sobs, blinking back tears, I set down my good foot and raise my arms. Even if I didn't win, I competed—I completed.

Half a second later, someone lands beside me, the *pat-pat* of footsteps. Ramo. *I won.* Wait, did I win? I drink in the room. The audience shouts, but I can't make out words. I search for my team, can't find them. Look for Bazi, can't spot her. Hanging screens remain blank, in limbo, as I face Ramo and Ramo faces me. We bow toward each other, despite whatever comes next.

Next comes now. "Quate wins!" the announcer blares. Screens update with my name and world. It doesn't sink in. I don't understand. Even when the crowd roars, when Ramo shakes my hand, I don't understand.

"Congratulations," Ramo says, then disappears into the crowd.

Coach finds me. Joy warps his face. He waves a medscanner over my palms, knee, and ankle. *All better. Always worse.* Yet still, I don't understand.

"You won, Camroc," Coach barks above the celebration. "You won for us—our first medal, and it's gold."

The intercom crackles. Efia clears her throat. To the arena, to Starstop, to the worlds, she announces, "Quate wins the obstacles final. They earn gold, one hundred points, with a total of one hundred points. Prime earns silver, fifty points, with a total of two hundred and fifty points, in first place overall. Dion wins bronze, with a total of one hundred points—tied with Quate in second. Tertia wins no medals this event, but holds a total of seventy-five points. Quin also wins no medals and has zero points."

"We're tied for second?" Nyo asks, joining us.

"We're tied for second!" Arada exclaims, and the crowd bursts.

One gold, and it earns us a chance. We're still in the running. We could still win. Yes, Prime is far ahead, but victory is no longer impossible.

"You gave us hope, darling," Nyo says. Ze kisses my cheek.

"You and Arada got us here," I say, crushing zem in a hug.

"Damn right we did," Arada says. She ruffles our hair.

Coach hugs us all as Bazi and Efia approach from the front row. The arena is a carnival; they dodge confetti and liquor to reach us.

"Great job, kid," Bazi says. "Knew you'd win."

"And on a shattered leg!" Efia exclaims.

"A sprained—" I start.

"You were *amazing*, like *totally brilliant*!" she interrupts, bubbling over. "On behalf of all of Quate, thank you to the stars and beyond!"

I point at my teammates. "It wasn't only me."

"Of course not! You all are superstars!"

Bazi rolls her eyes, then leads Efia away. M2O has articles to write. They already reported the main news, but this is history, legendary. Quate is an underdog. We don't fight back, and we don't win medals. Today, we did both. *Corny.* I know. But I'm proud for once, and I won something for once, so I'm allowed a little boast.

A flash of starlight hair grabs my eye. My heart lurches. Since Ora's still absent, it must be—

"Hey, Camroc." Ketra waves but keeps her distance. We're still forbidden, still opposites from different worlds.

"I love you," I mouth.

"I love you, too," she mouths back.

BURN THE SUN

Then she's gone, the crowd explodes, and guards usher us to our barracks.

The next hour is a blur. Champagne pops and pours. Snacks make the rounds. Joy overflows. Coach waits outside with the guards. It's a volatile time. Quate won. We upset the balance. We didn't expect gold, and it births new hope. Hope is a weapon, same as fear, two sides of a sword, both thirsty for blood. Prime is still first, but we have a shot. Most never thought we'd earn a medal, let alone a chance, but here chance is, and there is another bottle of champagne.

It doesn't take much to obliterate us. We're athletes; our bodies are tools. We nurture, nourish, protect, and polish them. But tonight, we celebrate. Coach cuts us off before we ruin our shot at the next event.

"I love you," Arada slurs. She punches my arm, and I flinch. "You're like my brother—no, fuck that, you *are* my brother, and I'd beat the shit out of all the worlds for you."

"Didn't peg you for a sappy sort," Nyo says. Zes words are still articulate, but zes honeyed letters slide together.

"I'm not sappy. You're sappy."

"Darling, you're remarkably drunk."

"Thank you." Arada pinches Nyo's cheek, then burps. "Ugh, champagne breath. So pretentious. Like shitting caviar."

Nyo laughs, deep and velvety. "Or vomiting lobster."

"What the fuck is lobster?"

"You know, that Earth delicacy. They have it on Dion, I think." Arada's nose twitches. "You reek of fancy fuckery. Have you been sucking up?"

"I have been behaving, unlike someone." Nyo smirks at me.

"I behave," I say, wasted. Two glasses, and I'm plastered.

"Starshit," Arada says. "Royal starshit, in fact." She winks, and

I shush her.

"No one can know—"

"Calm your balls, Cam. The alternates are out cold, Coach already knows, and the guards are under oath to keep all your dirty secrets. So tell me: What's the princess like? Does she queef rainbows and squirt sunshine?"

"Wow, Ri-ri," Nyo says, saving me. "There is a line, and you fucked it bloody."

"Oh, don't be such a prude," Arada says. "I want facts. She's hot. I'm horny. Give me deets, Cam. Draw her titties. Describe her scent."

"Her scent?" I snort. "Ri-ri, for fuck's sake, you need to get laid."

"That's my stardamn point. Is she down for a threesome? Fucking you'd be kinda incestuous, but I'm desperate."

"I am not fucking you, and I am not asking her if she wants to fuck a horny stranger."

"And here I thought we were family."

"That's my stardamn point," I say. "You're my sister. Don't make this weird."

"Well, if you find anyone else, let me know."

"Yes," Nyo says, "I'm sure Cam will tell you if, during his wealth of free time when he's not training or fighting to ensure our world's survival, he happens across a lonely, lustful damsel in distress who needs sexual fulfillment of a sapphic nature with lascivious haste."

Arada blinks. "Damn, that was hot."

"It was sarcasm."

"I know, fuckwad. Still was hot. Not the lascivious part. Big words don't make big tits or dicks."

A gentle silence falls between us as we lounge on a nearby

BURN THE SUN

bunk, tangled together like tree roots.

"I don't want to die," Arada says.

"As I said, a sappy drunk," Nyo says.

She play-slaps zem. "I'm trying to have a heart-to-heart here."

"By segueing from sexual organs to death?"

"Exactly."

"I don't want to die, either, Ri-ri," I say, "but we might win."

"Against Prime?" she asks. "We'd need a blue-balled teenager's load of luck."

"Fucking stars, take care of yourself so everything is not a bloody innuendo," Nyo says.

"It was beautiful, Ri-ri," I say.

"See? Cam gets it," Arada says.

"Cam is trying to calm you down before you hunt and hump his girlfriend," Nyo says.

"True," I say with a drunken giggle.

Arada elbows me in the ribs, then snuggles closer in our nest of limbs. "You miss her, don't you?"

I nod. "I wish Ketra and Bazi could be here, too."

"For a fivesome?"

"Fucking stars, Ri-ri."

We all melt with laughter.

"I'll miss this," Nyo says.

"When the sun fries us, and we die in agony as our blood boils in our veins and our brains cook inside our skulls?" Arada asks.

"That was the appropriate level of respectful sentiment I was going for."

"I aim to please."

We laugh again, but fear fogs the laughter.

"It's all shit, isn't it?" Arada asks. She fidgets on the bed and knees me with her bony leg.

"Cam's right. We might win," Nyo says, voice soft.

Earning gold in obstacles has boosted my confidence. Victory makes the impossible possible, and opens a door I thought forever locked. But it's still one door, one medal, one shot. And fate will fire many more shots before the Games end.

"Yeah, we might win, but everyone else will die," I say. I think of Ketra and Bazi, of all the foreign athletes who've honored us thus far. "Yeah, it's all shit."

"That's the spirit," Nyo says. Ze wraps a long arm behind my head, and I close my eyes, steady my breathing with zes.

"Heyo, fly high," I whisper.

A beat, a breath, then Nyo answers, "Live on."

"Heyo, fly far."

"Live hard."

"Heyo, fly free."

"Live free."

Together, we sing, "I'm ready to die. Come and steal my heart."

Arada sighs. "You both are hopeless."

Nyo nudges Arada, then tickles her stomach.

"You better fucking stop," she warns, "because I can't contain myself when I'm tickled."

"You can't contain yourself regardless." Ze tickles her more; she thrashes and grunts.

"You're a wild beast," I say, blocking her flailing limbs.

"No one can tame me!"

The tickle war rages while an omen wakes inside me. Dread branches to every pore and latches onto my soul. *Fear me.* I fear you. *Suffer my pain.* I suffer yours, mine, and there's far more to come. This is our last fragile ray of buttercup hope before blood taints faith as it stained the sun.

Cut Corners in Hot Water to Clean Blank Slates

Ketra

amroc won. Quate won their first gold. They did it. *They fucking did it.* And he might survive. He might remember my ghost.

But now is not time for him or memories, for soft kisses or whispered nothings. Now is time for politics, an intricate bed of razor-sharp words. Mother sends me to Dion—alone again. Hers is not a friendly face. Mine is. Though lately, I've suspected it's too friendly. *Don't lose your warmth*. My stomach scars itch beneath my violet robe, and I cringe. *Make me a monster, and I'll Make you the same*.

My skipper lands in Dion's hot and humid jungle. Guards survey the perimeter before helping me out. We walk through tropics, the air heavy with moisture. Dionese civilians eye us and smile, easygoing and content, more or less at peace. They wear trunks, bikinis, or shifts, minimal clothing for a melodic

world. Exotic plants flower nearby, flooding my nose with floral sweetness. Waxy leaves canopy overhead, dappling cool stripes across the path. Neon animals dart through the rainforest, and I trace their fleeting freedom beneath the swollen sun and bruised sky. Ruby light streaks through branches, splattering the ground with our star's red blood.

"Welcome to Dion, Princess Ketra," Senator Farsa greets as I reach the end of the path. She wears a sheer shift and bows. A multilevel village extends behind her with hangbridges and hammocks between branches. Treehouses rise in every trunk, and families spy on us as we sit on a bench.

"Thank you for having me," I say and return her bow.

I fan my robe away from my sweaty skin. The silk wilts. I am overdressed for this womb-like climate. Quin jails its people; Dion lets theirs roam. Streams trickle between trees, and people dance on their banks. From my research, I know these creeks flow into a larger river, and that river runs into an ocean, or several. So much water, none of it ice.

Farsa gestures at her guards, and they unfold fans. The breeze is better, but I'm still a child of snow and frost.

"Congratulations on your medals," I say. "You must be proud."
The senator shrugs. "Silver, bronze, and bronze make one gold. Quate tied us for second in one win. The match was impressive yet upsetting, so I came here for a short retreat." She motions at the rich jungle. Dion is middle class with a healthy market economy, neither rich nor poor, neither strong nor weak. Their problem is everyone's problem: the looming supernova, the red-dyed massacre.

"It is a beautiful world," I say. "A refuge."

"Yes," Farsa says, "a sanctuary, especially after recent events." I stay silent, wait for her to elaborate. There are many recent

events; mentioning the wrong one could cause political disaster. I don't want to lurk here, do this, poke Dion, look for decay, but Mother wants me to turn Dion against Quate because of their gold medal, or earn Dion's sympathy. Neither will work. Dion's too grounded to pivot either way, too socialist and democratic to cave to impulse. Ora knows. This is busy work. Her real motive is to send me away, to keep me from Starstop while she weaves vile webs. I'd rather go to Quate and see Camroc's home, but Ora hates Quate, and Quate hates Quin, and I'm from Quin, for better or worse. *Worse.* Always worse. The two underdogs bond in Starstop's sky, but on land, we nip at each other's heels.

"Yelir of Quate's death was tragic," the senator finally continues. "We on the Council claimed an alcohol overdose at the Olympic Ball, but athletes know their limits better than anyone else. I suspect foul play. What are your thoughts on the matter?"

A tricky topic, and Farsa knows it. "I agree that it was tragic," I say. "My heart breaks for the Quatic team. If there was premeditation, that is concerning."

"Your mother taught you well," Farsa says with a tight laugh. "Several are calling it an assassination. Someone also attacked you in your skipper, then in your suite. Accept my condolences on both accounts."

I stiffen at her layered probing. *What happened, Ketra?* No one trusts Quin, and for good reason.

I ignore my aching scars and say, "I was lucky both were mild." Severe. "And fortunate to recover." Parry. I see your passive-aggressive insult and raise you an insinuated threat. Call me weak, and I'll bare teeth. Easy. Easy. Mother is the weapon. Farsa is harmless; she merely tests the sword's reach. Do you wield fear, too, or are you a shield? I'm armor. I can be both.

Farsa understands my meaning and veers toward new waters.

She dips her sandaled toes in the cool stream and says, "We are fortunate as well to not suffer like Tertia. All those neighbors turning in each other, selling out Makers. Violence breeds vengeance, and betrayal spawns brutality. Queen Ora loaned Tertia ghosts, did she not? Money for bounties on Makers' heads? Rewards for accusations?"

The senator knows Mother did. She knows all answers are yes. Those are not her questions. Her questions inspect me: Are you the same? Do you agree? Are you mean Mommy's baby or dead Daddy's girl?

I should support Mother. I should defend Quin's actions and our draconian ideology against Makers. But we kill them at birth. We slaughter newborns in their cribs. How the fucking hell can I defend infanticide? I can't. Won't. I should, and I shouldn't. Because I am not the same. I do not agree. I am dead Daddy's girl.

But to rephrase that to maintain political strength is difficult. My dissent is not rot in the Quinish throne. This is our rebirth, an iron phoenix risen from ashes, an ember in the dust. *Some things burn longer than others*, Ribaj told me. It's time to show the fire within the ice, the steady flame of a thirty-year cage.

"Makers do not deserve that treatment," I say, tentative and delicate.

Shock slaps Farsa's face. A crack to her core. "Makers are dangerous, Princess."

"All people are dangerous. Choice decides the weapon."

A slow smile spreads across Farsa's lips. "That it does, Princess. I must admit, you are not what I expected."

"I am not what I expected, either, Senator."

She laughs at that. A friend? A foe? We agree on at least one thing, though her pro-Maker implication intrigues me. The

BURN THE SUN

worlds are not as cruel as Ora would prefer.

"Your Highness," a guard says behind me, "a situation is developing on Starstop. Her Majesty requests your presence."

Senator Farsa raises an eyebrow. "Best of luck, Princess. May the beck and call prove merciful this time."

This time, because in the future, time may be mine. *Not ready*. I'm not ready at all. And neither life nor death cares one bit. On that, they align.

* * *

We dock at Starstop. The clunky space station greets us with a blast of dry heat. Old as Earth's seedship, but broken, no escape. I follow guards down dark metal halls, between blue-orange running lights, past windows glowing red with the dying sun's gore. We walk in artificial gravity, breathing synthetic air. Fake. *Fake*. Everything's so fake. Except for the deathbed star.

The Games' familiar racket surrounds us: intercom announcements, athletes' interviews, M2O coverage splashed on electronic screens, cells and tablets in every hand. It's overwhelming after Dion's jungle peace. I miss the gurgling streams, the dancing people, and the humming breeze. Stop. *Stop.* Look backward, and fall forward. Must remain on the cliff.

Guards lead me to my suite and shut me inside. A metal, windowless prison with Mother as ward. She stands opposite me, a sneer on her face. Silver-blonde hair curtains her iron-gray eyes, icicles against her ashen skin. Short yet tall: intimidating. She's mastered her aura, fed it corpses and wraiths, a cemetery halo of graveyard moonlight. Though scrawny, she is an army in one, and I see how she killed my

father, how she commands our cold, cruel world.

"I assume you were unsuccessful," she says, her voice the grate of nails on steel.

"Dion is too peaceful to take sides," I say. "They respect all worlds and do not wish to encourage disfavor."

"So you neither sowed Quate's distaste nor gained Dion's support."

"Correct, but Senator Farsa did offer me her condolences." *Me*, not Mother, for her attacks against me.

"For something I would not approve, no doubt." Ora paces the room, hands clasped behind her back. She wears royal furs despite the heat, *to spite* the heat, and refuses to sweat, more skeleton than flesh. "The guards have not informed you why I recalled you from your fruitless meeting on Dion."

Stab. Jab. Failure. Misfit. Loser. Freak. Mother's barbs dig deep.

Without allowing me a chance to respond, Mother continues. "The judges disqualified Isrik from the Games. Valo will take her spot. Ze is not a great athlete, but ze is steady, at least. Ekris and Kire will remain as leads."

"Why?" I ask.

"No questions," Ora snaps. "Guess."

"I do not know. Isrik is a star athlete, a crowd favorite. She would never jeopardize her placement on the Olympic team."

"Wrong. Isrik is a seasoned athlete, and she thinks herself wise. Even if we win gold for the next two events, we will still lose, Ketra. We will still die. There is no chance that we will win the Games. Understand that. Grasp that. We have zero points. We are already dead."

Realization drowns me. We are already dead. Understanding crumples my limbs, and I sag, slump, onto the floor. Even

with two golds, we'd only earn two hundred points, and Prime already holds two hundred and fifty. No matter how hard we fight, nothing matters from this moment on.

So Isrik threw it all away.

"Moxies," I say. Performance-enhancing drugs, illegal for athletes.

"Yes. Your critical analysis skills need work. She thought she'd 'live hard, live free,' and she's 'ready to die." Mother scoffs. "Quatic nonsense."

Rage rips my gut, gnaws at the hardened skin scarred by Mother's iron will, but I hold my tongue. I will not win this battle, but I must survive to win this war. "That is unfortunate," I squeeze between fangs, my fury in chains for now, *for now*.

"It is more than unfortunate, but it is not our most unfortunate situation at the moment. Ice Enterprises has rescinded our sponsorship. Tell me why they have done this, Ketra." Glaciers shift in Mother's piercing gaze, ready to charge, to run me over.

"Again, I do not know." I keep my voice calm, then stand from the floor and straighten my shoulders. Whatever this is, I'll face it strong.

Ora's nostrils flare, a bull, a beast. "Their official statement claimed 'political differences." A pause, a heartbeat, a blazing snarl. "They saw you, Ketra. They saw you in the arena, staring at that Quatic boy."

I love you. I love you, too. "Which Quatic boy?" I ask.

"Don't you dare play dumb, and for the love of all the stars in this cursed sky, ask no more bloody questions."

I don't react. Mother fumes. So I shrug and say, "They won their first gold. It was appropriate to offer Camroc congratulations from a polite and political standpoint. If I did not, it would appear rude and discourteous."

"Fool, using my words and ways to your own gain," she spits. "You ruined *everything*. Ice Enterprises agreed to sponsor us because of our shared Maker sentiment. Quate does not share that sentiment. Ice does not trust Quate, and now, they don't trust us because of your little love affair."

"It's not an affair," I say, still calm. "I was showing respect."

"With your fucking twat." She seethes, balls her hands, pounds her fists against the wall. "You think I'm stupid. You think I haven't known this entire time." Neither is a question, so neither deserves an answer. "I do not recognize you anymore. You have destroyed everything I toiled years to build by spreading your legs and losing yourself to that fucking Quatic scum. You are the princess, Ketra. Act like one. Have more self-esteem. You deserve someone much higher than Camroc of bloody Quate."

I channel my cool wrath into words, a venomous trickle. "You're right. I don't deserve him. I've never deserved him. After all I've done, after all the disgusting ways you've taught me to live, I deserve someone far worse. He's better than my best dream, better than you and me and Quin will ever be. If our relationship cost you that dreadful sponsorship, then good. Reject me. Abandon and disown me. I don't care."

"You should. You are the heir. Quin lives on in you."

"Quin won't live on at all. The sun is dying. Our world is dying. We have no chance to win the Games, to survive the fall. The best we can do now is die free, die in peace, die better than we ever lived. You must let go, Mother."

Ora won't let go. Her claws are too long, too sharp, too deep. She impales me and Quin with her toxic reach. "You did not learn last time. This time, pay attention."

In a twirl of furs, she leaves the suite. Guards lock the doors. Pain will come next. But this time, I am ready. This time, I will choose my mark.

Déjà vu. A Maker enters the suite. *Hurt her so she hates you all,* Mother's will resounds. Static, shimmer, a dagger in his hands. "I'm sorry," he says.

"I'm sorry, too," I say.

"My family...I need the ghosts."

Blood money. Sin rusts the crown. Gore paints our gilded throne, and death gloves our bloodstained hands.

"What's your name?" I ask.

"Nalon," the man says, brow pinched.

"Hi, Nalon. I'm Ketra."

The Maker hesitates. I recognize him. He is a sweet man, a father and a lover. Ora preys on what she perceives as weakness, and love is vulnerable.

But love is powerful, too.

"Her Majesty requests I hurt you," Nalon whispers. His hands twitch with the Made dagger. "I do not want to hurt you, Princess, but without that money, my family will starve before the sun dies. And we are from Quate. We might have a chance. Ora will kill me after, but my family will live on, and they might live free."

"I understand," I say.

I simmer with scorn for Mother, for the world she twisted with fear and hate. Quin is greater, better, more. Even if we die, we'll die well, and we'll die strong. Let the future remember our wings. Let history remember our fangs. The Maker activist rings in my ears. This is what I must do for Quin, for all the worlds, for the ghost of our dying sun.

"And I will not resist, but I have two requests," I add, quiet so the guards cannot hear. "They do not contradict the queen's orders." The Maker waits, uneasy. "I will do my best to ensure I obey you both. We Makers hold you in high esteem." *But not Mother. Never Mother.*

"One: Cut my face. I want scars through my brows and over my cheekbones on each side, but spare my eyes."

The man shivers. "You are brave, Your Highness, but I can hide the marks somewhere else."

"No," I say. "Let the worlds see Mother's cruelty. Let her suffer her soul's reflection. I will be her mirror."

He bows in acceptance. "What is two?"

"Two: Coat my skull in tungsten, beneath my skin. The last Maker sent by Mother shielded my heart. I will shield my mind as well."

His eyes blow wide. "Princess, what you ask will cause extreme ag—"

"Can you do it?" I interrupt.

Shaking, he bows again. "Yes, Your Highness, if that is what you desire."

"It is."

"I can do it through the scars."

"Good. Thank you, Nalon. And how about you? Do you have any last requests?"

The Maker fidgets foot to foot, then runs a hand through thinning hair. "I do not hold the standing to make requests, Princess."

"But I hold the standing to make you make requests, so speak." Mother would appreciate my tone if not my words.

He clears his throat. "Um...if possible...instead of Ora, I would like you to kill me—unless that would renounce my family's reward."

"You want me to kill you," I echo.

BURN THE SUN

"Yes. I would rather die by your hand than hers."

"I have never killed before."

"And I have never tortured before."

"Yet here we are." I pause, consider. "If that will help you go easy, then okay. And it will not affect your family's reward. In fact, the queen will admire the act. It will regain me a fraction of her favor."

"A win-win situation."

"Except you die."

"But my family lives." A wary breath rattles his cheeks. "I should start. It will hurt. A lot."

"I know." I brace myself, then lie on the bed as the Maker sits beside me.

"If it's any consolation, Princess, you are not your mother." Nalon raises the Made dagger to my forehead. "She is a monster."

"I fear I am becoming a monster as well."

"Perhaps in the daunting definition, but not in the wicked one." He offers a small smile, a smile I return.

"Begin," I order.

He begins.

Agony slams me. Fire slices me brow to cheek, on each side. I grit my teeth, but let tears fall. *I choose this pain*. Blood spills from twin wounds over my cheeks through the sheets. *Accept this offering*. I force breaths, will heartbeats. *Pain is power. Power is peace. Peace is freedom. Let me free.*

Nalon rests his hands on each wound. Fresh torment smashes my face. Molten metal sizzles over bone, beneath flesh, cooling before it claims my meat. Tungsten flashes across my skull, hidden beneath my skin. Agony lances my head, spears me with ice, chars me with fire. *I choose this pain. Pain is power. I*

am ice made fire.

This is where I take control.

"You should scream," Nalon whispers in my ear, "or the guards will suspect us."

So I shriek, so I howl, so I release pain to summon power. Again and again, I screech, shout, yell, bellow, bawl, cry out. My wailing chimes of pain peal through the suite as metal sets against my skull. Nalon removes his hands from my twin brow-to-cheekbone gashes. He heals the wounds and leaves my chosen scars. These scars will build me up, not break me down.

Pain dulls to an ache. Nalon rocks back on his knees. The blood-soggy bed squishes with his movement. Gore cools on my face, salty and metallic. I am whole again, stronger than before, shielded and sheltered against Mother's reign. The Maker trembles. The dagger and helmet stole much from him. Tears fill his gaze, and he whispers, "It was an honor, Princess. May miracles rise from your shadows. Take my life, and long may you live."

"Are you sure?" I whisper back.

"Yes. This is a gift. It is a good death, so put on a good show." He eyes the guards, edgy.

"For the record, I salute you. May the Makers grow wings and fly free. And don't listen to anything else I'm about to say." I then harness the voice Mother's taught me for years. "Maker bastard. I am the throne, yet you treat me like dirt." I spit on him, and he smiles—then pulls a frown as the guards stir to watch. "You are a plague on the stars."

The suite door opens, and Mother enters my room. A surprise, but one I can sew into my scheme. The queen spots my blood-greased scowl, the pulpy sheets, and the scars across my

face. She does not understand her own reflection, the mirror I tilt toward her with the glare of the dying sun.

"You were right, Mother," I say. "With your permission, I would take this traitor's life."

Her self-satisfaction chokes the suite. A break, a breath, then she says, "I approve."

I rip the dagger from Nalon's quivering hands. "May miracles rise from your shadows," I whisper, then throw him on the bed. Without thought or hesitation, I sink the blade into the back of his neck, at the base of his skull. The knife severs his spinal cord—one of Mother's many morbid lessons. The Maker dies in seconds. *A good death*. No such thing.

Panic doesn't come. Neither does regret. Instead, numbness washes through me as Mother reviews my work. "Good," she says, a word for a life. She turns to a guard. "See his family paid." Then she leaves.

I killed a man. I killed a man. I killed a man. I killed a man.

Still no panic, no regret or remorse, no guilt or grief or shame. *Not yet.* There's something wrong with me. *Make me a Monster, and I'll Make you the same.*

No, I chose my pain, and Nalon chose his. I must become strong to conquer the future. Cautious, I prod my face. The metal feels like bone. The Maker healed the flesh: two vicious scars, but no bruises or swelling. No one will know the difference between skull and armor, torture and triumph.

I can't do this alone.

So I don't.

That is part of strength, of power: asking for help. *I hate it.* But right now, I need help. *Save me from myself.*

I shoot Camroc a message, explaining Dion, Ora, the lost sponsorship, the Maker, the helmet, the scars, the first blood on my hands. Then I shoot him a follow-up: But I don't need to talk about it, and I don't want your anger.

A second, a searing delay, before: Then what do you need and want. Ketra?

I write: You. Me. Library. If you're free.

He writes back instantly: For you, I'm always free.

* * *

We arrive in the tiny cylindrical room at the same time. No windows, no witnesses. Then we lock the sliding door behind us. Lie on the central black leather ottoman. Leave the screens blank. Claw off all our clothes.

Anger and sorrow distort Camroc's face, blue under the glowing ceiling. "Ice knew about us." He strokes the scars on my face. "These are my fault."

"These are *my choice*." I pull him on top of me and urge him to take me, melt me, hack me apart to put me back together again.

He balances over me on his arms, enraged. "Ketra, wait."

"I told you, I don't want to talk."

"But I do."

"Fine," I snap, then flip him over. His back hits the ottoman as I straddle his legs. "You want to talk? Let's talk. For three decades, I've been a slave to that woman. I did everything she asked, held my tongue, closed my mind." I lower myself over him. "But today was different. Today, I took control." I sheathe him inside me. He moans. I don't. "I couldn't stop her from hurting me—she'd kill the Maker's family. But I could fight back in a different way. I want these scars. I need these shields." I tap my head and heart. "They make me stronger, and physical armor reminds me of invisible armor." I rock my hips, and

Camroc gasps. "I am not her slave, and I am not her clone. I am my own breed of monster."

Tears drip from my eyes to my breasts, then slide onto my ravaged, scarred stomach. Gentle, Camroc sits up and cradles my back with an arm. I move in his lap while he moves beneath me. "You are no monster, Ketra," he says through hitched breaths and muffled moans. "You are an angel."

"Angels are monsters, too," I say. "I killed him, Camroc. I killed a man."

"You granted his dying wish."

"And earned my mother's hostile approval."

"To save his family."

"Stop spinning sins into wins."

Camroc thrusts deeper, strokes my spine. Words flee us as we crash and collide, bubble over and burn out. Sobs rack my body, and he holds me. Tears scorch my cheeks, and he caresses me. Tender, wonderful, he eases me onto my back, squats between my legs, then opens me up again and again.

Shuddering, spent, I calm down enough to say, "We lost, Cam. Quin lost the Games. There's no chance we'll win. No chance we'll survive."

He flops beside me and pulls me close. "I'll stay with you," he breathes into my hair. "If you can't leave, I won't, either. I don't want to live without you, so I'm choosing, too."

"Don't be an idiot. If you win, you're going. I will drug your ass and chain you to that seedship if I have to, and if I can't, Bazi will."

Tension ripples through his naked body. "We probably won't win, so don't worry about planning my abduction."

"But if you do, Camroc, if you win..."

"We'll see, love. We'll see." A smirk tugs his lips. "Though if

CUT CORNERS IN HOT WATER TO CLEAN BLANK SLATES

you want to tie me up for practice, you are more than welcome to do so."

I roll my eyes and play-slap his chest.

He mock-sighs. "I'll take that as a no."

"I don't need ropes to tie you up, darling." I shimmy down his body, out of his arms, between his legs.

"You pesky, little princess."

I bend down, then neither of us can speak anymore.

Jump Through Hoops in a Kangaroo Court

Allebazi

elcome to the fourth day of the Olympic Games!" Efia bubbles into her headset.

I cannot handle this absurd level of joy. Another cupcake. Then a third. Then a fourth. I want a fifth, but there's no more left. Leaving the office, I walk to the kitchen's fridge and gag. Another angry company-wide message: Though the humorous ingenuity of a "find the toenail" cake is not lost on me, I would ask all employees to resist the temptation to defile company food products. This includes switching "coffee creamer" and "mucus specimen" labels. Thank you.

Not hungry anymore, I return to the office and hear Efia continue.

"Airball qualifiers are over!" she says. "And these qualifiers were lightning! Pure lightning, I tell you!"

I hate her. Love her. Need her. Want her. Her joy pumps life

into a death-hungry vacuum. I don't deserve her—the worlds don't, either—but here she is, cheerful and glowing. Worse, she feels like home. No. *No.* I can't do this again. I've lost too many homes, too many hearts, before.

A breakup, a divorce, a death, is like finding a home, then losing that home. You are cold, hungry, hurting, and alone, but you remember the warmth and comfort. Loss is powerful, painful, because love made you stronger, then hate stole your strength. You are the pit hell forged from heaven's fall. The shadows carved by dying stars. The ghost of a people who once sang, who once danced, reduced to ash, an ember in the dust.

"Psst, everything okay?" Efia asks, her headset muted. "You have your brooding face on. Not that your brooding face isn't cute—I mean fierce—but it usually preludes an existential cupcake crisis." Her plump lips pout as her blue eyes sparkle with trust and hope and undeserved things.

I clear a strand of orange curls from her beautiful bronze face. She blushes in her seat as I perch on her desk, my long legs against her warm, round body. *The things I would do if we were alone.* She lights me up. She cuts me down. No. *Stop it.* She deserves better. *And more.*

"The worlds are waiting," I say and point at her headset.

She hands me a cupcake. "You are becoming predictable, my darling Bazi."

"Then thank the stars the Games are not."

My assistant nudges my leg. I bite my lip to stifle my starforsaken lust, but she notices and winks. "Apologies for the pause, folks," Efia says into her headset. "As I was saying, airball qualifiers were lightning. No one anticipated the outcomes. Prime won against Dion and Tertia, but lost to Quate and Quin in two shocking surprises. Dion won against Tertia, then Quate

and Quin dominated the rest of the matches. Quate won four total, and Quin won three. Our two underdogs are headed to the final!"

Efia pauses for imaginary cheers as the rest of my staff updates M2O's homepage and PicTic account. While she sips her coffee, she motions at an intern to provide filler. He clears his throat and, nervous, says, "As airball measures ambition, what a way for qualifiers to end. This event pits full Olympic teams against each other instead of one-on-one athlete competition. It also utilizes low-grav modification in the arena, enabling higher and farther jumps. Some hoops were legendary. Camroc of Quate was on fire today, as was Valo, the newest addition to the Quinish team after Isrik's abrupt disqualification. Quin's success is surprising, given their impossibility of winning the Games with their lack of medals and points. Though Queen Ora remained absent at the matches today, Princess Ketra gave the team a rallying pep talk—"

Efia cuts his mic before he rouses Ora's wrath. "Yes, all athletes fought hard today, and we're proud of them all. To celebrate Quate's unexpected four wins, here's a little background on the underdog. Quate is a hilly world blessed with dramatic valleys and lakes. They are a friendly and fiery people, a world of dreamers and songs. Known for their music, they've graced the colonies with 'Heyo' and 'Live On,' among many others. Speaker of the Houses Esrioas represents Quate on the Council. *Og iannaebm an iatlaer uht*. May the stars bless you."

The poorest world. A three-mooned prison. A land of wheat and potatoes, of tunics and shawls, of Makers, hunger, and pain. Too many famines, too few resources. Too much hurt, too little hope. Their success here is a miracle.

"Bazi..." Efia's fingers fly over her tablet, and I know some-

thing's off. A rock in my gut, a stone in my bones.

I hunker over her desk, then block out the office's flashing screens, beeping updates, and flurries of staff. "What's wrong?"

"It's a...shit, it's a fucking mess." She grays with fear. Her hands tremble with the glowing tablet.

"Messes are our specialty," I say, remaining calm. If I can't give her all of myself, I can be her anchor now. Dumpster fires are my expertise. Add in a little emotional unavailability, a pinch of overprotective toxicity, et voilà, c'est moi. "What do we need to clean up?"

"Everything," she whispers, jaw tense.

I hold out my hand, and she passes me the tablet. A fucking mess, indeed. PicTic bursts with ill-researched headlines, and tabloids feast upon rumors like vultures. The cybervoid explodes: "Murder in the Sky," "Starstop Slaughter," "Maker Disaster," "Judgment Day," "Another Assassination," "Steal the Seedship," and "Fuck the Sun, the Games Will Kill Us First." *Shit.* I toss the tablet on Efia's desk and wring my hands together. *Not now. Not so close to the end, to escape.*

"Call the Council," I say. "Get facts. And another assassination? Yelir's death was an overdose." *Starshit.* I know. She knows. But the staff can't know, not yet, not ever.

Efia dials the Council. The Council doesn't answer. "They aren't taking calls."

"Message them, then."

She does. A second, an eon, then a sparse reply from Administrator Aya: Quinish leads taken hostage by Tertian Makers. Demanding ransom or asylum.

"Ransom for what?" Efia asks. "And asylum would undermine the point of the Games. If people could switch planets, could cheat their way onto the seedship..." "Epic shitstorm," I say. "This is in response to Queen Ora's loan. She advanced Representative Aseret the money to place one-thousand-ghost bounties on all Tertian Makers' heads. They've been turning each other in throughout the Olympics, neighbors against neighbors, friends against friends. It was bound to backfire."

"How do we fix this? The airball final is soon. Quin's supposed to compete against Quate."

Thoughts churn through my skull, none of them good. "The Council won't offer asylum. They can't. As you said, it would undermine the Games, and this close to the end, to the sun, they can't. As for ransom?" I exhale and finger-comb my tangled, graying hair. "Ransom looks weak. And this is public. If the Council buys the Makers' peace, other groups will rise from the shadows, demanding payment, too. Plus, if the Council saves Quin, they show bias, and they must remain neutral. It's an impossible situation."

"But the Games must go on," Efia says—almost sobs. "The Olympics must continue, or everything is for nothing. All that hope, all that pain...it must go somewhere, Bazi. We must save someone."

"We will." *Liar.* I know. "Wait, you said the Quinish *leads* are hostages? What about the alternates?"

Efia messages the Council, and Aya takes a full minute this time: *The alternates are safe. Coach, too.*

"After Isrik, there are three alternates left," Efia says.

That's it. "Three are still enough to play," I say. "Where were they taken hostage?"

Another message, another minute-pained reply: We don't know for certain, but footage suggests the library.

"Three Quinish leads plus...how many Makers?" I ask.

More taps, more messages: Twenty.

"It's a trap," I say. "Someone is framing them." I turn to a guard. "Scan the library for explosives."

Horror flickers in the guard's gaze. He's new. Fresh. Too young to die. *Aren't we all?* "Explosives, ma'am?" The staff bustles as fever grips the room.

"Yes. Scan now."

The guard removes a cell from his pocket, inputs a couple commands, then blanches. "There are three, ma'am."

"One for each Quinish lead," I say. "Efia, you're in charge. Do as much crowd control as you can. Monitor the feeds, and try to avoid mass hysteria. Barring that, lock the doors. Security, you're with me."

They don't question me this time. Guards fall behind me as we exit the office and cut through the manic hallway. *Too late.* I call Aya on my cell.

"Aya, is this a secure line?" I ask the Council Administrator.

"We're rather busy at the—"

"Is this a secure line?"

I hear her lips purse. "Yes, Allebazi. Make it quick."

"I always do," I snap. "This is a setup. The Makers are the hostages, not the athletes."

"That's impos—"

"It's Ora. There are bombs in the athletes. She weaponized her leads. Figure out the rest yourself. Can you defuse the bombs remotely?"

"Hold on, wait, this makes no—"

"Can you defuse the bombs remotely, Aya?"

Her tongue clucks as I dodge the rising frenzy. People scroll PicTic and swarm halls as panic roots in Starstop's skeleton. "No, we can't."

"I'm heading to the library with a security team. We'll do it manually."

"Allebazi, stop, we're still working on Maker negotiations—"

"You're negotiating with the wrong people. The Makers have nothing to do with this. They don't want ransom; money won't fix their problems. And they don't want asylum; they're hated across all worlds. It's Ora's trick, and you're all falling for it." Fists fly before me as the worlds combust with hatred. "Gotta go. Detain Ora."

"Ora's here," Aya says. "She's on the Council, in case you've forgotten, and she's insulted by every word you've said. This is her team. They are in danger. How could you make such absurd accusations?"

"Ora's there?" I ask, ignoring the rest.

"Yes, as I—"

"Then tell her to fuck herself." I cut the call. The guards' faces show no reaction, but the youngest one coughs, a covered chuckle.

We wind through corridors, across levels, while the crowd thickens with rage and fear. As we approach the library, the horde thins till it is me, the guards, and bloody fate.

The library is locked. I bang on the door. "Open up. It's Bazi. Let's fix this shit."

Ekris's small voice seeps through the metal, faint and desperate and tinged with tears. "Bazi? Allebazi? Help! We're trapped!"

I motion toward the youngest guard. He attempts to pick the lock, then mouths, "Jammed."

I mouth back, "Rigged." Then I raise my voice and ask through the door, "Who's with you?"

"Kire and Valo," Ekris says, "plus a bunch of Makers, but

they're all knocked out."

"Knocked out?"

"Out cold. I was, too, but I woke up. They were...gentle with me." A whimper. A shredding sob. "They were gentle, because I didn't fight back."

"Who were 'they'?" I ask as sweet as I can, channeling Efia and Camroc and the ones who deserve more.

"I don't know. They wore cloaks and masks, all in black." *Ora's elite guards*.

"What's happening?" Ekris asks. Panic laces her words. "There's something in my stomach. It hurts, Bazi. Stars, it hurts so fucking much."

"It's okay." *It's not.* "We're here to help." *We can't.* "Can you open the door from your side?"

"I already tried. It's locked."

I motion to the young guard to keep trying from our side, but I know it's useless, fruitless, *done*. Ora doesn't leave loopholes. She doesn't believe in last-minute escapes.

"Bazi," the guard whispers, "the lock is DNA-encrypted. No way in, no way out. Sorry, but there's nothing I can do."

"If we can't unlock the door, we can't defuse the bombs," I whisper-hiss.

Pity crumples his boyish face. The stars haven't broken him yet. "I know, and I'm sorry, so sorry. I'll keep trying, but without the person who coded the encryption, it's impossible."

"Would a relative work for the DNA?" Hope swims up my throat, and I beg: *Ketra*.

But the guard says, "No, it must be an exact match." Something flashes on the wall console, near the lock. "Wait, it's set to unlock itself in one minute."

"Bazi?" Ekris's voice wafts through the door. "Something is

beeping...inside me."

Shit. "We're here, Ekris. One second." I turn and whisper to the guard, "Can you cut through metal?"

"I'm sorry, Bazi, but—"

"No, got it. If the bombs detonate, will the library contain the blast?"

"Yes."

"Keep working on the lock," I say, but the game is over. It keeps him busy and gives me false hope—because that's all hope ever is: false and futile.

"Kire and Valo are beeping, too," Ekris says, dread rising. *Forty-five seconds.*

She doesn't need to know.

"We're gonna get you out," I say through the door. "Tech's a tricky bitch, so it's gonna take a minute, but we're right here. While we wait, tell me about Quin. Any friends back home? Friends with benefits? Friends with more than benefits?"

Thirty-five seconds.

After a pause, Ekris says, "My team is my family. I know no one else." Another pause, then: "Though I wish I knew the princess. She seems nice. I've only seen her in passing, but some people give off good energy, you know?"

"I know." I bite my lip, struggle to sound calm, collected, and in control when everything is falling apart. "The princess is nice. We've spoken several times. She's proud of you all."

Twenty-five seconds.

"She is?" Ekris asks, weak and waning.

"Of course," I say. "How are the others? Are they awake?"

"No, it's still only me."

They'll die in their sleep.

Twenty seconds.

"My stomach hurts," Ekris says.

"Then focus on me," I say.

"We're dying, Bazi. I know we're dying. You don't need to pretend we're not." For once, her words ring clear through the door.

Fifteen seconds.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I'm so fucking sorry."

"Don't be," she says. "We can't win the Games. No chance for the seedship. We're dead, anyway, but this way, we'll go out with a bang." A bitter laugh scratches the door, a caged beast itching to fight.

Ten seconds.

"We'll remember you, Ekris. We'll remember you all."

"I know. For what it's worth, I'll remember you, too."

Five seconds.

"May the stars bless you," I say. My words fracture into a thousand constellations as the end opens her maw and bares her fangs.

"Nooktanuis tedhat aunis," Ekris says. She no longer whimpers, no longer cowers. Regardless of medals or points, she lived a champion, and she'll die the same. "And Bazi?"

"Yes?"

"Burn the fucking sun."

Zero.

Crack.

The blast lasts a heartbeat. Over and done. The door unlocks, slides open. Out billows smoke, and nothing else. They're gone. *Vanished.* Vaporized. *Dust.* I kneel in their ashes, but I do not cry. Neither do the guards. The dead deserve more than shallow regret.

They deserve justice.

* * *

It took half the usual time to walk back to M2O's office. The hallway was empty, a phantom of the earlier pandemonium. Crowd control failed, so temporary lockdown ensues. On the way, I told the Council everything: Three planted bombs in the Quinish leads' stomachs vaporized them plus twenty Makers. The Council ignored all my warnings and issued some of their own: If you make any more unfounded accusations against the Quinish throne, the Council will arrest you and seize possession of M2O. Nothing I didn't already know, but I needed to hear Aya say it, in case there's an easy way out of this. There isn't. There never was. This is the end, and the end is a vipers' nest.

But I can't release the truth, because I can't prove it. Ora is too smart. And no one wants this clunky article: Quinish Queen Ora kidnapped her own three Olympian leads plus twenty Makers, surgically implanted explosives in her athletes' stomachs, locked them in the library, then cut off comms, framed the Makers for the massacre with an anonymous tip regarding ransom or asylum, and waited with the Council while her bombs vaporized her team along with the innocent Makers to erase all evidence.

No, truth would cause a civil war, and we can't afford a war of any kind this close to the supernova. The Games must end in a fair and definitive blow. There can be no suspicion surrounding the winner, or hell would break loose. Then we'd all die. There would be no survivors. No human race. No time to redo the Games and decide the "worthy" victor for the seedship. We can't weather more fuck-ups. The Olympics make people behave as they wait to die. Without distraction, the bedlam today would seem like child's play.

So I cannot release the truth. The airball final must continue.

The Games must end. Our winner: doubtless. Our victor: iron. The final Olympian world *must* survive. But I can knot threads in the story Ora hopes to spin. Because she will address the people, and soon. To gain Quin literal sympathy points, she will play the wounded queen. She will claim Maker retaliation for her loan to help Tertia find "peace" against "monsters." Yes, Ora will do *anything* to win, to survive, and anything ends with me.

"I want you to release a story," I say.

"A story?" Efia asks, rising from her desk.

Her face falls at my approach, and she hugs me. The other employees busy themselves with their tablets to pretend they don't notice the forbidden. Despite their pranks, they're loyal—I'll give them that.

"Are you okay?" Efia whispers in my ear.

"No," I admit, "but I'm about to be."

"What can I do?"

"Run this, but make it pretty." I message her the notes I braindumped into my cell, and she stops breathing.

"Bazi, I can't run this. It would ruin us."

"It won't. I promise. Aya gave her approval."

"She did?"

"Yes." After some questionable brokering tactics involving cupcakes, money, and a few reputation-targeted threats. (The cybervoid remembers everything, Aya, and tit pics are never a good idea.)

Efia gulps. "Okay." Breathes. "Okay, then." Sits back down at her desk. "Okay, let's do this."

She types the article while I watch. This plays by the rules. This stays in the lines. No accusations or allegations. No indictments, incriminations, or unholy insinuations. But it

steals Ora's steam. She wants to make-believe grief? Fine. But I won't let her steal sympathy, and I sure as hell won't let her blame Makers for her bloodlust. This is her response to the Maker Bow, to the respect they've earned and given through the Games. So this is my reply to Ora's unchecked reign.

"Are you sure?" Efia asks as she finishes the last sentence.

"Positive," I say. "Post it everywhere."

"Yes, ma'am."

PicTic snaps. Traffic surges M2O's site. We buckle down and keep everything online. The article is short, simple. It reads:

Freak accident claims lives of Quinish leads and Makers.

In a horrific technical malfunction this afternoon, the three Quinish Olympian leads along with twenty Makers died in Starstop's library. The Makers were attempting to help the Quinish athletes with historical airball research when a screen short-circuited, leading to an explosive chain reaction throughout the library's old-fashioned wiring. The blast incinerated them all instantly. Guards have since sealed off the destroyed library from further use.

M2O offers their deepest condolences to Quin, her people, and her crown. This is a devastating tragedy. Our thoughts and prayers are with Queen Ora and Princess Ketra as they navigate this difficult time.

The Games will continue this afternoon. The Council has sanctioned the airball final, and the schedule will advance as planned, with Quin's remaining alternates replacing the leads.

M2O's security team has validated and approved this article.

Perfect. Paint the Makers as martyrs. Avoid blame on either side. Allow sympathy, but erase scam. Plus a signed, sealed, and delivered security stamp of approval. This is no place for sympathy points. There is no enemy, no reason to sway the tally toward Quin, to question the Games, to doubt the eventual

victor. Yes, this was a tragedy, but this was also an "accident." And accidents bring people together, but they don't beg revenge. We cannot afford revenge.

Sure enough, hysteria ebbs as civilians reflect our condolences. They're off the hook for doing anything more. The crowd is controlled, so lockdown lifts.

Then Queen Ora takes the stage. Her image broadcasts to every screen across every world from somewhere buried in Starstop's entrails. She's pissed. She doesn't show it, but I feel it, know it. The Council members behind her sense it, too. But they smooth their faces and clasp their hands, the picture of duty-bound compassion.

"What happened today was a catastrophe," Ora says. As guessed, she plays the wounded queen, but she cannot weaponize blame as she weaponized her team. "Quin is grieving after this nightmarish disaster. We ask for your understanding as we mourn the best of us." *Starshit*. She thinks she stands above all. "I will host a candlelight vigil tonight, after the airball final." Behind her, Princess Ketra fumes. Good. *Good*. I fueled the right flame. "May the stars bless you all."

The feed cuts. The Makers remain innocent. *Make me a monster, and I'll Make you the same.*

We all become monsters at the edge of the breach.

Cross My Heart and Hope You Die, Stick a Needle in Your Eye

Camroc

I know it was her. My bones rattle with rage. There's no proof, no evidence, but Bazi's article is a shield. She deflects blame and saves the Makers, because we both see through Ora's ruse. I want to run to Ketra's side, hold her and comfort her, but I can't. She's the crown, and we're here, we could win, we have a shot at victory, at survival, but hope turns to ash in my mouth. My teeth are chalk. My tongue is a gag. My lips are a muzzle to tame me, maim me, chain me to the Games.

"Use it," Coach says beside me.

"Use what?" I snap. The arena refills with the pacified crowd. They are appeased, relieved. I am nowhere close.

"That fire."

I'm burning alive. "Okay."

"It's time."

Nyo and Arada flank me. Together, we walk to the arena's center. In the court, gravity is a third of its usual pull. The bounce in my step wars with the weight in my heart. We face the new Quinish team made of their alternates, the last ones left: Iram, Akina, and Urat. They do not cry or shrink, even though they will not survive the end.

Before I realize what my legs are doing, I kneel.

The crowd hushes. Nyo and Arada join me. Coach joins us, too. So do our alternates, though they remain distracted, as usual. Then the entire stadium kneels before the Quinish team: a salute, a tribute, a sign of respect. We see you. We bleed with you. We are five worlds but one people, one dream.

The announcer does not make the usual introductions. Silence fills the dome. The Quinish athletes stall, stunned, then they kneel, too, one people in prayer. *Ora will not break us. Neither will the sun.*

Then the faceless judges tap from shadows. The moment shatters. We rise as one, and the final begins.

An airball game is straightforward. Five minutes on the clock. No stops for fouls. No time-outs allowed. Three players on each team. Two netted hoops at opposite ends of the court. Each hoop counts as one point. Team with the most points wins. If we win, we have a shot at winning the Games. If we lose, we earn Quin's fate.

Nyo and Iram stand in the court's center. A countdown begins through the intercom: 3, 2, 1...honk. The ball drops from the ceiling. Nyo and Iram jump. Their bodies stretch. Feet fly off the floor. Fingertips reach up, *up*, *up* as the ball hits their hands. Nyo tips it toward us, and the match starts.

We gain possession. Arada catches Nyo's tip. She dribbles,

passes to me. We can't hold the ball for more than ten seconds each. I dribble, bound down the court, slide past Urat. The low gravity makes each step twice as high, twice as far. It's disorienting, but we've trained for this. I reach our end of the court. Nyo and Arada wait on the wings. I pass to Arada. Akina blocks. The ball soars through the air, but Nyo steals it back. I sneak around Arada and whistle. Nyo bounces the ball to me. I catch and jump for a layup. Iram leaps and slaps the ball from my hands, but Arada lurks beside me. She catches the ball and passes blind. Nyo cuts to the wing and catches it. I duck behind Urat. Nyo passes to me, then dive-rolls forward. I catch, pass back, under Iram's arms. Nyo catches and springs up in a back layout. Ze dunks the ball as the crowd roars.

"Quate: one point. Quin: zero points. Four minutes remain," the announcer updates.

Quin gains possession. All six athletes charge across the court, lithe as moonlight. On Quin's side, they spread into a triangle with Akina at point. She passes to Iram on the wing, then sprints toward Arada, blocking her view. I cover Urat. Nyo races toward Iram as the Quinish athlete feints a shot, then ducks and passes. The ball zooms toward me, but Urat pops out and snatches it. Urat drops and passes to Akina. Behind me, I hear squeaks on the floor as Arada and Akina pivot, ensnared in this deadly dance. Arada steals the ball. Akina smacks it from her hands. I backflip, catch the ball, but Urat soars above me. Ze grabs the ball from my hands and hauls it at the net. The ball bounces, misses. Akina catches the rebound and shoots a layup around Arada's defense. Score. The crowd explodes.

"Quin: one point. Quate: one point. Three minutes remain," the announcer updates.

This will be close. We can't afford close. These are Quin's

alternates, but they honor their leads, and grief is a powerful ally.

"Hold it," Coach shouts from the sidelines. "Fight for it. The ball's a slippery fish, so stab it."

Fast. *Fast.* That's how we'll win. Fast and fierce, a dagger in the dark.

I dribble toward our end of the court. Arada and Nyo line up with Arada in front. Iram and Urat flank them while Akina guards me. I feint left, feint right, then pass to Arada beneath Akina's arms. Arada passes back and pops to a wing. I pass to Nyo. Ze passes back and pops to the other wing. Iram and Urat stand in the middle. Akina lunges to swipe the ball. I turn and toss to Nyo. Ze catches then flips in an aerial cartwheel over Quin's heads, from wing to wing. Arada cuts beneath zem, between Iram and Urat. I twist around Akina. Nyo passes back to me. I pass to Arada, now open. She shoots, scores. Better, but still slow and sloppy. The crowd claps, unimpressed.

"Quate: two points. Quin: one point. Two minutes remain," the announcer updates.

Akina hurls the ball across the court. Iram catches it on their end. We scramble to reach him. Iram turns and shoots. Nyo flips to eat the distance between them. Ze jumps and plucks the ball midair, then throws it back toward me. Urat intercepts with a twisting layout. Ze passes to Akina, and Akina flings the ball back down the court. Again, Iram catches, shoots. This time, Nyo misses, and Iram scores. The crowd screeches, wild and feral.

"Quin: two points. Quate: two points. One minute and thirty seconds left," the announcer updates.

"Stop trading shots," Coach calls above chaos. "This is your last chance. You lose, it's over. You win, you fight on."

Fight on, fly on, live on, live free. I'm not ready to die. Don't take that from me.

Nyo grabs the ball and sprints across the arena. Arada and I flank zem. We pass between us, beneath Quin's spidery arms. Dribble, pass, leap, dribble, pass, and we reach our end of the court. I dart to the side. Nyo passes to me. I pass to Arada, then dive-roll beneath Urat. Arada catches, passes back to me, backflips over Akina. I catch, pass to Nyo, who launches into a side aerial, then passes to Arada as she lands near the net. She shoots; she scores. There we go. That's the rhythm we lost along the way, along with everything else. The crowd agrees and once again roars.

"Quate: three points. Quin: two points. One minute left," the announcer updates.

"That's it," Coach shouts. "Don't let them score, and you're done."

The Quinish coach has remained silent this whole time, *the abusive shit*, but the Quinish athletes read each other's minds. Again, Akina catapults the ball to their end of the court. Again, we scramble, off balance. Urat catches the ball and weaves around Nyo, then Arada, then me. Iram darts beneath the hoop. Urat passes. I intercept. The ball smacks my palm, and I pass to Nyo. Ze misses. Akina steals, passes to Iram. He catches and leaps, twisting to dunk. I handspring and flip myself above the hoop to punch the ball away from the net. It soars into Nyo's hands. Ze launches it toward our side of the court. It bounces off the hoop. Akina catches the rebound.

"Score remains the same. Quate: three points. Quin: two points. Thirty seconds left," the announcer updates.

"Hold them off," Coach yells. "You're almost there. Just hold them off."

The crowd is a wall of sound. The arena thunders with the impact of this moment. Akina dribbles down the court to the Quinish side. She passes to Urat. I block the pass, then Iram blocks my block. He dribbles, shoots. Nyo seizes the ball. Urat jumps and slams zes fists at the ball. It drops from Nyo's grip and rolls away. Arada picks it up, retreats, and dribbles.

"Twenty seconds left," the announcer updates.

Iram lunges for Arada, but she pivots and passes to me. I dribble down the court, Nyo with me. We pass between each other, running out the clock. The dome thunders louder, the storm of rebirth. A million phoenixes rise from the ashes of a thousand dying worlds.

"Ten seconds left," the announcer updates.

The crowd counts: "Ten..."

Urat steals the ball.

"Nine..."

Ze spins and sprints.

"Eight..."

Arada cuts in front of zem.

"Seven..."

She steals the ball back, passes to Nyo.

"Six..."

Iram intercepts, passes to Akina.

"Five..."

I slap the ball from Akina's hands, and it bounces free.

"Four..."

Arada catches the wild ball and holds.

"Three..."

Urat leaps, lands, wrenches the ball from Arada's grip.

"Two..."

Arada stumbles backward in the low gravity.

"One..."

Urat shoots across the court.

Swish. Net. Score.

"Zero."

The buzzer blares.

"Fair shot," the announcer says. "Quin: three points. Quate: three points. It's a tie. Teams, you have two minutes before overtime."

Panting, wheezing, we jog toward Coach.

"Good job," Racso says. "Not great, but good. Well, great, considering all today's shit. You have one minute in overtime to score. Possession will be yours to start. If you tie again, you'll go into double overtime."

An idea tickles me. It's crazy, rarely done, and yet...

"Coach, I have a different option," I say, still catching my breath. My chest heaves as my lungs swallow air. The match was clean and rough, but there were no fouls. Back and forth, here and there, ping-pong people between two worlds.

"You have five seconds, Cam," Coach says. "Shoot."

I inhale, then blurt, "We choose the tie."

Coach frowns. Arada freezes. But Nyo nods, proud.

"No one ever chooses the tie," Racso says. We train to win, not to share. Victory is a loner's feast.

"But it's allowed. It's in the rules," I say. "And it won't make a difference. Quin still won't win the Games with this gold, so they pose no threat to us, no change to the outcome. Yet if we lose in overtime, we lose our only chance of winning the Games. We need this hundred points. Without this gold, our people are dead."

Coach sucks air through his teeth and considers.

"I agree with Cam," Nyo says, voice deep and soft. "It makes no

difference to us, but it's a sign of respect toward Quin, especially after their tragedy. Those alternates fought well, despite all they lost, despite this being their first match of the Games. Let them win something, even if it changes nothing."

"What about you, Arada?" Coach asks.

The tiny woman smirks. "I like it. We get a medal. They get one, too. Win-win situation. Let's do it."

"Okay," Racso sighs. "But they must accept the tie, too."

"Time's up," the announcer says. "Teams, are you ready?"

Coach clears his voice and says, "We choose the tie."

The crowd gasps. Faceless judges rustle. Shadows whisper: *This is not the way of the worlds.*

"You wish to accept the tie? Share gold? One hundred points each?" the announcer asks.

"Yes," Coach says.

"Quin, do you agree?"

I cannot see the Quinish coach or their bare-bones team, three where seven once stood. I wish Isrik still fought with them. Then again, if she didn't disqualify herself, we wouldn't have the luxury of a tie, of a chance. She'd wipe the floor with our asses. But she chose moxies, chose out, because Quin is a dead world, a skeleton ghost waiting for the end. *Not Ketra. I won't let Ketra go.* She can't share that fate. *You have no power.* I know, but what's between us feels too right to end so wrong. *Enough. The Games.* Right. Fake now; fall apart later.

That abrasive voice slithers out, but there's no whip to the Quinish coach's words. "We decided on overtime."

I surrender, sink, squeeze hope from my mind—

"However," their coach continues, "we find Quate's decision to prove more agreeable. We accept the tie as well."

Relief floods me, and the crowd cheers, the wall of sound

raised to a fortress. Above the storm, the intercom belts Efia's statistics: "In a moving, history-defining moment, Quate and Quin accept the tie! They both earn gold for the airball final! What a remarkable moment of respect from Quate, and what a boost to Quin after today's horrific events. Our hearts go out to the alternates who fought like hell. We salute you, Quin. May the stars bless you.

"As it stands after airball, Quate and Quin tie for gold with an additional one hundred points each, Prime earns silver for an additional fifty points, and Dion earns bronze for an additional twenty-five points. These are the current totals with one event remaining in the Games: Prime has three hundred points, Dion has one hundred and twenty-five points, Tertia has seventy-five points, Quate has two hundred points, and Quin has one hundred points. It's looking like Prime will win the Space Olympics, but if Quate wins gold in trust and Prime wins no medals, there is a slight chance that the underdog world could win. What a shocking turn! Unfortunately, after the airball tally, even if they win gold, Dion, Tertia, and Quin do not hold enough points to win the Games. They will still compete in trust, the final event, but the victory will go to either Prime or Ouate."

Prime or Quate. Diamond and coal. The top and bottom of our dying system. Never did I dream this would happen, but here we are. And here Ketra is not. And here Bazi is not. Quin and Tertia are out of the Games. In, but out. Forced to fight a futile battle, but there's no chance for them to win the war. Yet somehow, someway, there's still a chance for us—and for something more. Even with survival at stake, humanity shines through.

"I know that look," Nyo says. "There's trouble in that look."

Arada hugs us both, then kisses us on the cheeks. "There's trouble in his soul, darling."

"What are you thinking, Cam?" Nyo asks.

"Nothing," I say. "Thank you both for agreeing to the tie."

Arada shrugs. "It was the smart choice. It guaranteed us gold, and it shoved a middle finger up Ora's entitled ass."

"Ri-ri..." Nyo warns.

"Ah, yes, sorry. I mean that I am overwhelmed by the recent catastrophe she orchestrated against her people."

Ze clamps a hand over her mouth, but Arada wiggles out of zes hold. "Oh, lighten up. No one can hear over this beast we unleashed." She motions toward the crowd, toward the roiling noise that envelops us in secrecy. "And speaking of beasts, you never answered zem, Cam. What are you thinking? Because you're never thinking nothing."

My lips curl into a roguish grin. "Some things are more important than survival. Some people, especially."

May the Stars Bless the Shadows, and May the Sun Bleed the Night

Ketra

other is livid. She's losing control.

This candlelight vigil feels more command than ceremony. A hundred of us border Starstop observatory, heads bowed, candles in hand. Our circle of flames flickers, mirages against the dark metal floor. Blue-orange seams glow at our feet, a reminder of the artificial, of the synthetic nature of hopes and dreams. The dying sun bulges through the windowed dome, a ruby blister ready to pop. Heat blankets the large space, and sweat shrouds the room. Sobs pepper the ironclad prayers. Quin is a brutal world, so Mother uses brutal words.

"Burn the sun. Bleed the night. Drown the stars. These are the pillars of power: harness fire, conquer darkness, defeat errant dreams." The queen stands in the middle of the prayer circle. I stand with the people; she does not approve. "Scripture never

leads us wrong, even when wrong happens. And what happened today was viciously wrong. Death does not ask questions, so I do not, either. I do not question why time stole our leads, and I do not question the library's malfunction." A pointed look at Bazi.

"Though my heart breaks as a womb, as a grave, I will mourn, move on, and pray the end justifies the means," Mother continues. "Where there's a will, there's a way, and this is our way. We suffer; we succeed. Hard work overcomes hard luck, and we will overcome. As time passes, shadows stretch, the old wounds distant and weak. But we are not weak. We are Quin. We are ice. Though we cannot win every time, we can use every loss to push us forward, and that is what I urge us toward now. Power always finds its pilgrims, and we are pilgrims of power. Strength opens doors, but power shatters windows, and the glass ceiling is a window we must break to rise, so rise with me."

"We rise," the crowd replies through grief. Athletes wear uniforms, and civilians wear black. Quate wished to wear their black mourning shawls, but Ora insisted on livery. She views them as servants and wants all worlds to bow to her.

"I thank the Quinish team for how they competed today," Ora says. "Our alternates won gold despite all odds." No mention of Quate, how they suggested the tie. "My daughter, the princess, will now say a few words."

Reluctant, I join her in the center of the flaming circle. We are two spokes of the same crown, two arms of the throne. While she lives, I must obey to respect our world, our people, our home.

But I can do all that while also pissing her off.

"Without friendship, life is nothing," I say.

My voice echoes through the grief-steeped dome. Mother bristles beside me. She objects, but she cannot say anything in public, and she gave me the stage: one of her many recent mistakes. The audience rumbles, "*Uttetsakar*." *Beloved*. They honor me, so I honor them.

"And the Quinish leads were good friends," I add. "They were the best of our world, they fought till the end, and they died as heroes. The Makers died as heroes, too." Mother quakes with rage. She did not mention them, so I do. "To praise them all, I have invited Isrik back to Starstop to grant us a speech."

Surprise rips through the crowd, then whispers as Isrik joins Mother and me in the center. Disqualified by moxie use, she's not supposed to be here, but there is no law against it—I verified with the Council. The burly, hairless athlete walks forward. She winks a silver eye, bows at Mother, and turns toward the gathered mourners. Her pale skin wrinkles with a sad smile as she spreads her arms toward the crowd. She was always one of their favorites, and she still is: quiet, noble, and good—so good. There are still good people at the end of the worlds. They rise to the surface through struggle.

"I'll keep this brief. My lost teammates would want us to live, and we cannot live while trapped here by death," Isrik says. Red sunlight bathes her frame. Her scratchy voice fills the dome, a ragged raven soaring beneath our dying star. "Also, if I stay longer, I might be tempted to break more rules."

The audience laughs a tear-stained laugh. A few call out her nickname, "Ice Pick." Joy at a funeral. I knew Isrik could pull it off. That's what we need now: joy and hope. Not the power Mother craves.

"There are a few Quinish sayings I'd like to share tonight," Isrik says.

Beside me, Mother's jaw twitches. She hates our language. It reminds her of limitations. She rules one world, but she wants to rule them all.

"Aekhor nakor oys. Fortune favors the bold," Isrik says. "Ekris, Kire, and Valo were bold. They lived hard, and they died free. Ie es aalep, akoj aaklep. No guts, no glory. It takes guts to hold your world on your shoulders, to fight for your people's survival. The Olympics are ruthless, and the Games are cruel, but attynattiry ie atetial. No risk, no reward. Yes, Quin cannot win or live on, but our memories will. So will our stories. And hell, we've told an epic story, winning gold despite all odds with Quate's neighborly help."

She dips her head at the Quatic team, acknowledging them as Mother did not. The crowd murmurs in agreement. I can't see Camroc, wreathed in shadow, but that's for the best. He melts all my masks, and I must wear mine a little longer.

"Our story will survive," Isrik says, "and memory is a victory far greater than life. After loss, Quin fought harder, not softer, and that is something to celebrate. *Akia aatnarap tavaah*. Time heals all wounds, so may time heal our wounds and remember our scars. Remember us, worlds. Remember us, and fly on."

The crowd claps, and candles bob with applause. It's a funeral, yet they cheer. Guards escort Isrik through the audience, off Starstop for her own protection. The Quinish legend slaps Camroc's shoulder on her way out. He hugs her, then eyes me, fierce with love and glory.

"Damn you," I mouth.

"Damn you, too," he mouths back with a smirk.

Flames fade as candles blink out. Guards collect the waxy lumps. The vigil disperses as the observatory's lights brighten.

"You lied to me," Mother hisses beside me. "You led me on,

then lied to me. If you weren't my daughter, I'd have you killed."

Dread ices me, but I don't shatter, don't break. "Mother, this is a vigil. Losing our leads upsets me. Surely death threats can wait till later."

"I doubt the leads' loss upsets you. You mourn the Makers."

I do not turn toward her, do not bait her, do not acknowledge her writhing hate. "All loss of life upsets me."

"Makers are not alive, so their loss is no tragedy."

"They are human, Mother. They live and die as we do."

"How little you know, and you understand even less," Mother says. "You killed that Maker for mercy, the one who carved your face, because you still care about them. You fooled me into believing you wise, yet you continue to defy me. I should have seen through you, seen your father within you, but I prayed enough of me prevailed. Seems I was wrong."

"I can support the Makers without defying you," I say, itching to leave, to escape her damaged soul. "Nalon was a good man. He deserved a good death."

"You use its name like it deserves honor." She scoffs. "You disappoint me, Ketra, though that comes as no surprise. However, I am surprised by the frequency of disappointments."

"We can't all be you, Mother."

"An unfortunate truth."

I wait for Mother to scold me, berate me, chip away at my marble foundation to find the pain within. But a group requests her presence in ululations of royal praise. She throws her head back and leaves me for ones she can yet mold.

"Your mother is lovely as ever," a soothing voice says near me. I turn and spot Camroc behind two guards.

"Scanning me for weapons or for something worse?" His golden-brown face quirks with mischief, but his amber-jade

eyes muddy with concern. He clasps his hands behind his back, his uniform taut against his athletic build. The guards don't react. They also don't move.

"Let him through," I say.

The guards listen and protect us. We stand in a bubble in the middle of the crowd, but Camroc keeps a few feet between us to maintain appearances. Garnet curls fall over his forehead as he gazes at me. He's so fucking young, twenty-five and barely alive.

"I'd like to hug you—and do more interesting things—but I fear the queen's retaliation would damage my pristine reputation," he says.

"Pristine?" I tease.

Camroc places a hand over his heart in mock-shock. "I was a pure and innocent soul before you soiled me with your lechery."

The guards still don't react. They won't report to Mother. More and more, I am the beloved while she is the beast.

"Pure and innocent as me," I say.

He half chuckles, half sighs. "Good call with Isrik. She beat the shit out of grief like she beat the shit out of me." A tiny smile, a worried pause. "How are you, Princess? Yelir's death destroyed me, yet you lost three. I can't impose or imagine what you are feeling."

I hesitate, fidget, wish the universe was only us two. "I don't know how I am. It's devastating. I'm feeling so much that I don't know what to feel. Though I didn't know the leads well, they fought for us, you know? But Yelir was your family. He was close to you. The loss was worse."

"Loss is loss. If you need anything, I'm here."

"Anything?"

He rolls his eyes and shakes his curly head. "Corrupter of

innocence."

I open my mouth to retort, but Bazi appears outside our security circle. She waves Efia past us and taps a guard on her shoulder. The guard scowls but lets her through.

"Exes in all the right places," Bazi murmurs. "Your Highness, may I speak with you in private?" Her ex grunts behind her. "Fine, in private with your cranky entourage?"

"Of course," I say, but fear gnaws at my gut. "Though I don't think anywhere is private at the moment."

"That shadow will do. Cam can come, too." Bazi points across the observatory to a couple empty benches, and we walk there, away from the brunt of the crowd. We aren't alone, but no one notices us, and that's a better type of privacy. They'll remember us here, harmless and ignorant, while we carve open their worlds and hold their beating hearts in our hands.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"Everything," Bazi says, "but in this case, your mother." She sits on a bench opposite me and Camroc. He keeps his hands to himself, but he sits as close as possible, our legs glued together. Heat stirs between us, but we pretend we're the statues fate demands

"That's nothing new," I say.

Bazi grinds her teeth and rests her elbows on her long legs, fingers steepled beneath her chin. I have never seen her like this before. Her swagger is gone. Fear grays her golden skin. Anxiety sharpens her jagged face. Her silver-kissed mahogany waves hang limp around her grimace. "Princess, we have little time, so forgive my bluntness. I am not insensitive to the gravity of my claim, but I hope you will believe the truth. Though I have no proof, I know Ora's mind, and I fear you do, too." Her thin brown eyes twitch with anger, not at me but at Mother. "I

cannot tell the worlds, but I can tell you."

"Why me?"

"Because you are the best armor in our arsenal."

Literally. My skull and ribs tingle. "I trust you."

"Thank you, Princess," Bazi says. "Your trust is a gift, and I pray I keep it after this conversation."

"You will. Even if I do not believe you, I will always trust you, Bazi."

"I appreciate that, though I don't expect always. We don't have always or forever or anything permanent."

"What did Mother do?" I ask.

Bazi kneads her hands, then vomits truth. "Ora kidnapped your leads and the Tertian Makers. She planted bombs in your athletes' stomachs, locked them in the library, and tried to frame the Makers. I rushed an article to deflect that blame by claiming an accident. It stopped this train wreck, but it might not stop another. Since I am Tertian, my hands are tied. I cannot interfere, and I cannot take further action. You, however, are heir to the throne, and Quinish laws are rather bloodthirsty, or so I hear. Anyway, if you need fuel for your fire, you are the only one who can stop Ora—or do more. She stole Quin sympathy from this tragedy, but she did not earn herself any. You are still *Uttetsakar*, Your Highness."

"Mother killed them," I say. Shock ices my veins, cracks my bones.

"It's only my word, but—"

"I believe you." It rings true, another monster of my mother's making. "She killed our people."

Camroc takes my hand and rests an arm across my back.

"She killed our people," I repeat. I cannot understand, cannot absorb what she did and why, so I again say, "She killed our

people." She's done it before, but to kill them here, to frame Makers, to sacrifice our own for her sport of hatred...this is the edge from which we must fly. "She killed our people." Mother is the power of pain. I am the power of hope. And we must hope harder than ever before to break free of her cage.

"I'm sorry," Bazi whispers. "You deserve to know, but the public can't. We fed them lies. Truth is dangerous. Mania could consume them. The Games are almost over, and we can't risk panic."

"I understand," I whisper back. *She killed our people.* Fury rings through my mind. *She killed our people.* Wrath squeals for justice. *She killed our people.* Rage screeches for revenge. *She killed our people.* I know. *I KNOW.*

"Ketra," Camroc breathes beside me. He holds me closer, hugs me tight. "What can I do?"

"Nothing," I rasp. "You can do nothing."

"You're not alone—"

"She's right, kid," Bazi interrupts. "We can do nothing."

"But I can," I say.

Camroc tenses, but he does not object. He trusts me. Frees me. Bows his head and says, "Hgiannaeb an iatlaer an annahtacs, suga og hdaelb na nairhg na ehcio. May the stars bless the shadows, and may the sun bleed the night."

Bazi smiles, a slivered dream in the dark. "Quate has the best blessings."

"That's not a blessing," Camroc says.

"No?"

"It's a drinking song."

Despite myself, despite death and all the godless blood, I laugh.

Startled, Camroc asks, "Ketra?"

"Sorry, sorry," I say, hysterical. "I'm fine, I'm fine. You remind me why everything is worth it."

"Because of booze?"

"Because of you."

He blushes, and Bazi coughs.

"And you," I tell Bazi.

"I know I'm worth it, Princess," Bazi says, standing. "If you need me for anything besides regicide, I'm yours. Till then, I've a date with a cupcake."

She leaves us alone on the bench, surrounded by guards and shielded from the crowd. Camroc pulls away, but I pull him back. No one can see us here. We have a moment, infinity. We can spare this heaven between hells.

"We might win the Games," Camroc says.

"And we will not," I say.

"I will not live without you."

"That's stupid, and you know it. If you don't live on, who will remember me?"

"Please—"

"I order you to go."

He narrows his eyes. "You're not my princess. You can't give me commands."

"Yet you've moaned my title many times when we—"

"Ketra—"

"Relax," I say. "That's an order, too."

He slumps forward and scrubs his hands over his face. I lean against his shoulder and breathe him in for one of our numbered last times.

"I hate this," he says. "I hate it all."

"Me, too, but if you win, you're going," I say. "I wasn't lying about chaining you to the seedship. Your life is a gift to me.

Give me something to think about—"

"When the sun burns you alive?" His lips wobble with a shackled sob. "No, Ketra. You can't ask that of me."

"I'm not asking." *I knew I was in there, darling daughter.* Go away, Mother. I'll deal with you later.

"I love you," Camroc croaks. "I love you so much it hurts, Ketra. And I'm sorry I'm falling apart, I'm sorry I'm breaking, but I can't...but I don't...but I won't let you die."

"Sweetheart," I say, sweeping hair from his forehead, "you don't hold that power. No one does." I kiss his cheek. He turns and catches my lips. Passion zaps through me, but we behave and lean away. "You should return to your team. They need you."

He scans me with scorching desire. "Promise me, Ketra. Promise me that if there's a way, you'll take it. If there's a chance, you'll find me again."

Tears blur my vision. "Of course I will. But there is no way, love, and there is no chance."

"The Games aren't over yet."

In Stars We Trust as Far as We Can Throw

Allebazi

oday is the final Olympic event: trust. Day five is no celebration. No one parties. No one raves. There is no drunken revelry. We all know what this means. One world will survive. The rest will die.

Efia is not her usual bubbly self. "Welcome to the fifth day of the Olympic Games. Today, we will name the winning world. Soon after, they will board the seedship and say their goodbyes."

It's real now. Real and raw. An unhealable wound. An everbleeding gash, skin ripped open, flesh tattered around the edges. One victor, too many victims. Tertia has no chance, but Quate does. Efia could live on. She could live free.

"Trust is different from the other events. It is purely intellectual and conducted in lightning rounds," Efia continues into her headset. "A proctor holds a world card, face hidden, and says, 'In my hand, I hold Prime,' for instance. If the athlete trusts the

proctor, they say, 'Stars bless.' If they distrust the proctor, they say, 'Stars burn.' Every correct answer receives one point. Each lead from both teams answers: three per team, six total. If there is a tie, the proctor offers an additional six cards, three to each team."

The M2O staff falls silent. No more jokes. No more distractions. This is the starforsaken end.

"Trust measures instinct, the ability to read faces, to *trust* one's gut in uncertain situations, and nothing is more uncertain than the future we now face," Efia says. "Prime is slated to win this event, and if they do, they win the Games. Yet trust favors the lower colonies, underdog worlds where survival depends on instincts. Quin does not hold the points to win at this stage, but Quate could win if they earn gold and Prime earns no medals. A slim chance, but a chance nonetheless."

Dark, especially for Efia. Her spirit wanes last, but it wanes still. My employees mirror her downcast mood. Tablets and wall screens scroll with doomsday statistics. Bleak information glows in the grim office. The red supergiant throbs through the window as our solar heart pumps life into the worlds, strains against death's infection, and rages against night's shadows.

Efia ties her orange curls in a messy bun, then trudges on. She addresses the worlds, one champion and four corpses. "Also, allow me to take this moment to offer my condolences to Quin regarding their recent tragedy. My heart goes out to all affected. As the farthest planet from the sun, Quin is a frozen world. They conquer the snowy tundra with ice palaces, igloos, and a resilient people. Rich in wealth and fortitude, they brave the elements beneath Queen Ora's reign, with Princess Ketra by her side. *Nooktanuis tedhat aunis.* May the stars bless you."

She clicks off her headset and lets field reporters take over.

Their voices buzz in the background as screens reflect their announcements. The office staff hunkers over their desks, busy with routine. They fill their minds with facts so fear can't steal their will. Efia copies them, blue eyes muted and bronze skin dull. She didn't sleep well last night. I saw her toss and turn across the barracks, but I couldn't offer her comfort then, not with so many employees around. If the boss falls, the masses fall with her. But there's still a bit of plank left to walk before churning fate devours us whole. *Peachy.* Shut up. I'm trying here. *Try harder.* I will.

"Efi," I whisper.

She jumps. "Bazi! Hi! Everything okay?" A few bubbles return, but they pop fast as flat champagne. She struggles to smile; the frown is foreign on her beautiful, round face. Rage rises within me. *This* is what death does. It kills us before it takes us. Breaks us before it destroys us. Powders us to dust, then sweeps us off the map. No. *No.* Not Efi.

"There's a secret project I could use your assistance with," I say.

"Always happy to help." Another failed smile. Another triumphant frown.

Well, that just won't do.

"Follow me," I say.

And she does.

I lead her out of M2O's office to the hallway kitchen. A mountain of ingredients waits on the countertops, cupboards ravaged bare.

"Do you believe the perfect cupcake exists?" I ask, retrieving us both aprons. I tie mine on. Hesitant, she ties hers, too, as I preheat the oven.

"Um...no?" she says. "I mean, nothing is perfect, and taste

BURN THE SUN

is subjective. So the perfect cupcake to one person could be the worst cupcake to another. One person's trash is another's treasure, and all that jazz."

"Then do you believe the perfect cupcake exists for you?"

Once again hesitant, she pauses and thinks. "I don't know, Bazi."

"What is your treasure, Efi?" I ask.

Uncomfortable, she shifts foot to foot. Her hips sway, swinging those large and glorious curves. That's it. Dance with me. This is the end, and the best music lies in the finale.

"Sorry," she says, a high-pitched bell, "but I really don't know."
"Then let's find out."

I loop my arms around her waist. She fits inside my embrace, a perfect match. Her short body jitters, nervous and shy, so I rest my chin on her shoulder, safe and secure. She surrenders.

"What if anyone sees us?" she asks.

"They won't," I say. "They're busy reporting on trust qualifiers."

"Shouldn't we be doing that, too?"

"Honey, I started this company on a shoestring budget with a tablet, an aircam, and a bad haircut. Now, it's the best media company in the worlds. I think I've earned a little delegation."

"Oh, of course you have! But I haven't. I only—"

"Run the best media company in the worlds in my absence and clean up all my messes?"

She stutters in my arms, tries to protest, but I nip her ear. Her breath hitches, and she bites her lip.

"Chocolate or vanilla?" I whisper.

"Ch-chocolate," she stutters.

I chuckle against her back. Over the intercom, a reporter announces, "Dion defeats Prime in the first match of trust

qualifiers." A surprise, but not a shock. Prime can still win, with or without gold.

"Get a bowl," I say.

Efia grabs a bowl and spoon from the counter as I measure ingredients.

"Chocolate, chocolate chip, or chocolate fudge?" I ask.

"What do you suggest?"

"These are your cupcakes. You choose."

Efia isn't good at choosing. She lives to serve, and I've had enough of that shit. I would kill to switch her modesty with Ora's confidence. Efia deserves all the esteem. Ora deserves a molten crowbar up her twat.

"Fudge," she finally says.

"Fudge it is."

I throw together a storm of ingredients: flour, sugar, cocoa, baking powder, salt, milk, butter, eggs, and vanilla extract.

"Tertia defeats Prime in the second match of trust qualifiers," the same reporter announces over the intercom. Farther from surprise and closer to shock this time. These lightning rounds have thrown them off balance. Prime relies on training and discipline; the other worlds lean on instinct. This is the only event where the golden world is at a disadvantage.

Efia stirs the ingredients in the bowl. The batter turns a rich brown, and she leans against me, comfort in the storm as fate's bomb ticks above us.

This is what I miss after every relationship ends. Not the heat but the warmth, the quiet of two bodies entwined. Someone to share moments, a partner to fight beside, a friend to face the cruel unknown. Knowing what the other person ate for breakfast, what they're reading, what feeds their soul and fuels their mind. After the heart-crushing end, there's always a void.

A yawning, gaping, ruinous void where a home collapsed into a pit. A hope-stomping pit. And this is the home before the pit. Because Efia and I will end, too. Tertia will not survive, but Quate might…but Quate *must*.

"Quate defeats Prime," the intercom sounds. Now, *that* is a shock. Sure, trust favors the underdogs, but Prime is a beast. It shifts into whatever monster it needs to survive. Losing three times in a row is not unexpected; it is miraculous.

"Congratulations," I whisper in Efia's ear.

She stirs faster, flustered. "You, too. For before, you know. What's next?"

"Muffin tin, then oven."

I grab the tin, spray it with grease. Efia dollops out batter with trembling hands. Tender, I slide my fingers down her arms and guide her, steady her, as the worlds fall down around us.

"Prime defeats Quin," the reporter announces, startling us both. One win, three losses. Prime could still tie for bronze, though. Even with twenty-five extra points, Prime would win the Games. It depends on how the other teams fare. At this point, besides Quin, all worlds won one match. Quate could do this. There's still a chance. *Come on, Cam. Fight like hell.*

Efia opens the oven. Together, we slip the cupcakes inside. Then we separate. Then we wait. And wait. And fucking wait. There is a delay before the next announcement. I don't like delays. Delays mean the unexpected, and we can't afford the unexpected this close to the end. Efia gives me a questioning look, but I shrug. I know nothing beyond what I've done, what I owe.

The oven dings. I remove the cupcakes. They cool on the counter as Efia pins me with that newborn-star glare. I hear Earth's sky looked like her eyes, blue and vast and full of wonder.

Well, wonder and frustration—Efia, not Earth. Though I bet Earth was frustrated, too, abandoned at the end to die alone.

"Did I do something wrong?" I ask, a hint amused. I cross my arms and lean against the opposite wall.

"No," Efia says. She rests her elbows on the counter beside the cupcakes, but offers nothing more.

"Efi, give me something."

She chews her cheek. "You're so...normal. Everything's falling down, yet you're the most relaxed I've ever seen you."

"I made peace with death long ago."

"Do you want to die, Bazi?"

"Stars no. But it's over for Tertia. We fought and lost. Nothing to change or control. Might as well accept it. Plus, you might survive. That gives me extra peace."

"I don't want to live without you," Efia whispers.

"Don't be daft," I say. "I'm not worth dying for, kid, but the future is worth living for. A new world, a new sky. There are binary suns. Double stars will bless you."

"If Quate wins."

"It's closer to when than if, love."

I give her space as I top cupcakes with strawberry frosting, caramel icing, and rainbow sprinkles. Efia doesn't want me with all this existential baggage. It's ready to rip and spill its gory innards on what could have been wonderful in a wonderful world.

An elbow nudges my arm.

Or maybe she wants the gory parts, too.

She kisses my cheek as she steals a warm cupcake. Frosting and icing melt over her fingers, weeping sprinkles on the counter. She takes a bite and winces.

"Not the perfect cupcake?" I also take a bite—then I also wince

at the flavor cacophony.

"It's...great," Efia says, gagging.

"It tastes like unicorn diarrhea."

She snorts. Crumbs spew out of her nose. I dodge the regurgitated onslaught, and we both laugh at the culinary disaster.

"We can try again," Efia says. "Next time—"

Above us, the intercom crackles, reminding us there won't be a next time. The reporter coughs. "Apologies for the delay. Comms were down."

Clunky, fucked-up, starshit station. They're leaving just in time.

"Qualifiers have ended," the reporter says.

Efia freezes beside me. I take her cupcake-sticky hand in mine as we wait for judgment.

"Tertia defeated Quin," the reporter continues. "Dion defeated Tertia and Quin. Quate defeated Dion, Tertia, and Quin. At the end of trust qualifiers, Quin won zero matches, Prime won one, Tertia won two, Dion won three, and Quate won four, meaning Tertia will take bronze as Dion and Quate compete to determine gold and silver in the trust final."

Starstop hums with distant cheers. Quin won all four matches. Prime won zero and didn't medal. If Quate wins the final, they will win the Games. But if Dion wins, even without a trust medal, Prime will win on points alone. Dion is a good world, a strong world—an intuitive world. Not as intuitive as Quate, but more so than Prime. Still, Quate beat them once. They could do so again. Or Dion underestimated them, and no one underestimates someone twice.

"Congratulations again," I tell Efia, the words cotton in my mouth.

IN STARS WE TRUST AS FAR AS WE CAN THROW

Tears stream down her cheeks, but her lips remain closed, her brow confused.

"Efi," I say, gentle this time, "Quate could win. You could live on." *But I will not.*

She wipes her hands on a towel and starts cleaning the cupcake chaos. I place my hand on her arm, urge her away, but she jerks free and cleans till the counter sparkles. Without facing me, Efia lifts the muffin tin with the weeping cupcakes and weeps herself. Then she tosses the treats in the trash, tin and all. She throws out the past—and me with it. Better now than later. We both won't survive.

"They were perfect, Bazi," she whispers. "But nothing else is." Efia turns to leave, but I catch her arm. "We were perfect, too, kid."

We link hands, stifle sobs together, and head toward the arena, toward the burning end.

Belief Begs but Never Dreams

Camroc

here is no time.

No time to think, process, realize we won four qualifiers, that we could win the Games, that we could survive.

The arena teems. Feverish and frantic. Boiling and burning. Panic bucks at society's chains, so near chaos, so close to the end. My heart thunders in my chest. Beside me, Nyo remains stone still, but Arada bounces, restless as me.

"One more," Nyo says. "One more match, darlings, then we can go home."

To our new home.

There is not enough *air* in this fucking *hell*.

"Calm, Cam," Nyo whispers. "Breathe, count, relax, repeat." I try. I fail. My lungs mutiny.

Arada says, "I'll help. One shitty-tit second, two stardamn-ram-me seconds, three fuck-me-over-a-dirty-counter seconds,

four rail-me-with-a-greasy-lamppost seconds."

"Bloody Mother Suns," Nyo swears. "That is more than I ever wanted to know about your sexual life, Ri-ri."

"Honey, that's the erect tip. You couldn't handle the full, throbbing truth."

"I am proud of that fact."

A laugh loosens my terror-strangled throat, but fear is stubborn as hope, and these twin fates orbit us while the trust final begins. It will be fast, furious, and eternal, a lethal slash to determine our future.

"Athletes, enter the arena," the announcer blares. "Welcome, Zifa, Razag, and Maasib of Dion. Also welcome, Nyo, Arada, and Camroc of Quate." The crowd crashes down and drowns out everything else.

"Whatever happens next, I'm proud of you all," Coach says. He claps each of us on the back and ushers us toward the arena's center. "Don't think. Trust your gut." He's not one for pep talks—more like pep grunts—but he *is* proud, and he's the father I never had. I focus on that as I approach the last battlefield with my siblings. We are a family till the bitter end, and beyond the end into a new beginning.

"You look like you're thinking something corny," Arada hisses. "Think something horny instead."

"I was thinking that I love you both, you ridiculous creature," I hiss back.

"We love you, too," Nyo says, "but Ri-ri's right, hate to say it. Get out of your head, Cam."

"And into your groin," Arada says.

"Not what I meant," ze says.

We reach the center of the roaring arena, opposite the Dionese athletes. The proctor bows to both teams as we salute her and

BURN THE SUN

our Council representatives. The final match of the final event in the Olympic Games steamrolls forward.

Don't think. Don't think. Don't think.

I will instinct to flood my system, to clear my mind, but intellect battles intuition. Logic is a child; insight is a sage. But I've trained the child so long that I've forgotten how to trust that generational lake.

Nyo and Arada have not forgotten. They stand straight and ready. The proctor begins the lightning round, the final round, the round we cannot repeat. Steady. *Strong.* Control. *Calm.*

"Zifa," the proctor says, addressing the Dionese athlete, "in my hand, I hold Tertia."

"Stars bless," Zifa says. Trust.

"Correct."

The announcer reports, "One point to Dion. Score: Dion one, Quate zero."

Too fast. Too fast. Too fast. Too fast.

Don't think. Don't think. Don't think.

"Nyo," the proctor says, "in my hand, I hold Quin."

"Stars burn," Nyo says without hesitation." Distrust.

"Correct."

The announcer reports, "One point to Quate. Score: Dion one, Quate one."

Too fast. Too fast. Too fast. Too fast.

Too wild. Too wild. Too wild.

Don't think. Don't think. Don't think. Don't think.

I am out, out, out of fucking c-c-control.

"Razag," the proctor says to Quin, "in my hand, I hold Prime."

A pause, a thought, then Razag says, "Stars burn." Distrust.

"Correct."

The announcer reports, "One point to Dion. Score: Dion

two, Quate one."

The proctor turns toward us. "Arada, in my hand, I hold Quate."

With a grin, Arada says, "Stars bless." Trust.

"Correct."

The announcer reports, "One point to Quate. Score: Dion two, Quate two."

We're tied. The crowd howls. It's between me and Maasib. If we both miss or score, we trigger another round. But if one misses, it's all over. All over and said and done, *done*, *done*.

"Maasib," the proctor says, "in my hand, I hold Dion."

Tall, dark, and godly, Maasib clasps his hands behind his back, but his charm falters. He's not sure. And his teammates can't help him, or they're immediately disqualified, so he's alone in this, as I'll be soon. I once thought him magnetic, but he's vulnerable, too. As the clock ticks down his mere seconds to answer, indecision crumples his face.

"One second, Maasib," the proctor warns.

"Stars..." Maasib starts, then stalls as his last second squeezes shut. "Stars bu—bless. Stars bless."

"Incorrect."

The announcer reports, "Zero points to Quin. Score: Dion two, Quate two."

The crowd shrieks, and the arena rumbles. It's down to me. Win or lose, I decide our fates. True, we could win another round, but Dion could, too, and I'm done with chaos. I want *control*. To *know*. I want this over *now*.

Maasib slumps among his teammates. His green stripes sag on his uniform's arms and legs. *He thinks I'll win*, I realize with a start. Maasib droops, because he believes in me. He doesn't think we'll have another round. He thinks this is the end. The

BURN THE SUN

crowd does, too. Hysteria thrums through their masses, but the proctor does not wait for them to settle.

"Camroc," she says, "in my hand, I hold Quate."

No time to think. I have moments to claim our fate. Maasib's world burned, but ours...

I study the proctor's face. Her eyes dart back and forth. She blinks once, twice, three times in succession. A glance to the right. Twitch of her cheeks. Pursing of her lips. Tug of her ear. Rosy blush. Beads of sweat. All lying tells. My mind shuffles through myriad possibilities. She covers truth with obvious tells. Her tells mislead me. She's double-thwarting me—

Stop.

Calm.

Don't think. Don't think. Don't think.

So I don't. Stubborn hope and defiant dreams urge my gut toward trust, toward truth.

Dion burned, but Quate must survive.

"One second, Camroc," the proctor warns.

"Stars bless," I blurt out. Trust. Truth.

A nerve-racking moment yawns before her response. Time smothers me with the starless night of a scream-devouring void

"Correct," she says.

"What?" I ask, but no one hears me.

The announcer reports, "One point to Quate. Score: Dion two, Quate three. Quate wins the trust final. Quate earns gold."

The crowd falls silent. They do not cheer as we wait for the final verdict. We know what this means, but till we hear it, nobody believes, because belief begs but never dreams. We pray this is true, but we won't accept it till the official statement.

"That concludes the Olympic Games," the announcer says.

"Here are the final scores. Quin and Tertia tie for last place with one hundred points total. In second place, Dion holds one hundred and seventy-five points. And in first place, there is another tie: Prime and Quate both hold three hundred points."

The crowd squirms, wriggles, murmurs, but no one speaks above a hush. Nyo and Arada grab my hands, and we squeeze each other as we wait for the final judgment.

The announcer continues, intercom slicing through the arena and the worlds. "According to the rulebook, the number of gold medals decides a final tiebreaker. Prime holds two golds in combat and racing while Quate holds three golds in obstacles, airball, and trust. As such, it is my deepest honor to announce that Quate wins the Olympic Games! Congrat—"

The crowd erupts. Arada screeches in my ear and launches into a backflip. Nyo sinks beside me, head in zes hands. Coach whoops, and the alternates holler, but I stand there, stunned.

"You did it, kid," Racso says. "You earned the winning point. Quate won the fucking Games. We're going to live. We're going to *survive*."

But four worlds won't, and those worlds now break. Hope burns brighter than fear, but fear burns hotter than hope, and now, fear burns all hope away.

Riots begin. The stadium swells with skirmishes, then brawls. I spot Bazi and Efia in the front. They wave, bow, then disappear in a circle of guards. A finger taps my shoulder, and I whirl around. Ketra stands before me. She grabs my cheeks and kisses me senseless. Then she, too, disappears...before I can kiss her back, before I can say goodbye. Guards surround her as brawls escalate to an all-out mob, and she's gone. We won, but she didn't. *Don't leave me*. But she must. It's not safe here for either of us, and we're still from different worlds with different

fates.

Anguish stings my eyes as Nyo and Arada drag me from the arena. Behind us, the stadium clashes with fists, swears, blood, and tears. Guards usher us to our barracks. The crowd spills into hallways, a volcanic burst of pent-up rage. Quate won, but the rest lost. They will die together as we live on alone.

Coach opens our barracks, and we tumble toward our bunks. Guards lock us inside. The throng surges behind the door, muffled but powerful, a river wiping everything clean.

"We're safe here," Racso says. "We'll wait an hour for the crowd to settle, then we'll leave."

"Leave?" I ask, confused.

Evam, Trebor, and Ronoc snicker, but I'm still shell-shocked, and I can't summon the will to care.

"On the seedship," Coach clarifies.

"You know, the whole reason for these fucking Games," Evam says.

"And he's the whole reason we won these fucking Games," Arada snaps.

"Ri-ri," I say, but no one can stop her, least of all me.

"No thanks to you three," she continues, seething at the alternates. "While we fought your battles and won your wars, you sat around doing starshit and picking your dirty wedgies. Play nice, or I swear to all the Mother Suns I'll kick your asses so hard that you'll taste my bloody toenails."

"Are you done?" Nyo asks, face composed, though amusement flickers zes dark beauty.

"Not at all, but it can wait," Arada says.

The crowd barks and thrashes beyond our metal wall. Beasts again. Monsters unleashed. Panic. *Violence*. Chaos. *Death*. We're back to our roots, a casket in a basket, as Earth reclaims

our ghosts. *This* is why security has trailed us for our entire lives. Without the Games, without sanity's glue, humanity crumbles as they realize they're dead. It's not conditional anymore; it's absolute. The Olympics were a distraction, a toxic diversion from poisonous pressure. Now, they are over, and horror lifts its scythe-bound hand.

"What about a closing ceremony?" Trebor asks.

"Too risky," Racso says. "No goodbyes, and nobody leaves this room."

No ceremony, celebration, or farewell. I can't do this. *Won't do this*. I fought so hard to win nothing in the end. This is my home. Ketra is my soul. And Bazi. I can't leave without one last look, one last embrace, one last warmth before the eternal cold.

Nyo reads my mind. "It's okay, Cam. We'll find a way to say goodbye." Ze deserves to survive. As for me? I do not know.

The hour passes in strained silence. Arada stretches on the floor. Nyo meditates on zes bunk. Evam, Trebor, and Ronoc nap while Coach stands before the door, arms crossed, brow furrowed. I lean against Nyo and close my eyes, but sleep won't come, won't offer reprieve. No rest for the wicked, and that's how I will leave Starstop, rotten and evil. My seat should go to Ketra, to Bazi, to a child, a baby, or a better soul.

We won. We're "worthy," because we won some stupid, silly, uppercase Games. I trained my life away to play while others suffered under the dying sun. And their suffering means nothing. They will die, and I will live on, because I was an orphan, because my parents didn't want me, because someone shoved my wailing infant self into Coach's hesitant arms again and again. No one wanted you then, and no one wants you now.

No. No. I can't relapse. Won't relapse. Can't return to those old ways of struggle and thought. Don't return. I'm better than

BURN THE SUN

that now. More than that, tougher than that. I've fought the worlds and myself in these Games, and this is the other side of a brutal tunnel. This is the blood-smeared, grime-soiled light at the end. We are *here*. We *arrived*.

But not everyone did. *Yelir, stars bless you.* And not everyone will. *Ketra, live on. Bazi, fly free.* They're ready to die, but you can't take them from me.

"Shit," Coach says. He checks his cell by the door.

"Good shit or bad shit?" Arada calls from a split.

"Shit's always bad, Ri-ri," Nyo says, stirring from zes meditation.

"Prude."

"What is it?" I ask.

Coach clamps his jaw hard enough to break a molar. "The seedship. Ora stole the seedship."

Ketra...

Stolen Thunder Is the Sweetest

Ketra

other, don't do this.

But she did. But she does.
She stole the seedship when the Games finished, and everything was for nothing in the end. Worse, she drugged me, sedated me, and dragged me along. I wake, disoriented, on a metal floor. How? The Council. She's on the Council. She knows where they hide it, and they thought their secret safe when shared.

But Mother never shares. She doesn't play well with others. I remain on the floor and scan the room. It resembles Starstop with clunky, dark metal walls and blue-orange seams. Schematics of the seedship's long rectangular prism flash in my mind. We're on the bridge: viewscreen in front, captain's chair in the middle, helm between the two for navigation and weapons.

Dozens of guards surround us, the same guards who must

have taken out security. *How long has Mother planned this?* Forever. From the moment she opened her iron-gray eyes, harsh and unyielding, she knew in her bones she would bow to no one. For sixty years, she's kept that promise.

"Good, you're awake," Ora rasps. "I worried you'd sleep through the best parts—true to character, but we all must change in the end."

Her scrawny body perches in the captain's chair, straight and stiff and bitter as ice. Violet silk robes pool on the floor, stark against her ashen skin and silver-blonde hair.

"Mother, what have you done?" I ask.

She sighs. "I'd tell you no questions, but you never learn. I've wasted too much breath on you already. Lie there, and don't interfere." She turns to a guard. "Prepare Quin for evacuation."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Ze taps orders into zes cell.

"Quate won," I say. I struggle to stand, the drug still in my veins, dragging my limbs, fogging my mind. "You cannot take the seedship. Quate won the Games."

Mother scoffs. "They won nothing, Ketra. They are not worthy. In their hands, the future would succumb to Makers. Quatic people are more than magic sympathizers. They're magic courtesans. They allow those things into their beds, between their legs, because they claim they're human, too. No, I will not let that happen. And no more interruptions, or you can spend our long journey in the brig."

"I will interrupt as often as I damn well please," I snap. A few guards watch us, wary, but most do not react. Mother glowers but lets me continue. "You have used and abused me at every turn. I am your tool to gain pity for Quin, because you cannot gain pity by yourself. After Tertia, you orchestrated the attack on our skipper and my malfunctioning harness. You then had

STOLEN THUNDER IS THE SWEETEST

Makers torture me to plant hate, but you sowed power instead." I point at my scarred gut and face, but she doesn't know about the metal beneath, the blessings over my heart and mind. "Our people loathe you, but they love me, and that's what you fear most, that lack of control."

"Lock her in the brig," Mother orders.

I face our guards. "You will do no such thing. She killed the Quinish leads plus those Tertian Makers to steal sympathy." The guards all scan me now—cautious and suspicious, neither of me. "She slaughtered our own for her cruel agenda, because she knew we couldn't win the Games. But Ora is not Quin. She is one person, and we are an entire people. Quin is better than this. Our world deserves more."

And these guards are part of this better, this more. They obey her, but they listen to me. These words could spawn panic, as Bazi fears, but they're weapons I need against Mother's war. Or these words could die here with her, because the Council will not let her escape. They will kill us all, by any means necessary, because we do not belong. This ship is for Camroc, for Quate.

"You speak nonsense," Mother says. "And you have no proof."

"I don't need proof," I say. "Look at the guards' eyes. They believe me. I would not lie to them, not about something this dreadful, this dire."

The guards simmer with anger and pain. To sabotage our team, to kill our own...it hits home in a literal way.

"I bet you killed Yelir, too," I say.

Mother laughs. It is not a kind laugh. "You still do not understand."

"Her Highness is right," a guard says. "Uttetsakar always speaks truth."

"Your beloved Uttetsakar is a princess," Mother sneers. "I am

your queen. I am the *throne*. Lock her in the brig, or I will replace you all."

A bluff. Sure, there are dozens of guards here, but they are the waning force that supports Mother. She does not have an army; she has scraps. And she cannot afford to kill any more people. That was one of her many mistakes; she murdered all resistance and, with it, support.

"Lock Princess Ketra in the *fucking* brig," Mother shouts. She starts to splinter; her leashes fray. The guards no longer obey her, but they still listen to me. Ora clenches her fists till knuckles whiten her hands. When she speaks again, she speaks to me, and her voice is the hellish scrape of a guillotine's blade. "The *only* reason you are still alive is because you are heir to the throne. There is a small, sick part of me that believes you can change. But I am tempted to admit this is a rare error on my part if you do not *stand down*."

"And the *only* reason *you* are still alive," I say, my voice the bleak Quinish tundra, "is because you are my mother. I do not want to kill you, but I will if it saves our world, because if you do this, if you try to steal this seedship, the Council will punish Quin. They will chain our planet, lock our people up, and we will rot away our last days in a cage. I will not let us leave that way. I want to watch our dying sun till its last breath, surrounded by our people, who lived their best till the end. You cannot win, Ora. It is you who must *stand down*."

"The Quinish crown does not yield."

"Then the Quinish crown will break."

"Queen Ora, stand down," the intercom blares. It's Priman Dictator Ribaj, the man who urged me down this path. *Some things burn longer than others*.

"You have one minute before Council retaliation," Senator

STOLEN THUNDER IS THE SWEETEST

Farsa says over the speaker. The Dionese woman is surprised and delighted by my rebellion. *I must admit, you are not what I expected.*

Both would support me. Representative Aseret from Tertia might, too. *Makers are not shadows*, he told me days and lifetimes ago. He accepted Mother's loan, but anarchy knows no bounds. And Speaker Esrioas would back me if it meant Quate could live on, as they earned. We must uphold the Games' decision. We cannot fall apart this close to retribution.

"You have no means of retaliation," Mother tells the Council. "My guards reprogrammed your security protocols. The seedship answers only to me. Release us, or I will initiate the self-destruct sequence."

She's lying. Her tone is less rigid, less contrived. Guards did not reprogram the seedship's security protocols. That is a near-impossible feat. No, they reprogrammed the communication protocols using Starstop's systems. Hence, the comms' downtime during trust qualifiers. Communication can bypass security for short periods, but mirrors are glass, fragile and brittle. And she said, *Release us...*so we're still inside Starstop. That's where the Council hides the seedship. We're still docked in the space station's core, and Mother is stuck. This is sloppy, messy, because she's desperate. Her one last hope for a last-ditch chance.

If I defy her now, there's no going back. One or both of us will die. But if I obey her yet again, her reign of terror will drive us all into the ground.

Fuck it.

We're all dying, anyway.

Might as well die free.

"Dictator Ribaj, it's Princess Ketra," I call toward the ceiling

and pray it reaches them. "Queen Ora is lying. Your security protocols are intact. She does not have clearance to initiate a self-destruct."

Mother's face flashes with fury as Ribaj says, "Princess, it is good to hear your voice. Are you unharmed?"

For the moment. "Yes."

"Can you access the internal systems and disable the locks on the doors and access hatches?" Farsa asks.

I watch the guards. Half nod. Half do nothing. They're divided between past and future, between queen and princess. Time to utilize those bloodthirsty laws Bazi mentioned.

"It might take a few minutes, but I'll make it work," I say.

"To avoid risking the seedship, we'll wait till you report back," Esrioas says. "But if we do not hear from you in five minutes, we will force a systems reboot. This would delay Quate's departure, so we would prefer to avoid that course of action." Any delay could prove deadly. Chaos bucks at rusty chains. "Starspeed, Princess."

The intercom cuts. I'm on my own.

"You are no heir of mine," Mother hisses. Wrath darkens her eyes. "And if we're all going to die, I don't need an heir anymore. You are your father's daughter till the end, and you will die the same way. Kill her."

A guard raises her stargun toward me, but another punches her arm away. The stargun clatters to the floor, then chaos explodes. Starguns blast. Shots crisscross above me. Feet stampede the bridge while fists storm overhead. I drop to the ground and crawl toward the helm. I do not make it far. A guard grabs my hair and yanks me up, a knife at my throat. I whip back my metal skull and crush his nose. He stumbles away in an arc of blood. I lunge forward, so near the helm, but

a guard slams into my side. I fall back to the floor and roll away from a blast. The shot bounces off the ground and hits another guard, one of mine.

Bodies pile on the bridge. Lasers sear the smoky air. Skin steams with stargun shots. The room reeks of charred flesh. We are better than this. We are greater. We are more. The Games were a distraction, but they were dignified. This is the opposite, the barbaric end, our Earth ancestors unleashed. Our death is no better than our birth.

"You," Mother caws.

Ora spots me near the helm. I turn to enter the override code, but a guard spins and throws me toward the queen. Mother lifts a stargun from a nearby guard. She aims, spits, fires. I try to duck, dodge, dive away, but a guard knocks me into its path. The shot connects with my chest. Cloth and flesh bubble away. Pain blossoms over my heart, and cries claw up my throat. I flop to my knees, limp and useless.

A hush smothers the bridge. Guards stop fighting. Mother's jaw drops. All eyes focus on me. There's pain, so much pain, and I should be dead, but I'm not. Leery, I glance down. Tense up. Keel over.

They all see what I've hidden: my metal chest, my heart's shield. In the center shines an engraved "M" surrounded by a lotus, the Maker's gift after Mother's prescribed torture.

"Traitor," a guard says, one who was supporting me.

"Spy," says another, also one of mine.

I have seconds left. I feel it. Know it. They would help me before, when I was one of them, but Makers are still enemies, hated and scorned. Mother sowed seeds too deep to rip out belief's iron roots. *Makers are weapons. Weapons can kill. Fear weapons. Fear Makers more.* Her cultural conditioning will save

her in the end. Fear burns hotter than hope, and hope is ash now.

But I am still an ember in the dust.

Mother fires at my head this time. Again, flesh froths while pain flowers. Again, I do not die. My metal mind saves me, despite the singed welt on my forehead. The guards all turn against me and whisper my demise. *Traitor. Spy. You betrayed us. Ora was always right.*

No. No. Ora is never right.

I drag my ruined body across the metal floor. Five seconds till freedom.

Five.

Mother shoots my back. Agony lances my spine, but she aims high. That's also metal.

Four.

Two guards shoot my temples. More agony, more metal. My face melts away as they claim my cheeks, too.

Three.

Shots at my legs. They are not metal. Meat cooks, and guards advance.

Two

I'm at the helm. Three guards block the console. They shoot my face, arms, chest, neck. *Metal, meat, metal, meat.* I am not fully Made, but I am fully pain. I gasp for air, will my heart to beat, and use the torment to catapult me up, *up*, *up*. They do not expect me to rise. They do not think I will fight on. And those are the only reasons I reach the helm in time.

One.

I slam a hand on the console. The doors and hatches unlock. With my other hand, I steal a stargun and fire at Mother. The shot blasts her brain, and she dies first. The Makers saved me

STOLEN THUNDER IS THE SWEETEST

long enough to survive an instant longer, to set one last thing right. I'm sorry, Camroc. I love you, always and forever. Live on. Live hard. Fly on. Fly far. Fly free. Join the stars for me. I'll wait for you behind the dying sun.

A guard rests a dagger against my neck. She cuts away my last words. Blood drowns me. Gore clogs my throat, and pain fades to ice. *In new worlds, old ways must die.* I have half a second left, so I message the Council: *I name Isrik my heir.*

Then I die.

Not a Hope in Hell on a Wing and a Prayer

Allebazi

fia cries silent tears. Screams quiet sobs. Mouths useless prayers. She cannot process our latest message. Neither can the rest of my staff. They face me, huddled in the M2O office, as reality fractures along grief's burden.

The Council wants us to break the news, to release a brief article without rousing panic. *Impossible*. This will break us all, but it will break Camroc most. *Later*. Duty first. Duty always fucking first. Save Quate. Save the human race. Deal with the fallout after freedom's guaranteed. *Freedom is never guaranteed*. I know, but let me play make-believe.

I sit at Efia's desk. "Take a break," I rasp. "I'll handle this."

She refuses to leave. "We'll handle this. Together."

Too drained to argue, I say, "Okay."

I don't think, don't feel, as I ignore my battered soul and punch unfeeling words into the ravenous void. A stream of madness. A cry of pain. No. Erase that. No emotion this time. Sterile words. Clinical coverage.

This evening, the Quinish government transferred hands. After a failed attempt of grand larceny by the former Queen Ora, Princess Ketra reclaimed the Council's financial property in a heroic act that cost the two royals their lives. The Council burned their bodies and shot their ashes into the sun. Before Ketra passed, she named Isrik, the former Olympian, as heir to the Quinish throne. We welcome Queen Isrik with open arms. The Quatic team and world will depart on schedule. May the stars bless them all.

I do not mention the stolen seedship or detail Ketra's bravery, because I cannot whet panic. This is about money, so the public will let it go.

Efia sniffles beside me and scans the tablet. "It's good."

"It's a lie."

"Good things are always lies."

"Careful, Efi, you sound like me."

"The horror," she says, stoic, without reaction. "Camroc will find out soon. You should tell him first."

My cell rings. Too late.

"Ketra," Camroc whispers when I answer. On his tongue, her name is a torn, broken, mutilated thing, a bird crushed with stones, bloodied to a feathered pulp. His breath shudders. A whine escapes his throat. A howl presses between his lips, but he forces it down to ask, "What happened?"

"I'm sorry, Cam," I say, and he shatters.

Sobs rack his body. Pain barks away his voice. I cannot see him, but I feel his agony, his anguish, as he collapses on a bunk and his teammates rush to his side. I hear Coach, Nyo, and Arada try to soothe him, but you cannot soothe a hurricane. Grief crushes my heart as it demolishes his.

"I'm coming to you," I say. "Don't move. I'll be there in a few." "Stay with me," Camroc begs. "Stay on the line. Tell me the truth."

I leave Efia in charge, then exit the office and double-check our call's encryption. "You don't want the truth. Hold on. I'm almost—"

"TELL ME!" he roars. The cell clips with his vicious heartache. I wince against the onslaught—a wave before the looming tsunami.

"This information does not leave that barracks, understand?" Assent murmurs from him and his teammates.

"We understand," Camroc says. His words crack like the rest of him. "Bazi, please. Tell me."

I whip through hallways, around corners, between guards, and whisper truth into the phone, barbs between my teeth. "Ora stole the seedship to save Quin. She drugged and knocked out Ketra, then brought her on board, too, along with a few dozen guards. The Council threatened to reboot the seedship systems, but that would have delayed Quate's departure, and any delay could jeopardize everything, so they waited for Ketra to override the locks. A fight ensued. Guards split their loyalties between Ora and Ketra, but once a shot revealed Ketra's Maker metal, they all turned against her. Before she...passed, Ketra managed to unlock the seedship for the Council and name Isrik her heir. In Queen Isrik's first orders, she canceled the loan for bounties on Tertian Makers, arrested the guards involved in the hijacking, and helped the Council recover control. The public cannot know about the seedship, and it must remain that way. We cannot afford panic this close to your escape."

Silence. Raw, hungry silence. Then: "How many times...was Ketra shot?"

"The Maker metal gave her longer than she would have had otherwise. It saved Quate," I say.

"How...many?" he demands.

"Sweetheart, I don't know. Too many. I'm so sorry, Cam, more sorry than I've ever been. If it's any consolation, even at the end, though her people abandoned her, she never abandoned her people. Many of them mourn her loss. She kept hope alive through the Games. Ketra would have died, anyway, but this way, she died a hero."

It's the wrong thing to say.

"She *lived* a hero," Camroc snaps. "And she deserved to live forever." He bites back a sob, clears his throat, and asks, "What about a funeral? A service? A memorial?"

"There's no time. The seedship leaves now."

He whimpers, and I hear Nyo and Arada calm him nearby. "I love her, Bazi," he says. "I'll always fucking love her, and I'm not leaving till I can say goodbye, till everyone knows what she did, who she was."

"You can't, Cam. She's not here anymore, and everyone who is here will freak if they learn the truth. Go. Leave this place. Live on. Live hard. Live free. That's how you honor her."

"Starshit, I'm staying."

"Then I will drug your ass and chain you to that seedship."

Camroc coughs out a sob. "That's what she said, too."

"So listen to her. She wanted you to live, so leave and live on."

He doesn't reply. More tears. More sobs. But no more protests. One more turn, then I'm at the Quatic barracks.

"I'm almost there," I say. "Hold on a little longer."

The line goes dead. Did he hang up? Or something more? *Crack.* Around the last turn. *Screams.* Far too close. Metal walls echo with struggle. Blue-orange lights flicker with fear.

That was a gun. I skid around the last corner. More shots and screams and heart-crushing dread.

Quate's barracks is open. Dead guards pile outside the door, their skulls split. Ragged wounds smoke from laser blasts. Their own starguns puff useless on their hips, disabled and destroyed. I scramble to find a working weapon, but there's nothing here. Not here. Not now. Not this close to the end.

Shrieks escalate inside the barracks. I sprint toward the open door. Inside, a guard trains her gun on Camroc. Racso and the alternates lie dead on the floor, face down in a puddle of ruby blood. *No.* No time to process. Coach died saving his team, and I'll honor him by doing the same.

"The future deserves better," the guard says. "Her Majesty could have done it, you know. She could have stolen the seedship. Quin should win the Games, not Quate. We have the will to survive—"

"Get *out*." I step into the doorway, behind the Quinish spy, and raise my hands. They're empty. I look ridiculous, but I don't fucking care. "Nobody touches him."

The guard/spy looks over her shoulder and sneers. Her gun does not move. "Come on, Bazi. We're just having fun."

"I am not amused. Ora's dead. Let them be. Queen Isrik won't stand for this shit."

Behind her, Camroc shakes on a bunk. Nyo and Arada grip him. All three shiver with terror, faces streaked with tears. The meager remnants of the Quatic team.

"Queen Isrik can go to hell," the woman snaps. "She has no royal blood."

"The princess herself crowned her, may she rest in peace," I snap back. "Put down the gun."

The guard/spy does not. Instead, she squeezes the trigger.

There's no time to stop her. No time to move Camroc. The blast will scorch his already broken heart.

Don't throw this all away.

There's no other choice. Everything I did, I did for him. All these years of waiting, planning, scheming, preparing were to ensure Camroc's survival, to save his life.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. The dangerous things we do for love.

The spy does not finish pulling that trigger. She can't move anymore. Two metal spikes pierce her head and chest. Blood plumes from the wounds. She tilts sideways, slides off the spikes, and collapses on Racso and the alternates. She bleeds over their corpses as deaths mingle in the growing red pool at our feet.

Horrified, Arada eyes the spikes in my hands. Nyo stills, uncertain. Camroc lurches forward and vomits on the floor as the air shimmers. *Static*.

"What did you do to him?" Arada cries.

Camroc convulses on the bed. Sweat streams down his face. His veins bulge; his eyes roll to whites. Calm and careful, Nyo lowers him to the floor as Camroc continues to thrash.

"Get him on the seedship," I say. "All of you, get on the seedship."

"I'm not leaving Coach and the others," Arada says.

"They're already gone. Please, leave while you can."

Nyo scans me with zes dark, knowing gaze. "You're—"

"Get on the fucking seedship," I snap. "If you don't leave now, someone else will try to kill you. You're the Olympic champions. Live *on*, for stars' sake. *Survive*." I turn toward Nyo. "And don't you dare tell him till there's no turning back."

"Tell him what?" Arada asks.

Nyo shakes zes head. "Later. Come on, Ri-ri. Bazi's right.

BURN THE SUN

We must go. Live on for Coach, for Yelir, for Ronoc, Evam, and Trebor."

Tears glow in Arada's eyes, but she listens to zem while she glares at me. "If not for the apocalypse, I'd kick the shit out of you."

"And I'd gladly let you, but not today," I say. "Go. I'll cover you. Get on the ship, then leave. May the stars bless you." *I love you, Cam.* But I can't say it. He can't suspect it. Not till they're gone.

They lift Camroc's quaking body and drag him out the door. I scan the corridors and spot Efia. *Shit.* There's blood on my hands and corpses on the floor.

"Bazi?" Efia asks. "I saw the spikes..."

Fuck. I forgot about the spikes. I toss them aside. "You should go, Efi. The seedship's waiting."

She doesn't move. Her jaw hangs open, slack and stunned.

"Go, Efi. Fucking go."

An hour ago, she would have said, *Not without you.* She does not say that now. Instead, she says, "You lied."

"Yes," I say. "That should make goodbye easy. You fell in love with a lie, so leave it all behind."

Tears film her big blue eyes. "You lied about everything, Bazi—if that's even your name."

"Yes, we've established that, so go."

"Did you even love me?"

Yes. A smashed-heart yes. To Earth and back, a million times yes. "No," I say. "But I needed you, and I realize that makes me a—" "Bitch. A bloody fucking worthless bitch."

"I was gonna go with twat, but props for pulling out the big guns."

She doesn't laugh.

Come on, come on, come on. Hate me so you can leave me. Break me so you can live on, live hard, live free.

Alarms blare in the hallway. Red flashes over rivers of blood.

"Security alert," the intercom trumpets. "All Quatic personnel to the seedship. A boarding pass will appear on your cell along with a map."

Efia eyes her cell. "So the ship was here all along, right under our noses." She scowls at me. "Like you. I should've guessed, but I hoped you were..."

"Who you wanted me to be?"

"I was lonely and stupid and wanted someone to love me. Pathetic, that's what I was. A stardamn loser."

No, Efia. You're the best our worlds can offer, and that is why you must leave now. But I say nothing. It takes everything I am not to collapse at her feet, beg for her forgiveness, tell her the truth about how I never deserved her, about how I love her more than the stars.

"Goodbye, Bazi," Efia says, "or whoever you are."

Goodbye, Efi. Dream on for me. I turn away as her footsteps fade.

Then shit hits the fan, and all hell breaks loose.

Guards round the corner. They spot the corpses, blame me, then raise their starguns and fire. Metal blooms from my hands. Shots rebound and hit flesh. Mouths shriek. Half fall. More replace them. They shoot again. I block again. And again and again and again. All for Camroc. Everything has always been for Camroc, only Camroc. Get on the ship. Please, Mother Suns, let him get on that bloody ship.

"Maker trash," a guard shouts.

I Make a spike, pierce her throat. Make a dozen more, pierce the rest. Guards fall from my tentacled metal. Blood washes the floor. Red horror soaks my shoes, but I don't move. Hold the line. Focus on me. Distract everyone from him. Don't let them notice that static, his fever.

An army of guards appears. I breathe, count, harness my thoughts, but my energy drains, and without energy, no matter. Nothing matters without energy, without spark. And it's been so long since I dreamed this big, since I wielded this primal song. Panting, sweating, I Make more spikes, but they're brittle. Two guards fall; the rest step aside. *I'm going to die.* Yes. And that's okay. But Camroc won't. *He fucking stardamn won't.*

Over the alarms, the intercom shouts, "Seedship boarded. Farewell and starspeed."

My cell buzzes. I duck around the corner to read the message. We're here. He's safe.

Nyo. Ze gave me this last gift, despite everything. Ze deserves to survive. I do not.

Tell him I'm sorry, I message back. And when you're far away, tell him this.

I send a letter I'd hoped to live and die a secret. But I fucked up at the end, and Camroc should know why—when he's safe between the stars.

I will, Nyo messages. *Good luck. Barring luck, give them hell.* Wise beyond zes years, too wise for one so young.

Hell is more my style, I send, then I toss the cell into the trash. Guards find me. Starguns fire. I Make a shield, but it isn't enough. My knees buckle. I slump to the floor. Stand up, or bring them down with you. But I can't stand back up. One option, then. I Make one more spike to stab a stargun. The barrel explodes, and the person with it. Flesh confettis the hall as they panic. They still don't understand us. They think us monsters, beasts without end. But we do end. Our power wanes. We are

NOT A HOPE IN HELL ON A WING AND A PRAYER

not gods, though they try to be.

There, kid. That's as much hell as I can manage. You're safe. You're free. Live on for me.

I collapse on the metal floor. Alarms chime my dirge. Red flashes. Blood glitters. Another wave of guards approaches. Isrik's fruit-fly reign cannot control Ora's cultural chains.

"She's breathing," one shouts.

Not anymore.

A stargun blast. A broken heart. Another, and a shattered mind. The dark claims me. I embrace its familiar touch. *Welcome back.* But I never left. My soul died long ago. Now, the rest of me dies, too.

Goodbye, Camroc. I love you more than you will ever know, and I'd rip apart the stars to see you home.

Baptism of Fire in Pandora's Box

Camroc

etra is dead. Coach is dead. Bazi is dead. The alternates are dead. Everyone is fucking *dead*.

Grief consumes me. My body jerks with spasms and fever. Sweat and tears course down my face. We reach Starstop's core. Alarms fade as we board the seedship. Arada and Efia drag me forward. Nyo hands Quatic guards my cell with my boarding pass, and everything happens too fast.

Ketra was here. She was here, and she died here, because she fought for us to live. She helped the Council so Quate could fly free, and it killed her. We killed her. Without our victory, she'd still be alive. She would know how to greet the future, but I can't claw my way out of the past's clutches.

We left Starstop, yet the seedship looks the same. We can never escape where we started, who we were. I stagger, slam into walls. Panic flickers across concerned faces. Arada and Efia struggle to lift me. Nyo wraps my arm around zes shoulder

BAPTISM OF FIRE IN PANDORA'S BOX

and carries me past rows of bunks. Ze chooses a few beds near the back, and I crash. The intercom announces our departure. I surrender to darkness and all her beautiful monsters.

* * *

When I wake, Quate is gone. Prime, Dion, Tertia, and Quin are gone, too. We left the dying sun and her cursed children behind.

We float through an ocean of constellations. The recently fixed stardrive hums through the seedship. We're in a wormhole between our second and third homes; it's not instant transportation, but faster than ion thrusters. Lifting my head, I survey the bunks between the bridge and the brig. They're filled with civilians; we stopped at Quate, then. Supplies lie under the floor: food, water, medicine, and our scant technology. We survived. We're free. It's over. Done. And everyone else is dead—or almost.

I still flame with fever. My body still twitches. Static sparks at my fingertips. Everything hurts and aches and blazes with rage.

"Sleeping beauty," Arada teases, but there is no humor in her tone.

"You scared us, darling," Nyo says.

My remaining teammates sit cross-legged on a nearby bunk. Efia curls into herself across the aisle.

I have no words, so I lie there, broken. My limbs convulse. Pain fireworks through me. Agony and anguish tear me apart. Guilt and grief smother me with avalanches. I'm buried alive, burned at the stake, drawn and quartered and abandoned for the wolves.

BURN THE SUN

"Cam, there is something I need to tell you," Nyo whispers. "If you're ready, that is."

I shrug. Don't care. Can't process or understand the apocalypse outside or the cataclysm within. So I wait, and stare, and cry sorrow dry.

"Ri-ri, you should also hear this." Ze turns to Efia. "And you, too."

Efia peels herself from her bunk and joins Nyo and Arada on theirs. They huddle around me, because I don't, won't, can't fucking move.

"Before she...passed," Nyo says, "Bazi sent me a message for you, Cam. We're far enough now that it's safe to share. Do you want to read it, or do you want me to read it to you?"

"She sent it to you, not me," I snap. "You should read it."

"She only sent it to me, because you were—"

"Psychotic?"

"Struggling."

"Same thing."

"Nowhere near the same, love." Nyo sighs. "Bazi is...was a—"

"Maker," I mumble.

"Yes." A blood-curdling pause. "And your mother, Cam. Bazi was your mother."

I don't react. Arada and Efia do. They suck in breaths and freeze into ghosts. But I suffer too much grief to grasp anything else. Death puppets my body and mind.

"Which means," Nyo continues, "you're a Maker, too."

Again, I don't react. I'm numb. *Dazed.* Stupefied. *Stupid.* I should have saved Ketra. I should have saved them all.

When I remain silent, Nyo reads Bazi's message on zes cell.

Camroc,

BAPTISM OF FIRE IN PANDORA'S BOX

I know you hate me now. Good, you should. Regardless, I'll explain what I did and why. It will change nothing, but it will make everything clear.

I am your mother. I am also a Maker, but I did not use my power after you were born. Because of this, it did not activate in you. Our instruments cannot detect dormant magic, so you could train without suspicion. As all parents do, I wanted a better life for you. Quate only took orphans to train for the Games. I knew in my gut that if you were on the team, you would win, you would survive, and you did.

So I made you an orphan. I gave you up, changed my name, changed my world, severed all ties, and it broke me. If I didn't, they'd hunt you before you could walk. Every mother is a warrior. We give our children life so they may live. I loved you so much that I let you go to save you, no matter the cost. It was the only way. If you believe nothing else, please believe this. I did what I did for love and only love.

Your father never knew. It was a one-night stand, and I never told him. Yes, that was wrong, but he would have loved you even more than I did. He would have never let you go, and you needed to go. You needed to live on, live free. Quate's only chance at victory was with you on the Olympic team. Know that your father was a good man. He died a few years ago in a Quatic famine, because he gave up his food for children. You get your heroism from him.

I'm no hero. I've committed felonies, undermined the Games by illegally changing worlds, and risked it all to see you free. But I'm dead now, you're safe, the past is the past, and the future is yours. I'd hoped to never activate your magic, but fate is a bitch, as usual. Last-minute regret, but I had to save you, or everything would be for nothing.

The transformation will hurt, but you will see the other side. I am

BURN THE SUN

sorry to say that I will not. Quate, our world and our people, will take care of you. Let them. And you are now too far away for the judges to disqualify Quate, to rescind your victory. It's a stupid rule, a horrid discrimination, to ban us from the Games, but you overcame prejudice. You, the first Maker Olympian, won the winning point for our world. I couldn't be prouder, though I always had faith in you. I knew you would win in my bones, in my soul.

Read this as more of a "good luck" than a "goodbye." I love you more than all the stars in all the skies. Live on, live hard, live free, baby boy. When you reach your new world, kiss the stars for me. Burn this first, then burn the sun.

```
All my love,
Iri (Bazi)
```

They wait for me to react. Yet again, I can't. Nyo deletes the message while fever fogs my mind and grief clogs my heart.

"Bazi—Iri—was Quatic," Efia whispers. "She should be here. She could have lived."

"She didn't want to risk someone connecting her and Camroc," Nyo says. "And Camroc couldn't have competed in the Games if they found out he is a Maker."

"You knew," Arada accuses zem.

"I guessed."

"When?"

"In the barracks, when she saved Cam."

"Starshit."

Nyo exhales a shrill line of air between zes teeth. "Well, she always took him under her wing—like a mother."

"But Coach was like our father, and he wasn't blood." Arada bites back a whimper at the fresh wound his death carved.

"No, but there was something fierce in Bazi. Feral, even.

BAPTISM OF FIRE IN PANDORA'S BOX

Whenever she looked at Cam, I felt it."

"She lied," Efia says. "I understand why she lied about Camroc, but she shouldn't have lied about me."

Nyo furrows zes dark brow. "Lied about what?"

Efia's lips wobble. "Never mind."

"She loved you, Efia. You know she—"

"No, she didn't, and she told me as much."

"To make you *go*. To set you *free*. She knew you wouldn't leave unless she broke your heart."

Tears spill down Efia's cheeks, but she can't accept it. I can't, either. Bazi/Iri was my mother. She was a Maker. I am a Maker. I have magic in my soul. But I have far more pain.

"Bazi killed Yelir," I rasp in realization. "She killed him to get me on the team, 'no matter the cost."

Nyo and Arada tense. Efia gags.

"It was an overdose," Arada says. "The Council ruled it an alcohol overdose."

"The Council lied," Efia says. "And Bazi made me suspect you two."

Nyo twitches, disturbed. "She did anything and everything to protect Cam, to ensure his survival. And I guess she was right. We won because of him. We needed him on the team."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Arada snorts.

"No, I mean, we needed him as part of our unit. We're a trio. As harsh as it sounds, we wouldn't have won with Yelir."

Efia dry-heaves and clamps a hand over her mouth. "I can't stand any more of this."

Me neither, and I don't. Numbness fades. In its wake, panic crashes down. Pure, brutal panic. Soaked with fear. Sharp as teeth. It clamps starving mouths on my soul and gnaws till I scream aloud.

"They're dead. They're dead. They're dead." The chant leaves my lips as bleeding hope.

Fear's beast rises within me. Anxiety shoots lightning through my mind. Nerves snake and strangle my heart. The apocalypse stampedes my soul. Death floods my lungs, and grief drowns me. I can't breathe, can't think, can't stop, can't fly free.

"They're dead. They're dead. They're dead."

"Breathe, darling," Nyo soothes. Zes onyx eyes implore me to stay, zes blue-black face soft with concern. "Breathe and fight."

So I fight. Gasp for air. Thrash against truth. Weak and dizzy, I tremble and choke. Cold and hot, I shiver and sweat. My gut twists in agony. Horror crushes my chest. *In new worlds, old ways must die*, but they shouldn't have died. Not them, not ever.

"They're dead. They're dead. They're dead. They're dead."

Arada's tiny brown body hugs me, shelters me from the storm. Her long black braid falls over my shoulder, and I clutch it, a rope to climb out of this pit. "We're here, Cam. We're always here."

But Ketra and Coach and Bazi are not, and they will never be here again. My love, my father, and my mother are dead. *Dead*. Dead before the sun. *Burn the fucking sun*. Save me from this *hell*.

"They're dead. They're dead. They're dead."

"Let it out," Nyo says, rubbing my spastic back. "Let it hurt. Pain is proof we can survive, and you *will* survive, Cam. Live on for them."

But this is not living. This is suffering. Or maybe that's all life is in the end. A blink of suffering before death's eternal mercy. Let me out. Let me go. Burn it all down.

Soon, everything will be gone. Prime's dunes and deserts: gone. Dion's tropical jungles and Tertia's olive hills: gone.

BAPTISM OF FIRE IN PANDORA'S BOX

Quate's rolling valleys and Quin's harsh tundra: gone. Quate will die empty. Our world will die alone. Ketra, Racso, Bazi, Ronoc, Evam, Trebor, and Yelir are gone, gone, gone, gone, gone, gone, gone, gone.

"They're dead. They're dead. They're dead. They're dead."

"Yes, they are," Efia says. A different side of her emerges, a blade to her bubbles, an anchor to her cheer. Her round bronze face shimmers with tears as her big blue eyes catch my own. She tosses back her orange curls in defiance. "But we are not dead, and we must live on, so you will now breathe."

I try. Can't. I collapse and twitch, a dead fish on the bunk.

"Breathe," she insists. "Inhale: one, two, three, four. Hold. Exhale: one, two, three, four."

Breath whistles into me, sputters and stalls, then wheezes out. Efia walks me through it again and again.

"Close your eyes," she orders, "but keep breathing."

Inhale: one, two, three, four. Hold. Exhale: one, two, three, four.

"Repeat this mantra in your mind: This will pass. We must live on."

This will pass. We must live on. This will pass. We must live on. Inhale: one, two, three, four. Hold. Exhale: one, two, three, four.

After minutes of crawling through grief's neck-deep muck, I reach reality's barren surface. *Breathe, count, remember, relax.* I inhale, exhale, chant, surrender. But fear remains ready to sink venom-tipped fangs into my throat and rip out hope.

"Thank you," I tell Efia, Nyo, and Arada.

But it's not just the four of us anymore. A crowd gathered during my panic, and they now eye me with worry and wonder.

"You are the Olympians," one mutters.

"You are Camroc of Quate," another says.

"You are a Maker," a third says, pointing at my glittering

hands.

Shit. I don't answer, don't move. They might kill me. Maybe Ketra, Coach, and Bazi sacrificed their lives for nothing, for no one, because I am no one—

"Thank you," the third one says. "Thank you for winning. Thank you for saving us." He bows to me, then Nyo, then Arada. Tears shine in his eyes, and he pulls a child close, then another, then his husband. "We are alive because of you."

The tide turns. The storm lifts. Throughout the crowd, praise soars our way. They all dip forward, thumbs linked and hands down in an "M" symbol. *The Maker Bow.* Tributes ripple through rows as Makers and non-Makers show support. The Games are the past: hunger, drive, and war. Magic is the future: peace, promise, and freedom. To survive, we must heal, reborn.

We are Quate. We are one people. And we will survive together. They don't hate me. They don't care that I'm a Maker. No, they only care that they survived. Their family and friends live on, live free, because there is no life without love. There is no life for me.

There is

Don't be an idiot. If you win, you're going.

I went, and you're gone, Ketra. But I'll fight on for you. I'll remember you in every breath, in every heartbeat, but I'll never fly free. Grief severed my wings.

I whisper a memory beneath the crowd's worship: "Don't die without me."

Don't forget to live, Ketra's echo whispers back.

"I will not live without you."

That's stupid, and you know it. If you don't live on, who will remember me?

BAPTISM OF FIRE IN PANDORA'S BOX

"Everyone, Ketra. Everyone will remember you. You died a hero, and I'd rather die together than live forever without you."

You're drunk on fear and pain, on love and hate. I can fight my own battles, so go, Camroc. Go and fight. Your team needs you, and I need you with your team.

"I love you so much it hurts, Ketra."

I love you, too.

"Come back to me."

She doesn't, and she doesn't respond again. I love her more than I ever loved anything, and her loss digs the deepest grave. I miss her beauty and brilliance, her scars and strength, our loud fun and quiet moments and all the instants in between. Tears sting my eyes as grief claims the rest of me. This is the end.

No, kid, this is only the beginning, Bazi—Iri, Mother, whoever—answers in memory. Fury flares at her lies, but her ghost laughs and cuts me off, true to character.

When the stars burn down, we bow, we dance.

When the sky is red, we take our chance.

When your dreams are close, come and hold my hand.

Then we'll grow our wings to fly from this land.

Her voice sings in my mind, real and raw and full of heart. It's our song, a Quatic song, an ancient hymn with myriad lyrics and versions, with words for every season. "Live on," or "Heyo," or "Fly on." Fly free.

Come on, kid. Come and sing with me. Sometimes, music is the only cure.

I clear my grief-scorched throat, then croak, "When the worlds are on fire..." A cough strikes, and I stop. It's stupid. Useless. Pathetic. Like me. Music is no cure. Music is a curse, same as memory, a reminder of what can never again—

"...and the sun keeps bleeding," Nyo sings beside me. Zes

BURN THE SUN

honey voice swims through the crowd, and they quiet, bewitched by the song's spell.

"We'll dance hand in hand," Arada sings with a flute-like lilt, "and we'll never stop singing."

"Cause tonight's our last night, but our hearts are still beating," Efia chimes in.

"Till these bones turn to dust, bet we'll keep on living," Nyo whispers.

There's a pause. A wild, pregnant, powerful pause where everyone waits for someone—for *me*. I started this.

So finish this, kid. They need you now, and you're ready now. Belt out that fucking song with everything you are.

Then Bazi falls silent, too, same as Ketra, but I am not silent. Not anymore.

"So fly on," I rasp.

Another pause, this one warm with promise.

Then the crowd responds: Fly on.

The melody surges through the seedship as a tide of redemption.

"Fly far," I sing, words hoarse yet strong. Fly free.

"You're ready to run." Join the stars for me.

"So fly on." Fly on.

"Fly far." Fly free.

"Go and burn the sun." Fly on. Grow wings.

I hesitate, but Nyo nods. This is not over yet.

"Heyo, fly high," I sing. Live on, they reply.

"Heyo, fly far." Live hard.

"Heyo, fly free." Live free.

Together, we sing, "Heyo, hey, you live in my heart."

Then we repeat it. Again, again, again. We sing till we lose our voices, till we forget our fear, till we remember hope, ghosts,

BAPTISM OF FIRE IN PANDORA'S BOX

the reasons we must keep living. The song bounces off the windowless space as sound grows and possesses us whole.

Ketra died. *She died.* And she's not coming back. Yes, she would have died, but I held onto the unfounded wish that she could somehow still escape. At least the sun didn't kill her in the end. And her mother didn't, either. It was a random guard. *Random.* Chaos. Everything is chaos in the end.

Grief still destroys me. Anguish still devastates me. You always remember your first love, and she was my first love, my first loss. We fell in love hard, and we lost that love fast. But I will lift my head and live on for her. I will fly on for her and for Coach...and for Bazi/Iri, too. We all make mistakes. We all fuck up. And we were so innocent before, but we aren't anymore.

Air shimmers. Static sparkles. Magic tempts me, is me, Makes me. I raise my hands and think one thought: a lotus. The lotus the Maker engraved on Ketra's metal chest. The letter "M" surrounded by petals of peace and freedom. Effort drains me, stokes my fever, shakes my hands, aches my muscles, but I think hard, and I think strong. *Instinct.* A small, metal flower appears in my palm. Nyo squeezes my shoulder, and Arada smiles. I pocket the lotus as the song swells. Shared struggle, shared humanity—that's what it means to fly on, fly free.

"Goodbye, Ketra," I whisper. "Goodbye, and find peace."

I don't see it, but they tell me, and I feel it.

Bleeding sky, crying stars, sun on a noose, swollen and red.

Our second sun dies, but we live on. Again, again, again.

Behind us, a supernova.

A flash of life, a wave of death.

Full circle, full blast. Again, again, again.

Threadbare galaxy, she's a temptress.

The rainbow bursts, devours worlds, swallows them whole.

BURN THE SUN

They're all dead.
Death flirts with daggers.
He chases us. We run.
Tag, you're it.

Acknowledgments

This book was "lighter" than my usual mind fare. Thank you for taking a chance on a new brain flavor.

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. You all are ridiculously gracious regarding my chaotic ways. I owe you all many kidneys.

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 your stalwart love. I am exceedingly lucky to have you all in my life.

To S and C: Live on, live hard, live free, 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 <u>book monsters</u>, many of which bite. Reviews and press are available on <u>HaloScot.com</u>. Halo has been featured in *Publishers Weekly* and *BookLife*. Also, as a founding member of <u>QueerIndie.com</u>, 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.

You can connect with me on:

- https://haloscot.com
- **y** https://twitter.com/halo_scot
- f https://www.facebook.com/authorhaloscot

Subscribe to my newsletter:

Also by Halo Scot

Burn the Sun (SFF novel):

Five worlds compete in the Space Olympics to determine which should survive a supernova.

The Mortality Experiment (grimdark SFF novel):

Secrets are sentient. In the far, foreign future, a deep-space mission turns catastrophic when the crew's personal demons become literal demons and seek revenge.

Girl of Dust and Smoke (dark fiction novella):

In the heart of America's Second Dust Bowl, Isobel Walsh weaves a web to survive.

<u>I Will Kill You</u> (psychological thriller novel):

After losing his wife, Alex drowns in crime to support his motherless kids. A new job offers freedom, but freedom demands sacrifice. Crime doesn't commit itself.

The Heartbeat of a Million Dreams (SFF novella):

Mars has a shadow, a mirror world torn from chaos. When a girl comes along with the power to reunite Mars, worlds collide in cosmic war.

Rift Cycle (grimdark series):

In a post-apocalyptic world where season of birth determines power, interrealm war beckons two lost and fated souls. Book order: *Edge of the Breach, Echoes of Blood, Eye of the Brave, Elegy of the Void*.

NOTE: Please read the content warnings. My mind is a horrifying place. Only enter with poisonous weaponry and snacks.